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CHAPTER 14

Pockets of Privacy in the Maritime World: An Epilogue

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Envisioning a historical study of privacy means attempting to connect deeply with the experiences of the people of the past. As human beings who embody a need to protect ourselves at a physical, emotional, informational, and social level, we often need to situate these shared feelings within historical circumstances that make the notion of privacy seem nearly impossible.1 The early modern period witnessed many of these circumstances where control and spatial constriction were the norm. Highly controlled abbeys, hospitals, and prisons would perceive a private life within its walls as a potential threat if not closely inspected for conformation to the tenets of their regulations. Yet, in each of these

1 Djoek van Netten, ‘Spaces on Ships: Secrecy and Privacy in the Dutch East India Companies’, TSEG, 18 (3) (2021), 109.

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institutions, inmates managed to create ephemeral pockets of privacy. A private connection with God was necessary for a pious life, and monks knew how to instrumentalise their daily practices in order to engender moments of privacy. Hospitals were usually overcrowded spaces, mostly hosting the sick and injured at their most vulnerable, having to attend to all their needs in cramped quarters with little or no division between beds. Nevertheless, bedside secrets were shared, last confessions took place, and visitors managed to exchange private information amidst the collective suffering. Prisons held people in conditions where, depending on personal status, basically no dignity could be maintained. Still, prisoners found ways of sharing letters or notes, planned—and sometimes succeeded in orchestrating—escapes, and kept their self-established rules of sociability. Most sailors and travellers were also aware of these constraints, many of whom lived through some of those institutions. But the confines of abbeys, hospitals, and prisons did not equate to the reality of life on board.

Life at sea combined constricting living spaces with high mobility. Periods of confined exchanges with an unchanging group of individuals were followed by reaching ports where this social constellation changed drastically. Although essentially inescapable when on board, personal interactions were also marked by this sense of temporality. As stated in the introduction to this volume, beyond being the connector between shores, the sea was an enabler of cultural encounters and, at times, the first point of conflict. This means that boundaries of access to one another, negotiations of proximity and distancing, and social compromises had to be constantly redrawn in the cultural diversity and usual temporariness of relationships, thereby making privacy at sea a revealing instance of how people adjust to the expectations and challenges of private life.

The chapters of this volume study a particular dimension of life at sea—questions, anxieties, and the drawing of boundaries related to privacy. Maritime notions and experiences of privacy come to the fore in connection with concerns related to access and non-access, vulnerability and protection, as well as knowledge and ignorance. These concerns are structured and regulated by an intricate grid of zones and boundaries. Some of these zones and boundaries are physical and, at first glance, relatively stable, made as they are of wood, canvas, or other tangible materials; others are based on codified behaviours associated with rank, gender, ethnicity, and the explicit and tacit standards that apply at sea. Finally, some of these zones and boundaries are transient and intangible,
shaped by human interaction, social codes, or social contracts—and the willingness to dispense with them—as well as by individual choices and dispositions. Each of these boundaries can serve to create, shield, order, or impose some form of privacy, and each of them is vulnerable to various forms of transgression and thus comes with an inherent porosity. When we look closer at these boundaries, we get a sense of interfaces between individuals and communities on board as well as of the spatial organisation, hierarchies, values, and norms that regulated early modern maritime life.

The ship itself may be seen as a boundary that demarcates some form of communal privacy for the crew and passengers. Some of the examples treated by Beck and LeJacq exemplify the maxim ‘What happens on board, stays on board’. However, most of the spatial boundaries examined in the chapters concern segregations within the ship. Obvious spatial and material delineations are created in connection with cabins, berths, and hammocks, but also in relation to gender—or rank—specific clothes as well as the wooden chests that contained the seamen’s private belongings. Access to and possession of such spaces depend on hierarchies, and these material boundaries signal the immediate forms of spatial privacy that were available to different groups on board. Cabins, allocated or rented, were reserved for the superiors and particularly distinguished passengers. Their walls were made of wood or canvas and they had doors with locks as well as windows and keyholes that might be covered. The boundary provided by a cabin could be reinforced by the lodger drawing rank and prohibiting people from entering, by the demand to knock on the door before entering, or by posting, as shown in the examples cited by Polónia & Capelão, sentries inside the door or guards or soldiers outside. Cabins, to some extent, shielded their inmates from the gaze of others, but they did not prevent other people from hearing or suspecting the nature of the activities that went on inside it. The protection offered by ad hoc canvas partitions, berths, and hammocks was even less robust—sounds were heard more easily, movements sensed or felt, and smells perceived. Nocturnal darkness, lowering the voice, and subduing movements might somewhat reinforce the boundaries of the spatial privacy offered by such spaces. Temporary shelter could be found in places allocated to storage or specific activities and accessible only to a few specialist crew members. Other corners and crannies that might afford frail and ephemeral protection are indicated in the records studied by Beck and
LeJacq, who mention the galley, the bow, the manger, and various gaps and nooks as potential places for momentary privacy.

As observed by Polónia & Capelão as well as Foy, male clothes might mask women as men just as tarred clothes might disguise landlubbers as seamen, or the enslaved as free, thus creating a shield of privacy around an individual. Foy shows how the smallest spatial unit—the chests that contained personal objects, letters, trading goods, money, personal writings, and identification documents—offered the only form of spatial privacy available to common seamen. Such chests could contain the very identity of their owner and were thus vital, especially for people who desperately needed to be able to prove or conceal their identities. The skin may be seen as the ultimate and most intimate material boundary. As Schadner shows, the seamen’s tattoos hovered at the intersection of public appearance and the private meaning that was associated with a particular tattoo and known only to the tattooed individual or to a small community of like-minded people who were marked with the same tattoo. Such boundaries provide some form and degree of what we may perceive as the privacy of individual or communal recognition.

Privacy, however, is vital not only in relation to personal information but also in relation to state information. Ceccarelli, Pizzorno, and Araújo present three different scales of boundaries applied for the secure transportation of state secrets by sea. The intricate and closely supervised postal systems, developed by the Genoese Spinola clan and sometimes reinforced by arms, created a large-scale set of boundaries around the secrets of the Roman Curia, but messages could also be hidden in silk crates unknownst to the people who transported them. The cipher used to mask the content of a state letter transported through hostile waters is the minutest boundary for such protection, creating a shield within the letter and thus protecting its message even if it were stolen.

As Silva Perez notes, privacy at sea is often not “attached to an individual or place”. The strength of boundaries hinges on the behaviour on board which was, in turn, regulated by tacit or codified social expectations and individual or communal relationships. Beck and LeJacq both show examples of this form of privacy. The crew could close rank and refuse to tell on a mate or choose to hear or disregard hushed sounds, to see or overlook hidden movements in hammocks, and to ascertain or ignore suspicious movements by touching or not touching the hammock; they could choose to seek this kind of knowledge actively or to disregard even
highly suggestive indications. One prevailing form of privacy at sea was created by fellow crew members’ conscious and deliberate overlooking.

Privacy could be appropriated, carved out, bought officially or through bribes, imposed, or granted. As demonstrated by Polónia & Capelão’s study of the segregation of women on board, there is sometimes a fine line between protection, privacy, and incarceration. Beck reminds us that occasionally human care would take the form of privacy bestowed upon fellow seamen who were particularly afflicted by melancholy, drunkenness, or mental illness. The privacy afforded by material or intangible boundaries would secure the virtue of females or vulnerable males, allow space for voluntary or imposed sexual encounters, shroud episodes of mental afflictions, severe drunkenness, or dire cases of melancholy, state secrets, or matters related to individual identities. No matter how material and seemingly robust they appeared, each of these boundaries could be traversed. Keyholes offered views, doors could be broken open or otherwise fail to hide what went on inside, hammocks could be touched, observed, or listened to, thus giving away tell-tale signs of the activities inside, chests could be pried open or stolen, and black seamen could be sold as slaves even though they were free if they lost their token of freedom. Despite and because of such risks, boundaries were taken seriously. It is telling that in some of Beck’s cases, the failure to respect privacy becomes decisive proof, either when the suspect flung open his door, thus revealing suspicious behaviour that a sane person would have taken care to keep hidden from view, or when a suspect banged on a superior’s door or even broke through it, thus revealing his lacking the sense of rank-specific privacy.

Issues related to knowledge is a staple in the cases examined in this volume. Who knew what? How did they come by this knowledge? Did they bring forth or withhold it—and from whom? Some forms of privacy depend on the maintenance of intricate knowledge systems. They could be the authorised and organised understanding of cipher codes, the more or less accidental and fragmentary awareness of illicit intimacy that is related or contained, or the insider knowledge of the meaning of a particular tattoo. Sometimes privacy depended on the professional ethos of those who were entrusted with particular knowledge, as in the cases outlined by Araújo and Ceccarelli. However, the question of professional obligations also appears in relation to particularly vulnerable passengers or crew members, as shown by Polónia & Capelão as well as LeJacq, or with the expectations related to a particularly regulated form of behaviour,
as demonstrated in Aguilera-López’s study of the soldiers in the Royal Shipyard in Barcelona.

Trust and loyalty are other privacy-inducing factors foregrounded in the chapters. The confines offered through trust and loyalty may be considered either strong and lasting or frail and ephemeral, relying as they do on human tolerance, care, and sense of community as well as the willingness to turn a blind eye to transgressive behaviour or to withhold one’s knowledge thereof. Such boundaries come with the inherent exclusion of people and conditions to which such bonds of loyalty do not extend. Sometimes privacy could be bought. Trust, loyalty, and professionalism could be buttressed by material provisions such as benefices or bribes given to the keeper of private information, as shown by Ceccarelli and Pizzorno, or by purchasing a cabin or a particular location on deck, as in the cases studied by Humanes as well as Polónia & Capelão.

The cases examined in this volume show how, in the early modern maritime world, privacy was often a hard-fought boon. At the same time, however, privacy at sea was dogged by the generally negative associations that it had on shore. LeJacq shows how carving out privacy could inspire so much suspicion about the activities occurring under this cover that the crew members actively bypassed it by, for example, keeping doors open rather than shut. After all, the ultimate consequence of guarding one’s privacy for behaviour that was deemed uncouth or illegal could be the extreme public exposure of a trial and the ensuing penalties, be they public flogging or public execution.

Overall, just like on the shore, early modern privacy at sea is perceptible in the absence of traces. As Pizzorno reminds us, the historical material available to us is generally fraught with large gaps, although, in accordance with the nature of the matter, this is particularly acute for issues related to privacy. Silva Perez notes the silences of extant sources that hint at or shroud private matters and motivations. Araújo remarks on the archival lacunae with regard to particular sources, in casu encrypted letters. Ceccarelli notes the silence shrouding the names of private persons who travelled incognito while trusted with secret messages. Humanes and Foy both comment on those who boarded the vessels in order to be forgotten because of crimes committed onshore or an enslaved past, concluding that some of these did indeed disappear from view.
Maritime Contraction and Extension

The situation on board early modern ships resembles that of other tightly defined communities. The many tacit and explicit regulations bring to mind the Benedictine abbey with its strictly hierarchical organisation within a confined space, the call for obedience towards the superior, the constant presence of others, as well as the inherent mutual surveillance. As noted by Humanes, crew members often left their past behind when boarding—a situation which has some similarities with the forsaking of the world by the monastic novice. Even the maritime ruptures of rules and regulations, in the shape of harassment of fellows, homoeroticism, and murder, have some parallels in the monastic world. While the meticulously regulated communal work-life balance on board may be compared to other early modern institutions such as the abbey, the workhouse, or the prison, the sea, however, makes a decisive difference. Conditions at sea are characterised by a particular dynamic of contraction and extension. As demonstrated by Araújo and Humanes, ships are thoroughly regulated


legal entities of their own, but they are also defined, culturally and legally, by the powers that they belong to as well as by the nature, purpose, and size of the vessel. As Bakić, Foy, Humanes, LeJacq, as well as Polonia & Capelão underline, the pockets of privacy created on board were influenced by the conditions that reign at the particular maritime interface of strict hierarchies, norms, and legally defined structures on the one hand, and a sense of anarchical chaos caused by constant dangers from within and without the ship on the other. A voyage brought into co-existence different groups such as superiors, crew, and passengers, but also people of different ethnicities, religions, and classes who would not otherwise co-exist in such close proximity and with as little distinction. On the one hand, this tension caused societal norms to be upheld with similar or even stricter fervour than on land. On the other hand, they created a disruption of landlocked standards—as Beck shows, there are cases where the maritime context seems to create a heightened sense of community and a greater interpersonal responsibility than on land, while Foy demonstrates that the vulnerability that dogged some groups on land could be augmented at sea, deprived as they were of even the scarce protection that codified measures would offer on land. Life at sea retains some of the expansive and chaotic nature of the ocean itself that, as Bakić, Ceccarelli, Foy, and Pizzorno show, makes it fit for all manners of licit as well as illicit business. As Humanes reminds us, the tight and socially complex community with its potentially higher proportion of human beings that would have been considered outcasts on shore was a factor that added to the tension on board. In some dimensions, the chaotic anarchy on board does, however, also afford some degree of freedom that is not available on shore, as shown in Foy’s chapter.

**Privacy Studies and Maritime Studies**

Privacy studies has much to learn from maritime history. The situation at sea was unique and complex which amplifies both the absence and presence of privacy with equal acuteness. As underlined by Araújo, Bakić, Ceccarelli, Foy, Humanes, and Pizzorno, ships were arms in war, vehicles for the open (non-secret) transportation of people, goods, and messages. They were, however, also hiding places for people, goods, and messages. Ships were a place of training, exploitation, as well as intimate and communal bonding. The overall aim of going from point A to point
B was the ultimate goal, but one that left plenty of room for other intermediary goals. This particular situation creates a spatial and social density which enhances issues related to early modern privacy. The pervasive nature of early modern surveillance by peers and superiors is increased, just as the charge of forgoing surveillance takes on more nuances.\footnote{For recent historical privacy studies, see Michaël Green, Lars C. Nørgaard, and Mette Birkedal Bruun, eds., *Early Modern Privacy: Sources and Approaches* (Leiden: Brill, 2021); Natália da Silva Perez, ed., *TSEG Special Issue: Privacy and the Private in Early Modern Dutch Contexts*, 18 (3) (2021); Sari Nauman and Helle Vogt, eds., *Private/Public in 18th-Century Scandinavia* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).}

The threat of public exposure in punishment by legal authorities or by the *vox populi* is a reminder that privacy was considered a boon.\footnote{The public punishment of crimes, maritime and otherwise, was part of a culture of exposure ranging from the medieval pillory to the early modern newspaper defamation with slander, libel, and general gossip as potentially devastating supplements. See Jesper Jakobsen, ‘Commercial Newspaper and Public Shame Pole: Exposure of Individuals in the Copenhagen Gazette Adresseavisen 1759–73’ in Nauman and Vogt, *Private/Public in 18th-Century Scandinavia*, 99–118.}


Privacy requires that human agents are able to evade some, but not necessarily all the senses of those around them. Actions may be heard but not seen, or seen but not heard, and sometimes these sensory distinctions
make all the difference. Tensions around facilitating, identifying, and revealing sexual promiscuity are enhanced. The maritime situation does away with most human autonomy, largely subjecting individual needs to the requirements of navigation. This reinforces issues pertaining to public authority and private behaviour in the superiors; the maritime context sharpens the apprehension that a superior acts against his public authority if he is directed by his private inclinations.

Privacy studies, in turn, brings to maritime history an acute sense of the many different material and immaterial zones and thresholds on board. The concern with privacy is an analytical catalyst that brings to the forefront spatial and social segregations, power dynamics, issues related to control of access, and autonomy. When examining the zones and thresholds on board, we are reminded that early modern privacy is not simply a matter of stable and firmly delineated distinctions of public and private. Such distinctions are, as shown in the chapters of this volume, hard to come by in the early modern period. However, when we begin to look for malleable and ephemeral instances of privacy in the early modern material world, and in the silences of such a world, we begin to discover...

10 Lena Cowen Orlin underscores this point in her observation that the early modern gallery offered an opportunity for private conversations because in this open space, conversants could see anybody approaching. Lena Cowen Orlin, Locating Privacy in Tudor London (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 226–261.

11 This alarm regarding homoerotic relationships and the measures to reveal them is an intensification of situations described by Natália da Silva Perez in ‘Sexual surveillance in Paris and Versailles under Louis XIV’ in Histories of Surveillance from Antiquity to the Digital Era: The Eyes and Ears of Power, eds. A. Marklund and L. Skouvig (London: Routledge, 2021), 53–69. The exploitation of hidden or semi-hidden spaces at sea for illicit business is a more acute version of conduct on land. See, for instance, the fear that any form of spatial segregation, in casu private chapels, may be used for misconduct in Mette Birkedal Bruun, ‘A Private Mystery: Looking at Philippe de Champaigne’s Annunciation for the Hôtel de Chavigny’ in Quid est sacramentum?: Visual Representation of Sacred Mysteries in Early Modern Europe, 1400–1700, eds. W. Melion, E. Pastan, and L.P. Wandel (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 606–655, 622.

12 See the study of the early modern view that the exercise of authority is dependent on the public office held and can be undermined if, in this office, the magistrate acts as a persona privata in Paolo Astorri and Lars C. Nørgaard, ‘Publicus Privatus: The Divine Foundations of Authority in Dietrich Reinking’, Journal of Early Modern Christianity, 9 (1) (2022), 93–119. See also the case study of how the proper alignment of the public and private figure of the prince is cultivated in princely education in Michaël Green, Lars C. Nørgaard, and Mette B. Bruun, ‘En privé & en public: The Epistolary Preparation of the Dutch Stadholders’, Journal of Early Modern History, 24 (3) (2020), 253–279.
all the many subtle and delicate ways in which the people of this era created pockets of privacy. We need to approach such pockets from many different angles. As demonstrated in the contributions to this volume, privacy is carved out, granted from above or from below, appropriated, and even forfeited within a composite framework defined by legislation, spatial delineations and restrictions, social conditions, hierarchies defined by social and professional rank, bodily and mental challenges, needs, and concerns as well as issues of beliefs and convictions. All of these factors interact and, depending on the immediate circumstances, particular ones predominate. As Beck, Foy, LeJacq, and Schadner show, communal bonds and a sense of peer loyalty occasionally trumped demands related to rank, ethnicity, the moral concerns of religious hegemony, or the sense of security on board in favour of—or against—an individual. As Humanes demonstrates, the regulations secured by national and maritime laws created strong, albeit sometimes mutually conflicting, dense grids of demands and obligations. Several contributions underline the spatial limitations and the way in which they fenced in the potential for achieving privacy, just as many contributions give paradigmatic examples of ways in which such spatial restrictions were overcome by means of other strategies.

Privacy studies alert us to zones and thresholds. A stylised systematisation of such zones may help us reflect on different dimensions of life at sea. If we begin in the innermost, mental core, the care of the souls on board is referred to in legislation, albeit often in terms of dispensations from feast days and other religious requirements. Thus, as shown by Humanes, the state of the souls is identified by religious observants as a dimension of maritime life fraught with risks and threats, even if storms and other dangers may, for a time, spur on a sense of religious acuteness. Silva Perez underlines the inaccessibility of the mind and choice of historical persons. Convictions or beliefs may be represented by the tattoos studied by Schadner. They underline the body as a boundary zone between private knowledge and public appearance, condensed in Schadner’s observation that the most common tattoo was one’s initials or name. The privacy of the body can be violated or shared, accessed

13 For the zones and system of zones examined at the Danish National Research Foundation Centre for Privacy Studies, see Mette Birkedal Bruun, ‘Towards an Approach to Early Modern Privacy: The Retirement of the Great Condé’, in Green et al., Early Modern Privacy, 12–60, 22–24.
either with or against one’s will—the clothes shielding one’s gender and keeping it private; the cabin, the berth, and the hammock as secluded spaces. Different communities on board have access to forms of privacy marked by more or less explicit boundaries—the chapters in this volume linger over, for example, the community of upper-rank crew members discernible by their ampler private spaces; the ‘Tahitian’ community marked by the tattoo of a star (Schadner); the community emerging around messes. However, as Beck and Foy remind us, such communities could be exclusive, thus posing a threat in turn to the privacy of individual seamen who were not integrated into such communities. Moving to the wider zones, several cases remind us that the state and its penal systems represent the ultimate publicity. This is the case, not least, in the juridical exposure of homosexuality, studied by LeJacq. However, privacy was not only a concern for the individual and smaller groups but also for states or state representatives, which means that while the zone of the state may in many ways seem the ‘most public zone’, it is also a zone that comes with its own measures of privacy, as shown by Araújo and Ceccarelli. The conveyance of state secrets by the sea challenges the imperative of political secrecy, as indicated by the vocabulary related to the arcana imperii (state secrets and the strategies to keep them).  

The household may be said to be a zone that is not relevant for ships. That said, some similarities do appear between the ship and an early modern household understood as a composite social unit where different people are living, working, eating, sleeping, and making love together within a shared space under the watchful eye of the pater familias or another such superior figure, subject to written and unwritten laws and codes. Early modern households consisted of family members as well as other people such as servants, journeymen, clerks, or workers. The ship as a microcosm—as a composite unit of crew, superiors, and passengers of a potentially wide variety—may be said to be akin to the household in its complex, living and working as well as hierarchical nature. Beck describes the mess as a socio-spatial or family-like unit. Foy talks of competing loyalties, observing that it required a shift of allegiance from home to ship to secure the cohesion of the crew.

As brought forth by historical privacy studies, the intersections and thresholds between these zones of analysis are one of the most fruitful

research loci to find examples of early modern privacy being carved, craved, or challenged. Beyond the zones of the mind, body, chamber, household, community, and state, the chapters of this volume vividly demonstrate how privacy can also be found at the clashing point between opposing forces. Strategies of privacy enabled people at sea to navigate between conflict and consensus, confinement and mobility, surveillance and support. If social and cultural expectations, hierarchical powers, bonds of friendship and convenience, fears, and conflicts are rivers feeding an ocean of state regulations and normative definitions, then privacy can be more easily found when navigating the brackish waters of the estuary.

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