Oporto: The Building of a Maritime Space in the Early Modern Period

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Abstract

During the 16th century, while the Portuguese Crown was concentrating its best efforts on exploring the Cape sea route ("The India Run"), as well as the far-eastern circuits, from Lisbon, commercial shipping agents from other Portuguese seaports sought alternative outlets for their business. It was due to the existence of ports such as Oporto, Viana do Castelo, Vila do Conde, etc., long considered to be minor, that the Portuguese Kingdom was able to make its definitive contribution to the formation of the first Atlantic system. The present essay follows a tendency in modern historiography and pays attention to one particular case: that of the evolution of the city of Oporto, the building and organization of its seaport, its inclusion in an international port system, the mobility of its merchant fleet and the extent of their enterprise. The influence of the Oportan maritime space was felt across the Atlantic world and helped to improve European trade and the economic system of that period.

Keywords

Atlantic system, Early Modern period, maritime space, navigation, Oporto; seaport, shipbuilding, shipping, trade

1. The present essay consists of a brief summary of a thesis on the subject, which was defended at Oporto University, in the Faculty of Humanities, on October 20, 2004.

Traditionally, the study of both Portuguese and Iberian overseas trade, considered mainly from a macro-economic perspective, has been based upon research into sea routes, predominant colonial products, the rise and fall of different types of merchandise and trade circuits. From this point of view, the so-called imperial ports of Lisbon and Seville frequently appear as the only ones worthy of study, consequently minimising the contribution of other peninsular ports to the construction of the

Atlantic system. Furthermore, such study has tended to give primacy to external agents, as far as the development and success of trading initiatives are concerned.

My aim now is to provide evidence relating to the city of Oporto and its port activity. It will provide a microanalysis, in which we may clearly discern facts that were of far-reaching importance, and which, when set alongside other pieces of evidence relating to similar events, enable us to discover a constantly changing port, where we can see ships, capital funds and agents in constant movement. It will be seen that this activity contributed effectively to some of the most important changes occurring in the world economy in the Early Modern Period.

In the following pages, I shall provide evidence relating to some of the subjects mentioned above, as well as the main conclusions of the work. To begin with, I must say that the main purpose of this paper has gradually been modified in accordance with the various "reefs" or favourable winds that have steadily pushed it into other areas. I started with a provisional theme: "navigation and sea trade in Oporto". My aim was to uncover data relating to trade with Brazil and Northern Europe. The more documents I consulted and the more information I gathered, the more difficult I found it to keep myself within these boundaries (and to restrain my ambitions). An alternative and more sensible title would perhaps have been "Oporto and 16th-century sea routes", but even this title was a risk, for, as we frequently say, you cannot build a house by beginning with the roof. I needed to know the foundations that led to this trade and its many voyages. And I knew nothing about the geomorphology of the bar across the harbour's entrance or about the port itself, port practices, ships, shipbuilding or the cordage industry. So I cautiously chose to begin research into these subjects and discarded the original, broader area of investigation, which was "the great sea trade of the 16th century".

1.1. The first theme I turned my attention to was the "port organization of the city of Oporto in the 15th and 16th centuries". After formulating a theoretical and historiographical account, which dealt not only with political, institutional, economic and territorial aspects, but also architectural features, such as the harbour buildings, paying special attention to the link between this latter aspect and the urban landscape, I studied the organization of space, works on the bar at the harbour entrance, security and protection, the ship's holds, equipment, pilot guidance services, financial structures, religious viewpoints, and health and hygiene at sea, without forgetting other matters, such as the need for translation services or the provision of information for harbour users.

I also added some contemporary illustrations of Oporto and the Douro River which, together with historical cartography and photography, allow for a clearer and more accurate understanding of the space.

1.2. After this presentation of the layout and functioning of the harbour, the second theme consists of the study of the fleet and shipbuilding. I consider Oporto to have been a city actively engaged in shipbuilding. The collected information allowed me to list and chronicle the shipyards (*taracenas*) and dockyards on both banks of the Douro River. All urban spaces give the impression of having their own dynamics, so it was also important to establish links with other shipbuilders on the Portuguese coast. Afterwards I had to answer the question, "who took the initiative in ordering ships to be built?" The answer was private individuals and, naturally, the Crown. But meanwhile we can consider the system of undertakings and contractors, the groups interested in shipbuilding and the merchant networks they dealt with. At a time of large-scale fleet reorganization with scant public

finances, the State depended on agents to bring about effective renewals and introduce new ship models, such as galleons. Private involvement was only possible when individuals could summon great quantities of money, enjoyed influence in the circles of power or were represented in the various financial markets, where they could get shipbuilding materials and rely on rapid customs clearance. In fulfilling this last requirement and because of its longstanding network of contacts, Oporto was in a position to meet these demands.

The survey of ship models and shipbuilding techniques – an area that needs further research – led me to a subject that I studied carefully, namely the trade in shipbuilding materials: everything from the evolution of the cordage industry and the buying and selling of timber to nautical instruments and naval supplies. Shipbuilding, together with the manufacture of equipment and utensils and their respective trades, leads us into the world of labour and the commercial patterns of the Old Regime. My research revealed an organized and efficient universe, which was perfectly able to meet the demands placed upon it.

1.3. One of the tasks I considered to be of great significance was to discover the "composition of the fleet of Oporto". For a long time, I had felt that it was necessary to move from generalities about ships and merchants to an accurate systematization: more specification, names, owners. To speak of twenty ships is quite different from describing a hundred or a thousand. I began with a list of data from the 15th century and then defined the profile of the fleet at certain specific moments in the 16th century (1520, 1558-9, 1573), finally putting all the information about the century together. This allowed me to detect evident contrasts between the several fleets under study, and to decide what their profile was. For example, at one time larger ships, the *naus*, predominated, and, on other occasions, the preference was for lighter and faster vessels, such as the *navios* and caravels.

1.4. The next step was to follow ships working on the Brazilian route (circa 1573) with the invaluable aid of insurance policies from the Consulate of Burgos (*Consulado de Burgos*). This provided evidence of the role of the city in the international exchange system; in the second half of the 16th century, Oporto clearly continued to maintain strong links with South American trade, relegating destinations which previously had been highly visited, such as the Mediterranean ports, to second place. Furthermore, Oporto came to define its vocation more clearly: it was more heavily involved in trade than in transport. So vital was trade that, besides being one of the main inlets for Brazilian sugar imports into Europe, Oporto also had its merchants heavily involved in what was the greatest and richest business at that time. This trade continued into the next century, not only within the city itself, but also with the Dutch Republic, with which Oporto had close connections. I also had to compare the Oporto fleet with other fleets such as those from Brittany, the Basque Country, Cantabria, Malaga and some English ports. This was a difficult task and I showed that such lines of research are far from being satisfactory, because of the various realities involved and the insufficient data available.

I compared the numbers, tonnages and functions of the ships and found some companies that were more involved in transport, whilst others were more interested in trade.

1.5. Then, to conclude my study of ports and ships, I analysed the "role of the parties involved in transactions", establishing the ownership of vessels, their administration costs, their use in keeping with the company's strategies and the ships' profits. Finally, I needed to know how local

agents dealt with the infrastructures and the available resources. In order to do this, I had to analyse the performance of city tradesmen. By way of example, I chose "trade with the Islands" and, having adopted this perspective, I found that my research into maritime history was enriched by the fact of its being linked to economic and social matters. Although I frequently state that throughout the 16th century there was an increase in the number of vessels operating on the Brazilian run, it seemed to me more feasible at this juncture to study the trade relations with the Islands: Madeira, the Canaries, the Azores, São Tomé, Cape Verde; each of these destinations deserved an independent study. From the results, one may infer that, at the end of the 15th century and in the first half of the 16th century, Oporto succeeded in recovering the leading role and wealth that it had lost at the end of the medieval period. The Islands are shown to be a paradigmatic example of a sea route through which investment was aimed at more ambitious targets: the Atlantic trade, operating the Brazilian route and Castile's Indies route. Some of them – like Madeira, or the Canaries – became important points of call for the Brazilian route although continuing to be important per se (for instance, we have a great amount of information about the sugar trade and wine commerce of these islands made by Oportan businessmen, not just for the Brazilian and West Indian markets). The Azores, too, held their own in terms of pastel production and remained a lure to Oportan traders.

I sought to establish the practices involved in such trade: the number of departures, which ships sailed, their frequency, emerging problems; as well as the business engaged in: wine trade, cereals, sugar, pigment plants for the textile industry such as woad (*Isatis Tinctoria*), among others.

2. The second volume of the thesis contains appendices: lists of charters for each run (or ship brokerage) and the identification of the vessels, as well as the publication of 125 previously unpublished documents, most of them being charter contracts, but also including some other interesting categories, all related to the question of maritime trade.

The sources must also be mentioned. They are, in fact, worthy of a chapter of their own. However, many of them are already known and have been studied by many before me, such as, for example, the municipal documentation (administrative deeds, town hall accounts, correspondence with the central government). To this I have nothing to add from the hermeneutic and heuristic point of view. Nonetheless, the main documentary evidence came from the records of the city's notaries: powers of attorney, wills, contracts of charters, loans of money, accounting balances.

This specific documentation discovered only a few decades ago, previously being considered as notaries' documents of minor importance; their real value was assessed by J. Bono y Huerta, J. Montemayor and V. Vázquez de Prada, who wrote books on merchant and credit activities and industrial skills under the scope of urban studies. Voluminous series of disorganised (i.e. unsummarised) papers, which were difficult to decipher, came to us in a very bad condition.

Here I attempted, and in my estimation succeeded, in finding the essential details about the merchant maritime history of Oporto in the 16th century: ships' accounts, identification of shipowners and boatswains, logbooks, trade relations that might highlight the city's international significance. Eiras Roel (1984: 13-30) warns us about the limitations of this legacy, raising the question of who goes to the notary and why, i.e. questioning the real importance of that documentation. How important are the cases from the notaries' offices, when considering as a whole all the established and agreed occurrences, many of them taking place without the need for legal written records? We don't know. But one thing is clear: for all of us who make use of the Portuguese archives,

even though these sources may be limited in number and less expressive than we might wish, they are nonetheless of enormous value for filling in the gaps of extant knowledge.

Next comes the question of veracity. Roel speaks of "dissimulation on the part of the notaries" when he deals with the payment of taxes or the distribution of profits. These are seldom mentioned. There is also the problem of "adequacy": what do these protocols describe - social pressure, conventional practice by notaries or socially-fashioned collective attitudes, or all of these at the same time? But where are there documents that, in one way or another, are not manipulated?
Finally, there is the question of sufficiency. What we have is not enough to uncover all the possible dimensions of social and economic life. Due to this, I decided to turn to distinct collections for help.

2.1. The notaries' records were compared with other sources. Firstly, with the already mentioned municipal ones: town council deeds, judgements, general registers, financial and tax records. Next with Church documents, mainly those kept by the church's chapters (judgements and treasury records were most useful). Then with those of the *São Pedro de Miragaia* Friary (or Confraternity), a charitable institution for seafarers, which had accounting ledgers similar to those kept by the town council. The records of central government were not to be ignored either. I even tried to obtain some information from the few, but nevertheless essential, documents relating to auditors' and customs' records.

3. Passing over to the main conclusions of my work, the "field work" revealed that there were settlements on both banks of the Douro River, which gradually spread from the city walls to the river's mouth and whose populations were mainly engaged in fishing activities. They persisted in going to sea and in trading, overcoming natural geographical difficulties such as the bar of silt across the mouth of the river, full of ridges and of uncertain shape, and frequently deadly currents. This maritime-based life may be included in the model of a "behavioural geography" proposed by Hoyle and Pinder, and designed to study the settlement models of several communities.

Oporto clearly had a particular aptitude for seafaring life. Being the gateway and outlet for a large productive territory, it attracted intense traffic to its markets, warehouses and ships, these goods later being gradually sent on to more distant markets. The city became a seaport partly because of its links with its hinterland. Its medieval rulers fought for its political control, travelling to the country's decision-making centres and speaking out on the city's behalf, making demands and protests, obtaining privileges, controlling different trades – such as the salt trade – and pushing other competitors aside.

In this way, the city became the gateway to northern Portugal and indispensable for the nation's trade. No time was wasted and it was soon organised as a commercial city that conducted its own trading activity, as well as that of all the northern districts of Portugal. No wonder many rich tradesmen were tempted to settle here, some of them permanently.

3.1. Initiatives for the building of a harbour had begun a long time before. The first mooring places were constructed as early as the 14th century in order to respond to the increasing demand. And, by the end of the Middle Ages, the Town Council had modernised these mooring places, establishing limits for the freight that could be transported and building loading and unloading bays, as well as moving the shipbuilding activity to the sandy shore of Miragaia, outside the city walls. The

boatyards (*taracenas*) on the shores were given over to shipbuilding. Galleys gave way to larger vessels (*navios*), caravels and *naus*.

Elementary quays were built; checkpoints on transhipped goods were created as were services for unloading ships. In the 16th century, there was already mention of harbour zones, with distinct sectors being created for river and sea traffic.

This activity soon gained international projection. There is mention of "the men who trade with France". Such trade was determined by the reduced number of inhabitants: the city itself was unable to absorb and consume the volume of merchandise in circulation and the main trade was directed towards satisfying foreign markets.

However, there is a lack of documentation enabling us to fully understand the ways in which the entrepreneurs operated. The only available documents come from the Town Hall, and so all that we hear are the voices of those in power. In several records, we find papers relating to sailors' confraternities in which we can find mention of ships. Here there appear a great number of *naus* and *barinéis* (smaller boats used on the Mediterranean), but rather less mentioned are the caravels. We can also identify active boatswains, pilots, sailors, carpenters and caulkers, otherwise retired at the hospice of the Holy Spirit. Compared to that of the Town Hall, this documentation doesn't furnish any further information, even about trading mechanisms.

3.2. These registers do, however, coincide in terms of their general contents, showing us the maritime society of the 15th century. There appears to be a clear distinction between seamen from the riverside neighbourhoods and merchants from *Rua Nova* (New Street) or *Rua dos Mercadores* (Merchants' Street), the city's two main streets. Ships appear to be owned by just one person (a local oligarch or aristocrat), although, by the end of the century, we may speak of "ownerships" that presage the more customary partnerships of the 16th century. For the most part, these ships traded with Flanders, France and the British Isles, but did not ignore the Eastern Iberian coast, especially Valencia, or the Italian ports, establishing a permanent and constant link between the North Sea and the Mediterranean.

Between the 15th and the 16th centuries, things changed drastically. There is a lack of documentation that prevents us from assessing the full extent of those changes, and some of our perceptions pointing to a period of difficulties may be due to that very lack of records. However, news of a large-scale decline in trade, together with other facts, such as the city's secondary role in terms of the national project for expansion, the decline in Portuguese navigation on the east coast of the Peninsula and the appearance of a new aggressive merchant class that challenged the local authorities, all point towards, if not a period of decline, then at least to a complex readjustment in the trading strategies of local agents.

At this time, we may note increased links with the islands, chiefly Madeira, the Azores, the Canaries and then São Tomé, which later functioned as strategic points in the rich trades with Brazil.

From the middle of the 16th century onwards, we can find only a reduced amount of documentary evidence from notaries' records and the information they provide, especially when compared with documents from other institutions.

3.3. Through the records of notaries, we can understand something of the diversity of the Oportan trade world: a strong maritime engagement centred on trade with Brazil – in close connection

with northern European seaports – and a vigorous link with the islands as far as the international dimension. Furthermore, we can discover more about the movements of inshore and offshore coastal traffic, which enable us to know something about the wide range of goods from Oporto delivered to the important centres of the European economy, starting with the Iberian ports. This network of relations grew wider and was permanently stimulated, so that, besides its principal Atlantic influence, Oporto also enjoyed connections with the Cape Run, as well as participated modestly in the North African and Mediterranean itineraries. The "Inner Sea" was never far removed from the plans of Oportan commercial leaders, for the Iberian east coast, Sardinia, Sicily and some Italian ports (such as Civita Vecchia and Genoa) also traded heavily in primary goods and cereals, as well as engaged in major financial activity.

One of the starting questions of my Ph.D. thesis had to do with the trade taking place with the East: to discover if Oporto had been kept away from this field before the abolition of the royal monopoly and how it had become interested in it after 1570, as a result of the Crown's opening up this trade to co-nationals. Archival research drew attention to the construction of Vasco da Gama's ships in the Oportan dockyards for the opening of that route, Oportan ships hired to undertake the journey to the East throughout the 16th century and finally to a massive documental base of data regarding Oportan inhabitants who migrated to India in the same period. The thesis, however, began to move into other areas and, with regard to the information collected, further research needed to be made.

To sum up, then, the city's principal features were demonstrably:

- A high level of immigration, with great fortunes being amassed through investment and high rates of interest at the *Casa da Índia*, stimulating the city's economy.
- An engagement in shipbuilding, furnishing know-how that enabled the development of the *nau*, the emblematic ship of the run. The first ones were built in Oporto, where mariners, boatswains, pilots, caulkers and ships' carpenters who took part in the first expeditions were trained, highlighting the skills of the city's human resources.
- Regular supplies of meat and other victuals to the fleets.
- A participation with chartered vessels in the India Run, although not on a regular basis.

These features were important as far as naval activity was concerned, but greater knowledge is needed to understand how important the Far East was for the development of companies and trade associations in the city. For the moment, it seems that neither before 1570 nor afterwards was the city's participation significant because at that time it had, above all, a firmly established and growing Atlantic vocation.

3.4. On the other hand, Oporto played an important role in the Hispanic colonial world, in Castile's Indian routes, and in the exploitation of the American territories. There were ships that sailed from Brazil to Santo Domingo carrying sugar, and others sailing from the Canaries to the West Indies with slaves, ignoring bans, impediments or embargoes, and being supported by partnerships with Castilian agents, with increasing frequency, from 1580 onwards. We can see some of the city's ships being sold to businessmen from the neighbouring kingdom. There are also instances of pilots from Oporto being incorporated into Spanish shipping routes, in the Spanish *Carrera de Indias*, for example. Sometimes, mainly during the Dynastic Union (1580-1640), the Douro River provided

berths for ships from the West Indies. Puerto Rico and Peru appear in the customs records as suppliers of gold and silver to the local Royal Mint.

For trade partnerships, especially those owned by New Christians, the most powerful group of all, Seville appeared as an important centre, an open market where they could deal more easily in large-scale transactions. Almost all of these businesses had agencies or partnerships at the *Casa de la Contratación* with prominent Sevillian businessmen, insurance agents and bankers, who financed operations such as slave traffic. The Oportan managers worked directly with these people, travelling between Iberian, Flemish and Dutch centres.

From the lists collected by Eufemio Lorenzo Sanz, we can distinguish people from Oporto travelling regularly from one side of the Atlantic to the other. Until the 17th century, they were involved in both trade and smuggling, so that, in 1625, Oporto appeared on a list published by the Board of Trade in Madrid relating to seaports that had to be closely watched in order to prevent smuggling from Holland and Zeeland. One hundred years earlier, Carlos V had done the same thing. Thanks to these activities, the city received increasing investment in slave traffic and saw many ships setting sail to African emporiums and bringing slaves back to redistribution centres in the Canaries and Andalusia, although the Brazilian Northeast remained the main centre for this traffic. Throughout the 16th century, all of the city's businessmen considered Brazil their main target. The South American continent became a priority as a result of the systematic exploitation of the area in a bid to find a valid alternative for the revitalisation of trade.

3.5. With its economy and shipbuilding activity recovered, and once the impediments to its involvement in the South American trade route had been removed (the French invaders had been driven out of Brazil by 1567), the city discovered the full potential of this business. By the middle of the century, there were already promising results, and these were maintained well into the first half of the 17th century, in collaboration with the Dutch, as Amélia Polónia and Leonor Costa have stated in their own studies on this subject. This led to major changes in the rankings of Portuguese seaports. Oporto had been a secondary port from the end of the 15th century to the first half of the 16th century, having increased in importance thanks to the dynamics of the sugar trade. The city had close connections to sugar production, through ownership of sugar plantations and mills *(engenhos)* in Brazil, a situation that resulted in migratory flows of great social and economic significance and led to greater involvement in such vital areas as the slave trade. Thanks to these essential elements, Oporto became one of the leading ports at both a national and international level.

Such developments led to the regular formation of partnerships, greater circulation of managers, increased shipbuilding activity and the adaptation of the harbour to be able to cope with the more intense traffic. This increased even further after 1573 when tax laws made the ocean-going navigation to and from Galicia a less attractive prospect – this region having been until then perhaps the most important centre for sugar importation to Northern Europe, having been preferred by Portuguese traders because of the more favourable nature of the taxes levied on such merchandise. From now on, when traders chartered ships, they ordered them to return to Oporto, leading to a golden period in the city's history. The control of the sugar trade by locally established managers attracted foreign investors. And the movement of ships in and out of the Douro estuary increased dramatically. This can be confirmed from consultation of the naval medical records in the last quarter

of the 16th century: if, until then, the local authorities had kept a close watch on the arrivals of Portuguese ships, from now on, they began to be more concerned with exercising control over foreign vessels.

All of this led me to a deeper appreciation of the shipping at Oporto's disposal.
During the medieval period, the city's fleet of ships, either owned by or placed at the service of the Town Hall elite or oligarchy, was adapted for trading purposes. The merchant fleet of the second half of the 16th century was organised in accordance with the commercial interests of the newcomers, who were sometimes owners of parts of the ships (the so-called *parcerias*). The fleet was prepared to operate along the South Atlantic trade routes and left the redistribution of goods to other ports to the neighbouring cities' fleets, such as that of Vila do Conde and later Flemish ones.
From this, we may draw two interesting conclusions:

- Firstly, major changes occurred during the 15th and 16th centuries in terms of the development of skills, profile and performance of merchant ships and crews. Vessels were adapted, becoming lighter, more versatile and better suited to the kind of business carried out by the city's agents (their main clients), and caravels were reintroduced as transport ships. This was also caused by the greater dispersal of investment, as a means of minimising risk.
- Merchant trade partnerships led to a widening of seaborne relationships. The naval resources of the major European powers were used, especially those from the North, as a way of solving the difficulties in reaching certain areas, profiting both from more competitive prices, as well as the naval superiority of those fleets. In other words, there was a greater division of tasks. And although this may have reduced the capacity of intervention of native merchant vessels (a fact that still remains to be proved), it didn't harm the natural development of trading companies.

3.6. Trade and navigation. New relations and partnerships were established, strategies were programmed, privileges were sought after and competitors were fought off. At the same time, there was innovation resulting from the arrival of new merchant groups, who caused a revolution in the city's economy – a process that began at the end of the 15th century. From this we can infer that longstanding merchant businesses were given a secondary role (although they still controlled the local political scene), Mediterranean traffic diminished and, as the city was left out of the royal expansionist project, there was a fall in revenue.

Secondly, there was a recovery brought about by the new leading forces in Atlantic trade: woad (*Isatis Tinctoria*) was imported from the Azores, in association with merchants and financiers from Burgos, Seville and Flanders; control was exercised over the Atlantic slave trade and sugar and cotton imports from Brazil.

Thirdly, these local merchants had a great capacity for initiative and enterprise. We cannot accept the general idea that the activities based in Oporto were dependent on plans drawn up by foreign merchants, with the Portuguese being merely good transporters of goods (by then sugar had become an import with a great impact and provided important revenue). Business both inside and outside the city was conducted by its inhabitants in keeping with the policies dictated by their own commercial houses. This is certainly what happened if we consider the city's trading activity as a

whole: woad, iron, codfish or salt, slaves or the contracting of ships. At a certain point, attempts were even made to establish monopoly control over some of these areas. This illustrates the vitality and independence of a city that went its own way and sought to adapt its port services to the increasing traffic.

When we study the documents, we find two cities: one was that of the Town Hall and the old oligarchy now in decline, whilst the other was that of the effervescent world of the first Atlantic system of recently established New Christians, or *conversos*. Such merchants were organised into various far-reaching networks, enterprising people who had connections with some of the most important businesses of that time, reaching well beyond national borders. Nonetheless, they were obliged to comply with the legal procedures imposed by the city's administrators. Because of these restraints and a number of insoluble problems, many of these traders left for Holland and the other Dutch United Provinces in order to carry out their activities under better and safer conditions.

4. I would like to close this article by reasserting some of the major conclusions of my thesis. From resurveying old historical sources and divulging information collected from new ones, such as notary registers, I was able to investigate the building-up and management of a sea harbour since the Middle Ages, one which became very busy and thrived during the second half of the 16th century. That important infrastructure proved vital to the very prosperity of Oporto and its merchants and their integration into a wider economic system.

The second conclusion fitted and completed the first one. I intended either to combine a micro study (of local urban history) with a macro perspective, by involving this town, in terms of its port system, maritime and economic features in an extensive and dynamic region (within and outside the political borders of the Portuguese kingdom) in early modern times. The role of Oportan merchants involved in advantageous intercontinental business, for instance in South America and in the West Indies, and the connections they had established amongst the major maritime centres of northwest Portugal and northern Spain, were extremely important in defining and widening the major trade lines towards the lively cities of England (such as Bristol and London), Northern France (Nantes and Rouen), Flanders (Antwerp) and Holland (Amsterdam and Rotterdam). The North provided the wealth and the mould. Oporto turns out to be the southernmost city of Northern Europe.

At the same time, the data presented, combined with an ample and published documental *corpus*, are enough to certify the widespread activity of this particularly seaport but, most importantly, it calls for a new look and an urgent need for updating our knowledge regarding the economic and maritime dynamics developed since the early Modern Ages. By integrating a coherent economic space between other seaports usually seen as less important, Oporto, its merchants and ships contributed decisively to the building of the first Atlantic System.

Meanwhile, the city had rediscovered one of its greatest and most ancient skills: shipbuilding. This activity was carried out not only in response to local demands, but also in response to royal requirements. Huge amounts of money had to be invested and at the same time the activity was dependent on specific maritime strategies planned in Madrid (although these were implemented in Portugal even before 1580). Close links were maintained with Biscay's naval requirements – all of this work being done in light of the reorganisation of naval warfare in the 1590s. It was the period of the galleons, modern ships used for trading but conditioned by their military characteristics: they were built in increasing number at the *Ouro* yard, which was a first-rate shipyard. It was a time of

forwarding-agents and brokers, people who amassed great fortunes in trading from Oporto, Vila do Conde and Lisbon, benefiting from the vitality of the customs and the city's strategic geographic position. Here, they could more easily find imported tools and timber from the Baltic sea, as well as obtain planking from the regions around the city, in the upper Douro valley and the Minho province – a supply that was already rare (or becoming rare) in the Iberian Peninsula. As a well-known commander wrote to King Philip III, "those lands that produce wood should be guarded like the Potosi hills".

It was a time for galleons and contractors. And a time for ships' carpenters, who enjoyed a great reputation at the *Ouro* shipyard – such as Bento Francisco, who built the galleon *Santa Teresa* in keeping with the traditional techniques of Oportan shipbuilders, "a remarkable man among us," as Dom Francisco Manuel de Melo wrote in 1639, "whom we ought to remember, for the powerful and excellent ships he built in this city; for, as the natural father of noble and great sons, he is worthy of veneration by posterity, being the one who skilfully engendered works that were not only illustrious because of their greatness but also extremely useful to the republic – and we do not have any notice of another man that should be so remembered".

Over the centuries, the carpenters of the Oporto shipyards built some of the best vessels that sailed the seas. This thesis wants them, too, to be remembered. As they well deserve.

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