



WRITINGS FROM THE SEA

Rutters, Sailing Directions and Pilot Books as a Specific Genre of Technical Literature

PROGRAM

11 february 2022

(all times are GMT/WET)

14:00–14:15 • WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Luana Giurgevich and Henrique Leitão

14:15–15:00 • Margaret Schotte (York University)

“From Rutters to Navigation Exams: In search of the missing link”

ABSTRACT:

How much of a rutter’s geographic information did an early modern navigator commit to memory? In this talk, I will suggest that it is possible to gain insights into this process by taking a closer look at formal navigational examinations. Mariners who wished to secure posts as navigators were expected to demonstrate their mastery of geographic and mathematical knowledge. By the late 17th century, their mathematical abilities were assessed by means of written exams, modest numbers of which survive in archives. While there are fewer records of the accompanying oral exams, I contend that it was these that probed their geographical knowledge. Through an analysis of the extant Spanish, Dutch and English records, I will make the case that oral exams asked navigators to describe common routes, enumerate shallows and other hazards. Essentially, these exams follow the textual format codified in rutters.

Although some scholars have questioned how widespread or mandatory such exams were, I have argued elsewhere that their content nonetheless shaped the mathematical curricula of regional navigational schools. My new analysis uncovers suggestive similarities between oral exams and earlier textual directions. It remains to be determined if there was an intermediary textual —or cartographic?— stage between rutters and exams. This talk therefore issues a call to reexamine potential links between rutters, examinations, and classrooms, in order to better understand how mariners mastered and deployed essential geographic information.

15:00–15:45 · Djoeke van Netten (University of Amsterdam)

“The Globality of Books on European Coasts: A century of Dutch pilot guides”

ABSTRACT:

In 1584 a new oceanic genre emerged in Leiden, when Lucas Jansz Waghenaer published his *Spiegel der Zeevaerdt*. This book brings together four different perspectives on sailing the seas, each of them based on earlier – mostly Iberian – examples. The bird’s eye view of charts, the ship’s view of coastal profiles, the narrative form of rutters, and the knowledge presumed necessary for ‘the art of navigation’. In the first part of my talk I’ll explore the coexistence of these different perspectives in one book.

The second part of my talks set out to explain the chronology and the geography of the production of (Dutch) pilot guides. Why first Leiden, then Amsterdam? How to understand the additions and modifications the genre experienced in the decades afterwards? This will be done by combining the political, social, economic and intellectual context with the personal lives of the authors and publishers of these books. This also allows me to go briefly into the twofold audience that bought pilot guides, and subsequently used or read them (or not – that is the question). It also allows me to address modern historiography on this genre, mostly written by historians who did not read these books, or only very selectively.

The third, and last, part of my talk will focus on the global aspect of Dutch pilot guides. The charts in the pilot guides till the very late 17th century only cover European coastlines. The world outside Europe though, can be discovered in these books, sometimes surprisingly on the surface, sometimes more or less hidden or implicitly present. Probably because of the map-focus of earlier researchers, the global dimension has never been commented on before. However, by literally reading these books, the wider world comes into view.

15:45–16:30 · Roger Lee de Jesus (Centro de História da Sociedade e da Cultura, Universidade de Coimbra and Centro de Humanidades, Universidade Nova de Lisboa/Universidade dos Açores)

“Reassessing the Rutters of D. João de Castro (1538-1541): Contents, circulation, and publication”

ABSTRACT:

D. João de Castro (1500–1548) is one of the most famous governors of the Portuguese empire in Asia in the 16th century. His time (1545–1548) was a decisive period to consolidate the Portuguese presence in India, mainly through military campaigns and the symbolic reinforcement of the King’s power. Nevertheless, Castro is also known for his scientific knowledge, being the author of three rutters and other works, being sometimes remembered as one of the foremost Portuguese Renaissance humanists.

This paper aims to analyse the production and circulation of the three rutters of D. João de Castro. Written during his first voyage to Asia, between 1538 and 1541, these sources give us valuable information about the nautical routes between Lisbon and Goa, Goa and Diu and Goa to Suez. However, they also bring essential data regarding the visited lands’ cultural, political, and historical context more than simply describing the voyages. Therefore, this paper will analyse its contents and how the original manuscripts were copied and circulated between the 16th and 17th centuries. At the same time, we will try to understand the importance of these rutters in the context of D. João de Castro’s works and life and how their publication (in the 19th century) created a new historiographical image of this man.

16:30–16:45 · TEA BREAK

16:45–17:30 · Jorge Semedo de Matos (Centro de História da Universidade de Lisboa)

“Portuguese Roteiros (Rutters) from Southeast Asia: Characteristics and background”

ABSTRACT:

The first objective of my presentation will be to define the term “roteiro” (rutter), especially since this term is often used arbitrarily, even by historians, to refer to travel accounts or even lists of ports and distances. Rutters are technical instruments used by pilots to guide a ship safely along a route. In this sense, they all reflect the nautical knowledge of a particular era. The peculiarity of the Southeast Asian sailing rutters (in which I include those of the Indonesian archipelago) is that they were designed on routes that had long been used by ships of many nationalities, all serving a trade centered on China. Moreover, the routes are complex and intricate, passing through islands and shoals of various kinds, where they often sail within sight of the coast. Therefore, the rutters describe the sea routes with their features such as islands, beaches, rocky shores, cliffs, depths and bottoms of various kinds that should be constantly sounded by lead. Most rutters describe a succession of depths and bottoms of mud, sand, stones, etc., which are among the most important features of the route itself.

In my presentation I will discuss these oriental routes with their own characteristics and language, as well as their development in the 16th and 17th centuries.

17:30–18:15 · José Manuel Malhão Pereira (Centro Interuniversitário de História das Ciências e da Tecnologia, Universidade de Lisboa)

“Shaping Sri Lanka: Nautical aspects of Portuguese cartography and geographical descriptions of an island”

ABSTRACT:

During the Portuguese maritime expansion, a great amount of information was collected by pilots and sea captains. All their nautical writings were handed over in Lisbon to the Crown authorities, which interpreted them and used them for future voyages. Such “written tools” were key elements in the development of a global knowledge of Oceans, making possible technically challenging naval operations.

Taking into consideration different kinds of text (especially rutters, nautical charts and other geographical descriptions), this presentation offers a diachronic perspective on the interpretations of the “shape” of the island of Sri Lanka (Ceylon, in Port. *Ceilão*). The analysis of this peculiar case study discloses the richness of 16th and 17th-century maritime sources and their importance in registering, on a planetary scale, nautical, geographical, hydrographical, meteorological and physical data.

18:15–18:30 · CLOSING REMARKS

Luana Giurgevich



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