

Eighteenth century ships as research vessels? Southern-Netherlandish observations and shipboard knowledge production on the early-modern marine environment

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Just as was the case for other European sea voyages, maritime expeditions from the Southern-Netherlandish port of Ostend to Asia presented opportunities for bringing exotic naturalia to Europe, and with it the production of knowledge on the natural world in the early eighteenth century (Egmond 2010). While this exchange took place alongside the more commercial aspect of these expeditions, and mostly comprised gift objects brought back for study or collection in the curiosity cabinets of Southern-Netherlandish dignitaries, new research also shows how the ship itself served as a space for knowledge production on the marine environment. Marine life, naturalia, and geographical features were all approached from a shipboard perspective in the production of natural historical knowledge, resulting from practical interactions and observations by sailors and sea-going passengers.

While the activities and knowledge production of 18th century proto-scientists and collectors have been well-studied (Adamowsky 2015, MacGregor 2018), research on new and previously unexplored sources reveals how sailors perceived and interacted with marine life from within their own technical traditions, on board their 'wooden world' at sea (De Winter 2019). As an isolated working environment in which they faced the challenges of oceanic navigation, the ship itself provided the infrastructure for developing knowledge on unfamiliar marine environments. Case studies on selected ship logbooks, such as those of ship's chaplain Michael de Febure (De Winter 2019) or navigational sources from the Southern-Netherlandish Prize Papers collection, urge us to reconsider the ship as a historical space for knowledge production on the marine environment during the early modern period. Taking into account the working experience and technical traditions of seamen influenced how sailors as well as proto-scientists interacted with the environment as 'organic intellectuals' (Egmond and Mason 1996). Their testimonies show how the role of curiosity, exoticism, and utilitarianism all served as drivers for the expansion of early modern knowledge on the natural world (Daston & Park 1998). This production of knowledge at sea was formed by a culture of maritime navigation as well as a developing culture of reading embedded within a burgeoning geographical literature and scientific discussion during the 18th century (Shapin and Schaffer 2011).

Both long-distance expeditions to Asia or Latin America and shorter distance voyages across the Atlantic reveal how 18th century sailors perceived the ocean as an environment, within which specific human-environment interactions took place. These voyages coupled the exoticism and curiosity involved in the perception of an unfamiliar environment to the environmental, climatological and oceanographic challenges faced by sailors in the creation of practical shipboard knowledge.

Newly encountered geographical features, such as islands and other 'seamarks', received names while exotic marine wildlife was observed and compared to familiar European fauna, which was also plundered by sailors as part of their food supply, or as a pastime. These elements were also treated as signs within navigational practices forming a shared knowledge within the maritime working community (Rediker 1987).

Experimental scientific approaches, such as the temperature measurements conducted at sea by de Febure in 1721, could also be coupled to these observations. Resultingly, early modern ships can be reconsidered as precursors to later systematic uses of research vessels or 'vessels of opportunity' as a means for developing knowledge on the marine environment.

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