

# A new world in the Atlantic: sailors and rites of passage crossing the Equator, from the 15th to the 20th century<sup>1</sup>

*Um mundo novo no Atlântico: marinheiros e ritos de passagem na linha do equador, séculos XV-XX*

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## RESUMO

O artigo analisa o rito de passagem da travessia da linha do equador e suas transformações. No século XX, a persistência desse ritual deixa a impressão de que suas formas tenham sido sempre as mesmas. Todavia, ao acompanharmos as fontes desde o século XVI, podemos perceber sua origem, disseminação e transformação na cultura marítima. Marinheiros e oficiais participaram da construção do ritual repleto de significados para a vida profissional dos homens embarcados como trabalhadores do mar. As fontes aqui utilizadas são basicamente narrativas de viagens no período assinalado.

Palavras-chave: cultura marítima; história atlântica; trabalhadores do mar.

## ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the rite of passage upon crossing the Equator line and its transformations. In the 20th century the persistence of this ritual gave the impression that its form had always been the same. However, looking at the sources from the 16th century onwards, we can understand its origin, dissemination, and transformation in maritime culture. Sailors and officers participated in the construction of ritual, full of significance for the professional life of men working at sea. The sources used here are basically travel narratives from the period in question.

Keywords: maritime culture; Atlantic history; workers at sea.

## A RITUAL OF MARITIME CULTURE

In the middle of the twentieth century the Brazilian admiral Amphilóquio Reis described the baptism of crossing the equator mentioning onboard characters and practices:

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the sea baptism... is of old usage among sailors, in the middle of festivities, the crossing the equator for the first time. For this reason those charged with the baptism mask themselves as Neptune, Time, and other characters; after various questions and answers, a sailor with a syringe or hose throws as much sea water over the neophyte as necessary for him to be well baptized...<sup>2</sup>

Although he states that this is an 'old custom among seamen,' Reis does not date it. The references to the festivities, to the presence of Neptune, to the questions asked by the crew and the throwing of water over those crossing the equator for the first time appear here as elements of ritual. Reis registered the antiquity of the practice and the elements present in its execution in the middle of the twentieth century, however to discover the elements and their transformations, the historian must visit other sources. I shall present here an inventory of the descriptions of this ritual, without any totalizing pretentions.

I shall start with Burke's wide-ranging definition for the term *ritual*, referring to action which expresses meanings, "in opposition to more utilitarian actions and also the expression of meaning through words or images."<sup>3</sup> The baptism of the equator demarcated the effective integration of men in the maritime community. The entrance of novices occurred based on the recognition of experience in the world of work and not by the attribution of an alias. The ritual occurred in a determined part of the world and in the limits of a professional community formed exclusively by men, specialized workers who spent many years engaged. To analyze the ritual, I have gathered evidence of its persistence among sailors and the communitarian approval with legitimated it. Not being something common, it encouraged the curious among those from outside the community to register it, but it was not the subject of systematic recording by the actual workers of the sea.

Ginzburg used a search for morphological similarities in rituals practiced in ancestral times and societies to decipher events in the modern era.<sup>4</sup> It is not the case here of scrutinizing traditions in such diverse times and places: the longevity of the ritual of crossing the line is shorter, it can be more precisely dated and is restricted to the Atlantic. Although the imaginary belt crosses all of the Earth, I have found no mention of the baptism of western sailors when they crossed the line in the Indian or Pacific Oceans. I observed on another occasion that the descriptions of the baptism rituals upon passing the equator contained in the reports of travelers seem strange to our understanding. Here,

I seek to expand the range of sources and the temporal focus to revisit the theme, with new questions and in search of new responses.<sup>5</sup>

Looking at immemorial remains, Ginzburg detected similar traditions in different times and places which could have informed the inquisitors in the intellectual construction of the Sabbath (1991, p.96-101). Scholars of the Inquisition have had to outline filters to deal with the documentation produced by men who fought 'deviant behavior.' Similarly, the popular culture of the Modern Age has been studied using materials collected by folklorists in the nineteenth century, valuable sources which need to be handled with care in order not to repeat their paternalist procedures, marked by a class abyss and made by observers of 'popular antiquities' divorced from the context.<sup>6</sup>

The descriptions of baptism upon crossing the line come from writings and images of passengers, external spectators whose a maritime experience is limited to crossing the Atlantic who found this a curious and exciting experience. The historian of this ritual depends on the reports of travelers who were on onboard and did not necessarily understand the meaning of what they were witnessing. Their voyages, unlike professional sailors, were occasional, and between the narrator and his subject there were abysses of class and language, amongst others. Although these men shared wide-ranging experiences, the culture of sailors was not disseminated among occasional passengers. However, it is on these narratives that we count, being critical towards them and trying to overcome the problems they raise. The rarity or absence of reports written by the sailors themselves expresses an absence of literacy on the part of many of them. The ritual of the equator baptism was a given identity for the men of the sea, those baptized came to be part of a community and a culture in which they were neophytes or with little experience. Confronting the adversities of the equatorial zone and submitting oneself to a ritual practiced by those who gone before them in this route signified entering a fraternity, and being able to officiate in front of new freshmen when this was the case. Mentioned by travelers from the northern hemisphere, the ritual does not appear in the description on the return journey. The exceptions I found were written by Brazilians much later – such as by Jayme Adour da Câmara and António de Alcântara Machado,<sup>7</sup> both Brazilian modernists in the 1920s. The mention of the ceremony of passing the equator in this period emerges in various contexts.

I have drawn on the narratives of travelers who, despite having differentiated cultural origins and social insertions, have established a mode of presenting information over time. I have also followed the methodological route of Ginzburg to analyze them, taking into account that the identification of formal similarities is neither obvious nor simple to operate, especially if we acknowledge that, other than superficial divergences, there are profound analogies (Ginzburg, 1991, p.149). To establish the grandeur of the divergences or similarities, I have dealt with the reports of crossing the equator, ordering them chronologically, and verifying their identifiable origins, their morphology and their transformations relating them to the contexts of production, trying to extract mutant meanings.

The ritual of crossing the equator fulfilled the functions highlighted by Louisa Pittman in discussing the four propositions of the US anthropologist William Bascom about folklore: amuse or entertain, allow things to flourish that would not otherwise be discussed and make them the motive of laughter, allowing socially imposed repression to be escaped; validate a culture and its institutions; educate through the reinforcement of morals and values; and maintaining the accepted standards of behavior, approving the behavior of those who conform, acting as an instrument of social control.<sup>8</sup> To these propositions she added one more: “giving individuals a feeling of control over uncontrollable events and elements.”<sup>9</sup>

Simon Bronner indicates the theory of Henning Henningsen as the most cited about the origin of the baptism of the equator. According to this theory, the baptism began among the French in the sixteenth century, later spreading among maritime powers such as Holland, Great-Britain, Scandinavia, Germany, the Baltic countries, and Russia. During the process of its diffusion, the ceremony was continually transformed from the sixteenth century onwards, which is not so bizarre when compared to the initiations of artisans, traders and students from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. While on land many of these initiations disappeared, that of crossing the equator grew and became increasingly strong from the eighteenth century onwards. According to Bronner, one of the problems with the theory of the French origin is that it leaves aside the tradition of the most powerful maritime states between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, such as Spain, Portugal and the Italian states (Bronner, 2006, p.27-28).

Although we should question the theory of the French origin of the ritual, there is an unavoidable question: the Portuguese and Spanish sources do not mention the baptism of the equator. I started from the principle that the Portuguese, having crossed the equator before the other Europeans and in a systematic manner, could have invented the tradition of the baptism, but the evidence does not confirm this. Explaining the greater persistence of the nocturnal gods in the myths of Eastern Europe, compared with the West, Ginzburg ventures the hypothesis that the “offensive of the Orthodox Church against superstitions was weaker than that carried out in the West by the Roman Church” (Ginzburg, 1991, p.174). It now needs to be known if this hypothesis can be adapted from Atlantic voyages, comparing the repression of heterodoxies among Iberian Catholics in countries with a Protestant majority, or those with a strong Catholic presence but which had not forged inquisitorial control. Portuguese sailors were frequent characters in inquisitorial persecutions,<sup>10</sup> and rituals which were not particularly pious, such as the ones in question, on board Portuguese ships could have motivated denunciations to the Holy Office. Protestant sovereigns appear to have been more tolerant with practices of this type in maritime culture, or to have been less bothered by them.

For the northern Europeans and Americans who, between the end of the eighteenth and the initial decades of the nineteenth century, entered the southern hemisphere for the first time, this event was demarcated as a rite of passage: under the orders of Neptune, the novices were humiliated before being considered to having been initiated in the universe of experienced sailors. Neptune and his wife Amphitrite were not chosen by chance: the Greek god of the sea carried a trident with the emblem of his sovereignty over the seas and among his power were various fears and desires, inevitably faced by the men of sea – storms, sea monsters, drowning, shipwrecks, doldrums and sources of freshwater.<sup>11</sup> Facing the violence of the seas was part of the work of sailors. The effort to overcome the terror of the sea had resulted in the emergence of a special case in society and in maritime culture, and in these situations working cooperatively was urgently needed.<sup>12</sup> If the symbolic help of Neptune could be counted on, so much the better.

Neptune emerges in the reports at the beginning of the eighteenth century as part of the vision of the world of sailors which, despite contradicting the formal religion, brought in its wake Christian and non-Christian beliefs

and practices which combined the natural and the supernatural, and were seen as 'superstitions' by officers and educated persons onboard. Rediker emphasizes that a *man* became a *man of the sea* not just by learning maritime work and language, but in its initiation; baptism was a classic rite of passage. The author exaggerates when he states that this rite was practiced by all sailors from all nationalities as part of the international maritime culture, an essential initiation ceremony which marked the passage into the cultural and social world of sailors (Rediker, 1989, p.179-189). The ritual is old and surely a European inheritance for all Americans (from the north and the south), however, there is no evidence that Neptune presided it since its beginnings.

#### HYPOTHESES ABOUT THE ORIGIN OF THE RITUAL

Crossing the equator on a sailing ship was a challenge. The absence of wind in the equatorial zone, a given of natural history, had implications for human history, not just because it was difficult, but because it allowed a relaxation from toil and in the hierarchy of crews, in the middle of which a ritual was held on long distance ships. This relaxation, however, did not signify the abolition of barriers between officers and the rest of the crew: some captains stayed apart from the festivities to maintain their authority. The ceremony temporarily inverted the hierarchy on the ship and many captains were treated with contempt and mockery (Rediker, 1989, p.187-188). Analyzing this ritual contributes to a social history of sea workers in the middle of the doldrums from the end of the fifteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth. It was found that a standard form of baptism on crossing the equator was establishing in the middle of the nineteenth century. I advance the hypothesis that the representation of Neptune was the work of Iberian mariners in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries crossing the equator without either melting under the sun or falling into an abyss (Rodrigues, 2005, p.214).

When the expedition of Gonçalo Velho reached the Azores at the beginning of the 1430s, although the latitude was very close to that of Portugal, he and his men imagined that they were entering a zone in which "the seawater boiled like caldron and the sailors are sucked with their ships into a great precipice and thrown into hell."<sup>13</sup> The equator would only be crossed in the 1470s. Dealing with the reports of seamen who had gone to the Orient in the fifteenth

and sixteenth centuries, Vilardaga calls attention to the space of enormous possibilities represented by the gap between the fantastic and imprecise European imagination and the supposed objectivity of Portuguese descriptions – a space “in which the expectations, anxieties and projections were effectively lived and narrated.”<sup>14</sup> The precocious Portuguese experiences in the sea accustomed them to an otherness in relation to European sailors. However, this did not signify an “innate incapacity of Lusitanian imagination.”<sup>15</sup> We also have to consider the effects of the policy of secrecy adopted by the Iberian crowns. Fantasists or realists, paying tribute to the medieval tradition, or cultivators of experience, the Portuguese and Spanish sailors were the target of a control with the purpose of preventing the circulation of knowledge. However, this policy was not fully successful: secrets spread, amongst other reasons due to the choices of the men of the sea to serve other merchants, when nationality did not guarantee loyalty or the setting of territorial limits, much less oceanic ones. Providing services to the navies of other sovereigns, these men spread their knowledge orally, in addition to carrying with them manuscript information which since the last quarter of the fifteenth century had circulated from hand to hand and only began to be printed at the beginning of the following century, being known in Portugal as *books of seamanship*.<sup>16</sup>

Given the above, it is plausible that the capacity to cross the equator, after having faced the mishaps of the doldrums, was something talked about by sailors. Even though they did not invent or practice preciously a rite of passage on the equinox, the Portuguese could have disseminated the information which, appropriated by sailors from other parts of Europe less subject to Catholic censorial and inquisitorial repression, created the theme for the appearance of the ceremony. When institutions from Protestant countries, such as the English Royal Navy, began in the eighteenth century to suppress the irreligiosity of sailors, it was too late to prevent the ritual, though the intervention could have made the ceremony decline (Rediker, 1989, p.167), as well as the introduction of steam power which reduced the time spent in the doldrums.

Facing the risk and the novelty which characterized the beginning of the modern era could have been the origin of the equatorial commemoration. The risk included a fact of a natural order which allowed the holding of the ritual. In meteorological science we can find explanations for the doldrums in this zone due to the pattern of atmospheric circulation, though it is perhaps

not necessary to digest the entire complexity of scientific explanation. Fifteenth and sixteenth century sailors did not know all of the details of this, however, what mattered was that due to the wind system, doldrums were created around the equator which made the crossing of the line one of the rare moments of relaxation on board a sailing ship. On the equator, the doldrums were more frequent than elsewhere. Even causing trouble and fear, “the doldrums caused a reduction in the rate of work which could be filled with a rare possibility of an onboard party” (Rodrigues, 2005, p.214-215).

For decades historians have tried to explain the empirical bias and the lacking of concern with wonders on the part of Portuguese sailors. The debate was recently addressed by Vilargada, who highlighted three causes for this:

a generalist characteristic of the Renaissance which emphasized its rationalizing meaning; a Portuguese specificity based on the ‘empiricism’ resulting from the consistent development of navigation and mathematical procedures in Portugal; and finally a gradual Portuguese apprenticeship about the manner of dealing with new landscapes and cultures derived from its ‘African experience,’ developed during the fifteenth century on the Western coast of Africa.<sup>17</sup>

Iberian mariners left no signs that they had prepared the ritual. In his study of the daily life of the crewmen on the India fleets in the sixteenth century, Pablo Emilio Bueno did not verify the frequent occurrence of onboard festivities – the equator in this case was not crossed by the Spanish fleets, concentrated in the North Atlantic.<sup>18</sup> The same absence emerges in the analyses by Amaral Lapa (1968) and Miceli<sup>19</sup> of the Portuguese India Run. Luís Felipe Barreto was one of the few, if not the only one, to identify the practice of the ritual on this route.<sup>20</sup> If the knowledge constructed and disseminated by Iberian mariners at the time of the navigations was of summary importance, this still does not mean that they were the first to carry out the ceremony of crossing the equator.

## MORPHOLOGY OF THE RITUAL

To understand the ritual, I have gathered descriptions of its forms from the beginning of the sixteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, counting many works which did not mention the rite of passage – a significant



silence. The evidence includes reports in various European languages, social origins, occupations, and confessions.

### *Sixteenth Century*

According to Hersch and Bronner, the ceremony of crossing the equator was documented for the first time in a report by the French travelers Jean and Raoul Parmentier during a voyage to Sumatra, on 11 May 1529.<sup>21</sup> The oldest report with a French origin I consulted was Binot Paulmier de Gonneville, who crossed the line on 12 September 1503. He mentioned nothing about onboard rituals, observing only the maritime fauna as he crossed the equator.<sup>22</sup>

Previous texts from Iberian explorers or at the service of the Catholic kings did not mention any ritual upon crossing the line. An example of this is the *Itinerary* of Vasco da Gama's voyage<sup>23</sup> at the end of the fifteenth century, when there was no longer any expectation of meeting an "anthropomorphic monster" or the "inhabitability of the Torrid Zone, decisive elements in the imagination and knowledge of the Orient and Africa coming from the Middle Ages" (Vilargada, 2010, p.22). The only entry in Pigafetta's diary from the beginning of the following century was: "After passing the line of the equator, and approximating the Antarctic Pole we lost sight of the Polar Star."<sup>24</sup> A similar brief mention is found in Hans Staden's report: reaching the equator, he noted it was warmer, the lack of wind and the formation of unexpected rains.<sup>25</sup>

The climate of the region was invariably recorded by voyagers. At a similar date to Staden, the pilot Nicolas Barré complained of the heat of crossing the Tropic of Cancer. In the torrid zone, the calmness lasted for weeks, interspersed by 'impetuous and furious winds' and 'fetid rain.' The aid of the Lord, he believed, came in the form of winds at the latitude of Guinea: "We passed the center of the world on the tenth day of October [1555] close to the islands of São Tomé, which is below the equator, close to the land of Manicongo..."<sup>26</sup> This natural data confirmed the interference of the Christian divinity and could have been at the center of the tradition of the equator baptism, with a pagan substratum. However, the reports of the men who crossed the equator in the age of the discoveries allow us to state that the ceremony had not yet spread among all Europeans. The silence of the Huguenot Barré about the equator ritual is not of the same nature as that of Staden. The 1555 letters that the Frenchman wrote to his family did not

allude to his first trans-hemispheric voyage, since he had been on the South American coast three years previously (Moreira Neto, 2009, v.I, p.122). Crossing the line for the second time, he may have avoided reporting a ceremony which, after all, he knew and hold told his family and friends either in person or in written records that have not reached us.

The precise affirmation of the date of origin of the dissemination of the equator ritual is reckless, especially if we consult other contemporary reports, also silent like this one. This is the case of the Franciscan André Thévet: the cosmographer of the French king wrote tracts at the moment when he crossed the imaginary line, observing the apparent trajectory of the Sun, the partition of the planet into day and night in two equal halves. To disavow the ancients, who “believed that this region or zone located between the tropics would be uninhabitable due to its excessive heat,” he resorted to the frequency with which the equinox had been crossed “as a result of the explorations.”<sup>27</sup> In his analysis of Thévet’s work, Ronald Raminelli noted that the descriptive efforts linked to his belief that “the facts and the true observation of various lands and nations” increased human perfection.<sup>28</sup> Other analysts emphasized the descriptions of customs of the land and the authors’ interests in natural history. But in this part of the report he had not yet seen Guanabara and its inhabitants. Cosmographic interest occupied his feelings, drawing them away from any onboard practice, no matter how vulgar and distant from his religious and scientific spirit.

This explanation of the silence of the sources has an intention. The reference to the writings of Thévet and Barré, even though they do not mention the baptism of equator, is the fruit of the perplexity of the silence of both of them, provoked by the existence of a more detailed report from another author, a contemporary who also experienced the foundation of Antarctic France. Here I introduce to the debate the first reference I found to the equatorial ceremony, written by Jean de Léry:

On this day, the fourth of February [1556] we passed the waist of the world and the sailors practiced the habitual ceremonies of such a difficult and dangerous voyage. This consisted of tying those who had never crossed the Equator before with ropes and throwing them in the sea or having their faces painted with rags rubbed at the bottom of the cauldrons. But the patient could ransom himself, as I did, paying them with wine.<sup>29</sup>

The report of the Calvinist Léry about the ceremony is relevant for many reasons. Initially, because it was the oldest one I found. Next, and this is more relevant, because the description he gives makes the silence of other contemporary authors more intriguing, especially since Léry mentions that the ceremonies were ‘habitual’ and thus had a certain antiquity, dissemination and daily knowledge. Another reason is the because we know that Léry knew of at least one report of his contemporaries – that of Thévet, his religious opponent, eventually his rival in the dispute for the interest of readers in the curiosities of the New World<sup>30</sup> and whom he disdained in his interpretation of the events that occurred in the Antarctica France. Another relevant piece of information is that the description made by this young Calvinist pastor and shoemaker is that it can help identify the origins of the ritual and date it. In relation to the morphology, Léry presents some elements which continued to be cited in the following reports: a dose of violence, the plunging into water, the symbolic shaving of the beard, and the negotiation to avoid the joke involving a payment in wine or other drink. Finally, comparing this report with later ones the analyst can verify the dynamic of the transformation process of the ritual, especially when looking for the presence of Neptune and other pagan entities which are absent here. It is necessary to go beyond the original descriptions and deal with transformations and permanencies in the reports.

### *Seventeenth Century*

The following description is from the French Capuchin Claude d’Abbeville, on the way to Maranhão. He crossed the ‘ridge of the world’ on 13 June 1612<sup>31</sup> and knew of the difficulties of the crossing due to the absence of winds from the experiences of sailors. On his expedition there was time to enact the ritual:

Those who still had not crossed had to obey the irrevocable law that the novice had to be soaked with a bucket of seawater; or that they had to be plunged three times headfirst into a barrel full of this water, receiving after this operation the password preserving them in the future from similar events upon the promise of never saying this to others who had never crossed the line and endured this maritime ceremony with its particular solidarity. (D’Abbeville, 1975, p.46)

The reports of Léry and d'Abbeville are separated by 56 years, but united by notable similarities. The former calls attention to the ceremony as something habitual, an 'irrevocable law' in the description in the latter. The expressions denote the antiquity of the ritual, and we should recognize that this occurred in part among French-speakers. The use of seawater does not appear in Léry, and the mention of baptism in the citation from d'Abbeville denotes a somewhat less violent ceremony – although he also cites the 'dive,' not directly in the sea, but into a barrel on the deck, three times and upside-down. D'Abbeville introduced the mention of the password which those baptized had to repeat in the future in order to escape the ritual in another crossing, and also noted the solidarity among the sailors. Unlike Léry, he did not mention the shaving of the baptized, perhaps because it considered it irrelevant. Despite the interval between the report, the morphology did not suffer any significant changes. The differences could be in the peculiarities of the narrators rather than in a change of practice.

Other reports mention diverse traditions. The Spanish Nodal brothers crossed the equator at the end of 1618 without mentioning the line or ceremonies.<sup>32</sup> The silence concurs with the hypothesis that among the Iberians the commemorative tradition of the crossing either did not exist or was of no interest to these brothers, with long years of service to the kings of Spain.

Also in the first half of the seventeenth century, the narratives report the Atlantic experiences of men who had worked in the Dutch East Indian Company. One of these is the diary of the soldier Richshoffer, who participated in the invasion of Pernambuco. The second case is the writings of Joan Nieuhof, revised for publication. A final case is the diary of Schmalkalden, an adventurer born in Thuringia of whom little is known before he joined the Company in 1642. The three registered the crossing of the equator in some way. Richshoffer crossed on 24 January 1630 with good winds and the 'help of God,' without mentioning the ritual.<sup>33</sup> Nieuhof crossed on 5 December 1640, after which "we no longer had a reason to complain of the cold," but rather of the lack of drinking water.<sup>34</sup> Schmalkalden also mentioned the crossing: "on 6 December [1642], we crossed the Equator ... On this day two soldiers were obliged to throw themselves from the great board into the sea, each one three times, due to having committed theft. After this each one [received] one hundred lashes on the buttocks with a thick rope..."<sup>35</sup>

The three reports, written by men from the German states, are coherent in their silence about a new ritual for those recently engaged in maritime culture. Perhaps the silence was due to the fact that in 1614 the Dutch East India Company prohibited the ritual from being held, “probably because of the injuries of sailors,” according to one scholar, who also noted that the Company promised doubled rations and drink for the crews to abandon the ritual, a signal that the written prohibition was not effective (Bronner, 2006, p.7). Schmalkalden made reference to something which appeared to be a ritual. Being thrown into the sea (three times as in d’Abbeville) was a form of baptism on the equator, and the fact could have escaped a stranger, confusing the rite with a punishment for theft. The coincidence of applying a punishment on the crossing of the line could have been an appropriation of the ritual by the officers from the expedition – a re-carnavalization, with the aim of reinforcing the hierarchy in which they occupied the top and showed the soldiers the strict discipline to be followed onboard. All three writers highlighted that the passing of the line was something noteworthy: even though the reference seems to lack importance, the equator is cited, but no other parallel in the journey between Holland and Pernambuco.

### *Eighteenth century*

Cross This century and the beginning of the following one marked the period of the dominion of the seas by British ships, whose traditions also spread to the United States and were incorporated into daily life onboard (Pittman, 2006, p.199). Among the authors selected from this period there is one Francophone, four English speakers and the Spaniard Vargas Ponce, whose mention of the event is limited to the day, time and place when he crossed the line.<sup>36</sup>

ing the equator on 6 March 1712, Frézier observed that “we carried out the crazy ceremony of the baptism of the line, a costume spread among all nations”:

The catechumens were tied by the wrists with ropes stretched from the apparatus in front running back over the officers’ quarters and over the sailors quarters, and after many treats and being masked they are untied to be led... on foot to the main mast, where over a letter they have to swear an oath that they will do

to others what was done to them, in accordance with the laws of navigation; they pay not to be soaked, but always in vain, since not even captains are pardoned.<sup>37</sup>

Described by an author of objective prose, dedicated to scientific observation, this text gains a certain grace in the narrative of crossing the equator. The universalism of the report is exaggerated, since in other ‘nations’ (Germans, Portuguese and Spanish, for example) there was no evidence of the practice of the ‘crazy ceremony.’ The violence, also ritualistic, appears here, as well as the oath in which they receive a password to avoid new submissions in the future and the payment to escape the baptism – which the author does not say whether it was in money or alcoholic drinks. No matter what, the payment was possible, saving at times those who wanted to avoid being baptized.

The remaining four eighteenth century reports are written by Englishmen and are concentrated in the final years of that century: Arthur Phillip, John Barrow, Aeneas Anderson and Samuel Holmes. Phillip is laconic about the events of the crossing on 13 August 1788. Scurvy had greatly afflicted the fleet,<sup>38</sup> which perhaps prevented the holding of the baptism. After all, submitting a member of the crew suffering from an ailment to the ritual of the crossing of the equator would have been unusual and even cruel. At the equator the ship carrying Barrow was not afflicted by scurvy, since it had been supplied in Cape Verde with “the best oranges I have ever tasted,” as well as other fruits and vegetables. The absence of scurvy was not a sufficient reason for holding the rite of passage for crossing the equator and Barrow only reported the climatic conditions of the crossing.<sup>39</sup> Anderson rapidly described the crossing of the equator, which occurred on 18 November 1792, saying that the team had been very excited about burlesque and ridiculous ceremonies.<sup>40</sup> Similar adjectives were used by Holmes to describe the crossing of the line on 7 November of the same year. In his vision, it was a ‘bizarre custom.’<sup>41</sup>

The reports do not represent a large sample and the authors were more interested in describing the lands, customs and the economic potential of the places of the places which they passed on their travels. It may also indicate that educated officers disdained events involving common sailors, to judge by the qualifications they use in their descriptions. It cannot be lost sight of that during the eighteenth century work at sea was standardized, even in the Royal

Navy, with the introduction of professional categories, responsibilities and hierarchies on a scale corresponding to pay (Rediker, 1989, p.83-84).

*The nineteenth century and the English-Speaking World*

In the English-speaking world the ritual was established in the nineteenth century. The profusion of formal descriptions leads one to believe that it spread and attracted the attention of various types of English and Americans. It also indicates the configuration of English-speakers as a “distinct group which had been strengthening their Protestant, literate, and idiomatic identity, to compensate the difficulties of distance and maritime life.”<sup>42</sup> Of the reports about the baptism of the equator in this century, 15 are in English, ten from Germans, eight from Frenchspeakers, and two from Brazilians. I will deal with them in linguistic blocks.

James Tuckey is the first author selected, having crossed the line in the middle of 1803. He observed the visit of Neptune, along with the latter’s wife and son, and said that it was a ridiculous ceremony: the ugliest people on the ship were chosen to represent Neptune and Amphitrite (hard to pronounce, she was known as Mrs. Neptune). Their faces were painted in a ridiculous manner and their heads decorated with polished dusty mops; Neptune’s beard was made from the same material, while a pair of branches or a boat hook served as a trident. Some sailors served as tritons. After asking about the destiny of the ship, greeting his old friends and giving presents to the captain, the ceremony continued: Neptune shaved the men with a piece of rustic iron and threw salt water over them.<sup>43</sup> On 31 October 1805, it was the turn of the English commander George Keith to cross the line, when Neptune and Amphitrite appeared wearing make-up in a grotesque ceremony, held in accordance with ‘ancient custom.’<sup>44</sup>

Two Englishmen came to Rio de Janeiro in the same year as the Portuguese Court: John Mawe (1764-1829), with years of experience in maritime voyages, and John Luccock, who, with some brief interruptions, would remain in Brazil until 1818. Mawe did not register anything worth noting, though perhaps it was not his first crossing of the equator. He said that everyone “was bored and exhausted by the continuous doldrums, under the noon-day sun,” until a breeze allow the ship to cross, adding the information that they had reached the mouth of the Platte River.<sup>45</sup> The silence about the events in the immense stretch between the equator and the Platte River is a sign of

lack of excitement with the voyage and reinforces the hypothesis that he already knew this area, and thus the custom of baptism did not interest him especially. With Luccock it was no different. He travelled from England to Brazil more than once in the period in which he lived in Rio and stated that “the Atlantic has already been so thoroughly examined and described so precisely, that very little remains to be observed on this side of the line,” which denotes his condition as someone knowledgeable about the sea and the social dissemination of information about navigation in the British Isles. The ship which transported him crossed the equator on 20 March 1816 (therefore, this was not his first crossing). After passing Cape Verde, “every sailor going to the South felt anxious about crossing the line;” however, the reason for this anxiety was not the ritual, but the difficulty with the wind, which meant the approach to Fernando de Noronha and the Cape of St. Augustine very difficult.<sup>46</sup>

John M’Leod had crossed the line a few days previously on 4 March. He saw a member of the crew dressed as Neptune doing the interrogation and announcing that the following morning he would inspect the novices who entered his domain. At the break of day, he emerged with a trident and insignia, this time dressed as Amphitrite.<sup>47</sup> The naturalist Clarke Abelat exactly the same date, recorded the ‘usual tribute’ to Neptune.<sup>48</sup>

One of the most detailed descriptions of the crossing of the equator is that of Maria Graham. She crossed the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean in 1808 and married an officer from the British navy, Thomas Graham. Suffering from tuberculosis and a reader of Lord Byron, Graham she accompanied the preparations for the “festival of the men of the sea for crossing the line” on board the frigate *Doris*. Although she alleged that she did not know the precise origin of the custom, she stated that “the Arabs observed it with ceremonies not very different from those used by our mariners,” and since it is known that she had already sailed in the Indian Ocean, perhaps she had contact with Muslim crewmen there. A people of astronomers, the Arabs carried out the rite and Graham deduced that its origin had “some relationship with their now forgotten devotion to the celestial bodies”:

Like us, they burn anything combustible, or anything else, and let it float, but add some food as if there had been a sacrifice accompanying the festival. At



least, from what various gentlemen told me, who knew well the Arab traders in the Orient, that this was their custom.<sup>49</sup>

This later reference to the rite of passage among the Arabs at the beginning of the nineteenth century brings us back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and can illuminate the explanation for the absence of the equatorial commemoration among the Portuguese. Wanting to conquer new lands, motivated by a crusading spirit, and by the possibility of enriching themselves in the transoceanic trade, the Portuguese did everything to differentiate themselves from the Muslims. Like Graham in the nineteenth century, they might have noticed since the fifteenth century that the Islamic sailors in the Indian Ocean carried out a rite of passage crossing the line on that ocean, which perhaps led them to stop doing this in their own vessels in the Atlantic, if they ever had actually done it. As well as being pagan, in the version which included Neptune, the rite could also be dangerously unfaithful in the visions of the champions of Catholicism.

Aboard the *Doris* everything started with the reading of a letter to the commander. Graham foresaw the decline of the ritual due to the posture of the captains who preferred to give money to the sailors “than to permit this day of disorder,” but until that moment, the fun ran wild:

The sons of Neptune on board His Majesty’s Ship *Doris*, commanded by Captain T.[homas] G.[raham], present to Your Lordship their thanks for his kind consent to guarantee them the favor that has been granted since immemorial times of crossing the equator under the dominion of our father Neptune, when we hope that the distribution of the papers below will meet the approval of Your Lordship, as well as the figure in the margin ...

We have provided Your Lordship with as complete a list as possible of our weak possibilities.

Believe, honored captain, that we wish you all the joy that life can provide, and also for your worthy wife; we the undersigned, etc. etc. etc.

*Sons of Britannia.* (Graham, 1990, p.120)

Signed the *Sons of [Great-]Britain*, these sailors claimed a nation identity for themselves, not an internationalism arising out of the maritime profession or the affiliation to the god of the sea. The letter listed the senders, which allows us discover the retinue of Neptune: as well as Neptune himself, the crew

and their functions signed in the name of Amphitrite, Triton, the horse of Triton, the Grand Sherriff, the under-sheriff, the barber and his assistants, the chief butler, nine assistants, the coachman, squire, lackey, painter, server of wine, Satan, lawyer and eight seahorses (these were the only ones whose names and functions were not designated). Close to this date, M'Leod and other narrators mentioned the presence of Amphitrite, but the larger crew of the *Doris* did not require that the same individual assume the masculine and feminine roles.

The hierarchy of the retinue was top to bottom, as were the positions of those who had functions in the ritual: the list began with the quartermaster, followed by the person responsible for the forecandle, the captain of the large crow's nest, the gunner's assistant, the captain of the foresail crow's nest and the guardians. The functional titles are invented to create a carnivalesque pomp, transforming common sailors into officers of some sort. Only one of them – C. Brisbane, who embodied the Horse of Triton – was chosen because of his color: he was a black man.

On 5 September 1821, Thomas Graham acknowledged receipt of the letter and gave permission for the festival, which only took place on 18 September. There is another variation in relation to previous descriptions: a prior request for consent to hold the ceremony. In this case, the request was made many days before, while later we will see in other reports that these requests were only made on the eve. The staging began at twilight and involved the setting up of a small boat which, aligned to the ship, brought Neptune demanding the presence of the captain on the poop to answer questions. After the answers Triton came on board riding a seahorse and bearing a list of those who would be baptized the following day. No one was taken by surprise.

Triton was the first to return the following day, followed by the rest of the retinue. Neptune came with a trident and crown, with Amphitrite by his side and his son at his feet, on a cart pulled by sea horses and followed by everyone else. The entertainment was watered by brandy, but there was no mention of food or fuel, as Graham asserted the Arabs and 'us' did in the festival. Anyone who did not want to have their beards shaved had to pay a toll to the 'water father,' while "all the rest of those on board... began to mutually baptize each other without pity," except the women hidden in the

narrator's cabin. Graham noted that the order was completed inverted on this occasion, since all those necessary to keep watch on the vessel stayed at their posts during the 'Saturnalia' (Graham, 1990, p.123).

Between the middle of September and the beginning of October 1834, the Briton Peter Scarlett was on the way to the Pacific, with a stop-over in Rio de Janeiro. Crossing the equator, he alleged that he did not know the origin of the ceremony, but believed that it was universally adopted by all nations and saw the ritual as opening a breach for personal resentments or aversions between men.<sup>50</sup>

In 1836 the Scot George Gardner showed that he knew the descriptions of the Atlantic crossings, to the point of thinking that it was not worth adding anything to what was already known, supposedly through the intermediation of other travelers' narratives. Of the voyage from Glasgow to Cabo Frio he said nothing other than that it was "tedious, but not unpleasant."<sup>51</sup> If there was a ritual, he was not interested in describing it. The Englishman Thomas Ewbank, who had lived since he was 27 in the United States, came to Brazil in 1845 at his own expense to visit his brother who lived in Rio de Janeiro. He also does not mention crossing the equator on the cargo ship which brought him.<sup>52</sup>

It was not a rule that all those who crossed more than once became disinterested in the ritual. Hinchliff is an example of this. In his first crossing (1863) the ceremony did not occur, and the explanation given by him illuminates the changes underway in maritime life: "In these degenerate days, how many ancient beliefs are rudely shaken, the God of the Seas received his share of neglect; and the *Royal Mail Company*, after considering Neptune a nuisance, abolished him entirely."<sup>53</sup> Hinchliff appeared to have been a Briton conscious of tradition, but perhaps this one was not so old among his contemporaries, and the annoyance of the directors of the postal company may have been due to the loss of meaning of the ritual, since the introduction of steam and the overcoming of the equatorial doldrums with the machinery being used at sea. Stopping to celebrate was a practice of other times and other navigating conditions. Ten years later, the same Hinchliff the line again and appeared less concerned about the tradition and more connected to the time of steam. He mentioned no ritual, but the 1873 narrative hints at the changes wrought in him: "four days after crossing the line of the Equator [near to Fernando de Noronha] ... a fresh breeze coming from the west

covered with foam the profound violet sea. On this occasion, nothing could be less applicable to the equatorial zone than the habitual 'doldrums' of sailors."<sup>54</sup> Whether there were winds or not, it no longer made difference; the heat was confronted for a shorter time and the 'doldrums' which allowed on-board relaxation due to the lack of tasks during this time lost their *raison d'être*. Clear evidence that the exploitation of sailors' labor increased with the introduction of steam.

In the United States other English-speakers also experienced the crossing of the equator at different times during the nineteenth century. Brackenridge, the first correspondent selected, left Norfolk at the beginning of December 1817 in a sailing ship. Apparently there was no ceremony for crossing the equator, as the author only noted the decisions related to security on the route, which forced ships coming from the Northern hemisphere and with a destination on the Atlantic coast of South America to sail very close to Africa in search of strong winds which would project the ship in the right direction. While the US fleet did not take advantage of the doldrums to hold the festivities, the sailors were even more despoiled, since their wages, according to Brackenridge, "were extremely low at that moment."<sup>55</sup>

In 1831 Reynolds crossed the equator coming from the United States, but did not meet Neptune or Amphitrite and missed both of them. He believed that this custom came from when sailors were recruited by force as involuntary workers. It was a manner of expressing animosity onboard, though he did not observe it on his ship, alleging that the sailors were professionals.<sup>56</sup>

During the gold rush in the middle of the nineteenth century more Americans used the oceans to go to the Californian mines. This expanded traffic made Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires stops for ships on the way from the Atlantic coast of the United States to the Pacific, until the opening of the railroads and the Panama Canal. In this voyage the crossing of the equator in two oceans was inevitable. Ezequiel Barra described the ritual that occurred best, with texts and images.<sup>57</sup> Traditionally, some violence was inbuilt the ceremony. While there is some evidence that European and American travelers felt mistreated, there is little documentation about the violence black crewmen were subjected to, but this should not lead to the conclusion that it was any less. An uncommon mention can be seen in the report of the intellectual and senator, Arnold, in 1847: "There were some jokes and the usual fun. They

threw with great cruelty a black passenger into the water from the bow, a joke he did not understand and should not have been subjected to, since he had crossed the line going to Europe.”<sup>58</sup>

Our list of US citizens closes with two reports. One is from the laconic William Auchincloss, who came to visit Brazil in the 1870s; the other is from the excited (though convalescent) tourist Charles Atchison, who sailed from Southampton to Lisbon and from there to various ports in South America. A merchant proud of his little Wilmington, in Delaware, Auchincloss published his work there on his return from his voyage in 1874, and would also be the tourist guide for Pedro II when the latter visited that town two years later. From what it seems, leaving the small town where he lived disturbed his personality, and he complained of the boredom onboard. The apathy was not broken by any festivities. Crossing the line he noted only that they were entering the mouth of the Amazon River close to Pará.<sup>59</sup> Atchison had different behavior: although he considered tiresome the sea voyage, he knew of the existence of the ritual and pointed to its steady decline at the time he crossed the equator at the end of the 1890s:

We are crossing the line at this exact moment... as far as we can see. The old practices of passing tar, etc., which occurred for a long time in sailing ships and were undoubtedly welcome to break with the tedium of the depressed, have no place on steam ships of twenty knots. Inoffensive tricks which survive by themselves, insignificant descendents of those great jokes. Someone getting an unexpected splash of water, another getting an ‘apple pie’ and so forth, but nothing more than this. Even a thread of hair tied to a telescope, which once caused a young lady to think she had ‘seen the equator,’ does not find any more victims these days.<sup>60</sup>

Atchison knew the theatrical details of the ritual. The bored and depressed would not have the chance to entertain themselves in steam ships, and he believed this was one of the functions of the equator ceremony, due to the doldrums faced in the time of sailing ships. If anything was left, it was as a survival, but in this case no one was baptized or faced any slapstick scenes.

#### *The nineteenth century and German reports*

Wied-Neuwied prepared his journey to Brazil after the opening of the ports by King João; he crossed the line on 22 June, with the ‘usual ceremonies.’<sup>61</sup>

The Brazilian translation did not provide much more information; however, among the sketches and drawings he made we can find an image of the ritual faced by sailors. Represented in this were figures which, although they had only appeared in written reports from the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards, were crystallized in the memory of the rite of passage of the equator. These were Neptune and Amphitrite on a carriage pulled by sea horses, with their son Triton ahead of them opening the way – all in harmony with ancient mythology, in which the loyal son calmed the waters to allow his parents pass with the music he made from shells. The presence of musicians fulfilled the pacifying function, as well as being consistent with the musical tradition of sailors, although the drums used by the assistants of Triton must have been a luxury of scientific or military expeditions, and not usual in merchant ships.

A short while later, Spix and Martius embarked on 10 April 1817 in Trieste, in the company of the future empress Leopoldina, for Rio de Janeiro. They crossed the inter-hemispheric line on 29 June, an event marked by a solemn mass and a drum roll upon the visit of a tarred Neptune and his “extravagant companions” who, however, “did not manage to shake the ship with the customary baptisms.”<sup>62</sup> The two or three lines they wrote about the ritual demonstrates the lack of commotion they felt, fruit of what Guimarães observed in relation to these travelers, from whom “a set of ‘romanticized’ impressions was not expected, but a detailed report, based on a method of work for the creation of knowledge about human societies in general.”<sup>63</sup> Even though they were dry, the two Bavarian naturalists noted relevant formalities, including the antiquity of the baptism contained in the word ‘customary’ and the fact that an official rite (the mass) did not compete with, or made disappear, the other, pagan one, under the command of Neptune.

Neptune was cited by Burmeister, who crossed the line on 10 November 1850, and Pohl, who did this in October 1817. Burmeister referred to the ritual as an ‘onboard holiday’ and considered that its origin could be found in the “rudeness with which the artisans usually receive their new colleagues of their trade, or the habits, now fallen into oblivion, of Universities in receiving their freshmen.” On the ship the freshmen were received by Neptune, climbing up from the sea onto the bow of the ship “wearing large white robes,” with a crown, trident and strips of wood in the place of hair.<sup>64</sup> Two tritons composed the court, and the ceremony included the questioning of the captain

about the reasons for the voyage and about those who were not yet baptized, followed by “an allocution of novices, telling them of their future as subjects of the god of the sea.” Covered with soot dissolved in brandy, the novices were shaved with a dull knife and were afterwards baptized with buckets of water. Burmeister paid in money to escape from this ‘grotesque festival.’ In addition to their personal impression and class prejudices, they were capable of perceiving the popular nature of the baptism: “See... that the desire for vengeance is... enrooted in man and no one avoids the satisfaction of being the first to avenge themselves for the injustices suffered, applying them to others” (Burmeister, 1952, p.28).

Violence as a cultural trait of sailors was something repeated by different intellectuals. Burmeister exaggerated by considering that the baptized compensated the injustices which they had suffered by submitting the novices to baptism, acting for vengeance. Becoming integrated in the vision of sailor required a dose of sacrifice which they were willing to pay and which was not only compensated in the following baptism, but also in the brotherhood constructed in their daily work. Pohl was more compromising, becoming emotional with the unusual festivities (“Never in my life was such a strange spectacle, such a colored function, offered to me!”), both for knowing the exact point of equilibrium between heaven and earth, and for the passage ceremony. At midnight in the middle of a ‘strange din,’ Neptune led a ‘crazy pageant’ of masked men and his ambassador asked the commandant leave to read the announcement at that the following afternoon he would use ‘his ancient rights’ to take the helm of the ship, levy a tribute on those crossing the line for the first time, threatening the ship with ‘great misfortune’ if he was not satisfied. On the day agreed, chairs were spread over the deck under a canvas cover and two trays were placed there with water and tar. Neptune returned, accompanied by his wife and enthroned on a cart pulled by four sailors with masks of horses (certainly the seahorses of other reports), followed by four men “wrapped in furs, with their arms and legs uncovered, and with fur hats on their heads and axes under their arms.” One detail of Neptune’s mantle calls attention: in it were represented ‘the flags of all nations,’ indicating the supra-national nature of ritual and maritime life. The god of the sea himself assumed the helm, while a devil climbed down the middle mast to provoke

the sailors whose faces were anointed with tar, after which they were shaved with a wooden razor, and finally thrown into the sea.<sup>65</sup>

Leithold, coming from Hamburg and crossing the line in 1819, mentioned nothing, likewise Rango, Seidler and Ebel. The first two, Prussian adventurers in search of wealth in Brazil, were economic in their descriptions. The former noted the custom of paying a tribute and the scope of the ritual, “from which the actual captain, the pilot, or the crew members who had not crossed it before did not escape.” The latter, in a hurry to arrive, only noted that the line had been crossed and the winds were pushing the ship towards the Tropic of Capricorn.<sup>66</sup>

Trying his luck in the New World, the soldier Seidler saw the sea and a ship for the first time on his voyage to Brazil, on the basis of which he published a book which critics see as being the one that complains most about the empire and its inhabitants in the nineteenth century. Crossing the line these impressions had not yet been formed and Seidler was enthusiastic about the ritual on 8 February 1825. On board he and another three passengers were novices, and all were told by sailors ‘fantastically dressed’ that they would be baptized, or by paying ‘some Spanish piastres’ they could release themselves from this obligation. Even though he was embarked for the first time, Seidler knew of the sea festivities. Water was spread around in buckets, splashing all over the decks, to such an extent that the novices themselves entered into the spirit and began to wet each other whilst singing. The meal which followed the festivities was better served than usual, and everything together made an impression on the memory of the narrator by breaking the “monotony of the sea voyage.”<sup>67</sup> The ship in which Ebel crossed the equator, at a similar date to Seidler, had a young crew, only two of whom had made the crossing. Although there was much celebrating, Neptune had little work. To free himself from the baptism, Ebel handed over some bottles of cognac, though he quickly regretted this “since the joyful festivities turned into a great racket that was only subdued at great cost.” The author wrote this with the aim of alerting his readers so that they would not make the same mistake, since the people of the sea had no notion of moderation.<sup>68</sup>

### *The nineteenth century and French-Speakers*

The presence of French travelers in South America in the nineteenth century intensified after the normalization of relations between the European states



following the Congress of Vienna. The artistic mission is a good example of this, and an important member of this mission, the Parisian Jean-Baptiste Debret described his voyage as historic and picturesque. The ultimate adjective can be added to his experience since his before he arrived in Brazil, to judge by his description of the ritual on the line. This is the most substantial report from French speakers in the nineteenth century.<sup>69</sup> The joy of the ritual struck the French. In addition to Debret, exalted with the crossing and the atmospheric phenomena, the polemical Douville<sup>70</sup> credited the baptism in 1833 with “some moments of good humor for those who were travelling as mariners.”<sup>71</sup> Édouard Manet, in letters he sent to relatives when he came to Rio de Janeiro in a French training ship in 1848, described the ritual of crossing the equator with the joy of someone discovering the world at 17.<sup>72</sup>

Neptune’s presiding role in the ritual was perceived and registered by various French travelers. Debret, Ribeyrolles and Castelnau called him, alternatively, *Lord of the Tropics*, *the Good Man of the Tropics*, and *Father of the Tropics*, whilst Jules Itier used the name *Father of the Line*. Knowing the ceremony from other texts, Castelnau preferred to copy the diary of a companion to describing the events of crossing the equator. First, there was a hail of beans<sup>73</sup> and salt water, thrown from the topsail. Afterwards a ‘dark figure’ came down from the main mast and asked the commander for the list of neophytes, saying that he was a messenger from Father Tropics, who would come the following day.<sup>74</sup> The noise and other theatrical effects called everyone’s attention: the procession, the use of false beards, the cart from where the divine couple came, the great wooden razor, the deployment of the procession on the deck and the summoning of the ‘catechumens’ who, knowing that water would be used for the baptism, used light quick-drying clothes (Debret, 1975, t.I, v.I, p.114). The violence inflicted on the cabin boys who came “naked, painted black and chained, and were whipped vigorously by a sailor” impressed Castelnau (1949, p.20). In other reports, such as that of Le Vayer (1844), the cabin boys were representatives of the devil.<sup>75</sup> The longest description is from Debret, who provides information about the persistence of elements in the ritual: payment in money to free oneself from the baptism; preparations for the festivities in the previous days; the permission Neptune had to ask the commander of the ship to carry out the ritual, the presence of the theatrical elements and the shaving on the deck and the interrogation of the

freshmen, in this case carried out by “fat *Lord Tropics*... whose invariable and concise formula was the following: *Name? Age? Nationality? Profession? Have you passed the line?*” (Debret, 1975, t.I, v.I, p.113-114).

After the festivities, the ship suffered the effects of the drinking of the crew members. Douville and Castelnau noted that the festivities were watered by wine and punch, creating confusion between officers, sailors, and passengers (Douville, 1833, p.41; Castelnau, 1949, v.I, p.21). In fact, drinking was the only aspect noted by the painter Biard on his crossing in 1858.<sup>76</sup>

Itier and Ribeyrolles were among the rare narrators to speculate about the origins of the ritual. Itier’s *Father of the Line* came down from the main mast on a cable – which denotes some experience in the control of the apparatus and a certain antiquity in the subject, in order not to get entangled in the great red draped coat he wore. On the deck his court waited for him and he tried to prevent the devil from leaping over his cart. The role of the devil in these nineteenth century reports is suggestive: what did he represent? The wind or the lack of them? Storms? Perhaps bad weather? Facing the elements of nature was always a given in the lives of mariners, but the presence of the devil at this late stage when steam had overcome climatic adversaries, permits other suggestions. Allegorically, could the devil at this time symbolize on-board discipline and the power of officers, which was increasingly aggravating? No hypothesis can be discarded. In relation to the ritual in itself, Itier believed that its origins went back to the discovery of South America, when the explorers had to face their fears “because of the doldrums in these parts, which caused terrible hunger in the ships” (Itier, 1848, v.1, p.39-40).

Ribeyrolles, who travelled by steam, knew that ships’ engines had allowed the stops at Madeira and the Canaries to be suppressed, and asked if the same would happen with the baptism of the line. “Fortunately... on board steamships the grotesque scene of the *good man of the Tropics* has been abolished.” As a passenger he feared being obliged to share the ‘bestial joys’ and ‘bacchanalias’ of drunken sailors. The republican journalist believed in the existence of the ‘spirit of historic centuries’ which four thousand years previously had conquered the unknown “of the dark shadows of three poor continents, island by island, forest by forest.” The “sacred festival of baptism, these nuptials of the conquered land, given whole to the inquiring and winning man,” was celebrated with drink and grotesque mythologies. It was necessary

to civilize the ritual, but not with coarse sailors who did not enjoy the ‘vivacious education’ which the dominant social groups prevented them from offered, because it ‘sacred and frightened them.’ A survival of barbarianism and convenient to the bourgeoisie, the baptism of the equator continued to exist.<sup>77</sup> The same political or technological questions were not raised by other narrators of the crossing of the equator.

### *Brazilians in the nineteenth century*

Whether because of the direction of the voyage, the lack of literacy among sailors, or the disinterest of officers, reports about equator crossing ceremonies in the Brazilian navy are rare. Two were selected from the second half of the nineteenth century.

The first was written by Sabino Eloy, a naval lieutenant travelling to Europe onboard the corvette *Imperial Marinheiro*. In this report, elements common to the tradition expressed by other narrators were mentioned, such as the visit on the eve of ‘*Rei Turno*’ (King Shift) asking permission to hold the festivities, the production of the clothes of the god of the sea, the use of the (human) horse as a means of transport and the demand for donations – collected in this case by the devil. Eloy recognizes the wit, a trait of popular culture, in the names of the divinities used by the sailors: King Shift – a clear reference to the work shift of the navy – was Neptune, and Amphitrite became Arthritis. The suspension of the hierarchy during the ritual was a process controlled by the officers who participated in the festivities the following day:

The cabin boys, also known as the ‘pawns of the sea,’ who had never crossed the line, are washed, shaved and powdered. For long distance sailors this is an important rite of passage, a type of deep water baptism. After an hour of joking, similar to Shrovetide, in the understanding of the lieutenant, the commander “became serious, stopping Neptune and all his imaginary grandeur, enlisting them again among the brave sailors of his corvette.” Everything became calm and “everyone was content with their true category onboard.” (Jeha, 2011, p.190)

In 1895 Adolfo Caminha published the novel *O bom crioulo* (The Good Creole), whose eponymous character was the gentle Amaro, a fugitive slave who had enlisted in the Brazilian navy as a cabin boy and who had become a free man.<sup>78</sup> Caminha had at least one long distance maritime experience and the opportunity to meet men such as Amaro when he left Rio de Janeiro on

board the warship *Almirante Barroso*, in February 1890, for the United States, where he would spend a few months. The experience was reported in a travel book.<sup>79</sup> *Almirante Barroso* was a ship with mixed propulsion, sail and steam, and the former was used when the winds permitted. On the crossing of the equator on 2 March 1890, there were ‘rotten doldrums’ and a strong heat worsened the sun directly overhead and by the ovens which burned in the bottom of the ship, but minimized by an improvised awning on the deck and “salty showers... received with special pleasure.” Apparently no ceremony was held on the navy ship, captained by Commander Saldanha and in which there reigned neatness, order, dexterity, and activity. Caminha does not establish any cause and effect relationship, though the description of this internal order contains references to corporal punishments in the following pages (Caminha, 1979, p.8, 15ss). However, in his rapid mention of the crossing of the line in the south-north direction, Caminha described two items common to previous descriptions in which the ritual was carried out: the provisional covering of the deck and the throwing of water over sailors and passengers. Formally he did not see a ritual, but his text points to one of the functions of the baptism, integrating novice sailors after reaching all those in the middle of the festivities.

The use of water, it is worth noting, could only have been due to the strong heat of the equatorial zone, since in higher latitudes it would have involved health risks for the sailors. Even in this mixed propulsion ship, the use of steam to cross the line of the doldrums did not prevent another use, older and enrooted in maritime culture, of baptizing sailors with seawater, whether to reduce the heat they felt or to integrate them in a disguised fashion in a ship whose discipline was maintained by corporal punishments – another tradition of maritime culture, which was practiced without any disguise by navy officers in many western navies until the twentieth century.

I believe that Caminha’s rapid description show the final breaths of the ritual among Atlantic mariners and after that baptism would escape them as part of an initiation into the onboard community, acquiring other meanings.

### *Twentieth Century*

Despite the end of the dependence on the wind to cross the ocean, the ritual of baptism in the crossing of the equator has been preserved in ships and airplanes until the present day. A quick search using the internet is

enough to find a vast amount of photographic material about crossing the line during the twentieth century, from certificates with the stamp of Neptune, images made by professional photographers on board tourist cruise ships, to amateur photos, registered by the tourists themselves, generally in groups, with their digital cameras.

With the introduction of steam and later transatlantic ships, the dol-drumms were overcome and the situation which stimulated the original ritual no longer existed, surpassed by the power of machinery. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the stops had less of a function of food supply and more of loading coal and preventing the ships from having their holds overloaded from the port of departure. Alcock, coming to South America around 1906, mentioned a stop in Cabo Verde with this purpose, and the expectation was to reach Pernambuco less than four days later. He was waiting for the presence of Neptune, an expectation which was frustrated as he explains:

the much awaited Neptune, accompanied by some of his satellites was supposed to come on board to carry out the usual ceremony and baptize those who had never crossed the line. There was great excitement, but unfortunately we were destined for disappointment. One of the passengers said that this was because we had many beautiful women on board and the mermaids down below were too jealous to let the King of the Sea come on board, and that would probably prefer to keep them at peace than have momentary pleasure. Certainly, we welcomed him well, and there were a large number of men in search of collars for the occasion and who did not shave for a while in order to better know the enthusiasm of blade used in the ceremonial rites... It is clear, there would be a great bath, since Neptune insists on a complete immersion; but he did not come, and the reader can imagine the reasons like the writer. He certainly had visited the *Oropesa* [the ship in which he was travelling] on its previous voyage...<sup>80</sup>

Adour da Câmara showed no excitement on the crossing of the line or with the appearance of Neptune, as had occurred for centuries. When in the 1920s, he crossed the line in the opposite direction to European and American travelers, no crew member or passenger was thrown into the sea in the middle of violence, the characteristic of previous time; at that time what occurred were “baths for children in the bow pool,” an “uninteresting farce, without any spirit and without the slightest creative imagination. Ugh!” (Câmara, s.d., p.28). The ritual had changed in meaning. Neptune now came on board to

entertain children travelling with their parents. Her contemporary and fellow modernist Alcântara Machado made the crossing more than once. In one of these, he met with Bastos in 1929 on a Transatlantic liner bringing them to Europe. The father of a family travelling with a “very complicated coffee machine” and commemorating the crossing of the Equator offered “a cup of our national drink to an Argentine colonist” (Machado, 1983, v.II, p.188). Nothing of throwing seawater or submitting anyone wearing white linen to any violence.

In the middle of the twentieth century, Albert Camus crossed the Atlantic twice: once going to the United States in 1946, and the second time going to South America in 1949, when he had already gained the fame of a controversial intellectual and at that moment was depressed. From his cabin, where he wrote and observed in the profound darkness of the seawater a contradictory “call to life and invitation to death,” he crossed the equator on the morning of 10 July. The ceremony of crossing the line was suspended, “due to the lack of passengers, [and] we replaced these rites with some games by the pool. And after a moment with the emigrants, who played accordion and sang on the vessel’s bow, looking at the desert sea... Calm day. Apart from the great dinner with Champaign for crossing the equator.”<sup>81</sup>

## PERCEPTION OF THE TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE RITUAL

Some integrative signals were presented here, especially about water as an instrument of baptism and its clear analogy with Christian baptism. Integrating when practiced in the middle of sailors, the ritual was also excluding. I have mentioned the rare references to black crewmembers in the baptism of the equator, and none of these has been flattering. Onboard slave ships for example, there were no reports of the practice of baptism, although there were thousands of voyages made between Angola and the Caribbean, for example, without there being any mention of a baptism ceremony of this nature. Of course this integration was for members of the maritime community, but the ritual had always covered occasional passengers, since Jean de Léry’s report in 1556, reaching its peak in the first half of the nineteenth century, coinciding with the apex of the slave trade to America. Although this trade had been banned north of the equator since 1807, it was maintained

with live contraband. Maritime culture had been described as solidarity based, libertarian, egalitarian and internationalist, but it also had strong racial and national cleavages. There are undeniable signs of this in the traffic of Africans and in the practices of a 'maritime proletariat' which dealt with Africans as simple human cargo, in addition to the employment of few free blacks in the Trans-Atlantic ships,<sup>82</sup> as well as the whiteness and patriotism of part of the English-speaking sailors, who tried to differentiate non-white sailors and to create for themselves an image of more honorable men.<sup>83</sup>

Scholars have highlighted the prevalence of the rebellious and liberating aspect of the equator rite of passage. This question needs to be teased out and its prevalence checked, in addition to accompanying long-term transformations. I tend to consider that the ritual had a more identity based and nature, integrating a maritime community, than being rebellious and liberating.

Its predominantly occurred in the Atlantic. Although Rediker states that the ritual was practiced by sailors of all nationalities, the evidence of its practice in the Indian and Pacific Oceans is scarce. The information of Maria Graham about its use among the Arabs is the sole support for this interpretation. The extension of the ritual to 'all nationalities' is the clear generalization of a European identity trait for all parts of the world, which is deceptive. Even looking at just Europeans, not all of them practiced the ritual, and when they did it was not always in the same form. While the baptism has appeared since the first references to the ritual in the sixteenth century, the presence of Neptune is later, occurring only in the eighteenth century. Having said this, there is no doubt there it was a ritual with a European origin, inherited by Americans, but not by other colonial subjects or spaces, and mostly practiced in the Atlantic in voyages from the north to the south.

Some travelers presented hypotheses to explain the origin of the ritual, all without theoretical or folkloristic pretensions, only pointing to possibilities or repeating what they had heard. Maria Graham's information deals with the similarity of the practices of Arabs and Europeans and the religious motives contained in the ritual. In the two cases, what were involved were survivals of temporalities of the religions professed at the time, in other words they were pre-Koranic and pre-Christian. The food and fire among the Arabs point to the old customs of adoration of elements of nature, with the offer of

sacrifices, but among Europeans there is no mention of fire (but rather of water) in the ritual, and food appears to have fulfilled another function.

Scarlett did not know the origin of the ritual, but believed that universality and violence of the festivities were caused by resentment. He does not structure an explanation, but Reynolds' contribution suggests a connection between the original violence of the ceremony and the time when sailors were press-ganged in taverns and near docks, or condemned by the authorities on land to work on ships. In his view the ritual may have emerged from this process and expressed the social differences and the resistance of the men of the sea to forced labor and exile at the beginning of modern times. Burmeister, in turn, traced an analogy between the baptism of the equator and the rude festivities of medieval guilds and universities, all of which were initiation rites for novices into a new phase of life in the middle of a new community. Itier and Ribeyrolles point in another direction, identifying the origin of the navigation, the discovery of new paths and new lands by Europeans, as well as the feared dangers of the doldrums and hunger faced on longer maritime routes. The ritual was, thus, a type of commemoration for the advances of civilization, and the symbolic delivery of the vanquished from the victorious.

The supposed universality of the practice did not exclude its most reduced origin in 'national' terms and the later expansion of Atlantic maritime culture. I also considered the hypothesis that Iberian mariners had been the creators of the ceremony in their sailing beyond the equator in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and that the festivities had resulted from the discovery that the line did not represent the dangers of which the ancients had been afraid. If this was the case, although we do not have any consistent evidence of the ritualistic practices on board Portuguese ships, they did not introduce Neptune into the festivities, since he only appeared in the eighteenth century.

Since the beginning of the ceremony in sixteenth century, various travelers have mentioned the offering of much food and drink. This is a relevant aspect because it highlights the importance of an episode marked by rationing and, at the limit, hunger and the diseases resulting from malnutrition. The special occasion was the opposite of the daily experience: in the latter there is a meticulous economy of everything which refers to subsistence; in the former there is waste and excess. In this way the crossing of the equator was a rite of inversion: to the contrary of the routine of the lack of water and food,



in the equatorial doldrums the sailors could eat and drink at will for a few hours, altering their daily routine of scarcity. There were special clothes and decorations for the rituals indicating a break with daily routine, which can be observed from the eighteenth century onwards in the exaggerated clothing of Neptune and his court and in the decoration of the deck to stage the appearance of the god of the sea.

The world turned upside down, the inversion given by passing from the north to the south Atlantic, included sexuality in more than one way. The shaving of beards, a sign of masculinity, indicates the priority of men in maritime work. It also indicates maturity, since the youngest are beardless and cannot preside ceremonies nor do work which requires the strength and dexterity that come from experience. On the other hand, the presence of Amphitrite, represented by a man in women's clothing, inverted the male/female roles in the ceremony. None of the informants explained how Neptune and Amphitrite were chosen from the already initiated sailors. It is plausible that the role of Neptune would fall upon an older or more agile sailor, or one who had crossed the line more often. The choice of Amphitrite may have only been entertainment, but dressing oneself as a woman introduces the possibility that homosexuality was not so strange nor so severely repressed in maritime culture. The only feminine role of the staging was performed by a man. The presence of a man dressed as a woman and the sea-horses are elements which are related to sexuality in the configuration of the procession and the whole ritual do equator, above all after the inclusion of the god of the sea as a character. After all there were numerous erotic meetings of Neptune/Poseidon, some of which had equine themes (Hansen, 2004, p.267).

However, the principal inversion involved in the equator rite of passage is that of hierarchical power. This characteristic does not seem to be present in the origin of the ritual, but was incorporated in it to the extent that the sailors organized their practices of resistance to the authority of their commanders. In addition to the humiliation to which novices were subjected, a symbolic questioning of the authority of the officers was expressed, even though the holding of the ceremony was negotiated with these representatives. The negotiation and the occurrence of the ceremony can be connected to what Rediker calls the 'subculture' or 'culture of opposition' within maritime culture: class conflict in relation to matters of power, authority, work

and discipline, with distinct attitudes, values and practices. Maritime culture, according to him, was fractured between corporative aspects, which came from the clash with nature, and the subculture of classes which emerged from the basic relations of production in navigation (Rediker, 1989, p.154-155).

While it was rebellious and liberating, the ritual also contained conformist and compensating elements, which maintained order. Various scholars have noted the practice of inversion of status in European popular rituals, and in all of them a periodic inversion was involved: after the sharpening of the feeling of belonging to a community and then the questioning of the authority of officers, order was re-established and hierarchy reaffirmed as a principle (Burke, 1989, p.225). In the ritual of crossing the line, the principle was reaffirmed upon the eve of the ritual when the ambassador from Neptune or the divinity himself asked the commander permission to carry out the baptism of the neophytes. The morphological transformation represented by the introduction of the god of the sea in the ritual emerged accompanied by this formal request.

Neptune was always a sailor, never an officer. Officers participated in the fun, or avoided it, but they were never dressed as the god of the sea, as his wife, or in the divinity's retinue. Only sailors filled these roles. While this reinforces the communitarian ties of sailors in opposition to officers, it also reinforces the hierarchical principal: Neptune was a god and had prominence over the others; his retinue was hierarchical and the way it was presented confirms this. Thus, while there may have been a rebellious questioning of order, the ritual replaced it with another hierarchy. Prior negotiation and the permission given by the commander were incorporated in the ritual. This data supports Burke's suggestion that the 'upper classes' permitted the inversion of social roles at certain opportunities, as if they were aware that this was an escape valve for the latent conflicts in an unequal society. If the dominated had no means to compensate their resentments and frustrations, the actual survival of the class and the hierarchy would be threatened (Burke, 1989, p.225-226).

Finally, I would like to call attention to mentions to the ritual over time. Between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries descriptions of the crossing of the equator only exist in a reduced number. However, they expand substantially in the first half of the nineteenth century, declining in the second half of

the same and the following centuries. What are the explanations for this? It is possible that at the beginning there were motives which stimulated the invention of the ritual, such as the commemoration of the fact that the crew had not melted in the sun along with the ships. However, once the mysteries about the line had been unraveled, why did the reports increase and the identity among the men of the sea become related to the ritual?

In the nineteenth century with the introduction of machinery and the possibility of getting rid of workers who would be replaced by the new inventions, with the loss of the functions of man because of replacement by machinery, I believe that the original motto of the ritual was lost, but simultaneously new motives were created to reinforce the brotherhood among sailors, due to technical development and the new forms of domination. Guided by a moral economy, these men gave importance to the networks they were capable of creating, especially to oppose the hierarchy and dominion of officers, also because these had not lost their work positions with the introduction of technical novelties. A common custom, shared by sailors and officers in the past, could have become an expression of an onboard class struggle between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth.

The numerical expansion and the lengthening of the reports occurred in the nineteenth century. More people were travelling on the seas, stimulated by the independences of the Americas and by the expansion of the global economy in the contemporary era. More books were consumed by Europeans and Americans, the target public of travel narratives, than in the past, now without the constraint of official censorship, the Catholic inquisition, or the need of the metropolitan European states to hide the wealth of their dominions. These stimuli for the production and consumption of books were also a sign of the growth of the publishing market and the interest in these works as consumption items inside capitalist development. This same development, whose outcome was not predictable at the beginning of that century, also included the emergence or reinforcement of the ties of the 'workers of the Atlantic economy,' amongst whom were disposed commoners, deported delinquents, hired servants, religious extremists, pirates, urban workers, soldiers, sailors, and African slaves, to return to Rediker and Linebaugh's metaphor of the heads of Lerna's hydra.<sup>84</sup>

‘Capitalist development’ is not used here as a demiurgic expression. It was neither inexorable nor did it have predefined winners or losers; these were configured during the violent process, of which the ritual of the equator passage is evidence. The hydra had here one more of its heads. Maritime workers were essential for the success of international trade, by creating much of the value of the goods they transported from one market to another (Rediker, 1989, p.74-77; Barreiro, 2010, p.190). At the end of the eighteenth century, the workers who had initiated their organization invented an analogy between the hydra and the tyrannous rulers and between themselves and mythological Hercules. Symbols are always re-signified: it is relevant that in the social struggles since the end of that century, Hercules and the Hydra, as well as Neptune and Amphitrite, symbols arising out of classical Antiquity, had been returned to. The effective combat of radicalism in the 1790s had resulted in the creation of racism as a biological concepts and of class as a political and economic category defined only within national frontiers. For Linebaugh and Rediker, from whose works I draw inspiration for these considerations, the history of capitalism in formation is not only a history of political economy and the concentration of wealth in the hands of a social class. It is also the history of a moral economy, of resistance to the process of exclusion and submission to compulsory work carried out by non-conformist social groups, although they were not always connected with each others. In the case of sailors and their insertion in this history, they were men recruited by force for the labor market or who sold their skills in port cities, going from ship to ship asking what their route was, being paid with food, and becoming apprentices when they did not have the necessary knowledge.

To fight the new heads of hydra, represented by the introduction of steam and the oppressive prominence of the officers, the common sailors could have reinforced their identity, they who originated from a wide variety of occupations or categories of tramps and slaves existing on the margins of the Atlantic (Linebaugh; Rediker, 2008, p.29). From the perspective of the officers, the new head of the hydra to be extirpated was precisely the reinforcement of the brotherhood which the transformed rite of passage of the equator represented. In relation to the sailors, they incorporated new symbols into the ritual and expressed their discontent with the form they were treated, inverting the order and negotiating conditions, even though the result was the

return of hierarchy and submission to authority after the festivities. The victory of univocal 'capitalist development' in the middle of the nineteenth century did not smile on either side.

The dispute continued until the second half of the nineteenth century, when the new technology of steam engines was imposed in an irreversible manner and the sailors of the brotherhood of sail were defeated and replaced by other men, with other visions of the world, and from whom other labor skills were required. Since then, and entering the twentieth century, passengers on transatlantic liners in cabins and elegant decks, and later in airplanes, became the audience for a ritual whose significance was no longer the same as the original one in the sixteenth century, nor the transformed one at the end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth. Now the ceremony was staged for a new public, which was also a participant. Crossing the equator and being baptized then became bourgeois entertainment. Historically the ritual was transformed not by the agency of steam, but by the fact that the alterations in the relations of production have been experimented in social and cultural life. The repercussion of this was felt in human values, actions, choices and beliefs (Thompson, 1977, p.266).

Between the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, ships came to be moved by steam and the sailors were no longer the same as in the previous centuries. In this period, the people who made the crossing of the equator changed, as the meaning of the ritual did. The practitioners came to be passengers without any great interaction with the workers of the sea, and the feeling of alliance with Neptune and his court was more concerned with entertainment than with the integration of the maritime community claimed by sailors on sailing ships. Corroborating Marc Bloch in *Apology for History*, Thompson reminds us that, "to the great despair of historians, men do not change their vocabulary every time they change their customs – and this is also true for the vocabulary of rituals" (Thompson, 1977, p.255).

## NOTES

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