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Chair: Inês Amorim

(CITCEM-FLUP)

The shipworm epidemic in the Austrian Netherlands in the 1730s. The social effects of an environmental crisis on a coastal and maritime society

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Abstract

Like many other European harbours, the port of Ostend (Belgium) had to face the devastating effects of the shipworm epidemic of the 1730s. Shipworms, despite their name, are actually not worms, but voracious wood scavenging molluscs. These animals, up to 60 cm long, use their shells to dig holes and eat their way into submerged wood. Although shipworms were known by the Europeans since Antiquity, they only appeared occasionally in North Western European waters.

But due to changing environmental conditions (temperature, salinity, ...) the shipworm population exploded along the West-European coast in the 1730s. Within a few years numerous harbour infrastructure, like quays, docks, bridges, locks, but also dikes were damaged beyond repair. The impact of the shipworm's destruction was wide-ranged and the Low Countries (both the Dutch Republic and the Southern Netherlands) were particularly hard hit by this ecological disaster, as the shipworm attacked the wooden dikes and locks that protected these low-lying lands. In recent years, the shipworm epidemic has been well covered in Dutch literature, although little information has been given on how harbours and port cities dealt with this crisis. In this paper we propose to look how a medium-sized harbour along the North Sea, in casu Ostend, coped with the shipworm infestation.

In the proposed paper we will focus consecutively on the shipworm, the outlook of the port of Ostend, how the environmental conditions favoured the shipworm infestation and how the different authorities tried first to remedy, and later to counter further epidemics. In doing so, many changes (political, technological, management) were implemented that had a profound impact on the outlook of the port of Ostend in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Keywords

Environmental history – Harbour infrastructure – Ostend – Port history – Shipworm

Biography

Michael-W. Serruys studied Modern history at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Belgium) and political sciences at the Université catholique de Louvain (Belgium) and the Institut

d'études politiques in Paris (France). He worked as an archivist at the Arenberg Foundation in Enghien (Belgium) and as a researcher at Leiden University (the Netherlands) and the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium). In 2014, he became a member of the Royal Belgian Marine Society. His main research topics are the Austrian Netherlands' transport policy (18th century), Belgian maritime geopolitical questions, the Ostend Company (18th century). Today he is a Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions – Individual fellow at the Centre de recherche bretonne et celtique at the Université de Bretagne occidentale in Brest (France). His current research is on the social impact of environmental crises – in this case the shipworm epidemic – on maritime societies in Western Europe in the eighteenth century.

Whales, manatees, sea turtles, and their products, as early modern oceanic teleconnections

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Abstract

Whales, manatees and sea turtles are amongst the most valued aquatic megafauna by European explorers of the Atlantic in the early modern period. Along the west coast of Africa, the Portuguese America or the Caribbean Seas, these animals and their products were perceived by Europeans as important resources for the subsistence of the first colonies, the onboard food supply and as global commercial commodities. Their appropriation and extractions was dependent on knowledge – mostly traditional and acquired from local expertise transformed into European expertise travelling via ecological teleconnections across transatlantic routes. Whales were useful providers of meat and lighting fuel in Iberia since medieval times and it was their abundance in the southern seas that triggered their exploitation since the early 17th century. It was not an easy enterprise to catch a whale but the profit from the massive beast was worthwhile. Manatees and sea turtles were completely unknown to and had never been exploited by Europeans. Manatees, also known as sea-cows, fish-woman or fish-ox, are large herbivorous that provide meat and fat. Sea turtles are oviparous reptiles that lay hundreds of eggs in each nidification and are a rich source of animal protein. They are both slow movers and can easily be grabbed and captured. Coastal pre colonization indigenous societies in Africa and in Americas knew these animals, their habits and occurrence; they relied on the animals' meat, oil and eggs, processes and uses that were learned and used by the settlers. In this paper we intend to highlight the early modern exploitation of marine living resources and to map their past occurrence and use in different cultural and environmental contexts. We will present a cartographic narrative constructed upon interdisciplinary approaches, within the humanities for the ocean, where historical agents are equally peoples and the animals.

Biography

Cristina Brito is Assistant Professor at the History Department at NOVA FCSH, Lisbon. Prior to that position, she has been awarded a Research Contract by FCT (IF/00610/2015) at CHAM – NOVA FCSH to investigate ‘Cow-fish, ngulu-maza or iguaragua? Local and Global Knowledge Production, Changing Perceptions and Practices on Marine Animals in the Atlantic, 1419–1758’ (2016–2019). She has an interdisciplinary, comparative and cross-cultural approach to her research. Her scientific interests include early modern marine environmental history, local and global perceptions about and uses of the seas, Atlantic and oceanic histories, animal studies and nature agency. She is currently a member of the Board of OPI – Oceans Past Initiative (2014–2019), a Sub-Director of CHAM - Centre

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Nina has a Bachelor's degree in Biology from the University of Évora (2003/2008) and a Master's degree in Marine Ecology (2008/2010) with a dissertation titled "Cetaceans Occurrence and Behavioral Patterns off the West Portuguese Coast". She is presently conducting her PhD research on "The taxonomy of Portuguese whaling between the 15th and the 18th century: An Atlantic history of the sea, whales and people" with the support of FCT. She is a research assistant at CHAM, NOVA FCSH and a founding member of the Association for Sea Sciences (APCM). She has been involved in national and international projects conducting research in history and ecology (OPP, OPI, CONCHA, UNESCO Chair of the Oceans). Her main research interests are the ecology and conservation of cetaceans, understood through the history of the relation between humans and those animals, their exploitation, their economic interest and the cultural and environmental impact of that relationship over time.