

Prize papers as new sources for maritime historical research: The circulation of knowledge on the sea

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The Prize Papers Collection, preserved at the National Archives (Kew, England), contains documents captured from enemy ships by the British Navy during the War of Spanish Succession (1702-1714). Those Papers relating to Southern Netherlandish ships and sailors have been previously unexplored, and offer new perspectives on the early modern maritime history of the North Sea area. Historical research and transcription of these sources, and in particular sailors' correspondence, allow us to examine two ways in which the sea was considered as a resource: this concerns the use of fish as an on-board food source and commodity, as well as the knowledge of ways in which the sea itself served as a resource, in terms of navigational strategies offered by currents, climatic conditions, and sea routes.

A series of selected case studies allow us to look at direct strategies of resource use from the perspective of the sea itself, and from the transient vantage point of the ship and its sailors. This reveals how certain privateering strategies and navigational tactics were enabled by the circulation of expert knowledge within a shared socio-cultural environment formed by maritime communities in the closely related ports of Ostend and Dunkirk.

By means of letters, cargo lists, and lists of victuals, research on the use of fish as a resource reveals how types of sea fish such as herring, 'mudfish' and codfish were either caught and used as a shipboard food source, or transported in order to serve as commodities. This was the case for oysters from Le Croisicq, or salted fish such as Mediterranean anchovy or North Sea herring. The provenance of the sources bearing witness to such cargo shows that fish as commodities were deemed valuable enough to warrant the Southern Netherlandish ships' hijacking by the rival British Navy or the Guernsey-Jersey privateers.

From shipboard correspondence on the use of the sea and its climatic conditions as a resource for navigational strategies, it is clear such specialist knowledge circulated primarily among privateers, who used this to their advantage in order to hijack and ransom rival ships and captains. Specific instructions probably circulated in both oral and written form, showing joint operations between Ostend and Dunkirk privateers towards areas such as the Dogger Bank or the Scottish seas. The considerable social mobility of sailor communities between both ports of Ostend and Dunkirk would have facilitated such exchanges and their required communication. Those communities apt at using navigational knowledge and making use of specific sea routes often sailed with smaller vessels such as snauw or dogger ships, which could also be involved in fishing. This implies fishing communities from Ostend, who would have had good knowledge of the sea as a strategic and navigational resource through their fishing experience, may have turned to privateering as a lucrative pursuit during wartime. On the North Sea coast, Dunkirk served as a main base for such privateering, although many crews comprised Ostend sailors and captains as well.

The research project on 18th century Southern Netherlandish Prize Papers forms a new line of historical research within the VLIZ (Flanders Marine Institute), initiated with support of the COST Oceans Past Platform and in collaboration with The National Archives (Kew). It opens up research into previously unknown sources on Southern Netherlandish Maritime history, and has wide research potential to link up with e.g. research on transnational economical networks, socio-cultural conditions of sailors, and strategies of commerce and privateering under early 18th century wartime conditions. It aims to be a collaborative project constructing research partnerships within a wider network.

Keywords: maritime history; prize papers; privateering; 18th century; historical; fishery; Ostend; Dunkirk