

Reaping the Returns of a Runaway Economy

Seamen's Wages in the Ostend Merchant Marine, 1775-1785

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, economic and maritime historians have shown growing interest in the wages earned by regular seamen in merchant shipping. Due to a lack of sources, however, the composition and size of these earnings remain an elusive topic, as are the economic, demographic, and political processes that shaped them. In this article, I conduct a micro-history of seamen's earnings in Ostend's merchant marine during the early 1780s, a period of commercial uptick in the principal port town of the Austrian Netherlands. I show how a confluence of wartime circumstances and domestic economic policies led to extraordinary wage levels. From a micro point of view, I show how individual seamen reaped the returns of this runaway port economy by successfully wrangling over wages and harnessing the mobility of their profession, both between and within ports. As such, this article provides a perspective on wage-formation from a neutral and small maritime power, as well as a novel history from below of Ostend's boom years.

Introduction

This paper presents a microhistory of the market for maritime labor in Ostend's private merchant marine between 1775 and 1785. Scholarly attention for maritime labor has mostly limited itself to major seafaring nations such as Great Britain, the Dutch Republic, and France. Ostend, the principal port town of the Austrian Netherlands, lay at the crossroads of these nations, and during the early 1780s, it briefly became the center of Europe's commercial world as the Austrian Habsburgs adopted a

neutral position during the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783) and the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780-1784). Additionally, inspired by mercantilist philosophies aimed at promoting commerce, Joseph II initiated infrastructure works and declared Ostend a free port in June 1781. Taken together, these Habsburg policies resulted in tremendous commercial fervor, with shipping increasing fourfold in the space of only a few years. Using Ostend's bustling port life of the 1780s as a case-study, I examine and elaborate literature on wage formation in early modern labor markets, both from a macro as well as a micro perspective.

During the last few decades, the lives of those dwelling and toiling on the world's vast bodies of water have become progressively less elusive. In the wake of the shift to 'history from below' and the branching out of the field of 'naval history' to a more encompassing and inclusive 'maritime history', many historians chose to change their point of focus from the quarterdeck to the lower decks.¹ By doing so, they attempted to get a better view of the large population of often anonymous seamen who played a crucial role in shipping – a growing economic sector and, according to some historians, a driver of growth in pre-modern Europe.²

The subsequent attention for sailors' pay rates came primarily from historians expressing the need to repaint the picture that for long had been obscured by the tones of nineteenth-century romanticism. Contrary to the latter's focus on independence and adventure, these authors claimed that the emergence of the sailor's salary marked the evolution in social status aboard ship, from the medieval mariner-as-

1 Marcus Rediker, *Between the devil and the deep blue sea. Merchant seamen, pirates, and the Anglo-American maritime world, 1700-1750* (Cambridge 1987), notably 1-9; Lewis Fischer, Harald Hamre, Poul Holm and Jaap Bruijn (eds), *The North Sea. Twelve essays on social history of maritime labour* (Stavanger 1989); Pablo Emilio Pérez-Mallaína, *Los hombres del océano. Vida cotidiana de los tripulantes de las flotas de Indias, siglo XVI* (Sevilla 1992); Peter Earle, *Sailors. English merchant seamen, 1650-1775* (London 1998); Gelina Harlaftis and Carmel Vassallo, 'Maritime history since Braudel', in: Gelina Harlaftis and Carmel Vassallo, *New directions in Mediterranean maritime history* (Liverpool 2004) 6-7; Amélia Polónia, 'Maritime history. A gateway to global history?', in: Maria Fusaro and Amélia Polónia (eds), *Maritime history as global history* (Liverpool 2010) 2-3; Stephen Taylor, *Sons of the waves. The common seaman in the heroic age of sail, 1740-1840* (New Haven 2020).

2 Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James Robinson, 'The rise of Europe. Atlantic trade, institutional change, and economic growth', *The American Economic Review* 95:3 (2005) 546-579; Richard Unger, 'Shipping and Western European economic growth in the late Renaissance. Potential connections', *International Journal of Maritime History* 18:2 (2006) 101-102; Jan Lucassen and Richard Unger, 'Shipping, productivity and economic growth', in: Richard Unger (ed.), *Shipping and economic growth 1350-1850* (Leiden 2011) 32-38; Jelle van Lottum and Jan Luiten van Zanden, 'Labour productivity and human capital in the European maritime sector of the eighteenth century', *Explorations in Economic History* 53:1 (2014) 84.

stakeholder to the early modern wage-earning, proletarian seaman.³ Other scholars began examining the migratory patterns of mariners and sought pull factor explanations in regional differences in earning potential.⁴ An increased appreciation of shipping for early modern economies led another group to look at salaries solely from a production factor point of view, questioning whether high wage costs could have been a driver of innovation in shipping during the early modern period.⁵

Conclusions to these salary-based debates have often been hampered by two major deficits: a general lack of data on the early modern earning potential of seamen and, consequently, a limited grasp on the mechanisms that fixed maritime wages.⁶ On a macro level, the idea of a properly functioning labor market – in the neoclassical sense as a dynamic place where supply and demand met, and which cleared at a price level acceptable to both parties – has long been found wanting by scholars studying early modern wages. Many returned from the archives with a collection of wage entries differing in time of recording but hardly differing from one another, seemingly undisturbed by market forces. Similarly, the stability of nominal wages found for seagoing professions has long eluded maritime historians.⁷ Charles Kindleberger summarized existing research in 1992, saying that “monthly pay [...] tended in peacetime to stay more or less steady for centuries at a time, rather than fluctuate in response

3 Richard Jackson, ‘From profit-sailing to wage-sailing. Mediterranean owner-captains and their crews during the Medieval commercial revolution’, *Journal of European Economic History* 16:1 (1987) 605-628; Rediker, *Between the devil*, 3-4; Marcus Rediker, ‘The common seaman in the histories of capitalism and the working class’, *International Journal of Maritime History* 1:1 (1989) 337-357; Paul van Royen, ‘Personnel of the Dutch and English mercantile marine (1700-1850). An introductory paper’, in: Jaap Bruijn and Willem Mörzer Bruyns (eds), *Anglo-Dutch mercantile marine relations, 1700-1850* (Leiden 1991) 103-105.

4 Jelle van Lottum, ‘Some thoughts about migration of maritime workers in the eighteenth-century North Sea region’, *International Journal of Maritime History* 27:4 (2015) 647-661; Alexander Klein and Jelle van Lottum, ‘The determinants of international migration in early modern Europe. Evidence from the maritime sector, c. 1700-1800’, *Social Science History* 44:1 (2020) 143-167.

5 Lucassen and Unger, ‘Shipping’, 29-32.

6 Roland Baetens, ‘Sailors in the Southern Netherlands and Belgium (16th-19th centuries)’, in: Paul van Royen (ed.), *Those emblems of hell? European sailors and the maritime labour market, 1570-1870* (Liverpool 1997) 284; Paul van Royen, ‘The “national” maritime labour market. Looking for common characteristics’, in: Van Royen (ed.), *Those emblems*, 1-2.

7 Ralph Davis, *The rise of the English shipping industry in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries* (Liverpool 1962) 127-132; Rediker, *Between the devil*, 124; Charles Kindleberger, *Mariners and markets* (New York 1992) 25; Paul van Royen, ‘Mariners and markets in the age of sail. The case of the Netherlands’, in: Lewis Fischer (ed.), *The market for seamen in the age of sail* (Liverpool 1994) 47-57; Karel Davids, ‘Maritime labour in the Netherlands, 1570-1870’, in: Van Royen, *Those emblems*, 67-68.

to perturbations in demand and supply.”⁸ Paul van Royen – in his introduction to a new multi-author volume on the topic a few years later – echoed Kindleberger by questioning the usefulness of the ‘labor market’ concept to explain wages.⁹ Market forces, however, seem to have been prone to surface during wartime: as armed conflict on the high seas increased the danger of sailing and extended employment (or, in the case of Great Britain, impressment) by the navy, the pool of maritime labor became shallow, and wages increased.¹⁰ Although this assessment has sometimes created the image that the incomes of early modern seamen were entirely dependent on forces beyond their control, scholars have recently highlighted the importance of the micro level in wage formation. Authors such as Blakemore and Vanneste have shown how maritime workers were able to leverage personal skills in wage negotiations and made ample use of their right to conduct private trade during voyages, considerably augmenting their monetary incomes.¹¹ Additionally, scholars have stressed how seamen were able to use the mobility of their profession to move between (i.e., migration) and within (i.e., desertion) ports to pursue economic opportunities and actively better their lives.

The goal of this paper is threefold. First, by contributing data from the Austrian Netherlands, it adds to the sparse information on early modern wages in the private merchant marine, a segment of shipping which has received little attention in historiography compared to chartered companies and the navy.¹² Second, on a macro-economic level, it tests the conclusions of previous literature with regards to wage formation during wartime, adding a novel perspective from a non-belligerent, neutral nation. Additionally, going beyond the traditional explanations of naval employment, it seeks to draw attention to the

8 Kindleberger, *Mariners and markets*, 25.

9 Van Royen, ‘The “national” maritime labour market’, 2, 7.

10 Alain Cabantous and Jacky Messiaen, *Gens de mer à Dunkerque aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Dunkirk 1977) 23; Alain Cabantous, *La mer et les hommes. Pêcheurs et matelots dunkerquois de Louis XIV à la Révolution* (Dunkirk 1980) 255-256; Rediker, *Between the devil*, 122-124; Davis, *The rise*, 129-131; Davids, ‘Maritime labour’, 67; Jaap Bruijn and Els van Eyck van Heslinga, ‘Seamen’s employment in the Netherlands (c. 1600 – c. 1800)’, *Mariner’s Mirror* 70:1 (1984) 13; Pérez-Mallaina, *Los hombres*, 117-122; Carla Rahn Philips, ‘Maritime labour in early modern Spain’, in: Fischer (ed.), *The market for seamen*, 23-25; Magnus Ressel, ‘Structure and payment of German long-distance shipping, 1630-1700’, in: Maria Fusaro et al (eds), *Law, labour and empire. Comparative perspectives on seafarers, c. 1500-1800* (New York 2015) 147-150.

11 Richard Blakemore, ‘Pieces of eight, pieces of eight. Seamen’s earnings and the venture economy of early modern seafaring’, *Economic History Review* 70:4 (2017) 1154-1184.

12 Ressel, ‘Structure and payment’, 148; Davids, ‘Maritime labour’, 41.

impact of governmental economic policies on demand and salary level. Third, on a micro-economic level, this article wants to explore how individual seamen navigated these macro forces and how they leveraged both the political constellation and their personal human capital in wage negotiations. In this way, this study provides a novel bottom-up perspective on Ostend's boom years, complementing existing Belgian historiography, which has tended to focus mainly on maritime capital (merchants and shipowners).¹³

The same paucity of sources regarding regular seamen that has plagued previous research is not unfamiliar to the situation of the Southern Netherlands. Roland Baetens has attributed the absence of sources to a lack of government concern for maritime affairs during the early modern period.¹⁴ Furthermore, both the administrative and admiralty archives of Ostend were lost during the Second World War. As a result, many historians have limited themselves to the study of the Generale Keijzerlijke Indische Compagnie (GIC, more commonly known as the 'Ostend Company'), the Austrian Netherlands' sole and short-lived chartered East India company, whose archives were more generously endowed with sources and, more importantly, remained safely tucked away in Antwerp.¹⁵ Still, the loss of Ostend's archives, tremendous though it may be, does not mean that *nothing* can be known about Belgium's early modern maritime history; many useful sources, admittedly often fragmentary, remain in national and foreign repositories. This paper mainly draws on two largely unexplored sets of documents: Ostend's notary archives (kept in Bruges) and the so-called Prize Papers (court and shipboard documents that resulted from the capture of vessels by British privateers, now kept in Kew, London). I complemented this material with numerous scattered fragments in other archives.¹⁶

This paper is outlined as follows. First, I assess the composition of Ostend's market for maritime labor. I examine if the description of the Austrian Netherlands having a homogenous maritime population

13 Jan Parmentier, *Het gezicht van de Oostendse handelaar. Studie van de Oostendse kooplieden, reders en ondernemers actief in de internationale maritieme handel en visserij tijdens de 18de eeuw* (Ostend 2004); Dirk Jacobs, 'Geopolitiek en sociaal kapitaal in een Brugse grafkelder. Slavenhandelaar Nicolas Masterson en de trans-Atlantische driehoekshandel tijdens de Vierde Engels-Nederlandse Oorlog (1780-1784)', *Handelingen van het Genootschap voor Geschiedenis te Brugge* 159:1 (2022) 65-108.

14 Baetens, 'Sailors', 268.

15 *Ibid.*, 267-285.

16 Concerning the notary archives, I made grateful use of the inventory created by the late Jan Coopman.



Illustration 1 View of Ostend in 1781, clearly showing the large number of ships
(source: G. Canali, circa 1781. Ostend City Archive PT/G0045.)

made by previous scholars holds for the 1780s, when increased shipping placed a significant extra demand on available seamen. I show how, despite the influx of many foreign seamen, supply of workers chronically fell short of demand. Then, I examine wage levels in Ostend during the eighteenth century and compare with those of the vibrant 1780s. Confirming existing literature on wartime influence on salaries, I show how wages rose dramatically during this period. Additionally, I stress the impact of governmental policies with regards to free ports and infrastructure works, suggesting that these were able to stimulate commerce in such a way that salaries remained higher than usual beyond the conclusion of peace. Lastly, I turn to the micro-level by looking at the actions of individual seamen in Ostend's bustling port life. I show how maritime workers were able to leverage the political/economic circumstances of the 1780s and nautical skills in negotiations with shipowners, and how mobility both within and between ports increased during market stress. All these aspects confirm the view of seamen being active economic agents, continually seeking opportunities to better their lives.

Growth and internationalization of Ostend's maritime population

"Everything is quiet here except trade which encreases [sic] Amazingly & to which the Government begins to give every possible encouragement", wrote John Peter, the British consul, to London on 4 April 1781.¹⁷ The accession to the League of Armed Neutrality and the proclamation of Ostend as a free port topped off the long list of improvements in port infrastructure that the Brussels and Vienna governments had initiated during the second half of the eighteenth century in order to encourage commerce.¹⁸ During the early 1780s, these reforms took effect in an exceptional manner: in the space of only a few years, shipping in Ostend grew from 500 incoming vessels per year to about 2,000 ships – an almost runaway economy which challenged both the size and composition of Ostend's maritime labor population in an unprecedented manner.¹⁹

According to Jelle van Lottum, Jan Lucassen, and Lex Heerma van Voss, the Austrian Netherlands belonged to an "intermediate zone" of the European maritime labor market consisting of states with a maritime population of mainly nationals. Denmark, England, France, and Spain also belonged to this zone, in contrast to the "central zone" of the Dutch Republic, which relied heavily on foreign hands to offset the lack of domestic workers.²⁰ The authors tested their model using the Prize Papers: as the London Court of Admiralty invariably questioned imprisoned mariners on their place of origin and the composition of their crew, said sources can be used to chart migration patterns of maritime workers.²¹ While van Lottum, Lucassen, and Heerma van Voss only tested their model for ships from the Dutch Republic, Scandinavia, Germany, and France, I use the same methodology to test their general positioning of the Southern Netherlands in the European maritime

17 The National Archives (TNA), Foreign Office, Austrian Netherlands (26), 1, Peter to Secretary of State (Ostend, 4 April 1781).

18 Daniël Farasyn, 1769-1794. *De 18de eeuwse bloeiperiode van Oostende* (Ostend 1998) 63-175.

19 Jan Parmentier, *De maritieme handel en visserij in Oostende tijdens de achttiende eeuw. Een prosopografische analyse van de internationale Oostendse handelswereld, 1700-1794* (Ghent 2001) IV, 64-65

20 Jelle van Lottum, Jan Lucassen and Lex Heerma van Voss, 'Sailors, national and international labour markets and national identity, 1600-1850', in: Richard Unger (ed.), *Shipping and economic growth 1350-1850* (Leiden 2011) 336-339; See also Jelle van Lottum, *Across the North Sea. The impact of the Dutch Republic on international labour migration c. 1550-1850* (Amsterdam 2007) 54-95, 135-139.

21 See also Van Lottum, 'Some thoughts', 647-661; Klein and van Lottum, 'The determinants', 143-167.

labor market – to determine how the early 1780s differ from years prior. Due to the much more modest mercantile activities of the Southern Low Countries during the eighteenth century compared to those of the Dutch Republic, the sample size only consists of 22 crews hired in Ostend, spread over three different eighteenth-century wartime episodes (table 1). Given the fact that privateers captured merchants vessels rather indiscriminately, however, this limited sample size still reflects broader trends in crew composition.

Table 1 Composition of crews hired in Ostend, 1703-1782.²²

Period	Vessels	Composition			Crew							Total
		Only ANL	Mixed	No ANL	ANL	FR	REP	GB	GER	ITA	DK	
1703-05	6	5	1	–	>94*	>1*	–	–	–	–	–	148
1756-63	7	5	2	–	40	–	2	–	1	–	–	43
1779-82	9	3	4	2	27	2	2	28	6	3	13	81

Source: TNA, *High Court of Admiralty*. * Examinations during the War of the Spanish Succession are less detailed on the origins of the crew. Of the 148 seamen, at least 94 were Flemish. The remaining vessel (*Saint Andrew of Ostend*) had a crew of 54, consisting of both Ostend and Dunkirk seamen.

Of the six crews captured during the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714), five consisted only of Southern Netherlands seamen; the remaining vessel employed both ‘Flanderkins’ and French mariners, the latter all from Dunkirk. Dunkirk’s proximity and shared history (the town had been part of the Southern Netherlands until she fell to France in the early 1660s) led to strong ties with the maritime communities of Flanders. Mariners migrated easily between Ostend and Dunkirk in accordance with job prospects and political circumstances.²³ A similar image regarding crew compositions emerges for the Seven Years’ War (1756-1763). Five out of seven crews consist only of subjects of the Austrian Netherlands. The merchantman *Olive Tree*, in addition to its five Ostend sailors, had two mariners of the Dutch Republic on board.

²² Using the search engine of TNA, I identified 35 files of captured vessels navigating under the flag of the Southern Netherlands. I discarded all vessels which (a) did not provide information about their crew and (b) did not hire a crew in Ostend, resulting in the 22 vessels listed in table 1.

²³ Cabantous and Messiaen, *Gens de mer*, 25; Cabantous, *La mer*, 57-92; Daan Maekelberg, *De kapernetwerken tussen de Vlaamse steden Oostende, Duinkerke en Nieuwpoort tijdens de Spaanse Successieoorlog (1702-1713)* (Ghent 2019).

Three Flemish mariners and one German sailor made up the crew of the *Two Young Brewers*. In total, 40 of the 43 sailors present on the ships captured during the Seven Years' War stated the Austrian Netherlands as their country of origin.

What was the impact of the increased demand for seamen during the late 1770s and early 1780s on the composition of Ostend's labor market? First of all, attractive job opportunities in Ostend drew in workers from other sectors, both locals and people from the interior of the country. Although no wage series are available for Ostend, the overall image of salaries for the eighteenth-century Southern Netherlands was one of stagnation.²⁴ When maritime wages – relatively high compared to land-based professions even in normal times, according to Vandenbroeke²⁵ – suddenly grew significantly (cf. *infra*), they must have posed an incentive for people outside the maritime sector. In July 1782, for example, Ghent merchant Laurent Janssens received a worried message from the father of Philippe Joseph Maillart, a young man from Brussels:

[M]y son has come to see you last week offering to work as a mariner on one of your vessels, which you have refused, but he has followed the crowd to Ghent nonetheless and has left Brussels without a word [...] could you please inform me if you have yet employed him or tell me what has become of him, because his mother is extremely distraught.²⁶

Head of the Maritime Trade Committee Henri Delplancq, in a report written in 1783, suggested that Maillart was no unique case: “*The people of this country who have taken up this profession have now spread themselves over the multitude of vessels [in Ostend]. We cannot foresee how many will return to continue this trade in the future*”.²⁷ Whatever their number, the deployment of new domestic seamen was limited to the lowest maritime professions, as it took time and education to rise

24 For Ghent, capital of the province of Flanders, see: Jan Craeybeckx and Charles Verlinden (eds), *Dokumenten voor de geschiedenis van prijzen en lonen in Vlaanderen en Brabant*, II (Bruges 1965) 429-461.

25 Chris Vandenbroeke, ‘Bijdrage tot de studie van de voeding en lonen van de zeelui tijdens de tweede helft van de achttiende eeuw’, *Tijdschrift voor sociale wetenschappen* 16:4 (1971) 414-415.

26 CAG, *Family papers*, 3301/5, Maillart to Janssens (Brussels, 29 July 1782).

27 Cited in Hubert Van Houtte, ‘Contribution à l’histoire commerciale des Etats de l’empereur Joseph II (1780-1790)’, *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 8:2 (1910) 356-357, my translation.

through the ranks.²⁸ Additional mariners would be needed from outside the Southern Netherlands to offset the quadrupled demand for labor.

The data in table 1 regarding the American Revolutionary War and Fourth Anglo-Dutch War show how the lack of sufficient (skilled) maritime labor in the Austrian Netherlands was indeed remedied by increased migration from abroad. The sample comprises four crews consisting of three different nationalities, while the Africa-bound ship *Count of Flanders* includes four nationalities in a crew of only seven. Moreover, for the first time, we observe two exclusively foreign-crewed vessels: the *Venus*, with 25 British sailors; and the *Asia*, with ten Danes, one Italian, and one German. Only three vessels have a homogeneous Austrian Netherlands crew: the *Minerva*, the *Porto Franco*, and the *City of Ostend*, the latter hiring its crew in 1779, before Ostend was declared a free port and the increase in shipping took force. In total, of the sample of 81 sailors hired in Ostend, 28 are English, 13 are Danish, six are German, three are Italian, two are French, two are Dutch, while only 27 are from the Austrian Netherlands. Moreover, the latter number comprised many maritime workers, especially officers, who had been naturalized by their shipowners in order to render the neutral status of the vessel more trustworthy, although they, too, had recently migrated to the Flemish seaboard just like the lower-ranking seamen they commanded.²⁹ For instance, Noël Macquet, the 47-year-old captain of the *Porto Franco*, stated that “he was born at Saint-Vallery in Picardy, but is now settled and lives at Furnes near Ostend and is Subject to the Emperor since the beginning of June [1781]”.³⁰ Jean Hagueron, the 43-year-old captain of the *Count of Flanders*, similarly attested that in “the Month of June 1781...he quitted his Establishm[en]t in [Honfleur in] France and went to seek Employ in Austrian Flanders [and] became an Imperial Subject by being admitted a Burgher of Ghent”.³¹

The maritime workers of the latter period did not simply arrive and leave on the same ship: most stated in their examinations that they saw the vessel they were employed on for the first time in Ostend, indicating they effectively had been part of the town’s labor market prior to their hiring. Cornelis Mechelsen, a mariner of the *Asia*, stated that he lived in “the village of Ballum in Holstein in the dominions of the King of

28 Bruijn, *Zeegang*, 63.

29 E.S. van Eyck van Heslinga, ‘De vlag dekt de lading. De Nederlandse koopvaardij in de Vierde Engelse oorlog’, *Tijdschrift voor Zeegechiedenis* 1:2 (1982) 108.

30 TNA, HCA32/426/4, Examination of Noël Macquet, 4 July 1781.

31 TNA, HCA32/296/1, Examination of Jean Hagueron, 14 December 1784.

Denmark [and was] shipped or hired by the said master upon the twenty-third day of May instant at the Port of Ostend".³² The 22-year-old mariner Samuel McDonald said that he was from "Fresersburgh in the county of Aberdeen in North Britain [and] that the number of mariners (officers included) was about twenty five... who were all Englishmen and came on board at Ostend".³³ Additional anecdotal evidence for Ostend's internationalization can be found in criminal records: during the 1780s, many of the quarrels in the town's inns include Dutch, English, Italian, Swedish, and Danish mariners.³⁴ Van Lottum and Klein have shown how early modern seamen pursued economic opportunities abroad when available, and Ostend's labor composition of the 1780s offers qualitative support for this thesis.³⁵ The economic slack in the ports of belligerent nations (and the danger of impressment in the navy) lured Dutch, British, and French seamen to Ostend, while the many Germans and Scandinavians perhaps came over from ports in the Dutch Republic, where they were amply employed in the merchant marine.³⁶ As Captain Strahle wrote from Amsterdam in November 1781: "[people here] know there are good job opportunities to be found in Flanders".³⁷

Thus, in normal times, Ostend's maritime labor market was rather national in nature, with the exception of numerous sailors from Dunkirk. Just like the Dutch Republic, the Southern Netherlands had a fairly small population, but in contrast to the Dutch, the region's commercial activities were modest and the demand for maritime labor did not outstrip domestic supply. These findings strongly confirm the theoretical model of van Lottum, Lucassen, and Heerma van Voss. During the mercantile fervor of the early 1780s, however, Ostend and its hinterland could not possibly provide the workforce needed by shipowners and merchants.³⁸ Analysis of the Prize Papers proves that during these

32 TNA, HCA 32/273/15, Examination of Cornelis Mechelsen, 31 May 1780.

33 TNA 32/470/15, Examination of Samuel McDonald, 9 January 1781.

34 See, for example, SAB, *Franc of Bruges: Registers*, 17 172, f. 177 (17 May 1779), which mentions an inn with '8 or 9 Swedish or Danish seamen, as well as numerous Dutch seamen'; 17 173, f. 166 (21 January 1780), which comprises a knife altercation between three seamen (and colleagues) from Genoa, San Remo, and Gistel (close to Ostend); 17 173, f. 183 (25 January 1781), on a brawl between Dutch and English seamen. I am grateful to Julien Verhaeghe, whose transcriptions allowed me to locate these court cases.

35 Blakemore, 'Pieces', 1166; Klein and Van Lottum, 'The determinants', 161-162.

36 Van Lottum, 'Some thoughts', 658-659.

37 Baetens, 'Sailors', 275; CAG, *Family papers*, 3301/15, Strahle to Janssens, (Amsterdam, 23 November 1781).

38 J. Walgrave, 'De bevolking van Oostende en haar betrekkingen met de zee in de Franse tijd, 1797-1814', *Mededelingen van de Marine Academie van België* 14:1 (1962) 17-19.



*Illustration 2 Two eighteenth-century sailors from Heist (source: J.C. Verbrugge, *Costume of the seafaring inhabitants of Heyst, three leagues from Bruges by the sea*, Collection HEY museum, Knokke-Heist, Belgium.)*

years, as suggested by Baetens, maritime labor was extensively sourced from abroad. These results echo the findings of previous scholars, who established a significant deployment of foreign mariners in Ostend during the short-lived existence of the Ostend Company.³⁹

Was this mainly foreign expansion of the supply side enough to meet increased demand by maritime capital? The answer seems to be no. Countless contemporary observers attest to a scarcity of maritime labor in Ostend and Bruges throughout the period under scrutiny. In November 1781, while gathering a crew in port, Captain Hendrick Eden signaled to his employer that “labor is Scarce in Ostend”,⁴⁰ The shortage of mariners continued into the next year: in March 1782, Jean Gaussen, a merchant, wrote from Ostend that “[he] had talked to [a

39 Jan Parmentier, *Oostende & Co. Het verhaal van de Zuid-Nederlandse Oost-Indiëvaart 1715-1735* (Ostend 2002) 25-29.

40 CAG, *Family papers*, 3301/7, Eden to Van Nuffel (Ostend, 2 November 1781).

crimp], who had told [him] that sailors are very rare at the moment”.⁴¹ In June, Theodor van Moorsel, another merchant, attested that “there are hardly any idle men here”; two months later, Jan Boerhorst echoed van Moorsel by saying that “there are hardly any experienced sailors here”.⁴² Romberg & Consors, a trading firm, even gave instructions to their captain embarking on a slaving voyage to hire local sailors in West Africa, “due to the difficulties of finding Sailors in our own Country”.⁴³ Clearly, during Ostend’s boom years, supply of labor chronically fell short of capital’s demand. In the next section, we will show how this lack of supply effected wage levels.

Wage formation: Macro- and micro-constituents

Macro-economic explanation of wage levels

To analyze the effect of an increase in demand on the wages of seamen during the period 1775-1785, we should first establish a trustworthy starting point. Such a benchmark, however, is hard to find in current literature. For example, the salary of not a single seaman – neither cabin boy nor captain – is included among those of many early modern professions in the monumental collection of prices and wages assembled by Belgian scholars during the 1960s and 1970s.⁴⁴ Some wage entries, however, were later recorded by Roland Baetens and Chris Vandembroeke (cf. table 2).⁴⁵ Additional data on monetary wages can infrequently be found in the Prize Papers (see the *Two Brothers* in table 2) and in muster rolls found in Ostend’s notary archives. During most of the eighteenth century, as in other countries, the latter documents are hardly available: wage agreements were written down informally on a piece of paper, if at all.⁴⁶ As one notary put it, “*it is not Customary to pass Crew Rolls before the Magistrate or Notary but*

41 CAG, *Family papers*, 3301/7, Gaussen to Janssens (Ostend, 13 March 1782).

42 CAG, *Family papers*, 3301/5, Van Moorsel to Janssens (Ostend, 24 June 1782); CAG, *Family papers*, 3301/6, Boerhorst to Janssens (Ostend, 18 August 1782).

43 TNA, HCA32/296/1, Instructions for Jean Hagueron (Ghent, 05 October 1781).

44 Craeybeckx and Verlinden (eds), *Dokumenten*, 4 volumes.

45 Vandembroeke, ‘Bijdrage’, 414-415; Roland Baetens, ‘Le comportement des marins sur les navires Ostendais vers l’Orient’, *Revue du Nord* (1986) 393.

46 See Paul van Royen, *Zeevarenden op de koopvaardijvloot omstreeks 1700* (Amsterdam 1987) 9. Such informal documents were found by her British captors aboard the *Two Brothers*: “Received from Captain Pieter Feliens the sum of twenty Flemish guilders in ready money to travel from Ostend to Nantes” (my translation), see TNA, HCA32/247/2.

ordinarily it is the Captains of the ships, or their correspondents, who make the Crew Rolls".⁴⁷ During the early 1780s, however, many shipowners *did* choose to make their crew lists official with a notary public, presumably to render the neutrality of their vessels more trustworthy in the eyes of British privateers, who were increasingly encroaching on neutral shipping.

Table 2 Wages of able seamen (in Flemish current guilders) mustered by merchant vessels in Ostend during the eighteenth century, prior to the 1775-1785 period.

Year	Ship	Destination	Total crew	Able seamen		
				No.	Range	Mode
1723-31	GIC ('Ostend Company')	China/India	-	-	-	14
1757	<i>Two Brothers</i>	Nantes	7	3	20	20
1762	<i>Saint Francis</i>	Cherbourg	9	6	22	22
1767	<i>Ernst Gustaf</i>	'Mediterranean'	12	5	16	16
1771	-	Trieste	-	-	-	18.1*

Source: SAB; TNA; CAB; Baetens, 'Le comportement'; Vandenbroeke, 'Bijdrage'. Numbers with * have been converted from 'argent de change'.⁴⁸

Table 2 shows the evidence collected on wages in the Ostend merchant marine prior to the 1775-1785 period. Earnings in private shipping were greater than in chartered companies: all shipowners included in table 2 paid higher salaries than the GIC. This information corresponds with findings for other countries: in the Dutch Republic, for example, working as a mariner in the private carrying trade was a more coveted form of employment than in the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (the VOC, or Dutch East India Company) due to the former's higher wages.⁴⁹

The monthly wages of 18.1 guilders for 1771 stems from a project designed by the government to spur trade from Ostend with Trieste. The thoroughly researched proposal estimates the costs of fitting out and victualing a 400-500 ton, Mediterranean-bound vessel. While the ship in question is fictitious, the wages of its (equally fictitious) crew

47 CAB, Notary public Antoine Rycx senior, 41/102, 584 (14 October 1780).

48 For each vessel, respectively: Baetens, 'Le comportement des marins', 393; TNA, HCA32/247/2; NAB, Notary public Anthony Rycx, 41/83 nr. 54; NAB, Notary public Philippus Rycx jr., 41/43 nr. 273; SAB, *Chancery of the court (Low Countries department)*, nr. 650. For the latter reference, I am indebted to Chris Vandenbroeke, 'Bijdrage'.

49 Bruijn and Van Eyck van Heslinga, 'Seamen's employment', 13. For Spain, see Pérez-Mallaína, *Los hombres*, 121.

no doubt reflected actual price levels of maritime labor in Ostend. The whole point of the proposal was to accurately assess the possibilities for trade with the Austrian hereditary lands, and the information was reliably sourced from customs officials in Ostend.⁵⁰

The 1771 pay rates closely resemble those of 1767. The slightly higher wages of 1757 and 1762 can be attributed to the wartime circumstances of the Seven Years' War. Although officially neutral, the ports of Flanders came to be regarded as enemy bases by Great Britain after French troops took up garrisons in Ostend and Nieuwpoort in July 1757. Thenceforward, Austrian Netherlands merchantmen were increasingly targeted by British privateers.⁵¹ The increment with regards to the earlier and later peacetime wage levels might reflect a 'risk premium' for the increased danger of sailing. Another explanation may be found in privateering: although no private men-of-war were fitted out in Ostend, privateers did put to sea in Dunkirk. The promise of bounty lured plenty of Flemish seamen to the French port, draining the domestic pool of mariners and driving up wages.⁵² In conclusion, a monthly salary of 16 to 18 guilders seems to have been customary for merchant marine crews mustered in Ostend during the eighteenth century. These wage levels closely resembled those of the Dutch Republic, where able seamen employed in the merchant marine around 1775 earned 14.5 Dutch guilders, equal to 16 Flemish guilders.⁵³

For the period of Ostend's boom years, the city's notary archives contain numerous deeds in which shipowners and merchants officialized the hiring of a crew. These contracts included the names of the seamen, their function on board and, most importantly, wages entitled to them. I was able to gather 373 wage entries for able seamen ('*matroos*' or '*matelot*') employed on 53 vessels owned by various shipowners between 1780 and 1783.⁵⁴ As some sailors earned more than others on board one and the same ship, I calculated the most

50 Vandenbroeke, 'Bijdrage', 405-407; SAB, *Chancellery of the court*, 650.

51 For plunder and harassment, see UAG, *Gazette van Gendt*, 23 March 1758, 10 July 1758, 11 September 1758, 14 September 1758, 29 January 1759, 19 March 1759; For captures, see TNA, HCA, 32/229/1, 32/230/14, 32/235/3, 32/247/3.

52 Cabantous, *La mer*, 63. See also Maekelberg, *De kapernetwerken tussen de Vlaamse steden*, 38-42. A Dunkirk privateer captured during the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748) employed numerous Flemish seamen as well, see HCA, TNA, 32/103/30.

53 Davids, 'Maritime labour', 68.

54 Able seamen set them themselves apart from ordinary seamen ('*lichtmatroos*' or '*mousse*' in the sources) by way of skills or experience. Generally, it took several years for an ordinary seaman to rise to the rank of able seaman. See Van Lottum and Van Zanden, 'Labour productivity', 96.

frequent wage level (mode) for each vessel; when different wage levels were equally distributed, I chose the lowest wage level. The difference in pay aboard one and the same ship presumably reflected slight differences in skill levels: enough to differentiate a seaman from his peers, but insufficient to gain a higher rank. If we assume that most able seamen were of average skill, and if we assume that maritime capital and maritime labor in general were rational, utility-maximizing actors – meaning that mariners did not negotiate salaries lower than the market price, and that shipowners and captains were not inclined to accept wage costs exceeding it – we can consider the mode of each shipping contract not merely as the result of a highly individual wage negotiation, but as a gauge of the Ostend market for maritime labor at different moments in time.⁵⁵

As table 3 shows, the early 1780s were marked by an extraordinary wage inflation. As we have seen, salaries for able seamen stood at 18.1 guilders per month in 1771. In contrast, by July 1780, they stood at 33 for ships plying European trade routes; by April 1781, the 1771 level had doubled to 36 guilders. Afterwards, wages seem to have stagnated: salaries tended to creep toward the 40 guilders mark in the winter of 1781-82, but half a year later, monthly pay for able seamen on the *Christine Seville* was still at 36.2.

Ostend's free port status and the neutrality of the Imperial flag caused many merchants to organize their colonial ventures from the Austrian Netherlands.⁵⁶ In this segment of shipping, pay did not stagnate after the beginning of the series. While able seamen bound on voyages to West Africa and the Caribbean earned 40 guilders per month in late 1780, earnings had increased more than 25 percent by the winter of 1782-83, when the shipowners of the *Young Lady Anna Bella* and the *Welfare of Bruges* paid no less than 53 monthly guilders to the sailors employed on their vessels.

Contrary to Davis, who found hardly any wage differentials between voyages of different destinations, Blakemore assessed for the English maritime labor market that "length and riskiness of the voyage affected wage levels".⁵⁷ The Ostend figures seem to support Blakemore's analysis: mariners enrolling on voyages to far-flung destinations such as West

55 Rediker, *Between the devil*, 151.

56 John Everaert, 'Le pavillon impérial aux Indes occidentales. Contrebande de guerre et trafic neutre depuis les ports Flamands (1778-1785)', *Bijdragen tot de internationale maritieme geschiedenis* (Brussels 1988) 43-67.

57 Davis, *The rise*, 128; Blakemore, 'Pieces', 1162-1164, quote 1164.

Table 3 Wages of able seamen mustered by merchant vessels in Ostend, 1780-1783.

Date	Ship	Destination	Total crew	Able seamen		
				No.	Range	Mode
12.07.1780	<i>Welfare of Bruges</i>	Western Europe	8	4	33-35	33 [†]
28.10.1780	<i>Marie Antoinette</i>	West Africa/Caribbean	14	5	20-40	40
19.12.1780	<i>Prince Charles</i>	West Africa/Caribbean	8	4	20-40	40
05.04.1781	<i>Virgin of Antwerp</i>	Western Europe	>7	6	38 [†]	38 [†]
20.04.1781	<i>Mercurius</i>	Western Europe	9	3	28-36	36
25.04.1781	<i>Flemish Lion of Bruges</i>	Western Europe	8	5	36	36
03.05.1781	<i>Swiftness of Ostend</i>	Western Europe	4	2	36	36
04.05.1781	<i>Young John</i>	Western Europe	7	5	30-40	40
25.05.1781	<i>Young Eppo</i>	Western Europe	7	5	36	36
09.06.1781	<i>Success of Brussels</i>	Western Europe	9	6	36	36
01.07.1781	<i>First</i>	Caribbean	14	6	30 [†] -40 [†]	40 [†]
10.12.1781	<i>Amelia Louisa</i>	Western Europe	6	3	34-38	34
31.12.1781	<i>Friendship</i>	Western Europe	12	7	38	38
31.12.1781	<i>Young Joseph</i>	Western Europe	6	2	38	38
31.12.1781	<i>Unity</i>	Western Europe	7	4	38	38
31.12.1781	<i>Phoenix</i>	Western Europe	7	5	38	38
02.01.1782	<i>Catharine</i>	Western Europe	9	7	24-38	38
02.01.1782	<i>Juno</i>	Western Europe	8	6	37-39	38
21.01.1782	<i>Saint Charles</i>	Western Europe	3	2	36-37	36
21.01.1782	<i>Saint Peter</i>	Western Europe	3	2	37	37
13.04.1782	<i>Pallas</i>	Caribbean	12	5	42-45	45
25.04.1782	<i>Count of Cobenzl</i>	Caribbean	20	8	44	44
04.05.1782	<i>Patriotism</i>	Caribbean	14	6	30-44 [†]	44 [†]
10.05.1782	<i>Friendship</i>	Caribbean	14	7	50	50
18.05.1782	<i>Welfare of Bruges</i>	Caribbean	16	10	46.7*	46.7*
23.05.1782	<i>Flemish Merchant</i>	Caribbean	16	8	52.5*	52.5*
14.06.1782	<i>City of Vienna</i>	Caribbean	13	5	48	48
15.06.1782	<i>Four Friends</i>	Caribbean	9	5	32-44	44
27.06.1782	<i>Emperor Joseph</i>	Caribbean	7	3	48	48
28.06.1782	<i>Lady Margaret</i>	Caribbean	13	7	32.1*-48.1*	48.1*
06.07.1782	<i>Oldenburg</i>	Caribbean	8	5	23.3*-51.3*	51.3*

Date	Ship	Destination	Total crew	Able seamen		
				No.	Range	Mode
19.07.1782	<i>Christina Sebille</i>	Western Europe	9	4	36.2*	36.2*
10.09.1782	<i>Archduchess Christine</i>	Caribbean	27	8	50	50
29.11.1782	<i>Pallas</i>	Caribbean	10	6	40–50	50
04.12.1782	<i>Fifth</i>	Caribbean	14	8	40–51	51
21.12.1782	<i>Emperor of Germany</i>	Caribbean	16	9	50	50
21.12.1782	<i>Sabre</i>	Caribbean	19	10	37.5–50	50
21.12.1782	<i>Young Sophie</i>	Caribbean	12	4	30–50	50
28.12.1782	<i>Young Lady Anna Bella</i>	Caribbean	13	6	53.2	53.2
09.01.1783	<i>Prince of Saxe-Teschen</i>	West Africa	37	20	30–50	50
10.01.1783	<i>Welfare of Bruges</i>	West Africa/Caribbean	28	12	53.1	53.1
20.01.1783	<i>Victory</i>	East Asia	23	14	50	50
30.01.1783	<i>Joseph of Bruges</i>	Caribbean	11	6	50–52.5	50
10.02.1783	<i>Lady Catharine</i>	Caribbean	15	8	48–51	48
04.03.1783	<i>Imperial Slaver</i>	West Africa/Caribbean	37	7	23.3*	23.3*
11.03.1783	<i>Young Sophie</i>	Caribbean	11	4	24	24
19.03.1783	<i>Prince of Starhemberg</i>	Caribbean	22	8	23.3*–27.5*	23.3*
22.03.1783	<i>Flemish Merchant</i>	Caribbean	18	11	24–26	26
07.04.1783	<i>King of Congo</i>	West Africa/Caribbean	50	16	18.6*–23.3*	23.3*
11.04.1783	<i>Prince of Starhemberg</i>	West Africa	21	7	24.3*–27.5*	24.3*
11.04.1783	<i>Count of Clair</i>	Caribbean	8	4	21.2	21.2
16.04.1783	<i>Flemish Seahorse</i>	West Africa/Caribbean	53	24	21.5*–23.3*	23.3*
23.06.1783	<i>Council of Flanders</i>	West Africa/Caribbean	48	19	23.3*	23.3*

Source: NAB, *Old notary's office*; SAB, *Secretary of State and War*. Wages with * mark have been converted from "argent de change" or foreign denominations. Wages with † mark did not specify "argent de change" or "argent courant", so the most common denomination in Ostend contracts ("argent courant") was assumed. 6 guilders "argent de change" equal 7 guilders "argent courant".

Africa, the Caribbean, or East Asia were paid a premium compared to crews contracting for strictly European destinations. Only 13 days apart, the shipowner of the *Christina Sebille* signed four sailors to go to Dublin for 36 guilders monthly, while the *Oldenburg's* owner needed to assign his sailors 51 guilders per month to take the vessel to the island of Saint Vincent. Jacob Bowens, Ostend's eighteenth-century chronicler, wrote about the town's boom years that "sailing to the West Indies lay

now at a mariner's fingertips, and a sailor was mocked if he had not gone out on such a voyage".⁵⁸ Scarce primary sources, however, paint a less rosy picture for owners of oceangoing vessels and highlight the averseness of seamen to the hazards and long duration of interoceanic trade. Captain Jan Boerhorst, busy hiring a crew in August 1782, wrote to his shipowner that "there are still some sailors here but they do not feel like going to the West Indies".⁵⁹ Johan Weickaert, captain of a slaving voyage to West Africa, testified about his hiring process that "it is very difficult to find the people of one's choice [...] especially for a voyage that long and unhealthy".⁶⁰

If we add the findings of section 1 (scarcity) together with those of section 2 (high nominal wages), the image emerges of a maritime labor market in which market forces did have an extraordinary influence on wage levels. Such, too, was the analysis of contemporaries. The aforementioned Jean Gaussen was told by a crimp that "sailors are Very Rare at the moment, and consequently very expensive, they are paid 38 to 40 [guilders] per month."⁶¹ Theodoor van Moorsel, an Ostend merchant, faced an even larger shortage-induced inflation: "there are hardly any idle men here, and those willing to work as Mariners generally demand 50 guilders per month".⁶² Not only demand by shipowners and merchants such as Gaussen and van Moorsel contributed to the scarcity. Dunkirk privateering, just as in previous Anglo-French conflicts, drained the Ostend labor market of seamen.⁶³

On labor markets in neighboring countries, too, there was an inflation of maritime wages, though not as great as in Ostend. Concerning the Dutch Republic, Davids does not cite wages for the period under scrutiny, but in the MCC, a Dutch slaving company based in Zeeland, wages rose from 18 to 30 guilders during the early 1780s.⁶⁴ For the same period in Dunkirk, Cabantous mentions a doubling of mercantile wages.⁶⁵ Davis does not include data for the period in Britain,

58 Jacob Bowens, *Nauwkeurige beschrijving der oude en beroemde zeestad Oostende* (Ostend 1792) 175.

59 CAG, *Family papers*, 3301/6, Boerhorst to Janssens (Ostend, 13 August 1782).

60 SAB, SSW, 1489/12, Letter from Johan Weickaert (Ferrol, 24 March 1781).

61 CAG, *Family papers*, 3301/7, Gaussen to Janssens (Ostend, 13 March 1782).

62 CAG, *Family papers*, 3301/5, Van Moorsel to Janssens (Ostend, 24 June 1782).

63 SAB, SSW, 2181/117. Privateer captain Vanstabel, for example, engaged seamen from Ostend, Brussels, and Willebroeck.

64 Davids, 'Maritime labour', 61; Ruud Paesie, *Sociëteit van Essequibo. Op- en ondergang van een coöperatieve scheepvaartonderneming, 1771-1788* (Vlissingen 2017) 60.

65 Cabantous, *La mer*, 255-256.

but mentions a doubling of wages during conflicts earlier in the century; Graham (though without citing figures) claims wages went fourfold in Scotland during the 1780s due to the British navy's pressgang.⁶⁶ However scarce they may be, these comparative figures suggest that Ostend's wage inflation of at least 100% for European voyages and more than 200% for oceangoing vessels was quite exceptional, caused by more than simply wartime circumstances – the policies fomenting commerce and demand for labor.

Table 3 also shows a remarkable decrease, collapse even, of salaries during the latter half of February 1783. As with inflation, the deflation of wage rates in Ostend can be largely attributed to outside circumstances. "I have arrived here [from Ostend] on 19 February to load up my cargo for the island of Tobago", wrote captain Francis Boni from Cork in 1783, "but because of the general peace concluded by the Belligerent Nations during my voyage [my freighters] do no longer want to give it to me."⁶⁷ As the captain signaled, the preliminary peace treaties between the belligerent parties concluded on 20 January 1783, meant the end of Ostend's short-lived boom period. Like Boni's freighters, many merchants abandoned transoceanic ventures under Imperial flag, as neutral vessels lost the privileges they had enjoyed in colonial waters during wartime. Moreover, in the wake of the Paris treaty, most merchants left Ostend and returned to their home ports. The town's appeal had come almost entirely from the neutral position of the Austrian Habsburgs; topographically, it was not suited for commerce on the scale of the early 1780s.⁶⁸ As commerce faltered and shipping traffic decreased after the conclusion of peace, demand for maritime labor dried up and, consequently, wages came down, although they remained at a slightly higher level than before the 1780s.⁶⁹ This situation may confirm Jan Parmentier's thesis, who argued that part of the mercantile links forged during the early 1780s remained active after the conclusion of peace.⁷⁰ The sustained high demand on Ostend's maritime population

66 Davis, *The rise*, 131; Eric Graham, *Maritime history of Scotland, 1650-1790* (Edinburgh 2015) 279.

67 NAG, *Council of Flanders*, 27483, Boni to Romberg (Cork, 26 February 1783).

68 Roland Baetens, 'Het uitzicht en de infrastructuur van een kleine Noordzeehaven tijdens het Ancien Régime: het voorbeeld van Oostende', *Mededelingen van de Marine Academie van België*, 23 (1973-1974) 47-62.

69 Some captains adjusted wages after the first leg of the journey: "Yesterday I came to an agreement with my crew; I dismissed them, and then rehired them...for the monthly salary now customary in Ostend plus two guilders"; see NAG, *Schenking D'Hoope (supplement)*, 31, Cornelisz to De Loose (Bordeaux, 1 April 1783).

70 Parmentier, *De maritieme handel*, 18-19.

may have led to higher salaries. However, a lack of source material prevents us from verifying whether wage levels eventually came down to prior levels when demand and supply reached a more balanced state.

Micro-economic explanations: Wage negotiations and seamen's agency
*"In our country, Mariners are not divided into classes, nor are they impressed into the Navy by the State, but to the contrary, they are men who are entirely free and who only enroll on a vessel through a particular contract, just like domestic servants who join the service of individuals."*⁷¹

Thus wrote the recently established Maritime Trade Committee in 1782 to explain the practicalities of hiring maritime labor in the Austrian Netherlands. A voluntary contract underpinning employment implied negotiation prior to this contract, not only over wages in ready money, but also over advances on pay, and the opportunity to trade for one's personal account (what Rediker has called "social wages").⁷² Recently, authors such as Blakemore and Vanneste have argued that this agency of sailors in negotiating beneficial terms of employment has been underestimated.⁷³ Although sources are scarce, in this section we will explore the agency of individual seamen on the Ostend market for maritime labor during the 1780s.

First of all, mariners were very well aware of the macro-economic environment in which they offered their services: they recognized the increased value bestowed on their labor by scarcity and actively leveraged this 'seller's market' when negotiating their contract. We have already heard Theodoor van Moorsel claim that "those willing to work as Mariners generally *demand* 50 guilders per month (my italics, SP)", and other anecdotes do indeed support the image of seamen standing their ground while wrangling over wages: in June 1782, a different Ostend merchant wrote gleefully to his business partner in Ghent that "I have managed to hire four mariners [for 50 guilders], who were in dispute with their captain over one guilder! Said captain wanted to pay them only 49 guilders".⁷⁴

Clearly, the macro-economic situation of Ostend's labor market, as well as the length of the voyage, determined wage levels on a particular journey (the 'Mode' column in table 3), and seamen made sure these circumstances were taken into account by captains and shipowners.

71 SAB, *Secretary of State and War*, 2181/117.

72 Rediker, *Between the devil*, 125-133.

73 Blakemore, 'Pieces', 1154-1184; Vanneste, 'Instruments', 1-33.

74 CAG, *Family papers*, 3301/5, De Bruyne to Janssens (Ostend, 20 June 1782).

Yet within a specific ship's mariner crews, wages also tended to differ, sometimes significantly so (the 'Range' column). This variation reflected differences in human and social capital among individual seamen. Recent scholarship has shown that the quality of the crew (in terms of skills and training) considerably impacted the productivity of a ship and, consequently, the profitability of the voyage.⁷⁵ Shipowners, then, were willing to pay a skill premium.⁷⁶ What do the Ostend sources reveal on micro-economic wage formation?

Literacy has often been suggested by scholars as a skill which could bolster productivity.⁷⁷ We can control for this particular skill by checking if sailors able to sign the muster roll were paid more than their peers aboard the same vessel who simply signed off with an X. 227 of the 373 sailors of table 1 were employed on ships where wages differed from sailor to sailor, enabling us to check if literate sailors were paid more. Of the 17 sailors that earned a higher salary than their peers (the mode in table 3), 7 are literate, while the literacy of 5 is unknown. Of the 42 seamen paid less than the mode, 19 could write and 23 could not. In both cases, the rate of literacy is close to that of the overall population: 180 of 373 sailors or 48 percent could write their own names (5.3 percent unknown).⁷⁸ Literacy, thus, did not seem very important in the decision to pay some seamen more than others; presumably, the ability to write was of more importance for higher-ranking personnel aboard the ship.

Much more than literacy, seamen could harness their training and nautical skills when negotiating terms of employment. Earlier, we saw how Jan Boerhorst bemoaned the lack of experienced mariners in Ostend, and Hendrick Eden voiced similar complaints while writing from Paimbœuf in December 1781: "It will be necessary for me to hire another mariner, because the seamen [I hired in Ostend] perform incredibly poorly [...] [they] are mostly inexperienced".⁷⁹ Captains were inclined to pay a premium to experienced personnel: as Boerhorst attested in August 1782, "There are hardly any experienced ('*bevaare*') sailors here, and they can earn at least 53 guilders a month".⁸⁰ Table 3

75 van Lottum and van Zanden, 'Labour productivity', 84, 96.

76 Blakemore, 'Pieces', 1166.

77 Van Lottum and Poulsen, 'Estimating', 68; Van Lottum and Van Zanden, 'Labour productivity', 95.

78 A rate that is significantly lower than the countries assessed by Van Lottum and Poulsen, 'Estimating', 72, suggesting again that many low-skilled mariners were present in Ostend.

79 CAG, *Family papers* 3301/7, Eden to Van Nuffel (Paimbœuf, 18 December 1781 and 26 December 1781).

80 CAG, *Family papers*, 3301/6, Boerhorst to Janssens (Ostend, 18 August 1782).

reveals that wage ranges were higher on transoceanic ventures, which supports Blakemore's thesis that captains were inclined to pay higher skill premiums on longer voyages where replacement of seamen was harder.⁸¹ By offering generous salaries, shipowners even tried to enlist Ostend's pilots, who were employed by the city to guide ships safely into the harbor. Undoubtedly in order to prevent the merchant marine from luring away such skilled personnel and to safeguard the town's critical shipping facilities, the central government issued a decree imposing a hefty fine of 300 guilders and a possible one-year prison sentence on pilots who abandoned their posts to enroll on private vessels.⁸²

Trading for one's personal account could be very lucrative for mariners.⁸³ Authors such as Jan Lucassen, Matthias van Rossum, Richard Blakemore, and Tijl Vanneste have argued that if such non-pecuniary benefits of maritime professions are taken into account, living standards and social status of seamen were higher than previously assessed by only including monetary wages.⁸⁴ It might be hypothesized that seamen could leverage labor scarcity by demanding the permission to move more sizeable amounts of commodities for personal account. Although the notary contracts remain silent on private cargoes, it is possible through the Prize Papers to catch a glimpse of extra-monetary forms of remuneration, as the High Court of Admiralty invariably asked seamen if they experienced a personal loss through the capture. Of the 56 seamen hired in Ostend who answered this question between 1700 and 1780, hardly anyone stated they had lost any personal cargo, and the only ones to do so were high-ranking officers. Anthony Crépain, captain of the *St. Antony of Padua*, said he lost "two baggs of chestnutts, one Bagg of musterdseed and 4 reames of Paper" due to the capture.⁸⁵ Antonius Lux, who commanded the *Hope*, was robbed of "two Hogsheads of Wine and a Box of prunes".⁸⁶ Dirk Sybrand, captain of the *Minerva*, stated that he lost nothing by the capture, "except Cabin Freight".⁸⁷ Lastly, private ventures on the *Marie Antoinette*, a slaving vessel, comprised "Six Priviledged Slaves [...] the

81 Blakemore, 'Pieces', 1164

82 Paul Verhaegen, *Recueil des ordonnances des Pays-Bas Autrichiens*, vol. XII, 29.01.1781.

83 Parmentier, *Oostende & Co*, 30-33.

84 Jan Lucassen and Matthias van Rossum, 'Smokkeloos en zilverstromen. Illegale export van edelmetaal via de VOC', *TSEG – The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 13:1 (2015) 99-133; Blakemore, 'Pieces', 1168-1180; Tijl Vanneste, 'Instruments', 1-33.

85 TNA, HCA32/48/58, Examination of Anthony Crépain, 22 December 1704.

86 TNA, HCA 32/199/1, Examination of Antonius Lux, 8 July 1756.

87 TNA, HCA 32/402/5, Examination of Dirk Sybrands, 16 October 1778.

Master had four [...] and the said Doctor and first Mate the other two”.⁸⁸ It is challenging to assess this analysis. Trading for personal account was a long-standing maritime custom in the Southern Netherlands, which was codified during the sixteenth century under Philip II.⁸⁹ The fact that private trade shows up only scarcely in the Prize Paper interrogations would not suggest the practice disappeared during the eighteenth century. After all, mariners employed by the GIC were still allowed to conduct private trade, a right they defended fiercely.⁹⁰ Presumably, the privateer’s people did not notice or bother to take away small private cargoes stowed away in personal chests, but *were* attracted to the larger *pacotilles* of officers.⁹¹ In any case, during the 1780s, “private ventures” of lower-ranking seamen seem not to have suddenly grown to the size that they were noticed by the privateers.

The last part of ‘social wages’ was the custom of handing out advances on pay to mariners while ashore. In Ostend, as in many other European ports, it was customary to give one month’s salary for European destinations and two months for transoceanic voyages.⁹² Contrary to private ventures, advances on pay were included in notary contracts. Nothing, then, seems to have changed during the 1780s: all vessels bound to European ports stick to the advance of one month, while transatlantic expeditions pay two months. Several shipowners handed out advances for three months, albeit *after* Ostend’s boom period had peaked. The reason for these elevated advances may be found in the fact that all but one of these ships were slavers of the house of Romberg & Consors: presumably, the crew was compensated for the dangers of such long and disease-ridden voyages with higher advances.⁹³ Rediker showed for the Anglo-American context that the system of wage advances, designed to easily provide maritime capital with the necessary labor, tended to backfire during market stress when many

88 TNA, HCA42/136, Examination of Kors Neurenberg, 12 March 1781.

89 Vanneste, ‘Instruments’, 5-6.

90 Parmentier, *Oostende & Co*, 33.

91 Bowen noted that private ventures were easily concealed from law enforcement by storing them in private chests. The same tracking difficulty might have affected privateers. See Huw Bowen, ‘Privilege and profit. Commanders of East Indiamen as private traders, entrepreneurs and smugglers, 1760-1813’, *International Journal of Maritime History* 19:2 (2007) 62.

92 Carla Jordi, *De scheepsbemanningen der Vlaamse Oost-Indiëvaarders (1718-33)* (Ghent 1974) 57; Davis, *The rise*, 136-138; TNA, HCA32/247/2; NAB, Notary public Anthony Ryxc, 41/83, 54; NAB, Notary public Philippus Ryxc jr., 41/43, 273.

93 NAB, Notary public Anthony Ryxc, 41/116, 401, 403 and 426; NAB, Notary public Anthony Ryxc, 41/117 611.

mariners simply chose to pocket the advances and run off.⁹⁴ Although seamen demanded these advances in wage negotiations, shipowners and captains were exceedingly unwilling to give them, as in Ostend, too, many mariners left service during the town's boom years and, after 24 hours of absence, officially became deserters. In September 1782, François Hugues wrote to Janssens that

I am not surprised at all that Captain Boerhorst has not found any Mariners, because he did not want to give them advances on pay, & he did perfectly well to refuse, because it is better to not find a crew than to have given away money to mariners & then see them deserting, as currently happens every Day.⁹⁵

Hugues's case was hardly unique. In December 1782, Captain Francis Boni wrote from Dover to his employers about his unpleasant experiences in Ostend some weeks earlier:

As is customary in Ostend, I paid my whole crew a month's salary in advance, but as soon as I wanted to set sail an English Seaman and two Slavonian Mariners deserted the vessel (imagine how surprised I was to be betrayed in such a manner) and the same happened to a Captain from Genoa under Ostend flag [...] not being able to replace them he left anyway with only three quarters of his Crew.⁹⁶

Desertion in seafaring life had many causes and included both 'push' (e.g., a lack of trust in the ship or officers, adverse working conditions) and 'pull' factors (e.g., opportunities of better employment). The latter undoubtedly explain the apparent high desertion rates in Ostend.⁹⁷ As table 3 has shown, wages sometimes rose every month during the 1780s, and better terms of employment were constantly available. Moreover, possible punishment for desertion became less likely. First of all, though shipowners and crimps actively attempted to track down deserters,⁹⁸ legal penalties were hard to enforce, as Ostend's vibrant port life presumably made it easy to jump ship or even to hide in the

94 Rediker, *Between the devil*, 125.

95 CAG, *Family papers*, 3301/4, Hugues to Janssens (Ostend, 21 August 1782).

96 NAG, *Council of Flanders*, 27483, Boni to Wagner (Dover, 20 December 1782).

97 Ruth De Vlieghe, 'Destertie bij Oostendse Oost-Indiëvaarders', Jan Parmentier en Sander Spanoghe, *Orbis in Orbem. Liber Amicorum John Everaert*, 181.

98 See for example CAG, *Family papers*, 3301/5, van Moorsel to Janssens (Ostend, 2 July 1782).

crowd that had recently come to live and work in the city. Matthias van Rossum described how it was possible for seamen to disappear in Batavia's "urban jungle", and to some extent the same term applies to Ostend in the 1780s.⁹⁹ Additionally, social punishment was almost absent. Karwan Fatah-Black has shown for the MCC that Zeeland-based seamen were much less likely to leave their jobs than seamen who lived further away, because they were part of the local community.¹⁰⁰ As many seamen in Ostend were foreigners and not part of the town's social fabric, they did not have to worry about a reputation of deserter and diminished chances of future employment – it is probably no coincidence that Boni's deserters were English and Slavonian sailors.

Not only the possibility of mobility *within* labor markets were parts of seamen's agency, also mobility *between* labor markets (i.e., the migration we analyzed in section 2). Opportunities and incentives for migration were presumably even greater for seamen with a particular sort of human capital: being a subject of the Holy Roman Empire. In order to curb the widespread fraud with neutral ship's papers, the Brussels government decided that for a vessel to be truly Imperial and neutral, it should have a crew that was comprised at least for two thirds of Imperial hands.¹⁰¹ According to the Imperial consul in Dunkirk, the lack of Imperial mariners not only caused lengthy delays for captains, it also drove up the cost of shipping due to mariners "often demanding four times the ordinary Wage Rate".¹⁰² Clearly, citizenship was yet another personal trait seamen could leverage in wage negotiations with maritime capital.¹⁰³

99 Matthias van Rossum, "Working for the devil: Desertion in the Eurasian Empire of the VOC", Matthias van Rossum and Jeanette Kamp, *Desertion in the early modern world. A comparative history* (London 2016) 146-152.

100 Karwan Fatah-Black, 'Desertion by sailors, slaves and soldiers in the Dutch Atlantic, c. 1600-1800', Van Rossum and Kamp, *Desertion*, 101-102.

101 Herbert Lüthy, *La banque protestante en France de la révocation de l'Edit de Nantes à la Révolution* (Paris 1970) 653.

102 SAB, SSW, 2181/117, Mémoire by De Lattre (Dunkirk, s.d.).

103 Some shipowners were less keen on working with Imperial mariners, as they were apparently used to larger rations than sailors of other nations and thus were – quite literally – eating into the profits of the venture. One French merchant estimated that he had embarked "a quarter to a tenth more food" on his vessels with Imperial crews during the 1780s. Perhaps the willingness to comply with these dietary demands is another sign of the strong negotiating position of Imperial hands. See NAG, *Schenking D'Hooppe (supplement)*, 34, Berard to De Loose (Lorient, 11 September 1784).

Conclusion

“L’Amérique a Commencée tout / La France entreprend tout / L’Espagne ne fait rien du tout / L’Angleterre se Bat Contre tout / La Hollande payera tout / L’Empereur tire parti de tout”. Somewhere during the early 1780s, in a moment of idleness between feverishly writing letters to trading partners, the merchant Laurent Janssens jotted down a summary of the extraordinary political situation he found himself in.¹⁰⁴ While *‘L’Angleterre se Bat Contre tout’* described both the War of American Independence and the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War, *‘L’Empereur tire parti de tout’* [The emperor takes advantage of it all]’ caught the ways in which Joseph II attempted to economically enhance the Austrian Netherlands by leveraging the neutrality of the Imperial flag and declaring Ostend a free port. The effects of the wartime conditions and Joseph’s economic experiment on Ostend’s maritime labor market lay scattered over Janssens’ desk: scores of descriptions and complaints, quoted in the above pages, of a shortage of mariners, high wages, and desertions.

The qualitative and quantitative data gathered in this paper have shed light on a remarkable episode in the economic history of the Austrian Netherlands and have allowed us to test previous assessments on pre-modern maritime labor markets from the perspective of a minor maritime power. On a macro level, it has confirmed the inflationary effect on wages caused by wartime conditions. I identified domestic economic policies as a crucial contributing factor, as Ostend’s development towards a neutral hub of shipping attracted much of Europe’s commerce to its harbor. In that way, the traditional wartime shortages of mariners in neighboring countries were transposed to the Austrian Netherlands.

On a micro level, I have shown how individual seamen reaped the returns of Ostend’s vibrant port life and harnessed the competition among shipowners for crews to demand higher wages and, sometimes, to simply take the money and run. Some mariners had only shortly taken up the profession and came from the interior of the country; many more were experienced and had come from all over Europe to enjoy the lucrative employment opportunities in the Austrian Netherlands. The example of Ostend has shown again how the maritime world of early modern Europe was continuously in flux – a world where individual seamen pursued economic opportunities where they surfaced and actively sought to better their lives.

¹⁰⁴ CAG, *Family papers*, 3301/10 (Ghent, s.d.).

About the author

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