

ANTH318

Nautical Archaeology of the Americas

Class 6

Summary

1. Who were the sailors?
2. The voyage to the New World;
3. Composition of the crews;
4. Life aboard;
5. Voyages in the New World.

1. Who were the sailors

Most sailors came from Andalusia and the Cantabrian coast. The Basque sailors were highly prized, although many preferred fishing.

Spanish sailors generally accounted for about 90% of the crews every year. The percentage of foreigners varied and could reach up to 50% on the ships sailing to the Far East. Foreigners were generally Portuguese but there were also many Italians, Greeks, and "Levanticos" (from the Venetian colonies). A smaller part of the crew was Dutch, German, French, or English. It was not uncommon to rent slaves, and crews frequently included black, *mulato*, and *mourisco* elements.

Most sailors lived in Triana, the sailor's suburb of Seville. Sailors lived in *corrales*, which were collective residences of several families. Captains, masters, and pilots lived on the main street (*Calle Larga*), in individual houses. Non-residents lived in boarding houses, an expensive option (in 1520 they paid 3 *reales/day*, while a sailor's pay at sea would be about 1.5 *reales/day*).

A sailor's life started frequently at the age of 7-10. Starting as pages, they scrubbed the decks, cleaned the ship, distributed the meals, called the crew for the meals and religious ceremonies, and cleaned up after the meals. They were charged with the maintenance of the religious rituals, reciting the ritual psalms and litanies, which were answered by the crew. They were also responsible for turning the sand clocks and were expected to help everybody when asked.

Around the age of 17-20 pages could become apprentices. Apprentices were young sailors. They would climb the yards, pull the oars, do the watches on top of the masts, carry the heavy weights, firewood, water, and ballast. Apprentices took all the brutality of the elders in silence and frequently had to cook and make the bed of an old crewman for protection.

Apprentices became sailors during their early twenties. Sailors could handle the helm, the sounding lead, the rigging during complex maneuvers, and fix a sail or a cable.

When they knew the complex job of handling guns they could become gunners. This meant knowing how to refine powder, fill grenades, select the various types of projectiles, load a cannon, aim, secure the gun, maneuver to a quick reload, and do the general maintenance.

Intelligent sailors could become pilots. This was the highest one could rise to on the social ladder. Pilots were high officers, although frequently despised and unconsidered by the other high officers: the master and the captain. Pilots were in charge of the nautical matters; they were the ones who decided which route to take and what to do to avoid storms or accidents. They ate at a separate table with the other high officers, and sometimes even had a page.

A sailor's active life rarely extended beyond his early 40's.

Typically two things would make a man want to be a sailor: misery and restlessness. Most times: all their ancestors were sailors; their parents sold them; they were engaged after drinking or they were abandoned or kidnapped. On the other hand, the sea was the only place in the 16th century where social mobility was a possibility, ...and there was food everyday!

The desire to see the world also played a part. The Renaissance ideals, the fast fortunes made in Portugal in the previous century, and the accounts of rich and exotic lands, with beautiful women and abundant foods, lead many to try their chances. In the mid 16th century 300 Portuguese and Italian sailors would find a way to be engaged every year in the New World fleets, and of these it was said that more than 80% would run away once they arrived in the Americas.

Shame could also be a reason. Homosexuality was violently repressed aboard Spanish vessels, but a century later the English were far more lenient towards this practice.

All accounts present sailors with a middling stature, a sound body, and a black beard. They were frequently mutilated. Most missed fingers, and many showed impressive scars.

The upper classes were a different matter. They would go to the sea at the age of 15, sometimes 20, after receiving an education. They were engaged as pages and aimed to become captains and admirals. On war vessels every nobleman was allowed to bring, at his own cost, up to six other nobleman to serve him and acquire experience. Problems with ranking within the navy and social rank in society plagued the Spanish navy until the 19th century.

2. The voyage to the New World

In the early 16th century there was only one old crane in Seville, and the arsenal was small, the beach narrow and dirty. In 1503 the House of Trade was created.

From Seville to Sanlúcar de Barrameda, down the Guadalquivir River, covered a distance of 89 Km and took about 1 week. Between five and seven places could only be passed during high tide.

From Sanlúcar to the Canary Islands took 7-10 days.

From the Canaries to the Antilles, between 7 and 15° latitude South took about 1 month.

There were mainly 3 ways into the Caribbean: the Windward, Mona, and Anegada passages.

Once in the Caribbean Sea the fleet was divided in two: the *Nueva España* and *Tierra Firme* fleets. *Nueva España* sailed to Puerto Rico and San Juan de Ulúa (at least 1 month). San Juan de Ulúa was a small island in front of Veracruz, where there was a wall 111 m long, with 20 rings to tie the ships. Merchandises would be unloaded there and carried in barges to Veracruz. The *Tierra Firme* fleet sailed to Cartagena de Indias (2 weeks).

On the way back to Spain both the *Nueva España* and *Tierra Firme* fleets would sail to Havana (2-3 weeks) where they would assemble in order to sail together to Spain. From Havana the ships would sail North and East to the latitude of about 40°, and then East, to the Azores (1 month). From the Azores they sailed East to the coast of Portugal, and then South, around the Cape St. Vincent, to Sanlúcar again (20-30 days).

These routes were dictated by the prevailing wind and current conditions.

3. Composition of the crews

Merchantmen around 200 tons in capacity carried crews of around 43 men. Warships slightly smaller in capacity would carry crews of around 69 men. Crews were divided into high officers, commanders, officers, and sailors.

High officers

Captain: Generally carrying exclusively military competence.

Master: Economic administrator of a ship. He was responsible for the loading and maintenance of the cargo, hiring, feeding, and paying the crew, as well as deciding what to throw overboard in case of storm.

Pilot: This trade required theoretical knowledge, as well as experience. Pilots were in charge of all nautical matters.

Captains and masters enjoyed many privileges together with wealthy passengers

Pilots needed to know how to predict a storm by the color of the sea, the disposition of the clouds, and the flight of the birds. They were expected to recognize every cove, bay, or reef, interpret the winds and currents, recognize the colors, smells, and tastes of the sediments, know the fishes, the birds, and the marine mammals.

Pilots had to know the magnetic compass, the portulan charts, the compass dividers, and the abacus. They had to calculate latitude with the astrolabe and the cross-staff, and interpret the printed tables for the computation of latitude.