

# Ports as Tools of European Expansion

16th - 21st centuries

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## Abstract

Ports became one of the tools of the expansion of European influence with the great discoveries of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the prelude to what some historians have described as the first age of globalisation. This explains why the ports of the Atlantic coast benefited from their advantageous location, promoted by states which, from Spain to the Dutch Republic, asserted their global maritime ambitions. The control of the sea lanes linking metropolises with their colonial empires also explains the creation of powerful arsenal ports and overseas naval bases. Over the centuries, the influence of commercial ports followed the evolution of the economic and political power relations of Atlantic Europe. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the English ports, starting with London and Liverpool, emerged as the most powerful in Europe. However, from the 1860s onwards, at the heart of the process of globalisation resulting from the industrial revolution, the most powerful port range in the world developed between Le Havre and Hamburg.

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## Article

The history of European global expansion inevitably passes through its ports. Ports were the bridgeheads of discovery and colonisation when, from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Europeans set off across the sea towards Africa, Asia and America. Ports were not only points of departure but also the places to which fabulous cargoes returned from other continents and, for precisely this reason, the great ports undoubtedly numbered among the main centres of the accumulation of capital and wealth in early modern Europe. Europe's major ports both supported and symbolised Europe's global power: the Hanseatic ports and those of Northern Italy were overtaken by Seville, Cadiz and Antwerp in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, followed by Amsterdam in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, London, Liverpool and Bordeaux in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and finally the ports of the Northern Range since the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In their wake, an entire European port economy flourished, from the Mediterranean to the furthest reaches of the Baltic. This list suggests the continually shifting hierarchy among the European continent's great gateways during the period of its global expansion that culminated around 1914. Until then, the destiny of ports was closely linked to the development of colonial empires, to the shifting power balance between European states and, increasingly over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to the development of Europe's industrial heartlands.

## The age of the Atlantic ports

From the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the combined processes of globalisation and colonisation gave an incomparable advantage to the ports of the Atlantic coast, which alternately benefited or suffered from the growing rivalries between Western Europe's maritime powers: Spain, France, the Dutch Republic and England. The struggle for continental supremacy was transferred to the sea and to the territories of the New World colonised by the Europeans. When Spanish power seemed to be running out of steam in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, the young Dutch Republic attacked the most vulnerable parts

of its empire, the Portuguese possessions in Africa, the Indian Ocean and Brazil. The relative decline of the Spanish ports was followed, for a century, by the glory of Amsterdam. But, in turn, the Dutch came up against the maritime ambitions of England and France; in the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Dutch capital lost its position as Europe's foremost commercial and financial centre to London and, more secondarily, to Bordeaux. The long series of wars of the French Revolution and Empire left the port on the Thames ruling the waves alone.

The major port cities, sometimes also political capitals, grew into large metropolises because their prosperity attracted merchants from throughout the continent, as well as drawing in abundant migrant labour, sometimes from far away, to work in the various maritime trades. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, major port towns linked to transoceanic trade experienced impressive demographic growth. Between 1622 and 1795, the population of Amsterdam rose from 105,000 to almost 220,000 inhabitants; Marseille's population doubled between 1650 and 1790, rising from 65,000 to 120,000 inhabitants; that of Bordeaux tripled over the course of the same period, rising from 45,000 to 130,000 souls. More spectacular still was the rise of Liverpool: a large village of 5000 inhabitants in 1700, the port had grown into an urban area of 80,000 inhabitants a century later and of over 750,000 on the eve of the First World War. Hamburg, meanwhile, had no reason to envy the port on the Mersey, seeing its population increase tenfold between 1750 and 1910 to reach nearly one million. However, London outdid all other European port metropolises: with a population of 675,000 in 1750, the English capital was home to 950 000 people by 1801, or one-eighth of the English population. At this time, with an average annual influx of 8000 immigrants, a quarter of the population was directly dependent on the port for its livelihood. Its peak in the 19<sup>th</sup> century reinforced its exceptional demographic vigour. In 1914, with around 7 million inhabitants, Greater London is considered to have been the world's largest urban area.

The process of accumulation undergone by the major European ports was not only financial and demographic but also technical. The struggle for mastery of the sea lanes gave rise to considerable innovations in shipyards, from the development of the caravel to the great ocean liners and motorised cargo-ships of the modern age. Moreover, the navy, an integral part of overseas conquests, also benefited from the constant improvement of arsenal ports, among which Venice for a long time led the way. European powers harbouring maritime and colonial ambitions all had such tools at their disposal: let us note, among others, Chatham, Sheerness, Portsmouth and Plymouth in England, followed by Scapa Flow during the First World War; La Carraca, Cartagena and El Ferrol in Spain; Brest, Cherbourg, Rochefort and Toulon in France; and Karlskrona in Sweden, which was the model to follow in terms of equipment by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The European geography of naval bases continued to shift over the following century as new powers declared their naval ambitions, including Russia with the modernisation of Kronstadt and Germany, on the road to unification, with the foundation of Wilhelmshaven in 1853 and Kiel in 1866. From the early modern period, these military-industrial establishments were at the forefront of modernity, combining the most sophisticated technology and the best materials, all of which was based on the concentration of very diverse human skills, the specific organisation of work for a large workforce in an enclosed space, and the logistics of supply drawing on exceptional means. The original characteristics of European naval bases endured, despite the technical shift in shipbuilding from wood to iron.

## The technical and commercial upheavals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

Technical changes also shaped the history of ports, including the transformation of long-distance navigation, the growth and diversification of traffic and the establishment of closer connections between ports and their hinterlands. In this respect, the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a major leap forward. To respond to the growing pressures of global trade and on the link between sea and land transport,

engineers fundamentally overhauled ports in order to improve access to the quayside for the largest ships, to accelerate transshipment operations to reduce lost time, and to facilitate the carriage of goods to and from the hinterland. As a result, by entering into a constant process of innovation, the physical spaces on which Europe's largest ports were constructed changed scale and they became increasingly separated from their original towns. This dynamic process has continually increased: from dock warehouses to hangars and wide expanses of reclaimed land, from steam powered cranes to coal powered ferries and container handling gantry cranes, from the arrival of the first ironworks at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the construction of petrochemical complexes. For every regulatory authority (state, municipality, private company) such advances became the price to pay, literally as well as figuratively, in order to maintain or increase the attractiveness of a port in the context of ever-increasing intra-European competition. Moreover, European civil engineers specialised in the construction of ports exported their expertise to other parts of the world, whether colonised or not. For instance, the great Dutch engineer Waldorp, after participating in the construction of the new port of Amsterdam in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, took part in the conception of the port of Batavia (Jakarta) in the Dutch East Indies, before taking charge of the improvement of the port facilities in La Plata in Argentina. The creation by the British of the ports of Singapore (1819) and Hong Kong (1842) also bear witness to the transfer of Western technology to other parts of the world. Following a common colonial model, these two ports combined the functions of commercial centres and naval bases.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the peak of the influence of European ports. They were the gateways in and out of the world's most powerful continent. Europe was at the heart of the world economy: rapidly industrialising and urbanising, the driving force behind the process of globalisation that was so marked between 1850 and 1914, and at the head of colonial empires that covered the Caribbean, Africa, Asia and Oceania. It was not only products, particularly manufactured goods, that left through these ports but also people, whose qualities were as varied as their motivations: soldiers, missionaries, explorers, scientists, political exiles, merchants, colonial administrators... These departures, whether temporary or definitive, culminated between the years 1850 and 1914 with the explosion of white migration that amounted to the departure of around 35 million European emigrants around the world. Ports like Liverpool and Hamburg became the symbolic sites of departure towards colonies of settlement, such as Australia and New Zealand, and even more so towards the Americas and especially the United States, which absorbed the bulk of the migration flow.

Three conditions combined to encourage these transoceanic mass migrations: the construction of great steam-powered ocean liners perfected in the British shipyards, the development of shipping lines, and the creation of major shipping companies with a global influence. The equivalent of land transport networks, shipping lines were an unparalleled innovation in the use of maritime space from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. They first emerged on the North Atlantic route, which also saw the first experiments in the use of ocean-going paddle steamers. The first two to sail to New York left from London (Sirius) and Bristol (Great Western). The shipping line, characterised by its fixed places of departure and destination as well as its fixed timetable, was not a creation of steam shipping, but the latter systematised its implementation and organising principles, particularly by rendering it less dependent on the elements. The growth of merchant shipping and passenger transport, as well as the establishment of transatlantic postal services, proved to be decisive factors in the success of the shipping lines. Most such ships belonged to the great European shipping companies that emerged from the late 1830s onwards, the largest of which had a global reach. Great Britain, the world's foremost maritime and commercial power, invented this model with the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company (P&O), founded in 1837. Each company was closely linked to a home port and thus actively contributed to that city's global influence: Hamburg was the headquarters, among others, of HAPAG (Hamburg Amerikanische Paketfahrt Aktien-Gesellschaft), Bremen that of Norddeutscher Lloyd, Le Havre that of the Compagnie générale transatlantique, and Marseille that of the Messageries maritimes.

In parallel to the rise of the passenger liners, other companies developed specialised in the transport of freight and in international trade, as 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe became the world's commercial hub, drawing in and pumping out the commerce of the world. Since the early modern period, ports have been the recipients of products brought in by their merchants and, as a result, are sites through which new consumer products have been introduced, fundamentally altering the eating habits of Europeans. Alongside the spices and tropical foodstuffs that gradually found their way onto Europe's dining tables—albeit at a different pace depending on region, social group and product type—ports also drew in the heavy goods needed by Europe's industry and agriculture. In 1876-1880, raw materials already accounted for almost two-thirds of global trade, 60% of which was continuously absorbed by North-West Europe, a situation that lasted until 1914. Cargoes consisted of foodstuffs (e.g. cereals, animal products), fertilisers (e.g. guano, nitrates, phosphates), of non-ferrous metals (e.g. copper, nickel, cobalt), as well as raw materials (e.g. cotton, rubber, gutta-percha) and sources of energy (e.g. oil).

## From British ports to the “Northern Range”, 19th to 21st centuries

As the capital of the world's foremost economic power and largest colonial empire, London asserted itself throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the world's number one port by volume of freight handled. Supported by the world's largest merchant fleet—and the world's largest navy—London's supremacy rested essentially on its role as the world's warehouse, as the series of evocatively named docks stretching along the Thames attests (West India Dock, East India Dock, Royal Victoria Dock, etc.). In the early 1820s, London, which was undoubtedly the most modern port in the world, aroused the admiration of foreign visitors. In 1913, with an external trade of over 20 million tons, it remained Europe's leading port. The port, standing alongside the largest city and most powerful financial centre on the planet, perfectly embodies Braudel's notion of a “world-economy” (*économie-monde*) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In a way, London was the symbol of a Great Britain that managed to ally the power of the nation-state with the wealth of a city state. However, the pre-eminence of London was increasingly threatened from the late 1860s. Indeed, its function as a global warehouse tended to diminish in importance under the combined influence of several developments: among other factors, shorter journey times, particularly after the opening of the Suez canal, the rise of major foreign companies and well-equipped ports on the continent, and the growing importance of heavy goods and bulk cargoes made it easier than ever to break free from the warehouses of the British capital.

At first, the port of London's main competitors were all British, even though each port's dynamism was in fact based on a different economic model. The rise of Liverpool was the most remarkable of all, so much so that it remained Europe's second biggest port until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Unlike London, Liverpool's prosperity rested on the existence of one of the most powerful industrial hinterlands in the world: Manchester and the cotton industries of Lancashire. While Liverpool built its fortune on the triangular trade with the British Caribbean in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, its dynamism was above all linked to its close ties to the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as witnessed by the creation, in 1818, of the first regular line of packet boats, the Black Ball Line, which linked the port on the Mersey with New York. It was the home of the most famous of transatlantic lines of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, taken notably by the first steamships of the Cunard Line in the early 1840s. From the end of the 1820s, Liverpool also benefited from the opening of the first commercial railway line which linked it to Manchester. From this point on, Liverpool was thus able to provide a rapid supply of bales of American cotton to the industries of its hinterland and, in the other direction, to ship the manufactures of Lancashire's spinning and textile industries throughout the world. Until the American Civil War, Liverpool was Britain's premier port for imports, accounting for over 90% of the needs of national industry. In terms of exports, the United States was the main market for Liverpool, receiving 80% of its exports in around 1850. The New York line also gave an advantage to Liverpool as the point of departure for European emigrants, when this population movement began to accelerate in mid-century. An estimated 20 million emigrants, from all over Europe, passed through Liverpool before

1914. Even though the growth rate of overseas trade tended to decline after 1850, Liverpool remained the United Kingdom's number one port in terms of export volume and continued to handle a quarter of its imports.

Nevertheless, the major development of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the emergence of a powerful range of ports between the mouth of the Seine and the Elbe. The primary advantage of this so-called "Northern Range" was in its location at the interface between the North Atlantic maritime route, the busiest route in the world in this period, and the "Lotharingian" axis stretching from North to South between the Low Countries and northern Italy, which was the most industrialised, urbanised and densely populated area of Europe, with the highest per capita purchasing power. Their high level of equipment and excellent connections with central Europe explain why, even after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the ports of North-West Europe drew in the majority of the freight from the Far East, to the detriment of Marseille. However, there was merciless competition between these ports over all types of traffic.

Until the mid 1860s, Le Havre had been the principal gateway to continental Europe. Henceforth, the Norman port came under increasingly stiff competition from Antwerp. It was the port on the Scheldt that led the way from the early 1870s to the 1890s, by establishing its position at the heart of booming transit traffic with the German lands. The quality of rail links with the German hinterland and the policy of systematically bulking freight allowed Antwerp, on the land side, to attract a clientele of shippers through low tariffs and, on the maritime side, to fix the regular frequentation of a higher number of shipping line services. This coherent policy allowed it to become, by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the continent's main port of call for liners. Like Antwerp, Rotterdam emerged as the gateway to West Germany, thanks to the opening of the *Nieuwe Waterweg* in 1875, the downstream part of the new Meuse, re-dug as a canal, which became the port's main channel. Upstream, the Rhine valley axis was a major asset for this port which had Europe's most powerful chartering market in the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Further north, in the same period, Bremen and above all Hamburg emerged as serious competitors, sustained by the new industrial strength of Germany, now Europe's foremost industrial power. Hamburg's renaissance was just as remarkable as Antwerp's. With a vast free zone at its disposal—covering roughly two thirds of its total area—created in order to compensate the city after its incorporation into the Zollverein in 1888, the port continued to function as a centre for re-export. Heavily equipped and located on a well maintained river giving it access to a large area of central Europe, Hamburg even robbed Liverpool of its position as the most important point of departure for emigrants heading to the United States. On the eve of the First World War, it handled the highest volume of traffic on the European continent, buoyed by the presence of numerous shipping companies, including HAPAG which was among the very biggest in the world in 1914.

The ports of the Northern Range formed the world's most active seaboard region until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Beginning in the 1950s, the construction of the European economic space, linked to the policy of liberalising continental transport, reinforced the idea of a hinterland common to all the maritime cities of the seaboard, which serviced the largest commercial complex of the age. Port authorities actively supported the modern revolution in ocean transport. In the field of liquid bulk cargo, the Antifer dock, north of Le Havre, was one of the largest oil terminals in the world when it opened in 1976. Moreover, the ports of the Northern Range were, alongside Japan, the preferred region for vast port-industrial zones (*zones industrialo-portuaires*, ZIP). Rotterdam opened the first on the Botlek site in 1957; Antwerp launched its ten-year plan in 1955-1965 which led to the construction of one of the largest petro-chemical installations in the world. Hamburg, Le Havre, and Dunkirk underwent the same process. In 1996, the 20 largest ports of the Northern Range handled traffic of 809 million tons, almost 9% of global tonnage, and three of them were in the global top ten in terms of container traffic. The movement of sea traffic through these ports amounts to 1.3 times the tonnage of total global shipping in terms of ship numbers and 2.5 times in terms of tonnage. The

ports of the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt delta regained the upper hand. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Rotterdam was the world's only port of over 45 kilometres in length in a single site, constructed in stages downstream on a series of polders (Europoort, Maasvlakte I and II). Handling over 300 million tons of traffic annually—more than a third of the total for the whole Northern Range—Rotterdam was the world's busiest port. This supremacy was lost as a result of the spectacular rise of the Chinese economy since the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, bringing with it a boom in activity for all the ports of South-East Asia. In spite of this, Rotterdam remains the most important port in the Western world for total traffic and container traffic.

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