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 minimiseing the contribution of other peninsular ports to the construction of the

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