

# Landscapes of Fear: the Portuguese coast

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## 1. **Portugal and the Sea: Introduction**

In Portugal, the connection with the sea goes back a long way. Even before the Discoveries<sup>1</sup> there was a long tradition linking its people with maritime activities (Godinho 67; Mattoso 18). In the country “where the land ends and the sea begins” (Camões<sup>2</sup> 268), its status as being the land-end of Europe and a coast opening onto the world seems to have been an intrinsic element of its existence — or this, at least, was the idea passed from generation to generation, and claimed as a source of national pride.<sup>3</sup>

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many historians, geographers and ethnologists considered that the specificity of the Portuguese people lay in their strong connection with the sea and their vocation for nautical activities, favoured by the characteristics of the territory and the extensive marine frontier.<sup>4</sup> The idea of Portugal as a nation of mariners and navigators<sup>5</sup> was also instrumentalized by the New State<sup>6</sup> to justify its own interests, contributing to maintaining a vision, still predominant today, of a close relationship between Portugal and the Ocean, one linked to the Discoveries, the overseas heritage, and the colonial experience. Recently, the cultural anthropologist Elsa Peralta, in reflecting on the sea as a characteristic element of Portuguese identity, has said that this association is a construction of an “epic, fictionalized, mythical” narrative (Peralta 78). This results “above all from the inculcation and dissemination of grandiose representations instituted by the state and the intellectuals” (Peralta 78), with the

objective of giving a unique stamp to the Portuguese historical trajectory, in order to strengthen its identitarian bonds as a nation. This sea, as exalted and projected in some historiography and in literature<sup>7</sup>, is a “fetish-memory” (Peralta 83), that bore no resemblance to the tangible reality of the day-to-day lives of the peoples who lived from sea-fishing on the coast.

In contrast with the discourse forged for intellectual and political reasons, in the Portuguese traditional literature the sea and maritime matters are little discussed. In fact, in the popular Portuguese tradition there is “a lot of land, not much sea” (Guimarães 198). The ethnographer Leite de Vasconcelos<sup>8</sup> noted that “despite Portugal’s being a nation of navigators, the sea traditions it had collected were not very many, and not very extraordinary” (*Tradições Populares* 81). Popular literature seemed not to interest itself very much with the Atlantic experience. The references to the Discoveries and to the sea-voyages that exist within it (and despite everything there are some) deal with extreme situations on the sea (as in the poem *A Nau Catrineta*<sup>9</sup>), and above all with the suffering of those who stayed behind, the pain of separation, the lives of those who lived with their eyes fixed on the horizon, waiting for the sailors to return (Guimarães 200-201). Popular tradition tells the story of those who remained on dry land and for whom the (neighbouring) sea rose up as a source of sustenance, and represented the struggle for daily survival. The sea was a source of sorrow as these popular verses of 1905 show:

If the sea had a veranda,  
I would go to Brazil to see you,  
But since the sea doesn’t have one,  
My love, I can’t go there. (Oliveira<sup>10</sup> 86)

Woe to the one who invented  
Boats to go on the sea  
As that was the cause  
Of my eyes being rivers [of tears]. (Oliveira 223)

The scarcity of maritime scenarios in traditional literature, compared to a rural setting<sup>11</sup>, seems to reinforce Orlando Ribeiro's<sup>12</sup> theory. This geographer recognized there were a set of labours and ways of life that attracted the populations to the seashore. However, he was cautious when speaking about the importance of these activities to the national economy. Indeed, Ribeiro believed that the labours related to the sea had always been "limited, fragmentary, intermittent" when confronted with the "permanent toiling of the fields" (Ribeiro 166-167), adding that although the indirect influence of the Atlantic reached almost half of the country, maritime way of life was limited to a narrow strip of the coast. For though many villages lived from fishery, salt and seaweed, there were "entire regions insensitive to the sea presence" (Ribeiro 166-67). Historical data regarding the settlement of the Portuguese coast also strengthen this idea: littoralization is a recent phenomenon, from the nineteenth century onwards. Until then two different realities concerning human presence in the coast can be distinguished, sheltered coasts and open coasts. The occupation of the former type — estuaries, coastal lagoons, and deep bays — is very ancient, and the towns and cities with the longest maritime traditions are located essentially in these spaces, flourishing thanks to their privileged situation (close to the sea, but far from its dangers) and to activities such as commerce and fishing. As examples we can refer Porto, Aveiro, Lisboa, Setúbal and Tavira. As for the second type, those stretches of the coastline that were almost straight, with few inlets, they remained deserted, or inhabited only by small communities of fishermen, until the middle of the nineteenth century. It is the case of the coasts between Porto and Nazaré and between Sado's river mouth and Cape St. Vincent, in the western coast of Portugal.

In this article we analyse the texts of the popular tradition, a range of folklore, oral histories, newspapers and other more anecdotal material, as an alternative speech to the official and erudite

literature, to understand the relationship of populations to the sea and the coastal areas. By comparing historical sources with the texts from the popular tradition we determine the reasons – either real (piracy, storms and shipwrecks, scarcity of resources) or imaginary (fear of the unknown) – for the scant population of long stretches of the Portuguese coastline. This was the *territoire du vide* [the emptiness territory] that the French historian Alain Corbin<sup>13</sup> spoke of. An uninviting, hostile and deserted coastline that also fits in well with that theorized by Yi-Fu Tuan, in his work, *Landscapes of Fear*. Broadly speaking, the *topos* of ancestral fears of Portuguese popular tradition correlates with Corbin’s and Tuan’s arguments: the coasts were for a long time no-man’s-land, desert and wild places, representing landscapes of fear. A situation that would only change in the nineteenth century when the images about this world were modified as the beach became a space for the recreation and leisure of the elites.

## 2. The Coast: a Landscape of Fear

2.1. *Se queres aprender a orar, entra no mar*<sup>14</sup>  
[If you wish to learn to pray, set out to sea]

For centuries, the sea seems to have inspired a real terror amongst the peoples of Western Europe. For an essentially rural civilization, compartmentalized in restricted physical spaces — since travel was slow and difficult — the ocean appears as unknown territory, a last vestige of the Biblical flood, inhabited by fantastic beings that had escaped the order imposed by God.

The French historian Jean Delumeau, in drawing up an inventory of the fears that tormented the people between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries, did not hesitate to list the sea as a “*topos* of fear” (Delumeau 31) that was common in the Western imagination. Facing the immensity of the ocean man felt himself small and fragile, while the maritime space embodied everything that was most fearful and terrible, taking on the dimension of an anti-element, turning

it into a place of perdition and death (Delumeau 36). “The cultural roots of this conviction go back, in part, to the Bible and to sources from antiquity, but they also relate to the available knowledge of the period” (Fonseca “O horizonte insular” 60). The absence of intellectual and scientific ways of understanding the contours of the globe led to the construction of overviews in which the mythical and the fantastic were mixed with concrete elements, forging a symbolic conception of space. The T-shaped planispheres reflect these geographical ideas: in the centre of the map lay Christendom, signifying civilization, order and harmony; beyond it, on the edge of the known world, there ruled idolatry, chaos, disorder, monsters and the excesses of nature; and surrounding the known world there appeared the ocean, represented graphically as an element marginal to God’s creation, and thus understood as a place of the inhuman, of the incommensurability of the void (Mattoso 13, 15).

This worldview was widespread amongst bookish people, but it is questionable that maritime peoples shared it. Studies by the French historian Patrick Gautier Dalché had shown that the peoples in direct contact with the sea “possessed more precise and less preconceived knowledge of the ocean’s islands than the learned men responsible for the teaching of geography and cartography. This fact, observed by him especially in the writing from northern Europe, seems to have been true of Portugal as well” (qtd. in Mattoso 16). However, up until the fourteenth century the fragile nature of boats and the very limited technical knowledge of navigation discouraged sailors from attempting to set a course on the high seas, limiting themselves to hugging the Atlantic coastline, reflecting an experience inherited from the confined waters of the Mediterranean. The open character of the ocean struck fear into the maritime peoples themselves, because, according to their beliefs, beyond a certain limit it was impossible to return (Fonseca “O horizonte insular” 60 and “A visão do oceano” 16-7). The land served as a point of reference: its

presence on the horizon established a frontier between the known sea (navigable and a source of sustenance) and the infinite sea, the space of the marvellous and of perdition, par excellence.

The coastline was for long the meeting point of two distinct worlds, one of order, one of chaos. Bathed by the indomitable force of the waves and full of threatening black rocks, it was a desolate scene that constantly evoked the uncertain *limes* [boundary strip] between the concrete of the earth and the unknown of the sea. For Alain Corbin, fear of and aversion to the ocean, as a place of unfathomable mysteries, explained the feeling of repugnance that led to a shunning of these spaces, and a universal inability to appreciate their landscape before the emergence of the beach as a desirable place, at the end of the eighteenth century (Corbin 11). Up to that time the coasts were “landscapes of fear”. The Chinese-American geographer Tuan applied this concept to mountains and forests, but we think that it can also be applied to coastal zones. Tuan wrote that “fear is in the mind but, except in pathological cases, has its origins in external circumstances that are truly threatening”: “landscapes of fear refers both to psychological states and to tangible environments” (6). Like mountains the sea and the seashores can come “under the category of willful and uncontrollable nature beyond the human domain, and even, in a sense, beyond God’s purview” (Tuan 80-1). In fact, “the ancestral fear of the sea [...] is common to the coastal peoples, [...] along the whole of the northern Iberian and Atlantic coastline, since the sea led to many dangers” (Núñez and García 260). These dangers (real or imaginary) contributed in part to the abandonment of some coasts until the middle of the nineteenth century.

## 2.2. *I heard you singing there, Mermaid / There in the depths of the sea*<sup>15</sup>

The Discoveries, and the advance of scientific knowledge based on observation, had led to a progressive disbelief in sea monsters, and fear of the unknown disappeared as the seas were opened to navigation. The dreamlike and irrational vision of the sea was being superseded, but

was never entirely erased. As Tuan has said: “Imagination adds immeasurably to the kinds and intensity of fear in the human world” (6). The dark, abstract, measureless side — fear — remained rooted in mental conceptions of some communities for whom fiction and reality intersected to form a worldview in which the marvellous (pagan or Christian) formed part of the everyday (Lopes 13, 23, 101; Amorim “Homens da terra” 29). According to the French historian Alain Cabantous (32), writers such as Jules Michelet, Victor Hugo and Jules Verne contributed, by their scientific descriptions of giant octopuses and other maritime animals, to the longevity of this malign fauna; the resulting complicity of erudite narrative and popular culture served to perpetuate and amplify this aspect of the maritime imaginary.

Being no-man’s-land, an uncertain frontier between the known earth and the unknown sea, the coast was the space of the marvellous par excellence. Traditional Portuguese literature contains many songs, tales, legends, superstitions and popular remedies that reflect both the sacred character of the sea and the belief that it was populated by all types of fantastic animals, and that these could be seen by anyone that walked along the shore. According to Leite de Vasconcelos, who collected the best examples of traditions referring the coast as a place of wonder, some “seaside peoples believed that below the high-water mark reached by the tide they would be free of everything they feared of the night: evil things could not pass below that barrier, because, they said, the seawater was sacred” (*Etnografia Portuguesa* VII 433). This idea could help to understand a superstition from Setúbal [coastal city near Lisbon] that states that “seawater did not produce expectoration in those who were soaked by it, that is, they did not catch a cold” (Vasconcelos *Etnografia Portuguesa* VII 433). This also explains the use of spells to break bewitchment, or the evil eye, which instructed the victim to channel his sickness into a particular object, which was then thrown into the sea, where it would disappear (Marta and Pinto 33, 35). In the same way there was a belief in various parts of the coast in the value of a ‘holy bath’ — a dip

in the seven seas — on the days of St John (24 June) or St Bartholomew (24 August), to free children from disorders such as gout or epilepsy (Pedroso 138, 150; Vasconcelos *Tradições Populares* 83 and *Etnografia Portuguesa* VIII 454).

At the end of the eighteenth century there were still frequent stories of the appearance of monsters near the coast, such as the sea-man found at Marseilles (1755) or the giant fish seen in the Tagus River near Lisbon (1748)<sup>16</sup>. A chapbook in Catalan reports the story of a threatening sea creature that actually comes to shore, a good example of the permeable coastal frontier:

new and true account of the astonishing and strange monster of nature, discovered off the coast of Mafra, in the kingdom of Portugal, in the late month of June 1760. It notes its formidable size, vigour and build; and its extraordinary appearance: it also being declared that it took the life of more than fifty persons both fishermen and passengers, and amongst them four priests and two Capuchin friars. And the damages it caused when it entered neighbouring villages, tearing apart those it met. The inhabitants resolved to kill it, but it evaded them all causing harm to many...(Amades<sup>17</sup> 112).

In the popular tales collected by Leite de Vasconcelos there appear stories of sea enchantments and men condemned to live in its depths, fish that spoke and promised great riches to those who could free them, and even of skeletons and miraculous images found on the beaches of São Torpes and Tavira. Near Cabo de Carvoeiro it was said that on moonlit nights there would appear a mermaid, once the daughter of a local fisherman (Vasconcelos *Contos Populares* I 230, 487, 549, II 587, 616). In the Azores, witches were known to gather on the sands, concealing their dark arts on the coast (Supico). At Boca do Inferno, in Cascais, where the sea is rough and dangerous, there lived a triton (Vasconcelos *Etnografia Portuguesa* VII 272-73).

In the coastal town of Vila Nova de Milfontes too it is possible to find this association of a fabulous being and a point on the coast to be avoided. In this case, some shallows at the entrance



to the mouth of the River Mira, where it was said there lived the Moura Encantada [Enchanted Mooress], who lured men with the aim of killing them (Quaresma 107). Popular wisdom seems to have populated particular places with monsters and fantastic beings, substituting natural dangers — shallows, sandbanks, capes, steep cliffs — by products of their imagination, in some ways more frightening and thus more effective in keeping sailors and villagers away. Homer did something similar assigning the dangers of the sea to mythic figures like Scylla and Charybdis. According to Tuan, a physical environment threat “acquires an extra dimension of ominousness (...) when it is identified with human evil of a supernatural order” (Tuan 105). For instance, in some part of Galicia and the Asturias [Spain] there was a beast called the Repunto or El Marín that personified the high tide. In Puerto de Vega (Navia) “children were frightened off so that they would not go near the cliffs of la Atalaya, where he lived” (Núñez and García 260).

These legends, transmitted orally over the generations, reinforce the idea that the seashore was for a long time a privileged space of the unknown, wrapped in an aura of mystery which simultaneously fascinated and terrified the local people. As Tuan noticed the ‘landscapes of fear’ represent for humans a “mixture of dread and appreciation” (Tuan 81) and in the case of coastal areas both death and survival.

### 2.3. *Anda moiro na costa*<sup>18</sup> [Moor on the coast]

The terror inspired by the ocean could take on vague and imprecise shapes, but there were real dangers that came from the sea, which created concrete fears. In fact, for many centuries the Portuguese coast was the frequent target of pirates and corsairs of different nationalities. First were the Normans; later the Muslims who occupied part of the Iberian Peninsula; in the time of the Spanish kings (1580–1640) the English, French and Dutch, enemies of the Castilian Crown;

and in more recent times predominantly Moroccans and Algerians. These pirates attacked not only the great ships coming from India and Brazil but also the smaller boats that sailed along the coast, trading or fishing. Not infrequently they would even land, with the aim of pillaging the closest villages and seizing men, women and children, who were taken to north Africa, where they were sold as slaves or were held captive until a ransom was paid.

These types of attack persisted until the beginning of the nineteenth century. The daring of the pirates knew no limits: the periodicals of the time — *Mercúrio Português*, *Gazeta de Lisboa* and the *Diário do Governo* — documented some of their activities. In 1718, the “moors” took some fishing boats in the neighbourhood of Cascais; in 1721, at Cape St. Vincent, two corsairs seized a Dutch vessel coming from Rotterdam loaded with goods for Portimão; some years later seventeen people from Viana do Castelo were taken captive, near the fort of São João da Foz (*Gazeta de Lisboa* 26 Mai. 1718, 02 Oct. 1721, 28 Aug. 1727). A Portuguese ship traveling from the north to the south of the country was attacked by a French corsair, in 1798; in 1810 a British vessel sailing in Portuguese waters entered in Lisbon’s harbour to warn about the presence of Algerians pirates nearby; in 1828 a ship coming from Rio de Janeiro was assaulted by corsairs near Cabo da Roca (*Gazeta de Lisboa* 21 Jul. 1798, 28 Mai. 1810; *Diário do Governo* 22 Oct. 1828). The authorities attempted to prevent these attacks by consolidating their systems of coastal defences and sending ships to patrol the coastal waters, but when pirates disembarked it fell to the local populations to see off the enemy:

the alarm was sounded immediately, the bells rang out in the parishes of Esmoriz, Paramos and Silvalde, and many people rushed to the beach. [...] The promptness and zeal with which they rushed to defend their country was impressive, not only the men, but women even, laden with baskets of stones, because there were none on the beach, which was all sand (*Gazeta de Lisboa*<sup>19</sup> 24 Jul. 1738).

Pirate attacks took place to some extent along the whole Portuguese coast — Viana do Castelo, the bar of the Douro, Berlengas, Cabo da Roca, the bar of the Tagus — but the worst affected area was the Algarve coast. It is not surprising, then, that the fishermen of that region refused to go far from port, “because is it very dangerous and risky for them to go out fishing; since pirates infest the coasts of Portugal and the Algarve with maritime larcenies” (*Suplemento ao Diário do Governo* 19 Feb. 1822). This situation was so frequent that there were religious orders that specialized in recovering those who had been taken captive (*Gazeta de Lisboa Ocidental* 9 Mai. 1726). This serious problem was only resolved with the signing of peace treaties agreed with Morocco (1774) and Algeria (1813). However, these agreements cost Portuguese diplomacy dearly: since piracy was the principal source of revenue to these states, it was necessary to pay heavy financial compensation for them abandon such a lucrative business (Cunha 7).

Pirate activity had a profound impact on the everyday life of those who lived along the coast. Fear of a possible attack, and anxieties generated by news — true or false — circulating amongst the villagers helped to create a climate of constant tension. The frequent alarms and the need to keep lookouts at key points on the coastline required abundant manpower, which was diverted from fishing and agricultural activities, disrupting the day-to-day lives of these communities (Silva “Pirataria e corso” 303, 309-10, 318-19). For instance, at the end of the eighteenth century, kidnap continued to be one of the greatest concerns for the fishermen of Ericeira: the *Misericórdia* [charitable foundation] of that town, instituted in 1715 and financed by seafarers, had as its primary function the ransoming of captives and support to their families, whose husbands, fathers and brothers were prisoners in north Africa (Reis 34-5). Some historians, like Silva (“Pirataria e corso” 318 and “O corso inglês” 329) and Magalhães (83, 89-94), claim that

these incursions were responsible for the depopulation of certain sections of the coast, as the inhabitants fled to the interior.

Signs of the fear created by pirates are visible in Portuguese popular literature. In the *Romanceiro(s)* we can find poems that show how these episodes became deeply rooted in popular memory<sup>20</sup>:

The Count of Arcelo left  
To make a great pilgrimage  
From which they came to rest  
On a very cold beach.  
The Count took up his cape  
The Countess her mantle;  
Out there in that night  
There was a Moorish galley;  
They wanted to capture the Count,  
He like a man resisted;  
Now the Count lies dead,  
Now the Countess is gone as a captive (Braga<sup>21</sup> *Romanceiro Geral* 134).

The accounts of these misadventures were widely circulated by way of chapbooks: stories of piracy and the experiences of its victims inhabited the popular imaginary. Published as pamphlets (Madahil 65-6), they were sold in the streets under titles such as *Account of the deeds of the kidnapping corsair, who for some time had been infesting the seas, capturing many ships* (17...) (Feliciano), or *Memorable account of the loss of the ship Conceição that the Turks burnt within sight of the bar of Lisbon and the various misfortunes of the persons captured from it* (1627) (Mascarenhas)<sup>22</sup>. Even today there persist some traces of this ancestral fear, such as the saying “Moors on the coast”, which is still used, although few people know its origin or original meaning (Cunha 5). In the same way, as noted by Luís Cancela da Fonseca<sup>23</sup>, not many years ago the oldest people from some villages on the Alentejo coast avoided the beach after dark, without

being able to explain why. This curious habit could be due to a latent fear of attacks by pirates, preserved from generation to generation, long after they had completely disappeared.

2.4. *À boca da barra, se perde o navio*<sup>24</sup>

[The ship was lost at the mouth of the bar]

Negative recollections associated with the ocean are based on concrete and often heart-breaking situations in maritime life. Pirates and corsairs were not the only danger on the Portuguese coast: shipwrecks were frequent, especially when navigation was impeded by the morphology of the coastline and by weather conditions. On coasts of an open type, such as the one extending from Espinho to Nazaré, the wind action from the north-west pushes the waves vigorously against an almost straight coastline, creating a violent surf — incredibly energetic — hindering the safe passage of boats during most of the year (Moreira 60; Dias, Pereira and Ferreira 134). On the other hand, the Portuguese river mouths, where most of the ports are situated, are very dynamic systems: silting, strong currents and submerged rocks made very difficult the passage of boats, especially during storms or in the occurrence of strong winds. The black spots on the coast were mainly the bars of Lisboa and Porto, Caminha, Viana do Castelo, Aveiro, Nazaré, São Martinho do Porto, Figueira da Foz, Peniche, Vila Nova de Milfontes, Lagos, Portimão and Faro. In themselves, shipwrecks did not stop people from wanting to live on the coast — sometimes they were even a source of income for local villagers who lived from the recovery of salvage. However, they contributed to a climate of fear of the sea, since death by drowning, without the administration of the last rites and the fulfilment of Christian rituals for the dead, for lack of a body, was deeply feared because of a belief in eternal damnation (Lopes 183; Cabantous 51). Amongst the many superstitions of those who lived by the sea there were

formulas for summoning up those who had died in shipwrecks and whose bodies they were trying to recover. This example is from Póvoa de Varzim:

At midday and at midnight the person who is calling for the dead cries from the waterfront: *O sea, throw up here that Christian, whom we wish to give a holy burial!* The cadaver will eventually appear, and when a member of the family approaches it will immediately expel blood, even if it has been in the water for more than fifteen days (Pedroso<sup>25</sup> 266).

Furthermore, the incidents that took place near the coast were often dramatic: to lose one's life at the end of a voyage, in sight of land and of families who watched without being able to do anything, because of the state of the sea or a lack of means to help, was a terrible moment of collective agony. Like in this example in the Tagus River where so many died being their bodies washed into the shore:

The stormy weather has continued, in the night of 22 to 23 there was a furious storm, and now appears to be lost one Tejo boat with 17 people, of which only one is saved, in the beaches of this town have appeared several corpses of the drowned (*Gazeta de Lisboa* 26 Dec. 1786).

According to the Italian Literature Professor Giulia Lanciani accounts of shipwrecks were very popular with the public, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Chapbooks, sold in the street by blind people, nourished the imaginations of the popular classes for more than three centuries. Although the print-runs of these pamphlets are uncertain, it is known that they were reprinted many times, and that the editions quickly ran out. For example, the account of the shipwreck of the steamship *Porto*, which took place in March 1852, went through three editions in that same year. This type of dramatic event profoundly moved public opinion, and accounts were much sought after by readers. If in the early phases the appeal of chapbooks was due to the involvement in seafaring by a large part of the population (Lanciani 29-31), later on their growth

was due to the newspapers<sup>26</sup> which saw in such news a way of increasing sales (as is still the case today). The loss of human life and the misery of the families, in particular of those who lived from fishing, was widely exploited on front pages, as happened in 1892, in a news published in *Diário de Notícias* about a big tragedy in Póvoa do Varzim:

Large number of victims. Entire crews, dozens of men, are devoured implacably by the waves. [...] In the annals of Portuguese shipwrecks it is long since there has been written a page so sorrowful, so heart-breaking, so tragic (*Diário de Notícias* 29 Feb. 1892, 1 Mar. 1892).

In the oral tradition, fishing communities also retain a memory of certain episodes, to recall the latent threat that hovers over their lives in a permanent way:

It was on the second of May  
That a barge overturned  
Between Tocha and Quiaios  
Killing fourteen men (Costa<sup>27</sup> 206).

The danger of shipwrecks led in almost all coastal villages to a cult of patron saints, especially those who by their vocation or hagiographic history were connected with the sea. Amongst them one might mention Senhor Jesus dos Navegantes [Lord Jesus of the Navigators] (Ílhavo), Senhora do Cais [Our Lady of the Quayside] (Setúbal), Senhora de Porto Salvo [Our Lady of Safe Harbour] (Oeiras), Senhora do Monte [Our Lady of the Mountain] (Caparica), Senhora da Guia [Our Lady of Safe Conduct] (Vila do Conde), Senhora da Bonança [Our Lady of Fair Weather] (Sesimbra), Senhora da Encarnação [Our Lady of the Incarnation] (Buarcos), Senhora da Boa Viagem [Our Lady of Good Journey] (Peniche) and Senhora da Assunção [Our Lady of the Assumption] (Póvoa de Varzim) (Felgueiras 178). These were associated with all types of legends — miraculous images that appeared on the coast or of people saved *in extremis* by divine intervention — which justified the foundation of many chapels along the coastline (Marçal 94),

and a great number of *ex votos* displayed there in fulfilment of promises made by sailors, fishermen and their families. Some examples collected by Leite de Vasconcelos:

Oh, Our Lady of Fair Weather,  
Who are surrounded by angels;  
Save the fishermen,  
Remember their little children!

Our Lady of the Incarnation,  
Has a covering of glass,  
Given her by a mariner  
Who found himself lost at sea.

My fine Lord of the Stone  
Who stands by the seaside  
To guide the sailors  
Spare us from shipwreck (Vasconcelos *Cancioneiro Popular* II 313).

2.5. *Quando soa o temporal, mal pela terra, pior pelo mar*<sup>28</sup>  
[When the storm blows, bad on land, worse at sea]

Paulo Lopes, author of a book about the fear of the ocean, says that with the Discoveries came a change in popular mentalities, insofar as that, in their imaginary, the greatest fear was no longer of meeting terrible monsters that inhabited the deep, but rather the ocean itself, as a real and hostile force of nature. Thus, the worst of dangers from the sea was the storm (Lopes 110, 189), something that afflicted both deep-sea mariners and those who sailed the coastline. It is not by chance that erudite literature, from Homer and Virgil to Camões and Shakespeare, takes this theme for the highlight of its maritime epic.

There are numerous popular Portuguese traditions related to ways of calming a storm, carried out in different coastal villages. For example, in Leça da Palmeira, when a storm threatened, two



girls would sweep out the chapel of the Corpo Santo with sprigs of broom, as the legend claimed that doing this would lead to fair weather (Marçal 100). In Matosinhos, “when their husbands were out to sea, it being rough, they [the wives] would go up to it, light an oil lamp in front of an image and pour the rest of the oil onto the waves, with the idea of placating them” (Vasconcelos *Etnografia Portuguesa* VII 454). In Póvoa de Varzim there was a similar custom: the families of the fishermen would pour oil into the water to calm the storm. In Lisbon, when the sea was choppy, they would tie a knot in the end of a rope which was thrown into the water, and towed behind the boat (Vasconcelos *Etnografia Portuguesa* VII 454).

Not only those who went to sea suffered. In fact, the coasts (specially the open ones) are very vulnerable to the wind, with frequent damage to riverside areas. The rage of the elements often prevented fishermen from carrying on their trade, condemning them in some cases to destitution and hunger, and forcing the closure of the accesses to the ports seriously harming maritime trade. Not infrequently the waves crossed the shoreline and destroyed the buildings closest to it, whether they were simple fishermen’s huts, or villages of stone and mortar, or port structures. A chapbook entitled *Phoenix of the Storms*<sup>29</sup> gave an account of the great damage caused by bad weather in many European countries, including Portugal:

On 19 November 1724 in the port of the city of Lisbon there was a hurricane, which started with rain at 1 pm and lasted until 3 pm; and its effects were felt both on land and at sea. (...). The boats moored and anchored in the river were seized violently by the winds; with their cables unable to resist and their anchors failing they collided with one another. Apart from local boats, thirty-three English boats were damaged and seven were lost; of the French three were damaged, and another three Dutch; ships, fishing boats, frigates and launches, and a great number of people killed.

On the above-mentioned days of the same month [January 1731], in the Kingdom of the Algarve, the tide rose so extraordinarily that that no one there remembered another like it; and between Wednesday and Thursday a wind blew up so furiously that it drove the river waters more than a quarter of a league onto the land, flooding the houses on the outskirts of Vila Nova de Portimão, even the furthest, to a height of four to seven feet. The town of Albufeira lost many houses. Along the whole of that coast there were notable losses (Lemos 10-1).

Given that storms are a natural condition of sea life and seaport activities, some can argue that it can hardly be seen as an inhibitory factor for human presence alongside the coast. However, extreme weather conditions are one of the reasons why the protected coasts – like estuaries and coastal lagoons - have an older occupation: they are less exposed to the strong impact of these events. The occupation of the open coasts occurred later in part because the populations did not lived in areas known to be highly vulnerable to bad weather and sea invasions. Studies show that for centuries fishermen only settled on the open coasts in the summer, returning to their inland villages, where they work in the fields in the winter (Amorim “Da Pesca à salga” 26-9; Gillis 75-76). In France, after the terrible consequences of the passage of the storm Cynthia, in 2010, natural and social scientists sought to understand how the ancient societies lived with the sea. They discovered that most of the coastal villages stood on raised areas or in territories sheltered by dunes or salt marshes. Settlements were then well away from areas usually submerged by sea water (Sauzeau 112; Sauzeau and Acerra 126). As John Gillis has pointed “what in today’s real estate market is the most attractive of properties – the beach – was considered *terra nullis*, a void to be avoided.” (Gillis 106). The type of beach's urbanization that we can see today all around the world is a twentieth-century phenomenon, being the “product of a modern delusion: risk zero” (Sauzeau 112; Sauzeau and Acerra 126).

2.6. *Quem quiser andar pouco e mal, meta-se no areal*<sup>30</sup>

[He who wishes to get on little and poorly, let him go onto the shore]

Already in the nineteenth century, there were still many to think that the coast was not an appealing place. In 1873, Sousa Pimentel, a forester, wrote in his graduation thesis on the relevancy the afforestation of the coastal dunes the following:

The least-known and least-visited part of the country, the part least studied, is undoubtedly the coast, where there are few attractions, since what nature offers is very monotonous. [...] After experiencing a few times the sensations that the coast and the ocean produce in us, we don't try to repeat them any more; the landscapes of the interior with their hills and streams, with their pastures and cultivated fields, offer a more cheerful panorama [...] (Pimentel<sup>31</sup> 32-33).

Apart from the threats, real or imaginary, that impeded the settlement of peoples on some parts of the coast, the other compelling reason to live inland was related to their own subsistence. The shape of the Portuguese coastline is not, for the most part, favourable to the creation of harbours that can offer safe haven for shipping. On coasts of an open type, such as the one from Espinho to Nazaré, an almost straight coastline, the waves hit vigorously against the sand, creating a violent surf, hindering the passage of boats and making the task of fishing dangerous and almost impossible for part of the year. In other places, such as the Cape St Vincent coast, steep or sheer cliffs, very high waves, and a lack of river mouths limit the points of access to the sea (Moreira 56-7, 60, 62, 72; Dias, Pereira and Ferreira).

Agriculture too is hindered on these coasts by a lack of arable land, by the rarity or absence of fresh water, by the hostile climate, by the harmful impact of salt contamination on plant life, and by the destruction of farming land caused by loose sand carried by the wind. To these (negative) factors should be added the climatic characteristics of these areas — with large temperature

changes in the course of the day — the difficulty of moving on the sand, and the near absence (up to the nineteenth century) of roads and access paths to the villages closest to the coastline, especially in the areas where there are extensive sand-dunes (Dias 9). For instance, between Ovar and Furadouro, a distance of 4,5 kilometers, in 1821, there was “a league of deep sands so impenetrable even to the boldest walker that it took a day to cross from one end to the other” (Araújo and Lírío 322). The idea of the coast as a sterile land can also be seen in this description:

Only by walking along the Portuguese coast does one get an idea of its bleakness and remote places; it can be felt, and I certainly felt it, whipped by the needlepricks of the sand, in typhoon northerlies and in the despair of an unavoidable fate, the epic desolation of the barren land

Where there is neither bread nor grain,

Nor sustenance for a Christian (Peixoto<sup>32</sup> 121).

So for a long time the exposed coastal space imposed serious limitations on the way of living (and the survival) of human communities, constituting a place that was inhospitable and hostile for people who, for lack of scientific and technical means, were very susceptible to the fluctuations in available natural resources and to environmental conditions.

### 3. **The settlement on the coasts**

It is important to stress that the Portuguese coast has always been inhabited since ancient times, being a focus of attraction for the people of interior of the country. The Portuguese historian José Mattoso (18) believes that, although the living conditions were difficult and the attacks of pirates frequent, the income generated by the labors related to the sea was important enough to captivate men. However, there were areas more attractive than others. The distribution of the population shows that the people did not live on the coastline itself, but in the fertile river valleys, taking advantage of the penetration routes constituted by the long estuaries (Daveau

1140-41; Amorim “Homens da terra” 33). The phenomenon was not exclusively Portuguese, being characteristic of the settlement of all of the European Atlantic coast. Alain Cabantous notes that between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, despite a huge increase in trading and the discovery of other worlds beyond Europe, the number of coastal dwellers did not increase proportionately. During this period coastal Europeans distributed themselves in an irregular manner, shunning the hostile coasts of Essex, Languedoc, Flanders, eastern Provence, the coast of Gaul, and the Portuguese Estremadura, settling instead in sheltered territories, such as inlets and estuaries, that offered living spaces that were safe and rich in resources. Cornwall, Kent, Sussex, the eastern coast of Scotland, Brittany, the Basque provinces and Galicia are examples of protected spaces where the human presence was relatively dense. In the small places with close contact between the land and the sea the predominant figure was the farmer-fisherman, who lived to the rhythm of the complementary labours of agriculture and fishing. The maritime civilizations of modern Europe developed above all in the port cities sited in estuaries, where they combined the activities of coastal trading and international commerce (Cabantous 54-7). From north America come other examples. The pilgrims and the first explorers’ didn’t settle on the open coast, they prefer protected areas. Straight shores were considered the most dangerous ones, so “mariners navigated from harbor to harbor, estuary to estuary, avoiding” them (Gillis 106). Like in Europe, “from the first years of settlement until the middle of the nineteenth century, New Englanders dreaded the coastal zone as a wilderness beyond their capacity to shape and to cultivate. Long after the transformation of the forest wilderness into farmland and villages, the entire New England Coast remained as an objectification of chaos” (Stilgoe 1981).

In Portugal, the demographic evolution and the population distribution on the coast, between the Middle Ages and the beginning of modern times, point to a concentration around a few urban centers. The historian Armindo de Sousa, based on historical sources like the *rol dos tabeliães*

[list of notaries] (1287-1290), the rol das igrejas [list of the churches] (1320-1321) and the rol dos besteiros [list of crossbowmen] (1422), said: “the Portuguese fled from the coast, although they liked to have access to it. There was no city upon the waves. Lisbon, Coimbra, Porto and Silves were inland cities. (...). With the exception of the Northwest coastline, from Caminha to Aveiro, and the Algarve coast, everything else were deserted beaches and cliffs, apart from some fishing villages here and there without economic interest to the country” (Sousa 319). The count of the population, ordered by the King João III, in 1527, reinforce the idea that in the sixteenth century, the attractiveness of the coast was limited to specific places, usually at the mouths of rivers, corresponding to major towns like Lisbon, Porto, Vila do Conde and Viana da Foz do Lima. To the south of the Tagus, coastal population was smaller and, excluding the Algarve (which was not covered by the count), only the towns of Sesimbra, Setúbal, Sines and Milfontes stood out, being the latter two sparsely populated (Galego and Daveau 27). A century later, the situation had not changed: the population was still concentrated around the 8 or 10 major ports that kept maritime commerce with Brazil and the Atlantic Europe (Serrão 225).

It is only well into the nineteenth century that we do see an alteration in the patterns of settlement. In this period, the start of the modern canning industry and a turn to deep-sea fishing (cod) breathed new life into the fishing industry, through new demand for fish, more stable prices, an increase in sales networks, and an increase in catches. The increase in the number of persons involved in fishing, the general development in the national population and the rural exodus led to heightened demographic pressure on the coast and the occupation of new spaces, namely the open and exposed coastal areas that had until recently remained practically deserted (Moreira 208-9). At the same time, the emergence of sea bathing for medicinal purposes changed the coast into an attractive space, associated with the glitter and the pomp of the elites for whom it became the preferred place to spend the summer season. This phenomenon signified a change

in the perception of the coastline, transformed in this way from a savage and abandoned territory into a socially sanctioned and approved space for recreation and pleasure<sup>33</sup>. From the late nineteenth century, the development of the Portuguese railway network allowed more people to have access to the shoreline. Coastal areas distant from major urban centres (and before not easily accessible) – like Granja, Espinho, Figueira da Foz and Nazaré - were transformed into beach resorts, highly populated during the summer. Cafes, restaurants, casinos, hotels, apartment blocks, car parking and avenues invaded the area immediately next to the beach.

It seemed to be the end of the coast as a “landscape of fear”.

#### **4. Final considerations**

Historiography, literature, intellectual and political speeches, at particular times, have highlighted the glorious and heroic connection of the Portuguese with the sea, making it a symbol of national identity<sup>34</sup>. The popular Portuguese tradition, the lifestyle of maritime populations and the patterns of settlement on coastal areas show a distinct reality, or at least a non-linear one with regard to this relationship with the ocean. In fact, Portuguese popular tradition image of the coastline matches — quite well, one might say — the notion of the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan of the “landscapes of fear”: a desolate and hostile environment, with real and imaginary dangers, where survival is hard; that is at the same time the space of the marvellous, where anything can happen, a territory of adventure and opportunity (Tuan 10). For Tuan, as well as the popular tradition, landscapes of fear are those representing the wild, the chaos, the no-man’s-land, as opposed to spaces that are built, domesticated, anthropized, over which man exerts some control. So, the coast, the forest and the mountain are opposed to the orchard, the cultivated field, the garden (Guimarães 34; Tuan 79-80). Places independent of man, wrote the researcher Andreia Cavaleiro,

places that do not need his attentions to survive, escape the social rules and become places where the marvellous may take place. Consequently, in traditional texts “the natural element seems to have a more important role the closer and more dependent it is on the human being” (Cavaleiro 167-169).

Given that the coast for many centuries escaped from human domination, is there not an explanation here for the fact that it is less celebrated, less talked of, than the rural world? As long as society could not control the chaos of the maritime margins, stamping its mark on the landscape and moulding it in its own image, the coast was nobody’s territory. The fear of dangers from the sea, the vulnerability to storms and overwashes, and the scant resources available to individuals may have contributed decisively to the weak settlement of long stretches of coastline, which were real *territoires du vide* until the end of the nineteenth century. It was only after this date that we see intensive occupation of the coastal strip, in an almost continuous manner, from the north to the south of Portugal (and all around the world). It was a settlement that involved construction and transformation, the creation of an anthropized landscape, a bubble of order and security — the walls of a house, a seawall, a groyne — that offered protection from the sea, the sands and extreme weather events, but which is at the same time a constant reminder of human vulnerability. Since, “in a sense, every human construction - whether mental or material - is a component in a landscape of fear because it exists to contain chaos” (Tuan 6, 8).

The fear of the sea has determined for centuries the attitudes and habits of the people, enabling them to face the danger. In the second half of the twentieth century, with the arrival of new populations to the coast who did not know this territory, that notion of risk was lost. Modern societies with complex technologies believed to have been able to dominate the forces of nature, developing a form of unconsciousness in relation to its dangers (Sauzeau 111; Freitas and Dias 714-19). So it seemed to be the end of the coast as a “landscape of fear”. It seemed... because in



the past twenty years the spectrum of climate change, the rising of the sea mean level, the increase of coastal erosion problems at several points of the world, raise the question of the ability of humankind to control these highly dynamic and complex natural systems. The increasing concern that in the future extreme events can step up and put at danger all that humans have been building on the coast make us wonder if this space does not continue to be, in this perspective, a “landscape of fear”.

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## 6. Notes

1. Portuguese maritime explorations, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, that connected the Europeans with other cultures, territories and routes in Africa, America and Asia.
2. Luís de Camões (1524-1580), Portuguese poet, who inspired by the classics Homer and Virgil wrote the story of the Portuguese Discoveries in a poem called *Os Lusíadas*. His book is considered the masterpiece of Portuguese literature.

3. The historian Inês Amorim (“L’Exploitation de la Mer” 291, 309) has pointed out that during the celebration of the world exhibition Expo 98, in Lisbon, particular emphasis was given to the romantic image of Portugal as "a country of navigators".
4. This was the opinion of some Portuguese intellectuals like Martins (1845-1894) *História de Portugal*, Braga (1843-1924) *A Pátria Portuguesa*, Eça (1852-1929), Sampaio (1841-1908), Teles (1860-1930), Cortesão (1884-1960) and Sérgio (1883-1969).
5. For more on the topic of maritime historiography see Polónia 176-78.
6. The New State is the authoritarian regime in power in Portugal between 1933 and 1974.
7. For more on the topic of the Portuguese identity with the sea see Trindade 191, 262-65.
8. José Leite de Vasconcelos (1858-1941), ethnographer, archaeologist and philologist, dedicated himself to the register of the popular traditions, trying to preserve a world that he thought to be disappearing. The gathered information was published in several books and volumes, which represent the most important collection of data on Portuguese popular traditions.
9. Portuguese popular poem about the difficulties of the maritime journey: the scarcity of food and the demon temptations.
10. Francisco Ataíde de Oliveira (1842-1915), born in Algarve, in the south of Portugal, collected and published a set of local oral traditions (tales, superstitions, songs and prayers).
11. About the importance of the rural world in Portuguese popular tradition see Guimarães.
12. Orlando Ribeiro (1911-1997), Geography professor and researcher, is known as the renovator of this discipline in Portugal.
13. In this text we use the Portuguese edition of Corbin’s book, but there are others. For instance, the first one, in French, *Le Territoire du Vide* (Aubier, Paris, 1988) and the one in English, *The Lure of the Sea: Discovery of the Seaside in Western World 1750-1840* (Penguin Books, London and New York, 1995).

14. Proverb collected by António Delicado (1610-?), prior of the Catholic Church in Évora (city of Portugal), who published a book about the common proverbs at the time.
15. First verses of a song sung in Minho, Beira-Alta, Trás-os-Montes (Portugal) and Galiza (Spain), collected by Vasconcelos *Tradições Populares* 82.
16. See Ferdinandisi, Vuillimont and Anonymous. These chapbooks were found at the National Library of Portugal. Many of the Portuguese chapbooks talk about monsters, but only a few about maritime monsters. Jacome Ferdinandisi was the pseudonym of the Portuguese Anselmo Caetano de Abreu Castelo Branco. The other names are not known.
17. This citation is from Juan Amades's study on monsters on chapbooks. He mentions that in Catalan chapbooks there are four references to monsters appearing in Portugal. The monster from Mafra is one of them.
18. Portuguese proverb collected by Santos. This proverb is still used in Portugal, but most people do not know its original significance: the presence of pirates nearby. Nowadays it means that something seems suspicious and one should be careful.
19. News on a moor attack near Oporto published in the official newspaper *Gazeta de Lisboa*, the main periodic at the time. This type of news was very common showing that piracy was frequent. However, most of the attacks took place in the sea, not on land. This is why this example is so interesting, it allows to see how the local defensive systems worked.
20. Other examples can be found in Vasconcelos *Romanceiro Português* I 208, II 214.
21. Teófilo Braga (1843-1924), intellectual, professor and politician, gathered many Portuguese (and Azorean) traditions in several books like the *Romanceiro*. This is a collection of popular stories from different regions of Portugal.
22. Feliciano and Mascarenhas reports are examples of chapbook stories about pirates. The text of Mascarenhas wrote in 1627 – there is a new edition from 2012 – tells the story of the ship

*Conceição* set on fire near Ericeira (close to Lisbon), in 1621, after a terrible fight with seventeen moor ships, and the destiny of the survivors.

23. Professor at the University of the Algarve, Faro, Portugal, in informal conversation with the author.

24. Portuguese proverb collected by Santos. Its means that even in the end of a journey something can go wrong. This was particularly true for ships entering in ports, in the mouth of rivers, which were very dangerous areas.

25. Zófimo Consiglieri Pedroso (1851-1910), intellectual, professor, ethnographer and politician, from the same generation as Teófilo Braga and Leite de Vasconcelos, dedicated himself to the study and collection of Portuguese popular and oral traditions. In the book *Contribuições para uma mitologia popular* he gathered many superstitions and prayers. This formula to call for drowning bodies is from an important fishing community in the north of the country, Póvoa do Varzim.

26. Chapbooks' poems and stories can be about true or fantastic events. In these small books or pamphlets entertainment is more important than reliability. Newspapers also report sensationalized stories, but they are more concerned about the accuracy of the information.

27. Fausto Costa (1914-2006) dedicates a chapter to shipwrecks in the monography of Buarcos, a fishing village in the central area of Portugal, where he was from. Costa says that the blind used to sing these events in the streets and gives the example of this ditty written to commemorate the sinking of the ship *Beato*, 2 May 1913. He also says that the local authorities put a stone plate in Buarcos cemetery with the following inscription: «If you do not know of your dead / Have them in your heart / Near the cross of a cemetery / Pray them with devotion».

28. Portuguese proverb collected by Carrusca 88. Maria de Sousa Carrusca organized a proverb collection published in three volumes between 1974-1976, with the name “Voices of Wisdom”.

29. Written by António Correia de Lemos (1680-?) and published in 1732 it's a description of a series of storms, floods and other natural disasters that have hit many countries. The author attributes these disasters to evil spirits that punish humans for their sins.

30. Portuguese proverb collected by Santos. Alice Santos gathered in a dictionary, published in 2000, a collection of Portuguese proverbs, adages, sayings, maxims, aphorisms and idiomatic expressions.

31. Carlos de Sousa Pimentel (?-1912) presented his graduation thesis to the Instituto Superior de Agronomia [Institute of Agronomy], in 1873. The work was never published. We found the original manuscript at the Library of the Institute of Agronomy.

32. António Rocha Peixoto (1866-1909), professor, anthropologist and writer, organized in 1897 a volume called "Portuguese Land" with several articles about different issues. This citation is from one dedicated to the description of the coast near the town of Figueira da Foz, to the problem of the moving dunes and to their need to be afforested to be productive and useful.

33. For more on the topic of images, uses and human impacts on the coasts see Freitas.

34. Some examples can be see in Martins *História de Portugal*, Braga *Pátria Portuguesa*, Eça, Sampaio, Teles, Cortesão, Sérgio, Vieira, Pessoa, Castro, Marjay and Polónia.

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