

History of the Ports

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Abstract

This article explores port typography and historiography. It reviews the expansion of port history as a field over the last 50 years, with increasing focus on the Early Modern, Medieval and Classical periods. Concentration on leading players has been replaced by interest in a range of ports, and comparisons at a local and regional level, although regrettably usually not at international or global level, for reasons considered. The author takes issue with suggestions that port history sits uncomfortably at a nexus of local, national and international historiography, arguing that this is a strength, providing both basic coherence and wider perspective.

Keywords

maritime commerce, maritime history, ports, port history

What is meant by a port? At its most basic a port is a place: an established landing point for the loading and unloading of sea cargo. Some port historians with a geographical disciplinary background have indeed identified location as key. They have distinguished between those located in commercial estuaries as opposed to those in industrial estuaries.¹ But this is just one example of a port typography. As has often been pointed out, there are in fact a bewildering range of possible analytical categorisations for ports, whether in the past or the present; far too many to consider here.² However, it is always worth

1. J. H. Bird, *The Major Seaports of the United Kingdom* (London, 1963).
2. A. Jarvis, 'Port History: Thoughts on Where It Has Come From and Where It Might Be Going', in Lewis R. Fischer and Adrian Jarvis, eds., *Harbours and Havens: Essays in Port History in Honour of Gordon Jackson* (St. John's, Newfoundland, 1999), 13–34; Sarah Palmer, 'Ports' in *The Cambridge Urban History, Volume III, 1840–1950* (Cambridge, 2000), 133–40; David M. Williams, 'Recent Trends in Maritime and Port History', in Reginald

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remembering that, despite the undoubted glamour of vessels pictured floating in a harbour, commercial ports are fundamentally about cargoes. They do not exist to serve shipping. As far as ports are concerned, shipping is the means not the end.

That said, much that affects the character of a port and how it operates is associated with the type and size of the vessels that use it. In fact, in today's maritime world there is a port typology based on its shipping; we speak of a 'container port'. A port's survival over the longer term depends not only on trade, but also on its ability to respond to changes in shipping technology; to handle not the cargo but the shipping. As we all know, the later modern shipping 'revolutions' – sail/steam/containerisation – have had a world-wide impact.³

Ports have a local physical presence. The handling of shipping and cargoes require capital resources, infrastructure, docks, quays, cranes and storage. Ports are also workplaces. They require human capital, although to a lesser extent in the twenty-first century than in earlier centuries. But a 'sea-facing' approach that treats a port in isolation from its wider economic, social and cultural context risks missing not only relevant influences on *its own* development, but also the ways in which the port itself may influence the world beyond the dock or terminal wall. Seaports are where all the economic components of trade come together. They are an element in a logistics chain made possible by investment in sea transport and created as a result of commercial, also sometimes political, decisions taken elsewhere. Conversely, if a port is more than an interface between land and sea, then a port town, port city or port region is more than just a settled area beyond a waterfront. To put the point metaphorically, we cannot stay within a port's boundaries if we are to understand its reality.

Where does port history sit in all this? In a 2003 paper dealing with then 'Recent Trends in Maritime and Port History', David Williams noted that there had been an enormous expansion of port history in the last quarter of the twentieth century.⁴ In 2014, Malcolm Tull calculated that between 1989 and 2012 there had been at least 59 articles dealing with port history published in the leading maritime history journal, the *International Journal of Maritime History (IJMH)*.⁵ Using the same broad definition, I have estimated that at least 16 more appeared between 2012 and 2017. Whether this total of 75 is seen as few or many depends on expectations, but the comparable number on shipbuilding in *IJMH* between 1989 and 2017 was just 18. The British journal *Mariner's Mirror* published 11 articles on ports over the same period (1989–2017).

Loyen, Erik Buyst and Greta Devos, eds., *Struggling for Leadership: Antwerp-Rotterdam Port Competition between 1870–2000* (Heidelberg, 2003), 11–25; Amélia Polónia, 'European Seaports in the Early Modern Age: Concepts, Methodology and Models of Analysis', *Cahiers de la Méditerranée, Dynamiques des Ports Méditerranéens*, 80 (2010), 17–39.

3. Yehuda Hayuth and David Hilling, 'Technological Change and Seaport Development', in B.S. Hoyle and D.A. Pinder, eds., *European Port Cities in Transition* (London, 1992), 40–58; Frank Broeze, 'The Ports and Ports Systems of the Asian Seas: An Overview with Historical Perspective from c.1750', in Agustin Guimerá and Dolores Romero, eds., *Puertos Y Sistemas Portuarios (Siglos XVI–XX): Actas del Coloquio Internacional El Sistema Portuario Español* (Madrid, 1995), 99–121.
4. Williams, 'Recent Trends', 16.
5. Malcolm Tull, 'Port History in the *International Journal of Maritime History* (1989–2012)', *International Journal of Maritime History*, 26 (2014), 124–5.

There are, of course, internationally many other journals, not all identified with the maritime sphere, which have also published work on port history,⁶ while numerous port history research groups and networks exist.⁷ I could also point to the number of conferences and subsequent proceedings dealing with ports, not all of which have an historical focus. What all this indicates is that port studies have remained far from a peripheral interest, something borne out by the number of those participating in this workshop who are not exclusively port historians but have written about ports.

However, there are perhaps some signs that port history may be currently attracting less attention from historians than previously. Twenty-two papers on the subject were presented at the 2004 International Economic Maritime History Association Congress, but only 14 at the 2008 Congress.⁸ It may be that there is now less interest in the modern era than previously. The *Early Modern World* volume in the extensive four-volume *Sea in History* series, published in 2017, has a whole section devoted to ports.⁹ Chapters specifically on ports feature also in both the medieval and ancient history volumes. But there is nothing so similarly sharply focussed in the final volume on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁰ I do not myself think that a shift away from these periods is any bad thing. Even so, it is high time there was more attention to the impact of containerisation on port operations, rather than the issue of port city decline, which has tended to dominate discussion of developments in the late twentieth century.

What have been the subjects of all this evident research enterprise and effort? What has influenced the selection of themes? Most important, to what extent has more recent work, that is over the last 30 years or so, added to, even changed, our understanding of the role of ports in history?

As a field, port history has long been marked by a focus on individual national cases, single ports, or groups of national ports. The first ports to attract serious scholarly attention from economic historians, as well as economic geographers, were the most successful leading national ports in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, typically identified by the size of their trade.¹¹ This is no longer the case. Any survey of publications in

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6. Carola Hein, 'Port Cityscapes: Conference and Research Contributions on Port Cities', *Planning Perspectives*, 31 (2016), 312–26.
 7. For example, the Ports and Indian Ocean Exchanges Research Group (British Museum, UK and Kerala Council for Historical Research, India); China Ports: History, Heritage and Development Network (University of Nottingham UK); The Global History of Free Ports Network (University of Helsinki, Finland).
 8. Amélia Polónia, 'Maritime History: A Gateway to Global History?' in Maria Fusaro and Amélia Polónia, eds., *Maritime History as Global History: Research in Maritime History No.43* (St. John's Newfoundland, 2010), 8–9.
 9. Christian Buchet and Gérard Le Bouëdec, eds., *The Sea in History: The Early Modern World* (Woodbridge, 2017), 137–209.
 10. Philip de Souza, Pascal Arnaud and Christian Buchet, eds., *The Sea in History: The Ancient World*; Michel Balard, ed., *The Sea in History: The Medieval World* (Woodbridge, 2017); N. A. M. Rodger, ed., *The Sea in History: The Modern World* (Woodbridge, 2017).
 11. In the case of the UK, for example, J. H. Bird, *The Geography of the Port of London* (London, 1957); Francis E. Hyde, *Liverpool and the Mersey: The Development of a Port, 1700–1970* (Newton Abbott, 1973); Gordon Jackson, *Hull in the Eighteenth Century. A Study in Economic and Social History* (Oxford, 1972).

recent decades reveals a remarkable range of ports studied.¹² In a masterly 2001 article, Gordon Jackson persuasively argued that no port, however seemingly unimportant compared with the giants, should be considered too lowly or unsuccessful to deserve the consideration of port historians.¹³ And so indeed it has proved. Such studies of previously neglected ports are often what might be termed ‘foundation’ works, in which their main features, trades and so forth are set out and analysed. In the case of already more well-known historical examples, where there is already a substantial literature, the tendency has been to investigate particular aspects in greater depth, rather than challenge previous interpretations.

Quite why any of us choose to research one particular subject rather than another is an interesting question, but among port historians there is not only a national bias but also an element of the directly contiguous. A number of port historians have been based in universities or museums located in the same city or town as the port they have researched. Happy the port, or former port, that has a university based nearby.¹⁴

However, the local and national bias of port history research does not mean that comparative history at a national or regional level has been neglected, as recent projects have demonstrated.¹⁵ The fact that all seaports share certain functional characteristics serves as a useful initial framework for research and analysis. It is also an encouragement, sometimes mistaken, to over-emphasise their fundamental similarity, something that has certainly influenced international policy-makers in recent years.¹⁶

What about moving beyond the local and national? As a discipline, port history, like maritime history more generally, is very much an international discipline, with academic networks, connections and indeed friendships extending well beyond national

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12. Since the pre-2013 *IJM*H contributions referred to by Tull, ‘Port History’, subjects in this journal have included ports in Africa, Asia, Australasia and, to a lesser extent, Europe. Book-length studies in English since 1990 include Frank Broeze, (ed.), *Gateways of Asia: Port Cities of Asia in the 13th–20th Centuries* (New York, 1997); Malcolm Tull, *A Community Enterprise: The History of the Port of Fremantle, 1897–1997. Research in Maritime History, No. 12* (St. John’s Newfoundland, 1997); Adrian Jarvis, *In Troubled Times: The Port of Liverpool, 1905–1938. Research in Maritime History, No. 26* (St John’s Newfoundland, 2003); Ferry de Goey, *Comparative Port History of Rotterdam and Antwerp (1880–2000): Competition, Cargo and Costs* (Amsterdam, 2004); Tapio Bergholm, Lewis R. Fischer and M. Elisabetta Tonizzi, eds., *Making Global and Local Connections: Historical Perspectives on Ports. Research in Maritime History, No.35* (St John’s Newfoundland, 2007); Haneda Masashi, ed., *Asian Port Cities 1600–1800: Local and Foreign Cultural Interactions* (Singapore and Kyoto, 2009).
 13. Gordon Jackson, ‘The Significance of Unimportant Ports’, *International Journal of Maritime History*, 13 (2001), 1–17.
 14. UK examples include Francis Hyde, Adrian Jarvis and Graeme Milne in relation to Liverpool, Gordon Jackson to Glasgow and Sarah Palmer to London.
 15. Loyen, Buyst and Devos, *Struggling for Leadership: Antwerp–Rotterdam*; Amélia Polónia and Helena Osswald, eds., *European Seaport Systems in the Early Modern Age: A Comparative Approach* (Porto, 2007); Daniel Castillo and Jesús M. Valdaliso, ‘Path Dependence and Change in the Spanish Port System in the Long Run (1880–2014)’, *International Journal of Maritime History*, 29 (2017), 569–96.
 16. A. K. C. Beresford, et al., ‘The UNCTAD and WORKPORT Models of Port Development: Evolution or Revolution?’ *Maritime Policy & Management*, 31 (2004), 93–117.

boundaries. Proceedings of international conferences and sessions focused on port history will invariably feature sessions with papers on a range of national ports.

But much of this is parallel history, not comparative history. Published historical research that makes systematic international comparisons between ports is unusual.¹⁷ No doubt linguistic inadequacy, time constraints and publishers' preferences play their part here, but I think this absence goes beyond practical aspects. Paradoxically, the expansion of interest in port history I have already identified has made us wary. The more we know about how individual ports have developed, the more we have become aware that each is a complex system, governed by particular circumstances and influenced by contingency. Comparing ports that have evolved in a broadly similar economic, political and social context is challenging. But voyaging into the deeper water of global comparative history is even more demanding, given the dangers of misunderstanding and over-simplification. So far, few maritime historians have been prepared to take the risk.

Perhaps there would not be quite such hesitancy if historians were typically happier with theorising port development. There is a theoretical tradition in port history, but until recently it has been associated with transport geographers rather than port historians. In the late twentieth century, a group of port geographers produced a number of studies that theorised port evolution and development.¹⁸ The leader was James Bird, whose 'Anyport' model appeared before the great expansion of port history. Bird argued that all major ports experience similar stages of physical development because they are all serving essentially the same shipping fleets. His emphasis on a particular pattern of evolution driven by economic and technological factors is undermined by evidence that many ports do not neatly conform to the 'Anyport' model and with some exceptions, it is hard to detect much influence of his approach on more than a very few port historians. In contrast with the expansion of port history within maritime history, geographers' interest in the history of port and port cities has markedly declined since the 1990s.¹⁹

This particular example should not be taken as evidence of a general resistance among port historians to drawing on theoretical insights and approaches in other disciplines. In fact, some port historians have recently followed the lead of economic and transport geographers concerned with contemporary port issues in utilising the theory of path dependence – the concept that economic outcomes depend on past decisions – to illuminate the history of ports in Spain and in Australia.²⁰ Those with an economics background appear particularly open to what can be offered by its methodology. For an

17. A recent exception is Ana Catarina Abrantes Garcia, 'New Ports of the New World: Angra, Funchal, Port Royal and Bridgetown', *International Journal of Maritime History*, 29 (2017), 155–74.

18. J. Bird, *Ports and Harbours* (London, 1961); J. Bird, *Seaports and Seaport Terminals* (London, 1971); B. S. Hoyle and D. Hilling, eds., *Seaport Systems and Spatial Change: Technology, Industry and Development Strategies* (New York, 1984); B. S. Hoyle and D.A. Pinder, eds., *European Port Cities in Transition* (London, 1992).

19. See the analysis in Adolf K.Y. Ng, 'The Evolution and Research Trends of Port Geography', *The Professional Geographer*, 65 (2013), 65–86.

20. Castello and Valdaliso, 'Path Dependence and Change in the Spanish Port System'; Justin Pyvis and Malcolm Tull, 'Institutions and port performance: A case study of the Port of Tauranga, New Zealand', *International Journal of Maritime History*, 29 (2017), 276–306.

impressive example of port history infused with economic thinking, the comparative project undertaken earlier this century on Antwerp/Rotterdam competition stands out.²¹

Such studies are part of an analytical shift away from an earlier focus on the construction of docks, cargo facilities and trade statistics towards a problem-based investigation of the reasons ports, in a range of periods, developed and functioned in the way they did. This has not meant that the role of engineers and architects in port infrastructure has been discounted. They still exert a fascination for the technically-minded, but even these traditional scholars, perhaps more engineering than port historians, now tend to adopt a more contextualised, critical approach, exemplified by Adrian Jarvis. Interdisciplinarity is also evident in the current interest shown by some architectural historians in the cultural and political meanings of the built environment of a port estate.²²

Like the history of port engineering, the study of port labour did not start from an interest in things maritime. In fact, port labour history began its expansion before the great burst of interest in port studies more generally.²³ Much of the early research on port workers was undertaken by those with a background in trade union history. The focus of their attention tended to be dock strikes and labour militancy in the modern period. This is no longer the case. Although there is still neglect of earlier periods, the study of waterfront labour has considerably widened, with researchers concentrating on the breadth of the port labour market, and on the culture of waterfront workers, their housing and living conditions. Exploration of certain issues on a worldwide comparative basis has proved successful, serving as an example of what can be achieved. Even so, those specialising in the study of port labour tend not to identify themselves with other types of port historian, seeing themselves as social rather than maritime historians, although there are of course exceptions.²⁴

Historians of port labour have not been alone in looking beyond the waterfront. In fact, much recent research in the field of port history has been concerned with examining the impact of a port on the wider urban economy and society – and vice-versa. Port-related industries, maritime communities of seamen ‘sailortowns’ as well as dockers, port elites and urban governance, commercial society and culture have received attention.²⁵

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21. Adrian Jarvis, ed., *Port and Harbour Engineering: Studies in the History of Civil Engineering, Vol. 6* (London, 1998); Adrian Jarvis, *The Liverpool Dock Engineers* (Stroud, 1996).
 22. Spike Sweeting, ‘*Capitalism, The State and Things: The Port of London, circa 1730–1800*’ (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Warwick, 2014); William M. Taylor, ‘Ports and Pilferers: London’s Late Georgian Era Docks as Settings for Evolving Material and Criminal Cultures’, in Brad Beaven, Karl Bell and Robert James, eds., *Port Towns and Urban Cultures: International Histories of the Waterfront* (London, 2016), 135–57.
 23. For an introduction to labour history historiography, see Joan Allen, Alan Campbell and John McIlroy, eds., *Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives* (London, 2011).
 24. Sam Davies et al., eds., *Dock Workers: International Explorations in Comparative Labour History 1790–1970*, 2 Vols. (Aldershot, 2000); Anne-Lise Piètre-Lévy, John Barzman and Éric Barré, *Environnements Portuaires: Port Environments* (Havre, 2001).
 25. Twenty-first century English-language examples include Richard Lawton and Robert Lee, eds., *Population and Society in Western European Port Cities, c.1650–1939* (Liverpool, 2002); Graeme J. Milne, *People, Place and Power on the Nineteenth Century Waterfront: Sailortown* (London, 2016); Su Lin Lewis, *Cities in Motion: Urban Life and Cosmopolitanism*

There is today no doubting the claim of port studies to be considered an aspect of urban history, which would not have been so obvious half a century ago. However, it seems that not all those who research the history of port cities have links with the maritime history community.²⁶

In conclusion, over the last 30 years or so the study of the history of ports has flourished. There certainly remain under-investigated historical areas, including the environmental impact of port operations. In 2013, Malcolm Tull, himself the author of an earlier path-breaking study of the Australian case, noted that up to 2012 no articles on the subject had appeared in *IJM*H and the situation is no different in 2018.²⁷ Arguably, such neglect by historians is defensible, given that environmental concerns have only recently gained the detailed attention of contemporary observers.²⁸

Nevertheless, many aspects of port history *have* been researched and often set within the wider economic and social context, as well as influenced by other disciplines. But in most cases, ports have either been studied in isolation or as groups, with a concentration on national or regional examples when comparisons are made. International comparative port history is still rare. An exception is port labour history, which has a strong comparative element, but those who study workforce aspects tend to be somewhat disengaged from the rest of port history practitioners.

In their introduction to *Making Global and Local History Connections: Historical Perspectives on Ports*, the editors point out that ports are focal points of competitive global maritime activity, but also tightly linked to local political, social, industrial and transport. Port history, they write, 'sits, uncomfortably at times, at the crossroad of international, national and even local historiography'.²⁹ I am not sure that this is uncomfortable. On the contrary, I think it is a strength. Unlike the wide reach of the study of maritime history more generally, the ports themselves are always the focus; they provide a basic coherence to the field, similar to that, say, of Mediterranean maritime history. But how will port history fare in the new competitive scholarly environment of maritime, world and global history? Over the next decades will historical port studies continue to attract the same attention? Perhaps the current relative weakness in comparative approaches will undermine its academic credibility? Perhaps the fundamental interdisciplinarity of much research in the history of ports will compensate? Everything depends on the choices made.

in Southeast Asia, 1920–1940 (Cambridge, 2016); Stephen D. Behrendt and Robert A. Hurley, 'Liverpool as a Trading Port: Sailors' Residences, African Migrants, Occupational Change and Probated Wealth', *International Journal of Maritime History*, 29 (2017), 875–910; Beaven, Bell and James, *Port Towns and Urban Culture*.

26. See the Global Urban History website, 'Some reflections on Imperial Port Cities in the Age of Steam', posted 29 October 2016. <https://globalurbanhistory.com/2016/10/29/some-reflections-on-imperial-port-cities-in-the-age-of-steam/> (accessed 10 September 2018).

27. Malcolm Tull, 'The Environmental Impact of Ports: An Australian Case Study', in Bergholm, Fischer and Tonizzi, eds., *Making Global and Local Connections*, 85–106.

28. N. Braathen, ed., *Environmental Impacts of International Shipping: The Role of Ports* (Paris, 2011).

29. Bergholm, Fischer and Tonizzi, eds., *Making Global and Local Connections*, vii.

Maria Fusaro has suggested that the maritime history discipline as a whole has become 'a very large umbrella under which many disciplines co-exist'.³⁰ As far as port history itself is concerned, I would suggest a more advanced technology – the helicopter – by way of analogy. It seems to me that the best port historians know where they are going, hovering over their subject of interest but never losing awareness of the wider landscape and the distant horizon.

Author biography

Sarah Palmer is Emeritus Professor of Maritime History, University of Greenwich, UK, and former director of the Greenwich Maritime Institute. Her research interests focus particularly on commercial shipping, port development and maritime policy from the nineteenth century to the present and she has published widely on these subjects. Sarah is currently completing a book about the relationship between London and its port from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth century.

30. Maria Fusaro, 'Maritime History as Global History? The Methodological Challenges and a Future Research Agenda', in Fusaro and Polónia, *Maritime History as Global History*, 269.