Europeans in Ports in Colonial Contexts
15th-20th centuries

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ABSTRACT

For almost five centuries one of the primary acts of European colonisers was the foundation of ports. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries this phenomenon reached new heights, some ports becoming vast maritime-industrial complexes as well as veritable global cities. In order to develop these ports, colonisers had to confront specific geographical constraints linked to their natural environment. These ports were then defined by a number of flows and functions connected (or unconnected) to the colonial situation, which could either lead to their hyper-specialisation or, on the contrary, to the accumulation of a wide variety of different functions and activities. As interfaces between metropoles and colonies, as well as sometimes between different regions of particular empires, colonial ports were essential sites for implementing the colonising process, not only militarily but also on an economic, social and cultural level.

"Isla de Cuba, Port Saint Jacques. Illustration of the conquest of Mexico or New Spain, I. Van Beecq, draughtsman; Don Antoine De Solis, author of the text. Taille-douce engraving. Source: Gallica"

One of the most characteristic features of European colonisation during the early modern and, especially, modern periods was that it was accompanied by the rapid expansion of port cities and infrastructures in Europe's new overseas peripheries. In the early modern period, the establishment of trading posts, often simple warehouses that did not require a permanent colonial presence as in Asia (European 'factories' on the Indian coast) or on the African coast for the slave trade, often preceded – sometimes by several centuries as in the case of the African coast – an ultimate colonial annexation by the great powers. These ports were thus, *par excellence*, the sites of what Jean-François Bayart and Romain Bertrand have termed "hegemonic transaction." When constructing their second colonial empires in the modern era, Europeans had to establish overseas port infrastructures capable of

supporting increasingly large flows of people and goods, making the port an essential component in the colonial system, the essence of any colony being the fact it is orientated towards the metropolis.

Geographical difficulties linked to the environment

Given that most European colonies, with the notable exception of those in North America, were in Mediterranean or subtropical settings, the establishment and development of these ports were subject to specific constraints both in terms of their sites (good anchorage, a sheltered site) and their locations, the best ports often being communications nodes or at the strategic point of entry into a maritime space (Port Said, Malacca, Singapore). Certain physical risks also had to be taken into account, including storms, cyclones, typhoons and volcanic eruptions: the destruction of the colonial port of Saint-Pierre en Martinique by the eruption of Mount Pelée in 1902 comes to mind. Specific health problems were also raised where malaria, typhus or yellow fever were rife, the most famous examples being Batavia, which had a reputation for being the "graveyard of Europeans," and Grand Bassam on the Ivory Coast. Technical innovations and progress, beginning with the advent of steam ships, as well as the development of effective tropical medicine at the end of the nineteenth century, allowed such hazards to be minimized.

Flows and characteristic functions

These ports were characterised by flows of trade (often unbalanced in essence, as in the case of exclusive trading rights), by economic flows (the colonial port was a site of the accumulation and the valorisation of capital) and by human and cultural flows linked to colonial logics, the best known being the slave trade in the early modern period and the coolie trade in the modern era.

The most important ports became colonial capitals in which various key functions were concentrated, except in Latin America where, for climatic and historical reasons, several capitals were located in cities of high altitude. Their primary functions, of course, were military and commercial. Singapore is a good example of this, at once a British fortress, an emporium in the China Sea and a hub for migrant flows. But the colonial port also regularly took on a wider function of domination, both in territorial terms (as a point of departure for conquest) and as a zone of contact between coloniser and colonised. On a demographic and economic level, colonisation could lead to the development of cities hosting a very wide variety of activities and which were already veritable maritime-industrial complexes. It could also, however, lead to the specialisation of ports: New Orleans for American cotton, Lomé for cotton from the regions to the south of the Niger, Dakar and Grand-Popo for oleaginous plants, Haiphong for the coal of the Tonkin. During the decades that preceded decolonisation, this specialisation was reinforced by the specialisation of the ships themselves, starting of course with the large oil and liquefied gas tankers which required ports with specialised equipment. It is therefore important to distinguish between specialised ports where trade was strongly orientated towards just one or a few products (e.g. cotton, metals, oil) and ports that could be described as 'general' and which were also often colonial capitals or closely associated with these colonial capitals, as in the case of the Andean countries where high-altitude capitals, in more salubrious and pleasant climates, formed partnerships with a port "down below" (Santiago-Valparaiso, Quito-Guayaquil, Mexico City-Veracruz).

Colonial ports as interfaces and the question of their influence

The importance of colonial ports also stemmed from relations established with the foreland and the hinterland. These relations were obviously very different in the case of ports created *ex nihilo* by the colonisers, like those of Oceania and sub-Saharan Africa, and those ports (as was often the case in Asia) where Europeans fitted into pre-existing structures that, though modified and shaped according to European requirements, never completely lost their autochthonous features. From the port, where goods were offloaded, the coloniser had to organise the distribution of goods throughout the rest of the region, colony or empire by coastal/river navigation or by railway: the colonial port thus controlled the railway network. The influence of these ports varied greatly, and in the case of global empires like the British and French empires in the nineteenth century, it is often more pertinent to speak of an imperial rather than a colonial port. In essence the site of the unloading of goods, the port has to be understood in connection with the colony, the empire or the region.

In these ports, which were economic and cultural interfaces, particular social interactions developed in a specific demographic context in which men were over-represented among both the colonists and among migrant

populations (such as slaves or coolies) in transit, often involving the specialisation of certain peoples in port activities, such as the *kru* packers in the Gulf of Guinea. Controlling these moving populations became an important issue for the coloniser. Cosmopolitism and hybridisation thus became part of the representations and classic stereotypes of colonial ports which, *de facto*, brought very different populations into contact, as in the case of the Malay, Persian, Jewish, Chinese and Indian merchants in Malacca from the fifteenth century onwards. This resulted both in cases of strict ethnic segregation by neighbourhood and in a variety of encounters and forms of co-existence, for example in markets. Such ports were thus the privileged sites of encounter and compromise in the "colonial situation" (Balandier).

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