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From Corporations to Companies: The Development of Capitalism in Maritime Cargo Handling in the Port of Barcelona (ca. 1760–1873)*

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Abstract

For centuries, the maritime cargo passing through the port of Barcelona was handled by the men of a half-dozen guilds. Collectively, these ancient corporations enjoyed monopolistic privileges over the various types of cargo and areas of operation—in the shallow harbor, to and from the Customs House, and throughout the city and beyond. At the end of the eighteenth century, the advances of economic and political liberalism began to question, challenge, and eventually dismantle the guild structure: a process that came to fruition in the early nineteenth century with the abolition of most guilds throughout Spain. However, some of the cargo-handling guilds had been defended by the Navy against abolition until the second half of the nineteenth century, when their orderly world collapsed into competitive companies able to hire men of their choosing (former guildsmen or otherwise). In this article, we look at the harbor-based guilds and the process by which guildsmen became the unorganized workers and capitalistic directors of the new dockworker companies. We offer a vision of the transformation of the guild system into a private system for organizing the labor of maritime-cargo handling. In this account, we examine technological changes in the means of production, changes in the organization of labor, the appearance of a new capitalist class in the sub-sector, and the rise of a capitalist mode of production based on the proletarianization of cargo handling.

Introduction

This is a micro-history of the transition from the ancient guild system of corporations to the foundations of the modern, capitalist order based on private companies.

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We look at the loading and unloading of cargo in the port of Barcelona over a century. The occupational and organizational cultures of the guild corporations that organized and controlled that labor were largely derived from the collective nature of their service provision.¹ Even so, the bifurcation studied here of these basically egalitarian, horizontal organizations of guild-brothers into employees and owners is illustrative of the guild-based transition to capitalism.

Two academic areas of interest inform our study: port labor history, and the transition from artisan to capitalist labor. The magnum opus on port labor is the two-volume *Dock Workers: International Explorations in Comparative Labor History, 1790–1970*.² The first part presents case studies of major ports around the world (although those of the Anglo-Saxon core predominate); the second takes a thematic approach. In most of these, minimal attention paid to the artisan phase, generally acting as background to casual, industrial labor and trade unions.³ In the subsequent quarter-century, barely 6 percent of articles published in English, Spanish, Portuguese, French, or Italian focused on the artisan phase of dock labor.⁴ Even so, there are a number of works that allow us to contextualize what occurred in Barcelona with other experiences in Europe and, especially, the Mediterranean.

Recent scholarship has underscored the importance of the transportation service sector in pre-industrial economic development.⁵ In the introduction to a collection on transport in the Global South, the editors note that transport labor was productive, inasmuch as it added value to the process “in ‘the sphere of circulation.’”⁶ There are a number of works covering aspects of port labor in Barcelona, especially of land-based cargo handlers.⁷

By comparison, there is a large and growing body of research in labor studies dedicated to the transition from artisan to industrial labor. This is certainly not new: there were important examples of economic philosophers and historians questioning the role of guilds in the development of capitalism during the end of the guild period and the rise of industrial capitalism (and it must be noted that the respective scholars or proponents at the time were often sympathetic to or involved in these processes in some way or another).⁸ Much of this focused on manufacturing and less so on services. As we will see, Spain was no exception, and the rise of economic liberalism was founded on a critical assessment of the guild system (even toward the end of the ancien régime).⁹

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Marxian line solidified around a negative appreciation of the guilds and a distinction between guild and industrial labor and relations (founded, necessarily, on the radical development of industrial means of production).¹⁰ For most of the twentieth century, the general appraisal is that the guilds were an impediment to the development of capitalism and their destruction was a precondition for, or byproduct of, the rise of capitalism and (by consequence) the rise of the trade union movement. A few notable—and more or less heterodox Marxist—authors have touched upon the issues with a bit more sympathy toward the guilds and a transitional approach to the labor relationships.¹¹

Over the past three decades, a wider reappraisal of the relationship has occurred (nicknamed the “Return of the Guilds”), which we call “contribution-focused.”¹² Among the contributions are the development of human capital, technological innovation, the configuration of markets, the construction of human networks, and the organizational concentration of labor and capital (albeit in leveling frameworks).¹³

Others have looked at early examples of class struggle within the guild system, and the connections between guild and post-guild organizational models.¹⁴

This has been met with some skepticism—which we consider “impediment-focused”—vis à vis the development of a capitalistic mode of production.¹⁵ Among the impediment-focused arguments, authors have questioned the real value of the contributions, and looked at barriers to entry in organizations or markets, discrimination against women, quality regulation, human capital investment, innovation, and growth. Interestingly, the contribution-focused arguments tend to have a reconciliatory or favorable view of the guilds, whereas the impediment arguments tend to portray a rather negative view of the guilds (and an apparent conceptualization of free-market capitalism).

In consideration of the above, the hypothesis we advance here is a sort of synthesis that incorporates aspects of both arguments: The guild-phase monopolies prevented free labor and the deployment of capital; however, their legacies contributed to the basic terms of capitalism in port labor.

The advance of liberal economic thought was based on eliminating obstacles to participation in the market (as regards both labor and capital). We differentiate between economic liberalism and political liberalism (the former occurring, by degrees, within the ancien régime; the latter advanced in increasing conflict with absolutism); whereas capitalism is the means and ability of private actors to invest in the productive processes.¹⁶ The importance of economic and, later, political liberalism in the development of capitalism rests in the diminution and elimination of monopolistic guild privileges, which opened the sector to unaffiliated workers, private investment, and a capitalist mode of production.

The development of a capitalist mode of production is evident in the rise of new relations of production: the social relations of how workers were organized and the technical relations between the forces of production—the laborers and the means used to provide their services. We seek to understand the relations of production: We look at the organization of labor (in guild-monopolized, then company-directed, work gangs) and the ownership of the means of service provision (the harbor lighters used to haul goods, and also different cranes). The work gang is an almost universal characteristic of dock labor; however, the organization and direction of these gangs varied by location or time. In Barcelona, the social relations of the guild system organized labor in work gangs in a leveled system of shared opportunities and a collective distribution of income, with important (and costly) activities of mutual aid.

By covering the century from 1760 onward, the context includes a number of processes: the advance of economic liberalism within the absolutist monarchy and thereafter (ending of guild monopolies in manufacture, then in most services); the turbulent advance of political liberalism; the transformation of sail-dominated shipping to incorporate steam-powered vessels; and the globalization of trade.¹⁷

The main primary sources for understanding capital are the harbor vessel registration lists created by the Spanish Navy, which include the names, class, and dimensions of the vessels, and the names and employment of the owners.¹⁸ Additional ownership information has been gleaned from notary records, including books kept by normal notaries and the special maritime notary (*escribano de mar*) responsible for all official maritime record-keeping. As the guilds were not in the practice of

registering their vessels with the navy we rely on the notary records of their inventories: These detail the number, respective dimensions, and state of repair of their vessels, as well as an accounting of the material culture of the trinity of guild life—organizational records, work equipment, and religious paraphernalia. For understanding the labor factor, we studied the documents of the guilds and work-gang companies. The guild membership and company information in a variety of archival sources allows us to identify possible leadership cliques and identify those who went on to form part of the private companies. The membership lists appear in the guild assemblies during the first third of the nineteenth century. Other lists of leadership and officers appear in the 1850s and 1860s. These sources are supported by the legislative measures, guild ordinances, price schedules, and judicial cases that created the normative framework.

Maritime traffic and port infrastructure

The period witnessed considerable growth in maritime traffic. In the case of Spain, much of this was based on long-standing relationships with the (former) colonies in the Americas; this trade was largely liberalized in the eighteenth century. The value of cargo trafficked in Barcelona (the leading Spanish port by vessel registrations and tonnage) as a share of the estimated GDP of Catalonia rose from 17 percent in 1847 to 31 percent in 1862.¹⁹

As the period studied ended, steamships amounted to 8 percent of the merchant vessels and accounted for 20 percent of the total tonnage registered in Barcelona.²⁰ It was only during the subsequent decade that the tonnage of steamships would overtake that of sail ships (even while sail vessels outnumbered them). The increase of trade and the appearance of steamships would require important changes to port infrastructure, but these improvements were made slowly and late in respect to the needs of shipping.

For centuries, the “pre-industrial” port of Barcelona had been a meager, artificial harbor with a shallow, sandy bottom (requiring periodic dredging): Cargo was loaded and unloaded from the beach.²¹

Over the subsequent decades, efforts were directed at offering greater protection to the ships anchored in the harbor by building and extending a seawall with the *muelle nuevo* (literally, the “new pier”), which was evident in maps from the 1840s through the early 1870s.²²

As reported in an official *Revista de Obras Públicas* (*Public Works Bulletin*) from 1856, the conditions remained insufficient to meet the rising demands of traffic:

with slowness, difficulties, and excessive costs: the considerable number of vessels that were on some occasions to be found for loading or unloading had only available for this objective some 800 linear meters of wharf, a great quantity of sacks head towards the vessels and are withdrawn from them with harbor lighthouses that go to and from the beach, where they are loaded and unloaded[....] On the Barceloneta wharf, where the great majority of maritime traffic is concentrated, these must be carried by hand up ramps or stairs to the higher boardwalk, where only the carts can circulate [....] The loading and unloading of very heavy

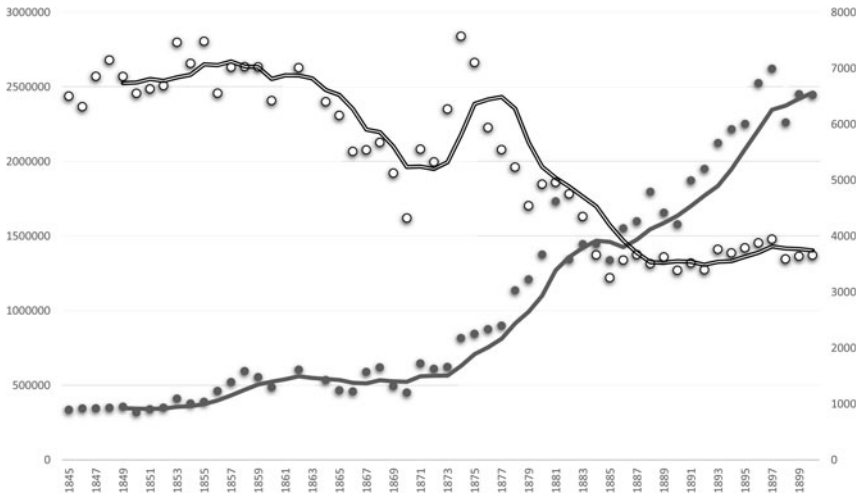


Figure 1. Tonnage and number of vessels entering Barcelona, 1845–1899

Sources: Author's work based on Avelí Pi i Arimon, "Barcelona antigua y moderna," 1854 (1845–1849); "Estadística de vaixells entrats i sortits pel port de BCN entre 1846 i 1855, per nacions, nombre i tonatge," 1860–1868, Secció de Foment: informes, oficis, sol·licituds i comunicats sobre ports, comerç, subhastes, Junta de Comerç, Legajo CXXXIII, Box 176-2, 233, JCC BC (1850–1855); and "Almanaque del Diario de Barcelona" (1855–1900). Note: Points show number of ships (white) and tons (grey); lines show five-year moving average.

objects, and the operations of raising or lowering a mast on vessels of some draft have to be undertaken with the only crane, the *Machina*, that exists in the port, which results in delays and very sensitive risks to the shippers and merchants.²³

This situation led to overcrowding of ships in the harbor, making unloading difficult.²⁴ It was only toward the end of the period studied that plans were developed to further expand the port, beginning around 1860 and reaching completion by the end of the 1870s, when the beach—long used for loading and unloading cargo—had disappeared.²⁵ This "modernization" included extending the protected area of the harbor with the construction of increasing sea walls, building wharf areas, and installing cranes for some aspects of fleet maintenance and cargo handling.

Over the century studied, the development of port infrastructure from a humble beach to a fully constructed port was generally insufficient for the needs of cargo handling and shipping, resulting in overcrowding and exposure to storms.

Modes of production in the port: Guild monopolies, transition, and capitalism

To better understand the changes in the modes of production from guild-monopolized to capitalistic, we examine the relations of production: the end of a basically horizontal, collective, and leveled guild system concerned with shared responsibilities, labor, and remuneration; and the rise of a vertical, employment-based, preferential system concerned with productivity and insuring returns on investment.



Figure 2. Barcelona, ca.1806

Alexandre de Laborde et al., “Plan of the Port and City of Barcelona” [detail], from *Voyage Pittoresque et Historique de l’Espagne* (Paris, ca.1806). [Map and image from author’s collection.]

We trace the development of the productive forces—the combination of the labor force and the means of service provision, which included the cranes, harbor boats, and the labor of cargo handlers. We look at technological developments, the ownership of the means of production, and the evolution of the organization of the labor force from the guild corporations of the *ancien régime* to the private companies dedicated to cargo handling made possible through liberalization. We have broken the processes into three phases to facilitate this analysis.

Port labor in the pre-industrial, guild-based configuration has been described as “artisan” or “pre-casual” labor, followed by the casual phase (characterized by the unregulated, often chaotic, hiring of unloaders on a daily basis).²⁶ However, we have found that a three-phase breakdown based on the legal framework is more accurate for this case, rather than a pre-casual/casual dichotomy: the guild-monopoly phase (ca. 1760–1849); a transitional phase (1850–1863) in which the guild lost its monopoly, and in which the foundations of a capitalist configuration developed; and the rise of a capitalistic configuration after the elimination of the remaining legal obstacles to a free market (1864–1873).



Figure 3. Port of Barcelona, ca.1862

Miquel Garriga i Roca, "Plànol de la ciutat de Barcelona de 1862" [detail] (Barcelona, 1862), Arxiu Històric de la Ciutat de Barcelona [hereafter AHCB], [<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=23877984>]. *Note: The seawall with the new pier extending from the extension of the peninsula is visible.*

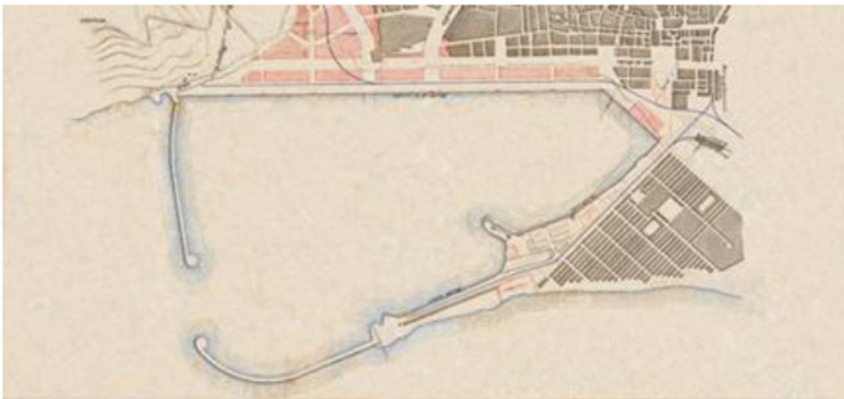


Figure 4. Port of Barcelona, ca. 1871

Source: Mauricio Garrán, "Distribución de los terrenos que se ganan al mar con las obras y los demás comprendidos en la Zona Marítima," 1871, Proyecto 11/1871, Arxiu del Port de Barcelona (APB).

Pre-transition: The guild-monopoly phase (ca.1760–1849)

For a millennium, and through the end of the ancien régime, guilds were the predominant legal structure for organizing qualified labor and commerce in Europe.²⁷ The guilds were established by a combination of royal and local ordinances, which detailed the rights, privileges, duties, and *modus operandi* for each trade or combination of related trades. In the case of port labor in Barcelona, these guilds monopolized labor and work processes, provided mutual aid, and, importantly, guaranteed the safe conduct of the goods and covered losses.²⁸

While guilds in manufacturing and commerce operated under the jurisdiction of local, municipal authorities (with a royal or local justification) in Spain, the main governmental authority for understanding port labor is the Navy. Spain operated a national naval registration and recruitment scheme called the *Matricula de Mar* (Matriculate of the Sea).²⁹ The matriculate was established to maintain a list of qualified recruits in case of war, labor projects, or other uses by the navy in exceptional times. Their availability for naval recruitment freed these men from the requirement to participate in the system land army.³⁰

The matriculate was first used in the very early seventeenth century; however, the most important version—in terms of codifying the monopolistic labor privileges and responsibilities of the matriculated men—was the 1751 Ordinance, which remained until 1802 (when it was modified). In exchange for paying this sort of tax in blood (through military service), the men could join the guilds responsible for organizing and representing maritime labor. The matriculated guilds auto-regulated ship-building, ship maintenance, sailing, fishing, and water-based cargo handling (but not land-based handling, which was monopolized by non-matriculated guilds).³¹

The guild system generally prevented the rise of capitalistic practices: The labor market was completely controlled by their monopoly; prices were state-sanctioned and beyond negotiation; and, most importantly, private capital was prohibited. The only exception (and one which increased over time) was to allow the owner of cargo to handle his or her goods with his or her own means, paying a half- or quarter-rate to the guilds.

The monopolies were based on two main areas of operation: in the harbor, where the three guilds studied here shared a monopoly; and on land, where each guild monopolized certain types of goods, based on their packaging, value, or place of origin. A great variety of coastal and ocean-going sail ships would anchor, in rows, in the harbor. They were serviced by gangs of cargo-handlers who rowed out in low-draft lighters, floating goods or rowing the small harbor boats—in some cases these were hauled by oxen or horses—to the beach between the city and the Barceloneta peninsula, or the wharf (basically a boardwalk) along the inside of the peninsula. Once the lighters arrived on the shore, the goods were unloaded and the merchant would then hire another guild (maritime porters, maritime horsecart operators, or maritime teamsters depending on the goods) to handle the goods. These men carried or carted the cargo to points within the city (especially the nearby Customs House). There were no machines of note in use in the port: All labor was done by men and beasts, using humble crafts on the water and on the land.

There were three guilds for water-based cargo handling: The Guild of Mariners (sailors); the Guild of Fishermen; and the Guild of Loaders/Unloaders (subsumed into the Guild of Fishermen during the mid-1820s). The mariners and fishermen could freely choose between working at sea, or handling cargo. Unloading offered opportunities for work year-round when not at sea. In theory, the dual work-roles of guild members as mariner-unloaders and fishermen-unloaders could have created a pressure valve for relieving excess laborers; any degree of specialization or preference by the members for one sort of work or another could further complicate the calculations.³²

The guilds' monopolies of labor required them to maintain an evolving balance between assuring opportunities for work for members and sufficient laborers for meeting the needs of commerce: this was complicated by the unpredictability and inconsistency of traffic from day to day and year to year. The guilds developed different systems for leveling opportunities for labor: The harbor-based guilds used a lottery system for daily employment, and a system of sharing wages among those who had worked the preceding period, depending on the shifts worked. They worked at set prices detailed in published price schedules that were negotiated between the guilds, merchants, and the responsible government officers. Sometimes decades passed before prices were updated.³³

The cargo-handling aspects of the matriculate-guild system suffered only minor adjustments over centuries save in the division or unification of trades within a single guild (while naval aspects changed to meet military requirements).³⁴ However, increasingly liberal governments focused on reducing or eliminating monopolistic privileges: This occurred during constitutionalist periods (the Cortes de Cadiz, 1812–1814; the Liberal Triennium, 1820–1823; and the Regency of Maria Cristina during the mid-1830s), but these efforts were overturned by the return of absolutist forces after the first two periods. While most guilds were definitively abolished in 1836 (a year-and-a-half after significant riots in Barcelona in the context of the Second Carlist War), the protections offered by the Navy meant that the matriculated guilds were excluded from this abolition.³⁵

There were conflicts among the harbor-based guilds during the late ancien régime, resulting in attempts by the naval authorities to unite the three autonomous guilds into a single structure (a guild of guilds). This conflict centered on the practice of men belonging to both the Guild of Fishermen and the Guild of Unloaders to maximize opportunities for work, to the detriment of the Guild of Mariners. The Guild of Unloaders was subsumed into the Guild of Fishermen by legislation emitted between 1824 and 1827.³⁶ It should also be noted that there were different social classes within the guilds of mariners and of fishermen, as some men were classified as “*patronos*,” a recognition of their military service.³⁷

In summary, while the decades covered in this section were increasingly tumultuous, the harbor-based guilds were generally protected by the matriculate system and continued to function as they had for centuries. However, the growing importance of economic liberalism—which was further strengthened by greater involvement of liberal political elements in government—was more than evident toward the end of the pre-transition phase, and combined with the increasing demands of merchants, put considerable pressures on the monopoly system.

Early transition: End of guild monopolies and abolition (1850–1863)

The advance of economic liberalism, which by the mid-nineteenth century was arguably a century in the making, finally reached the port of Barcelona in 1850. Between 1850 and 1863, the port guilds were not abolished, but they lost their monopoly over the labor market, although the right to work in cargo handling remained for all matriculated men. This period saw important labor conflicts in the port, and the formation of companies that combined the legal and labor qualifications of the matriculated men to handle cargo with the capital of business elites.

Businessmen had long criticized the monopolistic privileges of the guilds and what they considered to be exorbitant prices for the services. However, they were unable to outmaneuver the Navy in the central government. It appears that a semi-organized strategy was developed by Boards of Commerce representing businessmen across Spain. On November 9, 1849, a royal order removed the exclusivity of the guilds to handle cargo in the port of Cartagena (southeast Spain). Two months later, in January 1850, this was applied to the port of Valencia. On January 26, 1850, the businessmen of Barcelona sent a letter to the queen seeking the same liberalization in Barcelona.³⁸

These measures were unified on March 19, 1850, by a royal decree. This ended the guild monopoly over loading and unloading cargo across the country. Their remaining guild-specific roles were limited to mutual aid through their confraternity, rescuing shipwrecks, and loading ballast. In July 1850, a royal order was published that complemented the March 19 decree. With the royal order, the “confraternity’s half” (a half-rate or quarter-rate paid by the owners of a vessel who used his own means and laborers to load or unload his own boat) was abolished, and the owners of fishing boats could handle cargo with their boats as long as the owner notified the Commandant of the Navy.³⁹ The guilds thus remained without the principal economic resources necessary for maintaining their structure and their acts of mutual aid.

The leveled distribution of work among the matriculated men within the guilds was ended. The merchants could hire any matriculated man at their pleasure. These merchants were large-scale importers, and they began to hire a very reduced group of matriculated workers, who were always the same from day to day (as opposed to the traditional guild lottery). These men were organized in work gangs who always worked together under the leadership of one of them, constituting the forerunners of the cargo-handling companies.⁴⁰

The matriculated men who first worked in these gangs had been members of the guilds. While we still do not have conclusive proof, our preliminary analysis suggests that a larger share of these workers were fishermen, not mariners. Our initial comparison based on the names of 694 members of the guilds of mariners and fishermen between 1826 and 1850, and the names of 134 leaders and members of the work-gang companies formed in 1852, shows that roughly one-quarter of the members of the work gangs could be linked to members of the Guild of Fishermen (by identities and similarities in first and last names); whereas only one-tenth were linked to the Guild of Mariners.

This semi-liberalization of port labor removed the labor monopoly by which the guild collectively bargained and controlled the general terms of labor, which were

enshrined in the ordinances and the official price schedules. The changes created authentic rupture regarding the values that had guided the organization of work among the matriculated men. The solidarity and enforced discipline developed until then and enshrined in the guild ordinances disappeared.

The elimination of the guild monopoly meant that members could leave the guild and freely enter into new employment schemes. What arose for these matriculated men was greater vulnerability to exploitation and lower wages, in exchange for greater consistency of work opportunities. According to a report from the naval authorities, the former guildsmen now worked at far lower prices than those still in the guild—reportedly as low as one-half of the guild pay. Some of them—the men organized in semi-permanent work gangs—accepted far worse conditions. As they were paid far less per task, they had to work much harder earn what they had previously. As such, they tended to be younger, more robust workers. In exchange, and due to this lower price, they could work continuously, while leaving their former companions basically without work. With the establishment of a new model for organizing port labor these work-gangs fought among themselves for the available work.⁴¹ Only two years later conflict erupted in the port.

In April 1852, the Barcelona matriculate was comprised of roughly 1,000 workers: 350 were from the section of mariners; 400 were from the section of fishermen; 150 did belong to a guild; and about 100 were foreigners (“*forasteros*,” meaning that they were not from Barcelona), who, as outsiders, did not belong to the guild, either. The 150 local-born, non-guildsmen were precisely those who started the conflict. The naval authorities intervened in favor of the guildsmen without opposing what was legally established regarding the free hiring among matriculated men. They tried to maintain the legitimacy of the price schedule agreed between the guild and merchants only a few years earlier for all workers. Despite these efforts, the merchants prevailed and the Commandant of the Navy was ordered by civil authorities to remove his edict in favor of the price schedule. The government ordered the guilds to propose new ordinances in early 1852: the Guild of Mariners and the Guild of Fishermen unified into a single Guild of the Sea (*Gremio de Mar*), but their attempt to return to a monopoly was rebuked.⁴²

The strife was not only framed as a conflict between merchants and the guilds: it also was a political dispute at a moment of an ascending liberal regime. These changes in the organization of cargo handling coincided with legislative changes like the Royal Decree of December 17, 1851, and the Royal Order of January 30, 1852, which constituted the first general law for Spanish ports. This law established a new manner of financing the construction and maintenance of the ports, suppressing the numerous different rulings and unifying revenues through only two taxes—one for anchoring and another for loading and unloading cargo. Additionally, this new legislation made clear that the Ministry of Public Works (*Ministerio de Fomento*) and its engineers were responsible for ports, relieving the Ministry of the Navy and the port captains.⁴³ This can be explained by the notion that the naval authorities had to cede in the face commerce. The Royal Decree of February 26, 1853, prohibited the Navy’s authorities from verifying prices against the schedule or of interfering with merchants hiring “those that deserve it for their honor, industriousness, and intelligence.”⁴⁴ As such, this decree brought about freedom of hiring and the end of the formal price schedule. From this moment until abolition, the guild continued to offer

services to commerce, but acted as one more work gang in competition with the rest. Importantly, the guild continued to offer mutual aid, which made economic competition with the private companies more difficult. The resolution of this conflict was clearly contrary to the interests of the guildsmen, and in the end, to those of the matriculated men in general as it obliged them to accept far worse working conditions than the previous ones.

The first strike in the port of Barcelona occurred in April 1855, a few years after the deregulation of port labor ended the monopoly of the guilds. According to a legislative representative, the workers attempted to secure a 20 percent increase in wages. In the face of this challenge, the government promoted the hiring of replacement workers and the strike was crushed.⁴⁵

The end of the guild monopoly allowed matriculated men to form work-gang companies based at the beach and the wharf.⁴⁶ These companies combined their labor and legal access with the capital of key economic actors. The direction of work-related tasks (including the hiring of laborers) fell to one of the company members from the “laboring class”; the direction of the company was done by one of the capitalists, who was responsible for accounting, purchasing boats, and acquiring all the equipment necessary for work.⁴⁷ Apparently, the work-gang companies dedicated one-quarter of revenue as dividends, paid monthly to the capitalist class of members, and the “three-fourths that remained was shared among the members with a deduction for the expenses brought about by hiring other matriculated men or land-based cargo-handlers as day-laborers as were considered necessary to hire.”⁴⁸

In both 1852 and 1862, there were eleven companies (in addition to the guild) comprising the loading and unloading activities on the beach. In 1852, when the companies were formed, eleven managed a total of 167 workers, with considerable differences in the number of workers per company. The 1862 listing distinguished between the owners of the companies and the operational leaders. In most cases, this was the same person; however, in four of the eleven, they were not. This shows us the emergence of a business structure that was distinct from that of 1852, when, in principle, every member of the work gangs, including the leaders, had belonged to the guilds and there was no indication of capitalist members in their midst. By the 1860s, there were men who had never participated in the guilds.

We also see that there was considerable dynamism among the work-gang proto-companies: only two or at most three of the gang leaders or owners on the 1862 registration had headed companies in 1852. These companies generally did not last long; however, the sector did not see a concentration of companies, either. The next year, in 1863, the total number of men in these work gangs had risen to 255 and all but one had between sixteen and thirty-three workers, thus reducing the scale of the differences between the companies further.⁴⁹

Among the capitalist partners, we find businessmen already linked to maritime commerce, and who, as such, formed part of the bourgeoisie of the city. This was the case of Cayetano Prous and Company, which in 1856 was the most important in terms of harbor boats and the number of employees. Among its shareholders was Buenaventura Sola y Amat, founder and head of the *Compañía Hispano Alemana de Vapores* (Hispano-German Steamship Company).⁵⁰ Likewise, the company, founded in 1860, which eventually became Planas, Renom, and Company,

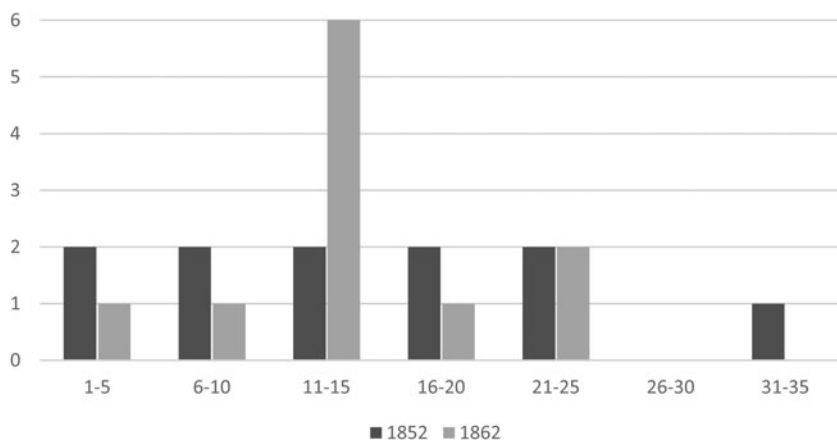


Figure 5. Comparison of the companies by number of workers, 1852, 1862

Authors' work, based on "Buques. Generalidad, carga y descarga," 1805/1839–1901, YM V j, Leg. 1, Puertos, Navegación y Pesca Marítima, ANC [for 1852]; and "Conflicto con los pescadores por utilización de la playa," 1863–1864, Capitanía del Puerto de Barcelona, Legajo 5639-6, AGMAB [for 1862].

counted among its capitalist members Fernando de Delas, lawyer and founder of the Sociedad Catalana de Seguros (Catalan Insurance Company), and Domingo Miralles y Gil, consignee agent and important businessman in the city.⁵¹ As noted in the founding documents of this last company:

Desirous, as they were, those who formed part of the laboring class of having constant work in the tasks of loading and unloading the vessels that arrive in the port, which is their habitual occupation; and, as it is far too difficult to meet the necessary objectives to achieve this due to the high costs, [determined to join with] gentlemen who do not correspond to their class [to form the company].⁵²

The establishment of these companies paralleled the rise of a new type of harbor boat for moving cargo to and from the ships anchored in the harbor.⁵³ Until the mid-nineteenth century, the flat-bottom harbor boats were known locally as "*gusis*" or "*barquillas*" (literally "small boats"). The terminology was basically a distinction without difference. We refer to them as "*barquillas*." Beginning around 1851, a new type of vessel appeared, interchangeably called "*barcaza*" (literally a "large boat"), "*lancha*," or "*lanchona*" (which literally means "launch" or "large launch," respectively). We refer to them throughout this paper as "*barcazas*." Importantly, the smaller *barquillas* had doubled in size by the later period, especially by becoming wider; in any case, they remained significantly smaller than the *barcazas* (which also increased in dimensions over the same period). The traditional *barquilla* harbor boats had traditionally been one ton; two-ton versions became more common. The *barcazas* that rose to prominence were generally six to seven tons.

The companies that formed were able to employ the resources of the capitalist partners to purchase larger versions of the smaller *barquillas* and the much larger *barcazas*. Many of the harbor vessels had been acquired nominally by matriculated

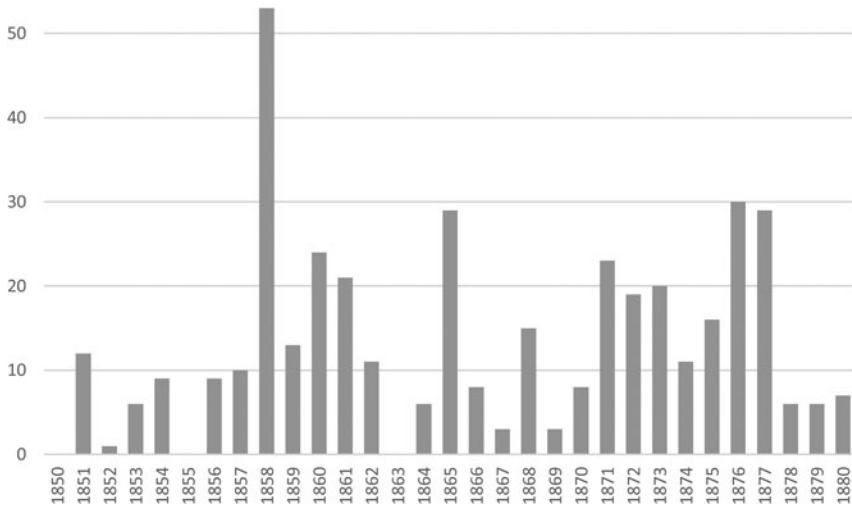


Figure 6. New *barcasas*, 1850–1877

Source: “Inscripción de Embarcaciones. Barcelona Capital,” Comandancia de Marina de Barcelona, Z-12, Boxes 287 and 293, ANC.

men, and the registry listed them as the legitimate owners; however, in the notary documents it was specified that these boats had been purchased with money from, and in the name of, the companies in which they participated.⁵⁴ In one case, the capital invested by the matriculated men participating in the company was the monetary translation of the rights, which they held, for example, to a determined place on the beach for loading and unloading.⁵⁵

An 1860 report by the naval authorities (covering the previous years) noted the number of boats owned by the beach-based gangs: 118, of which 58 were the larger *barcasas* and 60 were smaller *barquillas*. The number of vessels owned by each company varied significantly, from four to sixteen or seventeen. The companies with fewer vessels (and the Guild of the Sea) maintained a ratio of one *barcaza* for every four of the smaller *barquillas*; in the majority of the companies, the ratio was closer to one-to-one. These differences show important deficits in capitalization, since the larger vessels were significantly more expensive. As one of the owners from among the matriculated men noted, “they made considerable expenses to acquire the boats,” and, “not being, as they were, wealthy people, they had to acquire credit based on their honor.”⁵⁶

By early 1860s, the work gangs formed in the 1850s became more formal companies. According to the Commandant of the Navy for Barcelona:

upon founding these gangs of matriculated men, the better part without resources had to go to the very merchants in search of funds; with the aim of acquiring everything they needed to enter into business; and, naturally and as follows, those very merchants were interested in forming part of the new societies, placing in them the Capital for speculation or earnings.⁵⁷

The decreasing relative participation of the guild was pronounced. Between 1851 and 1858, the total number of harbor boats rose from 275 to 550; in a similar period (1852–1862), the harbor boats owned by the guild dropped from 36 to 17. According to an 1858 count, there were roughly 300 small boats and 250 *barcazas* in the port of Barcelona.⁵⁸ As such, we see two competing organizational types—the guild and private companies clearly driven by private ownership.

Completion of the transition: Full liberalization of port labor (1864–1873)

The following years brought the end of the influence of the Guild of the Sea, and the definitive organization of port cargo labor under a completely capitalist regimen. Important legislative changes, new developments of port infrastructure, and the—at times controversial—introduction of cranes would define the period.

Shortly after the initial qualitative and quantitative changes of the harbor boats, the second key means of production—cranes—were introduced in the port. While the combination of legally qualified matriculated men and capitalists altered the predominant ownership of the boats, the dismantling of the monopolies of the guilds immediately brought into question the privileges of the matriculated men regarding the operation of the cranes in the port.

In the 1860s, a number of cranes were installed in the port in an attempt to facilitate cargo handling. Technically, the ownership of cranes was a state-held monopoly and public access was to be granted at a low fee to cover maintenance. However, in the case of Barcelona (as in other ports in Spain), the right to install cranes was extended to select private individuals. In 1860, the state conceded a privilege to a company of French capital to install a steam-powered crane in the port, which occurred in 1861.⁵⁹ There was then a debate because the cranes were supposed to be a monopoly of the state.

Four more steam-powered cranes were installed by the state in 1863, with the aim of substituting the 1861, French-owned crane.⁶⁰ In any case, the steam-powered cranes appear to have been over-powered for the needs of the loads; on the other hand, they were few in number.⁶¹ In 1864, concessions were made to matriculated men to install hand cranes (although these had probably already been in usage for a couple of years).⁶² On August 20, 1864, a set of regulations was published for the use of the cranes by which all merchants were allowed to use them regardless of ownership. It would take another decade for hand-powered cranes to become more ubiquitous.

In the summer of 1864, a battery of legal norms brought about the complete liberalization of the sector. This was an especially tumultuous period for the Spanish government and for the Navy in particular. The Royal Decree of June 15, 1864, declared that the tasks of loading and unloading cargo were no longer regulated in any Spanish port: these tasks were declared “free” for anyone to participate. This meant that the merchants could hire anyone without any limitation based on registration in the matriculate. A Royal Decree in July 1864 formally abolished the Guilds of the Sea across Spain. To avoid any questions or doubts, on the same day that these guilds were suppressed, a royal order specifically declared the abolition of the Guild of the Sea of Barcelona.⁶³

The approval of these measures appears to have been the result of collective actions by the merchants of the major ports of Spain. These actions were clearly manifest in the summer of 1864, when the Board of Commerce of the city of La Coruña (in northwest Spain) extended a printed statement of appreciation to the Ministry of the Navy for having liberalized the loading and unloading of cargo using terms very similar to those used by the Board of Commerce of Barcelona.⁶⁴ Another example of collective action was the support given by a variety of boards of commerce to the work of Canuto Corroza, who had published a book largely dedicated to the abolition of the Matriculate of the Sea.⁶⁵ The collaboration was evident in the fact that the Board of Agriculture, Comercio, and Industry of Cádiz, on July 12, 1864, proposed a form letter for the other boards of commerce to use in support of the distribution of this book. They requested that loading and unloading be open to land-based workers (as opposed to the mariners and fishermen).⁶⁶

As a result of these pressures from the men of commerce, the maritime guilds were finally abolished in 1864. The guildsmen had lost the near totality of their privileges. Although hiring for tasks of loading and unloading vessels was made “free” to all matriculated men, an exception was maintained for piloting, “with absolutely no exception, of the vessels in which these labors were to be carried out.”⁶⁷ Thus, the guildsmen maintained the exclusive right for piloting the harbor boats until the abolition of the matriculate system.⁶⁸

The abolition of the guild immediately forced—in July 1864—a legally stipulated auction of its property, which was bought by a mutual aid society (La Beneficencia Marinera Barcelonesa) comprised of the same men. Despite the relative difficulties, this institution still maintained considerable economic importance in the form of its harbor boats (although not all of these were fully operational): it still had six, twenty-five-ton boats; eight between ten and fifteen tons; and another twenty of smaller dimensions.⁶⁹ In total, the value of the lot of boats was established at 5,305 *duros*. The capital investments of the companies founded to compete with the guild may act as a point of comparison. Prous and Company had an initial capital investments of 2,000 *duros* in 1856, which was augmented to 4,000 *duros* the next year; Estaper and Company was founded with 2,000 *duros* in 1860.⁷⁰ Evidently, the capital of guild was at least as important as that of the larger private companies.

Having successfully orchestrated the removal of the guild monopoly in 1850, and having successfully pushed for the abolition of the Guild of the Sea in 1864, the mercantile elites then pressed for the termination of the monopoly privileges of the men of the Matriculate of the Sea. While we have focused on the monopoly costs of cargo labor, there was another important motivation on the part of the bourgeoisie that contributed to ending the matriculate system. In a report by the Board of Commerce of Barcelona dated April 24, 1866, they claimed increasing difficulty in finding sufficient men to cover the demand for crewmen. In the same document, they noted that the matriculated men preferred to work as unloaders in the port as it was easier and more lucrative than seafaring.⁷¹ There were no legal limitations to hiring cargo handlers, but the companies continued contracting matriculated men. These considerations may help explain the difficulties in hiring men to go to sea.

Whatever the theoretical considerations, the following years would see important, sometimes brutal struggles for wages and working conditions in the port. The

contradictions (in materialist historical terms) brought about by the consolidation of capitalist labor relations, reached a critical point after the Revolution of September 1868, which brought to an end the reign of Queen Isabel II (after a failed attempt in 1866). This revolution empowered a provisional government (lasting until 1871), which was initially aimed at installing a constitutional monarchy with more-democratic characteristics; it was met with stiff armed resistance from Catholic and conservative elements under the banner of Carlism (which by this time was four decades old).⁷²

The Provisional Government had established the freedom of association for labor organizations in October 1868; in December 1868, representatives of sixty-eight Catalan worker associations (which had previously been clandestine) met openly. In June 1870, radicals, anarchists, and other leaders of workers' societies met at the First Workers' Congress of Spain, which marked the founding of the Regional Spanish Federation of the International Workingman's Association (founded in London, 1864, and which would later be known as the "First International") and the formal beginnings of consolidated anarchism in Spain.⁷³ The acts of that Congress include the reports of various organizations, including the *Marítima Restauradora* of Barcelona, which noted that the mariners had gained nothing from the Revolution of September 1868 and that, "Because over this class an injustice still weighs —and in the name of the associates I protest—, and this injustice consists of the *matriculas de mar*, we request its abolition."⁷⁴ The participation of cargo handlers in the anarcho-syndicalist movement would be important, but sporadic, in the years ahead.

In July of 1870, the mariners and others involved in loading and unloading cargo called an important strike.⁷⁵ According to the newspaper of the anarchist Spanish Regional Federation of the International, *La Federación*, at least nine hundred men participated.⁷⁶ Unwilling to reach an agreement after over a month of confrontation, the businessmen brought in scab workers and violence erupted.⁷⁷ A few days later, the government deployed four hundred soldiers to reestablish order and replace the workers.⁷⁸ A serious outbreak of Yellow Fever also contributed to the abrupt end of the strike, unfavorable to the striking workers. It should be noted that the outbreak was believed to have started with the arrival of a handful of sick sailors; the maritime trades accounted for one-quarter of the 1,236 deaths, and the maritime areas and city center were heavily affected.⁷⁹

The Franco-Prussian War and the Commune of Paris (1871) loomed large across the Pyrenees in the constructive visions of the discourse. King Amadeo I (of Savoy) abdicated on February 10, 1873, after only three years of constitutional monarchy, and the next day a republic was declared.⁸⁰ However, this did not placate revolutionary pressures, and the late spring and summer of 1873 witnessed calls for revolution by local leaders of the First International, important strikes, and the lynching of local politicians across Spain. In March 1873, the coal unloaders called a strike and obtained higher wages and the establishment of a workday of nine and one-half hours.⁸¹ A new strike by these workers nine months later was defeated through the deployment military forces used as replacement workers.⁸² It is apparent that these labor conflicts were related to the workings of an increasingly liberalized labor market.

The Matriculate of the Sea was finally abolished on March 22, 1873 (the recruitment system for the army, the *quinta*, was also abolished in the same days).⁸³

This law also established the free exercise of all maritime industries throughout Spain. A registry of men involved in maritime labor was maintained, but they no longer enjoyed any special privileges, rights, or control over the labor market.⁸⁴ The advances in naval affairs and the navy's greater reliance on steam-powered ships meant that the objections of the naval authorities to the suppression of the matriculate were insufficient to avoid the elimination of the Matriculate of the Sea.⁸⁵

The Restoration of the Monarchy in 1874 constituted yet another politically reactionary repositioning. However, the advance of capitalism would continue; albeit with less enthusiasm on the part of the central government. Sloth returned to the bureaucratic processes of approval and funding of the requisite public works to continue to mobilize the port with an eye to the revolution in transportation and global trade. The construction of the interior wharves restarted slowly, and would be completed years later.⁸⁶

In any case, there was no return to the *status quo ante revolutio* (as had occurred in the absolutist restorations in 1814 and 1824). The centuries-old Matriculate of the Sea system—fundamental to engrossing the rows of cannon fodder for the navy and for organizing maritime labor—was finished. Thus ended one of the last hold-outs of the heavily regulated, orderly world of labor in the *ancien régime*; thereafter, anyone could be hired to work in loading and unloading cargo, under any condition, and at a price determined by market factors and the whims of the employers of labor. In the following decades, the cargo-handling companies studied here would operate with few hindrances, hiring, working, and firing men as they pleased until the rise of industrial labor organizations towards the end of the century.

As for the means of production, the tendencies established in the preceding period intensified. More cranes were placed in the harbor. The total number of harbor boats of the maritime province of Barcelona almost doubled during the final period, rising from 661 in 1865 to 1,228 in 1877; importantly, the total built tonnage more than doubled, from 1,711 tons to 4,119 tons.⁸⁷

The years following the abolition of the Matriculate of the Sea were defined by the further consolidation of the capitalistic domination of the forces of production by the cargo-handling companies. However, it would be a full generation before the laborers of these companies had not previously been guildsmen. With the first strikes in the port, and the eventual rise of trade unionism, we can see a clear continuity of men between these organizational models.

Conclusions

The history of the maritime-cargo handling guilds of Barcelona reveals an important, complex transition from the guild system to a capitalistic configuration of port labor. This was not an abrupt, dichotomic rupture ending one system and enacting a wholly new one—it was a nuanced transition in which the past informed the characteristics of the system that developed. This development included legislative, technological, and socio-cultural changes that re-defined the operational parameters and employment relationships among former guild brothers, and between labor and capital. Where once the panorama was monopolized by consolidated collectives of guilds working at legally established rates and defending their ancient prerogatives from the advances of liberalism, by the end, a new relationship had developed, based on

men who had abandoned their guilds to partner with capitalist investors in order to take advantage of the liberalized de-monopolization of port labor and the free negotiation of prices and working conditions.

In the most general terms, industrialization (in manufacturing) laid the foundations for liberalization, or at least provided the logical justification for de-regulating markets by eliminating guild privileges. Sometimes, abolition occurred early in a process of industrialization (generally during the first decades of the nineteenth century); at other times, the abolition was enacted relatively late—the case of Bremen (where guilds were abolished in 1861) shows this.⁸⁸ However, the maintenance of the guild structure, directly through the legal continuity of the guilds, or by their substitution with other organizations that continued with the great part of the guild practices, was not uncommon in the transition from the *ancien régime* to capitalistic economies throughout Europe (even though the particularities and chronologies were distinct).⁸⁹ This was also the case in port labor, given their ability to transform into capitalistic structures.⁹⁰ Where abolition was not enacted wholesale to the sector, there were cases of eliminating barriers to entry such that larger groups of registered men could participate in cargo-handling. In Barcelona, as we have shown, this was through the matriculate system; in Genoa, this was through the registration of porters with the local police.⁹¹

In general, the guilds continued in trades in which technological change was limited or impossible, or otherwise did not occur.⁹² This was no different in the ports. That is to say, the port guilds (either formally or informally) continued to represent an economically efficient or advantageous labor system well into the nineteenth century (after the generalized abolitions of most guilds). This was clear in Le Havre: “Between 1790 and 1840, registered trades composed of permanent masters who hired casual but faithful helpers continued to dominate the work force,” being tolerated long after the abolitions brought about by the Le Chapelier and Allarde laws of 1791.⁹³ The cases of the cooperative *naties* in Antwerp and the Dutch *vemen*, which continued their traditional practices long after local deregulation, and then both transitioned into publicly held companies in the 1860s are illustrative of comparative path trajectories.⁹⁴ In Marseille, the general abolition of the guilds was circumvented by the porters, in 1817, through the establishment of a mutual aid society that monopolized cargo handling for another fifty years, until the construction of a new port outside of the guild monopoly.⁹⁵ One of the principal elements contributing to the longevity of the guilds or the continuity of their customary practices was their organization of the labor market, based on intensive human labor. In Thessalonica, the construction of a new port did not result in the decreased power of the guild.⁹⁶ The case of Port Sa’id, Egypt, further illustrates this point. Even with the construction of the Suez Canal and its modern handling infrastructure, a new guild was created for handling coal (where none had existed previously).⁹⁷ It is noteworthy that in the case of Barcelona, we have shown that challenges to the guild-monopoly system began long before the technological transformation of the port and cargo-handling: this shows that technological change was not necessarily decisive. While it is tempting to link the processes of qualitative changes in port infrastructure or the introduction of technology with the disappearance of the guilds, this was not always the case.

The fact that port improvements and technological change were not concrete determinants of abolition requires us to look at other considerations for the longevity

of guilds in the sector. One consideration was the economic value provided by formal organizations to guarantee the proper and secure handling of goods, and to cover losses due to damage, loss, or theft. The guilds in Barcelona often used this as a justification for their privileges: the importance was such that one of the private companies reported a single occurrence could halve their monthly earnings.⁹⁸ This also occurred (under distinct names and conditions) in Thessalonica, Istanbul, Marseille, and Le Havre.⁹⁹ However, distrust arising from pilfering or theft could also be a consideration; in any case, this question of trust was removed with the construction of warehouses in some locations.¹⁰⁰

The quality of the relationships (either economic or ethno-cultural) between the guilds and with merchants is valuable for understanding abolition. In Genoa, the employment-based system of a limited number of license-holders (paid to local authorities) from Bergamo (foreigners, incorporated in a guild) employing local porters was ended due to the political pressure by the porters in a context of democratization and nationalism.¹⁰¹ In Naples, the maintenance of a monopolistic system after abolition was based, in part, on the existence of a system of patronage by the merchants toward the new corporate entities that replaced the guilds.¹⁰² The trust-based relationship between merchant and porters contributed to the longevity of the system in Le Havre.¹⁰³ In Thessalonica, in which there were ethnic relationships between Jewish cargo-handlers and the merchants (to the detriment of the Greek and Albanian laborers), the guild-based system prevailed, largely unchallenged by the merchants.¹⁰⁴ In Barcelona, the merchants complained about the high prices of cargo-handling because of the guild monopoly, and the difficulties of securing men to go to sea, given that they preferred cargo handling. As we have shown, the political pressure of merchants (through the boards of commerce) was decisive in the liberalization of the sector.

The relationships with local and state authorities could also be important. In Genoa, the relationship with local authorities played an important role for the guild of men from Bergamo initially, and then (as political trends shifted towards democratization) to the favor of the local porters. In London (where there was an employment hierarchy between different guilds of license-holders and more generally registered porters), the major debilitation of the monopoly-based system occurred when the government allowed private merchant companies to build private docks with warehouses, and use their own unloaders, beyond the jurisdiction of the city (and, by extension, that of the guilds).¹⁰⁵ In Istanbul, we see a system of obligatory, private, individual licenses (*gediks*) that granted a work/employment privilege to the holder. In 1880, the Ottoman state decided to allow foreign companies to build cranes and employ barges. This created a scenario in which the local license-holders would either have to pay a predetermined share of their income to utilize these means or, become direct employees of these large companies, resulting in their proletarianization.¹⁰⁶ In Barcelona, the relationship with the Navy was crucial in defending the matriculated guilds and, after abolition, of the matriculated men in general because of the military use of matriculated men.

After the abolition of the guild in 1864, the further consolidation of the companies—individually and as a sector—in the subsequent decade (until the abolition of the Matriculate of the Sea in 1873) solidified the port labor panorama for decades to come. As such, this history departs from the simple dichotomy of pre-casual and casual hiring (the dominant framework in port labor histories). In Barcelona, the transition

from a guild-based monopoly to a liberalized, capitalist market demonstrates the complexities of trajectories. While the guilds successfully prevented the development of capitalism until the mid-nineteenth century, the removal of their monopolies opened the path for a free market. By removing the guild monopoly but not liberalizing the work entirely, and by keeping the monopoly among the matriculated men, an opportunity arose for those men who had left their respective guilds and capitalist investors interested in expanding their participation in the shipping supply chain.

As the period studied here ended, a new, capitalist mode of production had become hegemonic in the port. The corresponding changes in social relations are clear: the end of the guilds brought the close of a collective organization and its replacement with companies of employment-based relations, even as the organization of labor remained centered on the work gang. Importantly, the contributions of the guild-matriculate period are most evident in the fact that wholesale casualization was not a direct result of the end of the monopoly system. Instead, private companies of permanently employed workers organized in work-gangs created the foundation of the capitalistic labor market.

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