

Ana María Rivera Medina (ed.), Ports in the Medieval European Atlantic. Shipping, Transport and Labour, Woodbridge (The Boydell Press) 2021, XVIII–202 p., 18 b/w ill., ISBN 978-1-78327-615-8, GBP 75,00.

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This collection of articles is the result of a research collaboration between the University of La Laguna and the University of Cantabria studying the maritime world in late medieval Castile. Chronologically, the articles span from the High Middle Ages to 1600, but their focus lies on the 15th and 16th centuries. As stated in the excellent preface by the editor, Ana María Rivera Medina, the volume seeks to investigate the littoral communities along the Atlantic coasts and their role in the local and regional economies as well as the vital role they played in the development of the Atlantic port system. While most of these communities did not develop into major ports and centres of commerce, they played a crucial role in providing the necessary service to Atlantic shipping such as bringing cargo on land and providing an infrastructure necessary for shipping, urbanisation, and economy to develop. This has traditionally been overlooked in the research, but as Medina rightfully asserts, »The ›sea‹ is more than water and beaches; it permeates all surrounding activities, whether on the waterfront, riverbanks or even the interior«. As such, the volume deals less with the sea and seafarers, and focuses on the geographical, legal, logistical, and socio-economic aspects of the Atlantic ports. Thereby the volume seeks to highlight an understudied feature of the premises of medieval and early modern shipping, and the interface between land, littoral, and sea.

The preface is followed by an introduction by Eduardo Aznar Vallejo where the ideas presented by Medina are further outlined. In chapter 1, Mathias Tranchant presents a good introduction to French Port History with a focus on the legal disputes over the jurisdiction of the littoral between the French Crown and local *seigneurs*. The latter had sometimes semi-sovereign rights to the coasts of their lordships, and only around 1500 did the Crown succeed in imposing its jurisdiction.

This is followed by an article by Ana María Rivera Medina on stevedoring and cargo handling in the Basque ports. Medina delivers a thorough and detailed account of how ships' cargoes was packed, loaded, and unloaded in the ports, and how the seasonality of maritime trade prevented guild formation amongst Basque stevedores – contrary to their compatriots' organization in Northern European ports. Furthermore, even though stevedoring was an immensely hard physical work, Medina shows that probably a quarter of all Basque stevedores were women.



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María Álvarez Fernández deals with the Galician and Asturian littoral in chapter 3. Contrary to the Basques, people from these areas were more engaged in fishing and whaling than in international shipping and commerce. Accordingly, the maritime activities of the Galicia and Asturias were more aimed at supplying local markets than international commerce. Therefore, the imprint on local communities was different and less geared towards stimulating port urbanisation.

In chapter 4, Amândio J. M. Barros investigates the impact of slavery and slave trade on Northern Portuguese ports in the 16th century. He demonstrates that Portuguese slavery of peoples from the colonies in America and Asia, but primarily from Africa, was of a different sort than in the colonies themselves. Essentially, black slaves were paid wages and served in the same jobs as Portuguese slaves in the port industries and on-board ships. Thus, they were treated more like indentured servants than chattel to be exploited. Barros therefore argues that early modern Portugal seems to be a special case in the history of Atlantic slavery.

In chapter 5, Sara Pinto investigates the transborder shipping and coastal communities of Northern Portugal and Galicia. While important locally for commerce and the supply of foodstuffs and manpower, geomorphic changes prevented these ports from developing into urban centres. Nevertheless, their role in transborder shipping was crucial to the Portugal-Galicia border area as it suffered from labour shortage in the Late Middle Ages.

Turning to the Spanish south-southwest, Enrique José Ruiz Pilares studies 15th century Andalusian ports stretching from the Portuguese border to Gibraltar in chapter 6. Here he draws attention to the interplay between bigger ports such as Seville and Cadiz and their relationship and dependence upon smaller, secondary ports such as Huelva.

In the penultimate chapter of the volume, Roberto J. González Zalacain investigates the development of ports on the island of Tenerife. Despite this island's – and the rest of the Canary Islands – role in the transatlantic trade, Zalacain shows that only very late did these islands develop proper ports. This was because the islands had so many good natural landing spots that the local incentive for the building of wharves and ports was lacking. Only with the eventual expansion of trade did this come about.

The volume is rounded off by a conclusion by Jesús Ángel Solórzano Telechea. He stresses the ports' function as a gateway between land and sea. Based on the volume's findings he calls for Port History to develop as an independent subdiscipline of maritime, urban, and economic history.

The book succeeds admirably in its premise to present the *Stand der Forschung* to an international audience not familiar with French, Spanish and Portuguese research on the maritime communities at the dawn of the age of European global exploration and



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colonization. Furthermore, it clearly demonstrates the various mechanisms and social groups at play in the portuary communities on the Atlantic coasts of South-Western Europe. The articles are thought-provoking as they point to new, general insights into socio-economic life in late medieval Europe. Examples therefore are the articles by Barros and Pinto on slavery and labour shortage in the early 16th century Iberia and the employment of women in heavy labour in the Basque ports as shown by Medina. Taken together, these studies seem to suggest a general problem of an insufficient labour force in the wake of the Black Death (as proposed by for instance Michel Vergé-Franceschi).

Moreover, the volume convincingly challenges the statist or national-economic focus in maritime studies. Rather, the volume demonstrates local level resistance to state control and how autonomous and cross-border late medieval and early modern portuary life was.

A minor quibble: All the contributions are in English, but the authors quote sources directly in the original languages (French, Spanish and Portuguese) in the text and provide English translations in the footnotes. This is frustrating as it breaks the reading flow as the reader must switch languages constantly. It would be preferable for English academic texts to provide the translation in the main text and the original in a footnote. The book also contains many informative tables and images, but it is a pity that the latter are not in colour as the reproductions in grey make them hard to decipher.

These points do not take away the general conclusion however, that this is an indispensable volume for anyone interested in late medieval Atlantic ports and their role in the development of international trade and shipping.



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