

Supply, Demand and Fish Consumption: evidence for fish price in Portugal (1600-1800)

Inês Amorim*

Patrícia Costa**

Supply, Demand and Fish Consumption requires us to focus on such different aspects as the evolution of the efficiency of the fisheries (the evaluation of stocks caught) and consumption trends (demand), influenced by demographic pressures or by eating habits, conditioned by religious or economic motives. We cannot measure the real growth of Portuguese fisheries by quantifying the stock caught or by regularity in meeting market demands. However, we do have documents full of contradictions.

In seventeenth while on the one hand, there are signs of reorganisation in the fishing workforce along some points of the coast, on the other, there is a tendency to increase the importation and consumption of English cod. It was also a period in which the traditional links with Spain were consolidated, which explains the presence of Portuguese and Galicians or Andalusians, and others, trading sardines and other species between the two countries.

In the 18th century, however, it seems that the introduction of some new fishing techniques (seine-nets, in Portuguese *xávega*, from the mid-18th century) and sardine salting (which appeared on the beaches of the North around 1775), a method that comes from Catalonia or Galicia, improved the efficiency of fisheries.

In the absence of firm quantitative data, we are limited to a number of qualitative indicators such as the general tendency of Portugal's population up to the beginning of the 19th century, the influence of the religious calendar on fish consumption, established habits and tastes, and the trading routes discovered.

However the trading routes suggest a contradiction between supply and demand. In fact, although there are indications of a shortage of fish and there was nevertheless a flourishing export business with Galicia, the Mediterranean and Andalusia. It seems that fiscal interests were the main reason for this behaviour, accomplished by State interests.

Despite the important place that dried and salted cod has occupied in Portuguese diet and even in processing salting cod (due to the sea salt produced in Portugal) it has received little attention by the historiography of Portuguese consumption and food prices. An extensive bibliography of Spanish and North Atlantic allow comparability. It is an opportunity to understand the impact of the routes of cod between Newfoundland and Portugal, the concurrence of new routes of cod supplying and its impact on prices. That means, we will try to

* Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto, DHEPI, CITCEM, Investigadora do projecto PWR PTDC/HAH/70938/2006 Prices, Wages and Rents in Portugal 1500-1900

** Doutoranda no Curso de Doutoramento da FLUP, ex-bolseira de investigação do projecto PWR PTDC/HAH/70938/2006 Prices, Wages and Rents in Portugal 1500-1900

evaluate and interpret the eventual existence of irregular supply of cod to Portugal and its repercussions on the intensification of consumption of other fish (fish prices) from the Portuguese coast, or even of meat (meat prices).

To accomplish this, we have divided our paper into three parts. We begin with a section on methodology discussing the nature of data sources, and treatment, and how to use quantitative sources and transform them in qualitative indicators. Porto city is our observation point and in this moment impossible to compare with other examples. Then we will present our prices database, comparing with the Basque country, a country involved in the direct cod fishery on Newfoundland. Finally we compare with other fish species prices in order to evaluate cod's place in the price hierarchy.

Keywords: prices, fish, cod, market, supply.