

Maritimes communities of the early Middle Ages

A conference in Boulogne-sur-Mer, France, 10 and 11 March 2017



This conference is part of the European research cycle “Communities of the early Middle Ages”. It will be held on **Friday 10 and Saturday 11 March, 2017**, at the Université du Littoral Côte d’Opale, in Boulogne-sur-Mer, France. It will be hosted by the research team CRHAEL (Centre de recherche en histoire atlantique et littorale), a member of the research centre HLLI (Histoire, langues, littératures et interculturel, EA 4030).

We understand the phrase “maritime communities of the early Middle Ages” as covering all human groups which, within a long early Middle Ages (from the fifth to the early twelfth century), managed to “be a community” in an environment characterized by maritime experience. The geographical scope of the conference will be the medieval West, from Ireland to Italy and from Spain to Scandinavia.

In conformity with the axes determined by the European programme to which this event belongs, we will concentrate on all sorts of communities, but only on those that were both not too large and not too ephemeral; in other words, on groups which were able to act together as communities, that is to create and make use of discourses and/or practices which historians may defined as communal. It means that we will not be considering *gentes*, *ecclesia*, *imperium*, and all other large and all-including communities. We will rather study local communities of inhabitants (in farms, villages, ports, emporia, urban and proto-urban centres), clerical or monastic houses, communities bound by common interests or aims (guilds, trade groups, etc.), communities linked by devotions or other religious practices, and all other groups whose discourse and/or practices reveal that they lived some sort of communal experience.

All categories of communities will be considered, as long as they were characterized by interaction with the sea: our “maritime” communities may have had experiences of the seaside, of islands, estuaries or ports, of fishing or trading together, and even (as a comparison, if it appears of interest), of living close to lakes or rivers. All sources may be resorted to: texts of course, but also archaeology and, if relevant, iconography.

Because those communities interacted with their maritime environment, we will question more specifically the means used by those groups to “become and go on being communities”. In order to maintain a communal existence in a maritime environment, they had to be communities thanks to the sea, at sea, next to the sea, in front of the sea, and even against the sea. A short list of examples (by no means exhaustive) will illustrate our questions:

- Were ship crews (and, following on them, bands of vikings) communities? Were they stable enough in order for communal feelings to exist among the members of one crew?
- What was community life like among inhabitants of ports, emporia, and other maritime urban centres? What exactly bound the members of those communities together? Was life alongside each other by the sea enough of an experience to make a community? Was it also necessary to share a common origin (geographical, ethnic), religion, or activity (fishing, trading, raiding)? Were those rather unsettled populations able to create stable local communities?
- Were those communities different as far as gender relationships were concerned? For example, what of the stereotypical figure of the “mariner’s wife” in that period? What does it tell us about the way seafaring people created their communities?
- How did those communities play their part as interfaces? In what ways were they places of cultural exchange and hybridization? And how did they interact with the communities of their hinterland? Were there forms of distinction, of contact, of tensions? In a time when personal links and physical encounter were paramount, did the sea hinder or facilitate contact and community?
- Some communities of a special kind beg other questions because they lived by the sea. Did special practices and discourses emerge because of their interaction with a maritime environment? For example, in what way was the communal experience of a monastic community living by the sea (and, even more, on a small island) different from that of a landlocked monastery? And how did merchants maintain commercial contacts, but also personal links, with other members of communities that straddled the seas, and despite of long distances?

Those who wish to give a paper during the conference are invited to suggest a title and a short abstract (no more than a dozen lines) **before Sunday 10 April 2016**. We will ask for a longer abstract a few weeks before the conference. Thanks for answering by e-mail sent to both organizers of the conference, Alban Gautier (alban.gautier@univ-littoral.fr) and Lucie Malbos (lucie.malbos@gmail.com).

Please note that we will provide accommodation and meals for all communicants; conversely, travel expenses will have to be met by each participant. If you have major difficulties with having your travel expenses refunded by your own institution, please contact Alban Gautier as soon as possible in order to consider possible solutions.

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