

## HISPORTOS – A RESEARCH PROJECT ON PORTUGUESE SEAPORTS IN THE EARLY MODERN AGE\*

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### Abstract

The main goal of this paper is to present, briefly, the research Project HISPORTOS – A contribution for the history of NW Portuguese seaports in the Early Modern Age (POCTI/ HAR/ 36417/00), in which development this workshop is integrated, making part of the outcomes planned since the beginning of our research program.

The project, submitted to financing of the Portuguese Foundation of Science and Technology, began in October 2001, and must be finished and evaluated in October 2005. This meeting is, in some way, a closing event.

We intend to discuss the pertinence of the scientific goals of the project, its accuracy in the global panorama of Portuguese and European historiography on seaports, the main guidelines which direct our research program; the constitution of its research team, and the nodal axes of its realisations.

This paper provides a brief presentation of the HISPORTOS Project – *A contribution to the history of NW Portuguese seaports in the Early Modern Age*. Holding this workshop is, in fact, part of the project, as it was planned as one of its outcomes from the very start.

The project has been funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology and started in October 2001. It is due to be concluded and assessed in October 2005. Thus, this meeting is, to some extent, a closing event.

Some of the papers to be presented during the course of this workshop by project members are, in fact, reflections on specific issues of the research programme: sources, methodology and, naturally, obstacles and constraints arising or imposed during the course of our research. The main goal of this paper is to underline the opportunity of its emergence and the accuracy of its options in the European and Portuguese historiographical panorama.

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Ports have been centuries-old focal points of local, regional, national and international economic development and social change. Their major interactions with the hinterland, and, at the same time, with an extended *vorland*, have transformed seaport history into a major field of research, buttressing the understanding of historical transformations in economic, commercial, transport and technological networks, as well as industrial development and social and urban changes. Seaports are no longer viewed only as infrastructures, but as a complex system, resulting from economic, political, social and cultural forces; the gateways between land and sea, between the hinterland and the *vorland*, a nodal axis with reflections on territorial, economic, social and mental structures. They are also active agents in the process of modernisation and change, and have a role to play in the fields of technological innovation and in urbanisation processes. As a result of these dynamics, research on seaport history has achieved, in the last few decades, significant advancements all over Europe, even though it has focused particularly on economic and technological issues, and is mostly centred on the Modern period and recent History.

The discussion on the building of seaports during the Early Modern period is, therefore, a pertinent one. The important role played by ports in the early modern period (16th to 18th centuries) in Europe seems undeniable. They were essential in structuring political and economic spaces and comprised crucial junctions in supra-regional spaces. The mastery of new nautical techniques, the definition of a new network of routes, the increasing tonnage of seagoing vessels, all worked to increase the importance and prominence of maritime communication routes, from the coastal to the trans-oceanic.

In this historical period, the economic hegemonies were contested between city-ports, such as Lisbon, Seville, Antwerp, Amsterdam and London. Connections between Europe and other continents were naturally based on ports, at the same time that the internal implications of those dynamics were, at the very outset, projected on maritime centres.

In fact, we firmly believe that the strategic centrality of the ports, especially seaports, in the Early Modern Age, has given rise to specific historic phenomena and dynamics that should be studied. The concentration of population, plus the centripetal nature of these maritime complexes, certainly generated demographic, social and mental phenomena that clearly set port zones apart from inland areas<sup>2</sup>.

Port movements themselves require complicated logistics, including supporting arsenals and warehouses. Royal control of commercial operations resulted in complicated taxation and supervision systems, consolidated in customs and excise structures and procedures. Larger vessels posed problems of access, which required the building of quays, the implementation of procedures to control entry to and departure from the harbour and even the use of specialised pilots, for instance. But in the 18th century it also became necessary to expand the artificial infrastructures to protect and guide the vessels.

2. On the concept of city-port, see FERNANDO MONGE, MARGARITA DEL OLMO – *Un contexto de análisis para el concepto de ciudad portuaria: las ciudades americanas en el Atlántico*, in “Puertos y Sistemas Portuarios (Siglos XVI-XX)”, Madrid, 1996, p.215 a 233. These historians state that “*city-ports are precisely those in which the establishment of a port has concentrated a sufficient number of activities and people such that it develops the characteristic social fabric of an urban environment*”. (Op. cit, p.221).

A context of growing shifts in “sea power”, due to the rise of the Anglo-Iberian and French conflicts, boosted military, political and economic power. The confluence of international fleets and lucrative trading traffic in key ports also motivated piracy and led to the need for defence and the construction of military facilities.

The dual exposure of these fronts, to land and sea, made them more vulnerable to epidemic outbreaks. Improvements in health protection facilities were also a feature of the internal dynamics of these spaces<sup>3</sup>.

Along with this, advances were made in engineering, notably in the 18th century, at the same time that the royal authorities were awoken to the importance of investing in infrastructures - in bridges, ports and fortifications.

In fact, implementing an economic system centred on commercial changes, whether at a national, international or overseas level, processes in which seaports were central, led to significant investments by the central and local authorities in seaports.

Evidence of this impetus can be seen in the production of knowledge and representations regarding these matters. Navigation requirements and infrastructure interventions both led to the production of maps, especially in the 18th century, as well as intervention plans, accessibility studies and hydraulic engineering schemes. All these provide the historian of the early modern period with an increasingly more accurate picture of the situation at the time.

Both the cultural factors and the reforms resulting from the Enlightenment were responsible for a clearer understanding of the world and, thus, of the coast. This understanding was undoubtedly associated with the growing need for land planning, which consequently encouraged studies in Cartography and Statistics.

This was also a time when cities with seaports played a new role. Besides the economic issues, wars, piracy and military events, public hygiene and public health, also became a major concern, the reason and justification for a more effective intervention from the State in seaport affairs, which the local authorities were no longer able to deal with by themselves. Thus, individuals and local and central authorities concurrently proposed new forms of intervention, at the same time as engineering was offering new technologies in the building of harbours and infrastructures.

Different historiographical schools throughout Europe have developed studies on these and other issues, whereas there have not been a sufficient number of in-depth studies on the part of Portuguese historians to allow for the possibility of comparative studies with the Dutch, French, German, English, Italian or Spanish cases. Thus, a gap in this specific area of research had to be bridged so that international dialogue could take place.

Furthermore, in the last few decades, Early Modern European historiography has largely focused on the analysis of port systems and intercontinental seaport networks, paying particular attention to the overseas traffic system. This perspective is based on a theoretical conception of the existence of international seaport hierarchies and tends accordingly to be centred on a macroeconomic and international analysis. This type of

3. Vd. PRICE, Jacob M. – *Competition between ports in British long distance trade ...*, in “*Puertos y Sistemas Portuários...*”, o.c., p.19-36 e CONTAMINE, Philippe (dir.) - *Guerre et concurrence entre les États européens du XIV au XVIII siècle*, Paris, PUF, 1998.

approach, which places emphasis on the analysis of macroeconomic spaces, underrates or even disregards the study of the internal dynamics and specific profiles of each seaport.

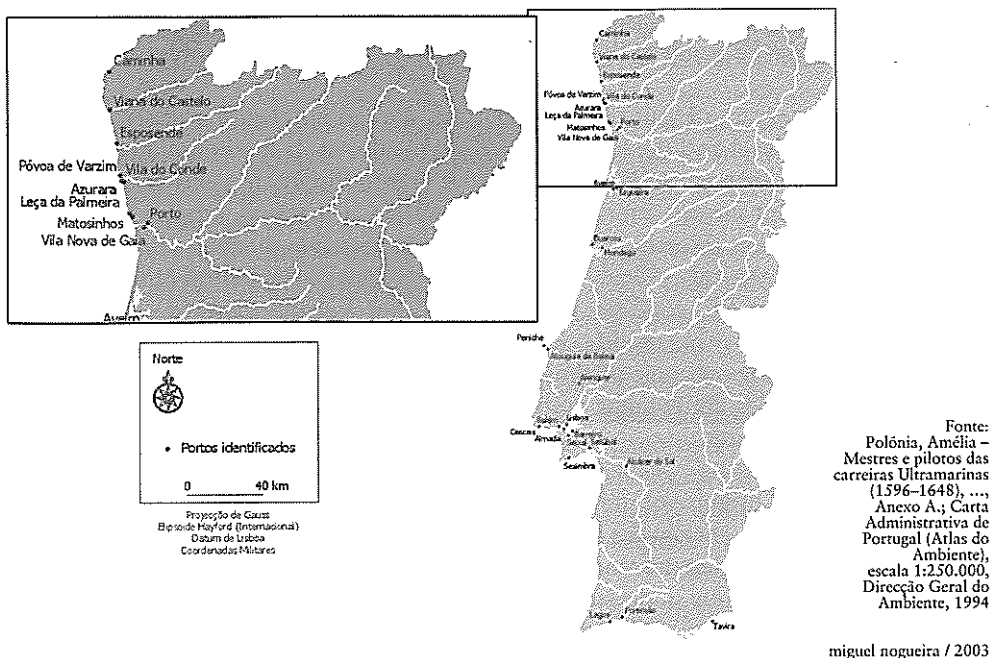
On the contrary, the Hisportos project, even though indebted to all this research, elected the micro level and the local and regional scales as its methodological starting point to study the seaports in NW Portugal, aiming to discuss the existence or not of seaport models. But models cannot be developed out of context, stripped of specific local realities, without resorting to the perception of possible diachronic evolutions in which, besides the general cyclical events and the policies of the central authority, local circumstances and specific conditions and features of each seaport interfere. If we accept that specific realities neither could nor should be subsumed in the general picture, simply because this is the outcome of those factors, then we should agree that the macro-analytical approaches are fraught with limitations that can only be corrected with a micro-analytical reading.

The theoretical premise of our research was, then, that a micro-analysis provides a crucial opportunity to review the levels of research and the thematic topics involved in seaport studies, facilitating the search for answers to questions that the macro approach is unable to give. It is our understanding that the micro-analysis provides researchers with a keener perception, since they can see, through this microscopic scrutiny, factors and issues that are diverse and heterogeneous.

Hand in hand with this, even though the geography of maritime scales insists on the international dimension of the European market, we must not forget the regional and interregional dimensions. This period, particularly from the 16th century, saw the consolidation of transport networks involving the coastline and the interior, some making use of the waterways as routes for shipping goods and supplying regional sub-areas. The organisation of roads accompanied this confluence of routes to the ports they served and connected with the vast rural hinterlands, and so the study of port zones is crucial to our understanding of the economic dynamics of far more extensive regions.

So it is important to examine other types of networks and complementarities, on a smaller scale and not simply that of the connections between the major ports, whether European or European and Eastern, or European and American. The historical protagonism of these great maritime centres often relied on local inter-port networks. In fact, from the point of view of logistics, shipbuilding, transport capacity, and the availability of navigation techniques, a cosmopolitan port in particular necessarily relies on other ports and on areas where agriculture and crafts were the predominant occupations, without which their dynamism would have been impossible to sustain. This is verifiable in the case of Lisbon during the period of overseas expansion. And hence it is important to study these local and regional interactions to better understand local situations, on the one hand, and international and intercontinental connections, on the other. It is also important to see a port in its complexity as a whole: human, social, urban, technical, administrative, and economic.

These are the goals and epistemological lines that guided the Hisportos project. Its aim was thus to study the ports of NW Portugal in the Early Modern Age (16th to 18th centuries), covering the areas of coastline shown on the map.



Some studies have in fact already been conducted on these seaports. In particular, Viana, Vila do Conde, Porto and Aveiro have already been object of academic studies, namely in the form of PhD theses. Their approach was, however, mostly directed at economic, demographic, urban and even social dynamics, without questioning or providing answers to four essential issues:

- in what way did geomorphological conditions interfere with the potentialities of each seaport;
- in what way did the crown, the local authorities and politics interfere with the construction of specific seaports and sea towns;
- in what way were the technological advances in Europe implemented in North-west Portugal, through the mobility of engineers;
- how did the different seaports in these historical and geographical spaces work together and in what way were they part of a larger system – regional, national, European and intercontinental.

Based on these points of view, our team developed a research project in which the following aspects were central to the research plan carried out:

1. The geomorphological features and their interaction with historical dynamics;
2. The installation and subsequent changes in sea ports infrastructures;
3. The interaction between these port areas and the *hinterland* and *vorland*;
4. The organisation of the urban area;
5. The application of technological innovations, associated with hydraulic engineering;
6. The production of scientific knowledge on the territory (cartography, topography, hydrologic plans, ...)

These aims led to the constitution of a multidisciplinary team that includes historians, archaeologists, geographers, cartographers, engineers and architects. The team's purpose comprised in developing a research methodology and data gathering that would enable the area under study to be considered from a pluridisciplinary viewpoint, and consequently examine all of its geomorphological, historical and urban planning aspects.

The choice of the area, Northwest Portugal (see map), was validated based on geographical criteria – the characteristics of the coastline and port accessibility – and on historical criteria: it is common knowledge that the north-western ports played a specific and highly relevant role in the trading networks of the Early Modern Age. It has been clearly established that they interacted closely with the North and South of Spain and Northern Europe, as well as with an extended insular, African and South American Atlantic. These essentially commercial dynamics should not cease to produce implications for port infrastructures and for strategies of leadership and political and economic protagonism that need to be studied, case by case.....

Our standpoint, also stated by others, is not to assess the overwhelming importance of some ports over others, i.e., to try to establish a hierarchy of ports based on indices chosen in terms of the large ports, and which have therefore tended to underrate those that are on the fringes of such hierarchies.

What interests us here is to re-exam the role of small ports (defined in terms of concentration and distribution of goods, vessels, services, capital) and place them in a system. In fact, we have ignored their comparative rank and have appraised them for their intrinsic value, on their own terms. We are particularly interested in examining whether these ports became economically and socially essential (in the national, or even local, context), or whether they were built in response to circumstantial political opportunities and schemes.

This is a fundamental aspect which led us to re-ask many questions. With respect to this, besides the historical dynamics, we concentrated on studying the consolidation of port precincts, and port infrastructure, and their integration in the urban setting, assuming an active interaction between these variables. The methodology we proposed to follow consisted in taking each port separately and subjecting them to investigation using the same inquiry grid, so as to compile databases that would guide the questioning of the documentation and systematisation in a manner consistent with the information available.

The methodological grid devised aimed to answer the following points:

1. The geomorphological aspects of each port
  - 1.1. The geomorphological constraints and potentialities of the coastal zone
2. The territorial backdrop
  - 2.1. Topographical setting
  - 2.2. Factors influencing changes to the coastal rim
3. Construction of port infrastructures
  - 3.1. Building or improving quays, wharves, etc.
  - 3.2. Building breakwaters, groins, jetties, banks, dikes,...

- 3.3. Constructing sea marks (channel markers, stakes, lighthouses, sails, buoys, flags)
- 3.4. Improving accesses (harbour entrances and depths)
- 3.5. Improving and constructing defence and communication facilities (forts, bridges, channels, etc.)
- 3.6. Establishment of administrative and fiscal controls (authorities, legislation, technical staff, specialised buildings)
- 3.7. Construction and specialisation of facilities: warehouses, arsenals, shipyards.
4. The historical dynamics of each port
  - 4.1. Connections to the hinterland and *vorland* (transport networks, costs, mobilities)

Royal and local polices relating to ports
5. Assessment of use of technological innovation
  - 5.1. The technical and cultural sphere (agents and institutions for scientific and technical development)
  - 5.2. The technological options in building each port in relation to advances in hydraulic engineering
  - 5.3. The route between the production of scientific knowledge (hydrology, topography, cartography) on the territory and the options of those in charge of the ports
6. Urban construction of each port
  - 6.1. The interaction between the port and the surrounding urban communities
  - 6.2. The definition of the relations between the construction of the urban space and the historical and economic dynamics of each port.

Not all of these items were, however, object of research.

In light of these assumptions, the analytical perspective was to re-ask a series of questions, and to examine:

1. whether geomorphological conditions influenced specific interventions in the ports, in terms of infrastructure, or the historical dynamics of seaports;
2. whether the global historical contexts revealed to be decisive in the construction of ports, and whether their influence could likewise be detected in the various ports studied;
3. whether, over a long period of time (16th to 18th centuries), and in light of contextual restrictions and related technological factors, common lines can be found in the building of technical, military, urban and economic infrastructures in the various ports of Northwest Portugal;
4. whether this construction, especially of infrastructures, arose from a concerted policy emanating from the central authority, or whether other institutional entities, to be identified, were the protagonists;
5. whether, from a multi-secular perspective, there were any developments in this institutional policy in terms of construction and intervention in port infrastructures and urban planning;
6. whether international contexts interfered in the domestic decisions of each coun-

try, setting a synchronic European pace, or whether it was the opposite, that is, the tendencies identified at a national level were specific or even contradictory amongst themselves.

To sum up, what we aimed to underline was that the infrastructural construction of ports cannot be exempt from areas of questioning that considerably transcend the technological aspects. They involve issues related to geomorphological variables and historical evolution, in which the micro approach can be essential, even when research covers a long period of time and a vast territorial area.

Strict answers to the questions raised by this analytical structure were not found in the historiographical output, which actually contained considerable gaps with respect to the history of ports in the periods prior to the 18th-19th centuries. We were confronted with three main kinds of work on this topic: that produced by local researchers, more monographic in nature and inclined to be descriptive and greatly bound to documental contents; that concerned with a particular plan from a particular engineer, generally without checking the geomorphological conditions and historical dynamics that motivated them; and those arising from academic research work. These ultimately aimed to tackle economic and social issues, although they still required a geomorphological and climatic contextualization, as well as having to reference buildings and infrastructural improvements, taken as reflecting or influencing historical dynamics.

From an historical point of view, moreover, works summarizing royal policies and the jurisdiction of central authority in relation to seaports, did not add much. They only explained which institutions were subsequently in charge of the public works carried out on these areas, but not really the tendencies and implications of their policies.

At the same time, although other disciplines have also focused on port precincts, making the coastal rim one of the most favored areas for geomorphological analysis, this approach is usually taken either on the basis of a long-term perspective, going back to the major geo-climatic eras and their impact on the design of the coastline (warm period, ice age), or concentrating on an environmentalist reading, focusing on the study of the occurrence of contemporary ecological assaults on the planet and how they have redefined coastlines.

Architecture and urbanism also favor urban seafronts, reflecting policies that aim to restore riverside and coastal zones, but apart from that, leave in the most complete silence all the earlier contexts and factors that shaped the development of these areas.

This division of interests and paths, blocking interdisciplinary dialogues, has led us to a 'core' option: establishing a multidisciplinary team that includes historians, geographers, archaeologists, cartographers, engineers and architects. The intention was to develop a research program and a methodological framework that would enable a particular zone to be regarded from several angles, in its geomorphological, historical and urban aspects. Members of the team had different, yet complementary, training, and they tried to question and interpret the historical materials (maps, written documents) submitting them to an inquiry grid that had been previously defined, under the appraisal of various specialized scientific readings that could maximize information which the training of a historian does not permit him/her to decipher.

We believe, then, that the major challenge presented by the project was in bringing



together a scientific team with diverse, yet complementary, academic backgrounds, and in seeking to implement a multidisciplinary research framework, in which historical materials could be subject to diverse and specialised scientific interpretations, able to decode information that a mere historical analysis could not ascertain.

Finally, another of this project's main aims was to include young researchers, through the attribution of initiation to research grants and, consequently, establish in the school community a research practice which would continue beyond the specific financing period. This is one of the reasons behind the project's interaction with the postgraduate studies offered by the History Department ("Postgraduate and Masters Course in Local and Regional Studies"), namely its branch in "Seaport Studies".

We think this goal has been successfully achieved, not on our own merit, but on that of the young researchers who have worked and are still working with us. Two have concluded their Masters, one is developing his PhD project in Florence; another is in the final stages of her Masters thesis and two others are currently Masters students.

So as to comply with the research goals proposed, the team followed a research program in the last four years, whose main steps were:

1. Research on sources found in private, local and central archives, in Portugal and abroad;
2. The holding of scientific meetings, whose main goals were the definition of concepts and methodological grids and the motivation of those with historical backgrounds to question not only the strictly historical, but also other aspects, especially the geomorphological.
3. The promotion of debates and work sessions to discuss database modeling so as to bolster data gathering and improve the potentialities of information research.
4. The presentation of essays on cartographic reconstitutions of seaport spaces from a diachronic and comparative perspective, aiming to project and reconstitute geomorphological, infrastructural and urban phenomena.
5. Group participations in national and international meetings in order to present and submit our research program to discussion and feedback.
6. Also foreseen were contacts with international research teams that develop similar research projects, namely CEHOUP (Centro de Estudos Históricos de Obras Públicas e Urbanismo) and CRHMA (Centre de Recherche sur l'Histoire des Mondes Atlantiques), as well as contacts with the International Maritime Economic History Association.
7. In the same way that we have participated in an international research and all-inclusive team, members from French, British, Irish and Spanish universities got together to prepare a project to be submitted to Interreg III B – Atlantic Space, under the general theme: "West Atlantic landscapes and representations", which was not unfortunately approved for Community funding.
8. Last but not least, we have planned the holding of this workshop since the project's beginning, whose goals have already been presented in this session.

We sincerely hope that our overall discussion may provide the Hisportos Project

with constructive criticism and, if possible, further suggestions for the next steps to be followed. And it is also our desire that the Hisportos research plan may unpretentiously contribute to the studies on European seaports in the Early Modern Age, having set standards we believe are appropriate and rigorous.:::

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