

European Commercial Ports

Major Sites of Globalisation (17th-21st centuries)

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ABSTRACT

Europe's major commercial ports have played a decisive historical role in the process of opening up large parts of the world. Today they are important sites of globalisation. These ports have evolved into highly developed, increasingly complex structures. Furthermore, the rise of Atlantic trade and the arrival of the industrial era brought profound changes in the hierarchy of European ports.



Giovanni Canaletto, *The Thames and the City*, oil on canvas, 1747

According to the French dictionary *Le Petit Robert*, a port—from the Latin *portus* (passage)—is a “natural or artificial shelter equipped to receive ships, for the loading and unloading of their cargo.” At the heart of the process of globalisation, ports are interfaces or zones of contact between different spaces. Seas and oceans occupy 71% of the earth's surface and are interconnected, thus favouring exchanges on a global level in the context of a boom in world trade since the end of the Second World War. Moreover, maritime transport has undergone a veritable revolution since the 1960s, particularly through containerisation, allowing it to account for 80% of today's global trade in terms of tonnage and 50% of it in terms of value. Some ports have thus become the hubs of a globalised economy. This situation leads us to re-examine the history of this process and to study the development of European commercial ports since the beginning of the early modern period.

Increasingly highly developed commercial ports

At the start of the early modern period and in many cases until the 19th century, European commercial ports were “without a port” (Gérard Le Bouëdec). They were harbours with very little equipment, in which ships could be grounded or moored. Urban ports only had quays, often oblique, and simple slipways. This situation endured in spite of the rise of transoceanic trade in the 17th and especially in the 18th century. In Bordeaux, the famous, crescent-shaped “port of the moon” celebrated by European travellers was in fact merely a natural harbour at the end of an estuary, where ocean-going ships lined up at anchor on the Garonne river without the possibility of drawing alongside the riverbanks, the quays having only a decorative and not a commercial function.

The growth of sea traffic led to a divorce between the hearts of cities and their ports, which meant that port installations spread downstream in the case of ports at the end of estuaries and along the foreshore in the case of sea-front ports. Nevertheless, construction work remained modest, condemning certain sites to a fall in status. Such was the case in Bruges, situated 13 kilometres from the North Sea and a trading post of the Hanseatic towns since the 13th century: an important trading centre, with the city of Damme as its outer harbour, the town fell into decline from the 16th century onwards because of the silting up of the Zwin and the decline of its cloth industry. Bruges faced increasing competition from Antwerp, which ultimately overtook it as a result of its freer commercial practices.

A recourse to outer harbours was an alternative possibility, particularly for ports at the end of estuaries, often located dozens of kilometres from the sea. Bremen, 80km inland on the river Weser, founded Bremerhaven in 1830. Some installations were even older: Le Havre-de-Grâce, created in 1517 at the mouth of the Seine on the orders of French king François I, became the outer harbour of Rouen, situated 125km from the Channel coast.

The transition from sailing ships to steam power with the dawn of the industrial era led to a spectacular rise in shipping tonnage. In 1862, the average tonnage of European merchant fleets per vessel was 304 for Belgium, 254 for the Netherlands, 169 for England and 61 for France. In 1899-1900, according to Lloyd’s register, the average tonnage of a merchant steamship was between 1,050 tons (for a French steamship) and 1,463 tons (for a German steamship). Such an increase made it necessary for ports to be equipped with wet docks to accommodate these ships: in 1715 Liverpool became the first port in Great Britain to be equipped with one, followed by London in 1802. Most European ports had to wait for the middle or even the end of the 19th century. Above all, the invention of the dock warehouse, an English innovation at the end of the 18th century, allowed for a significant improvement in loading, unloading and transferring cargoes, soon to be accompanied by even larger warehouses and mechanical cranes. At the end of the 19th century, the docks of Liverpool on the Mersey were the most advanced of their day: 36 miles of quayside, 65 docks, 22 dry docks.

Until the railway revolution of the 19th century, ports were sites of transshipment between maritime shipping and river traffic, the latter including the canal networks that developed, mainly from the 17th century onwards. This was a result of the low cost of river transport compared to road transport. The railway changed all this, creating a balance between maritime and inland transport by introducing a continuity between land and sea. From this point on, the ports of the future were those with vast hinterlands, from which they could bring in products and which they could supply.

The 20th century was marked by a process of continually extending the facilities of major ports: land reclamation, the construction of warehouses, the improvement of access channels, and the growing specialisation of sites through the creation of terminals. Moreover, the arrival of heavy industry along the coast led to the creation of industrial port zones. Such facilities required increasingly high levels of investment, which inevitably influenced the hierarchy of ports.

The changing hierarchy of ports

At the time when ports had no or only very few facilities, it is striking to note the profusion of small, scattered port sites, a situation described by Gérard Le Bouëdec as “poussière portuaire” (literally “port dust”). In the French province of Brittany alone there were 123 identifiable harbours in the 16th century; by the 18th century there were only around 90. This reduction of the number of ports was accompanied by a process of concentration within a few major port sites, leading to the creation of large zones of maritime activity.

Ports gravitated around command centres, often located at the end of large estuaries at the gateways to great river basins, and a division of tasks came into operation: the main port kept the most costly and lucrative transoceanic trade for itself (trade with the plantation colonies of the Americas, the Atlantic slave trade, journeys to the Indian Ocean), while the other ports catered for coastal navigation for supply and short-range redistribution, trade with Northern Europe being predominantly in the hands of the Dutch and Hanseatic fleets. This model was in operation in the large French ports of the 18th century like Bordeaux, Nantes, Le Havre-Rouen and Marseille but could also be applied to English ports like London, Liverpool and Bristol, as well as to Iberian ports such as Porto, Lisbon and Cadiz-Seville.

Once again, the process of industrialisation overturned this hierarchy: the ports of the Atlantic coast, which had benefitted from their advantageous geographical position when Europe’s economic centre of gravity shifted from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, now found themselves relatively far away from the continent’s main industrial regions, with the exception of the British ports. London, the great international warehouse, remained the world’s biggest port in the 19th and early 20th century but faced increasing competition from the ports on Europe’s North-Western coast, known collectively as the Northern Range. Stretching from Le Havre to Hamburg, they together formed the busiest and best equipped group of ports in the world in the 20th century, centred on the biggest port in the world at that time: Rotterdam.

The economic opening of China and its transformation into “the world’s factory” since the 1980s has pushed European ports down the global rankings. In 2013, Rotterdam was only ranked eighth in the world (in millions of metric tons), and Antwerp 18th, while 13 Chinese ports could be found among the 20 largest ports in the world.

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