

Book Review

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Gijs Dreijer, *The Power and Pains of Polisemy: Maritime Trade, Averages, and Institutional Development in the Low Countries (15th-16th Centuries)* (Leiden: Brill, 2023); xii+310 pp., €143.10, ISBN 978-90-04-54035-4.

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This is one of the essential books for researchers and readers interested in maritime insurance, risk management, and commercial regulation in the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Low Countries. To overcome doubts and the “pains of polysemy” surrounding the concept of averages, this work is indispensable. Published as volume 15 of *Brill’s Studies in Maritime History* – a series devoted to the international and comparative study of maritime history – Gijs Dreijer’s book stems from a doctoral thesis completed within the framework of the AveTransRisk project (ERC 724544), coordinated by Maria Fusaro (University of Exeter). Although the title may initially appear unusual, it is well justified given the semantic complexity (“the pains of polysemy”) and the range of uses of the term *average* during this historical period, which provided distinct advantages to merchants (“the power of polysemy”) in their late medieval and early modern maritime enterprises.

The book is structured in two parts and six chapters, framed by an introduction and a conclusion. The introduction, comprising 62 pages, which may strike readers as excessive, is divided into seven sections. Dreijer discusses the historical evolution of averages, maritime history, risk management, maritime law, and how this theme intersects with the institutional development of the Low Countries. Part I of the book focuses on the development of general averages (GAs) and risk management. Chapter 2, in particular, will likely be of special importance to the reader. Here, Dreijer outlines the polysemous nature of averages and their historical origins and provides a working definition. Drawing on an Arabic etymon (‘*awāriya*’), in the Low Countries *average* came to mean: “in the case of risk management the contribution was to reimburse the person having incurred damage, and in the case of cost management the contribution was to

common operational costs” (67). Chapter 3 examines evidence of averages in the European normative framework. Dreijer argues that GA was neither static nor uniform throughout history; on the contrary, it was subject to dispute, adaptation, and practical and legal development. This challenges the notion of a universal *lex maritima*, revealing instead a dynamic and polysemous process of legal construction, shaped by economic, political and jurisdictional interests in specific contexts such as Bruges and Antwerp. Chapter 4 explores the practical legal application of GA, showing how it was influenced by local legal practices, jurisdictional disputes, mercantile strategies and institutional change – particularly in the context of Iberian trade with Antwerp, where it served as an efficient legal solution even before formal codification.

The second part investigates the various forms of averages and their advantages in cost management. Chapter 5 focuses on contractual variants and cost-sharing practices, concluding that merchants and shipmasters developed practical and efficient contractual solutions that enabled predictability and equitable burden-sharing, contributing to a functional institutional system that lowered transaction costs and helped avoid litigation. Chapter 6 turns to consular averages, contributions and protection costs. Dreijer argues that the consular averages of the Castilian and Biscayan nations stood out for their innovative nature, serving to “simultaneously manage costs, minimise risks and create protection rents”. The conclusion praises GA and other forms of average as central legal and institutional tools in late medieval and early modern maritime risk and cost management.

Dreijer has left little room for criticism. One might suggest that the book could have more explicitly connected averages with the development of maritime insurance and other protective institutions, or that it is dense, with an extensive degree of contextual and historical framing. Yet none of these remarks detracts from the work’s quality; instead, they highlight Dreijer’s scholarly range and ability to draw on diverse historiographical traditions. The empirical foundations of the book are particularly impressive: it is based on a wide array of primary sources from various European archives, complemented by editions of English, German, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian documents. One should not overlook the extraordinary effort required to consult such a vast number of sources, often entailing complex historical-legal challenges.

This book is highly valuable for students and researchers interested in maritime risk management, maritime economics, legal jurisdictions and the evolution of maritime legal systems. At the same time, it offers comparative insights into the various actors involved in the development of averages, including case studies of the Spanish, Portuguese and Genoese communities in Antwerp. Dreijer’s methodological approach will likely inspire future research, with his extensive footnotes, references, definitions and arguments serving as a model for the study of maritime history in the early modern period.

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