

Eating Apart Together?

Commensal Rules, Customs and Deviations Aboard Ostend Company Ships (1722-1731)

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Commensality – the act of eating together – and its social effects of creating or reinforcing social groups has been studied extensively. In life aboard ships, in particular, eating together is attributed a key role in reflecting and thereby enforcing the professional hierarchies deemed fundamental to the functioning of the ship. However, transgressions of these commensal rules and customs have often been overlooked. Taking the eighteenth-century Ostend Company based in the Southern Low Countries as a case, this article argues that commensal deviations were possible for a variety of reasons, ranging from a means of disciplining crew members to signalling discontent and waging power struggles. Nevertheless, transgressions were temporary: regardless of the success in attaining the envisaged goals, the commensal structure was quickly restored. Thus, rather than threatening the social hierarchy vital to the ship's functioning, this article argues that these deviations helped sustain it by providing outlets for tensions before more serious challenges to on-board hierarchy could arise.

Commensaliteit – het gebruik om samen te eten – en de sociale gevolgen hiervan, zoals het creëren of versterken van sociale groepen, zijn uitvoerig bestudeerd. Vooral in het leven aan boord van schepen wordt aan gezamenlijke maaltijden een sleutelrol toegekend: ze weerspiegelen en bevestigen de professionele hiërarchieën die cruciaal zijn voor het functioneren van het schip. Overtredingen van deze commensale regels en gewoonten zijn tot heden echter weinig bestudeerd. Dit artikel neemt de achttiende-eeuwse Oostendse Compagnie, gevestigd in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden, hiervoor als casus en betoogt dat afwijkingen van de regels om gezamenlijk te eten verschillende doelen hadden zoals het disciplineren van bemanningsleden, het signaleren van ontevredenheid of het voeren van machtsconflicten. Deze overschrijdingen waren tijdelijk van aard en de commensale

structuur werd steeds snel hersteld. Dit artikel betoogt dat deze afwijkingen geen bedreiging voor de sociale hiërarchie aan boord vormden, maar juist bijdroegen tot het in stand houden hiervan en als uitlaatklep voor spanningen fungeerden zodat ernstigere uitdagingen voor de machtsverhoudingen aan boord konden worden voorkomen.

Introduction¹

It was 6 May 1725 and Chaplain Onnokati Ferrari had had enough. He had been the official ship chaplain of the Ostend Company ship *Sint-Elisabeth* ever since it had left the Chinese port of Canton headed for its home port in the Southern Low Countries. Little had he known that life aboard the *Sint-Elisabeth* would prove so challenging. Conflicts between crew members occurred daily, between captain and merchants, officers and sailors, merchants and their clerks – the small community was rife with tension. To aggravate matters, Ferrari had been obliged to spend a considerable portion of his time at the bedside of Captain Balthazar Roose, attending to the ailing captain during his month-long death struggle against dysentery. A month spent on unsuccessfully attempting to get the captain to repent, and being cursed at, had been challenging enough, but what happened on 6 May was the last straw. At noon, while he made his way to the ship's cabin – the room in the rear of the ship where officers and merchants shared their meals – Ferrari discovered that merchant Guillaume-François De Waersegher had returned from his personal quarters after an illness. The merchant had disdainfully moved the clergyman's plate across the table, as he was appalled that during his bed-ridden absence his customary seat next to the captain had been claimed by the chaplain. Affronted and seething, the chaplain announced he would take his meal with the petty officers, gathered his tableware, left the cabin, and loudly vowed never to set foot in it again.²

The incident, as related by ship clerk Gerard De Bock, reveals that aboard the *Sint-Elisabeth* officers and petty officers apparently ate in different

1 This article is based on my master's thesis: Dennis De Vriese, *Boten, broden en broeders? Voeding, eetcultuur en sociale (on)gelijkheid aan boord van de schepen van de Generale Keizerlijke Indische of 'Oostendse' Compagnie (1722-1731)* (Master's thesis; Vrije Universiteit Brussel 2018). I would like to thank Wouter Ryckbosch for his supervision of this thesis, as well as continuing suggestions during the preparations for this article. I would like to extend my gratitude to the colleagues of the research group Historical Research into

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2 Felixarchief Antwerpen (hereafter FAA), Generale Indische of Oostendse Compagnie (hereafter GIC), cat. nr. GIC#2397#8, Scheepsjournaal, particulier journaal van Gerard De Bock, folio 60v.

places. Such observations about on-board hierarchies at mealtimes are not new: over the past two decades, sociologists and historians alike have stressed the crucial role of commensality, the act of eating together, as a social act with profound impact, structuring daily life and social interactions. Sociologist and anthropologist Claude Fischler saw this as a creative process: eating together creates or strengthens bonds and fosters kinship, implicitly following sociologist Georg Simmel's 1957 observation that 'with each common meal (...) the same group becomes "more society" than it was before'.³ Sociologist Claude Grignon considered commensality less a process and more a reflection of the social composition of a society: pre-existing relations are reflected and enforced by who eats together and thus commensality provides a means of distinguishing the social groups present in a given society and understanding their mutual relationships.⁴

The idea and concept of commensality as creating and strengthening social distinctions has been embraced eagerly by social historians. Allen Grieco, Mary Hyman and Peter Scholliers followed Grignon in stressing how commensality played a major role in identity construction throughout history, especially in hierarchical societies where they served to create and maintain hierarchies.⁵ Similarly, Gervase Rosser and Laura Crombie demonstrated how, by the early modern period, European societies had a long history of using exceptional meals to demarcate group boundaries between members and non-members of certain (sub-)groups.⁶ In more everyday early modern meals Paul Steven Lloyd likewise discovered how commensality fostered senses of both social inclusion and exclusion as groups were either welcome or unwelcome at meals.⁷ When these firmly established and stressed social hierarchies intersected with professional relations, this process became even more explicit. Raffaella Sarti explored

3 Claude Fischler, 'Commensality, society and culture', *Social Science Information* 50:3-4 (2011) 533. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0539018411413963>; Michael Symons, 'Simmel's gastronomic sociology: An overlooked essay', *Food and Foodways* 5:4 (1994) 335. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07409710.1994.9962016>.

4 Claude Grignon, 'Commensality and Social Morphology: An Essay of Typology', in: Peter Scholliers (ed.), *Food, Drink and Identity. Cooking, Eating and Drinking in Europe since the Middle Ages* (Berg Publishers 2001) 24.

5 Allen Grieco, Mary Hyman and Peter Scholliers, 'Food and Drink Excesses in Europe. Admissible and Inadmissible Behaviour from Antiquity to the

Twenty-first Century', *Food & History* 4:2 (2006) 9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.FOOD.1.100079>.

6 Gervase Rosser, 'Going to the Fraternity Feast: Commensality and Social Relations in Late Medieval England', *Journal of British Studies* 33:4 (1994) 443. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/386064>; and Laura Crombie, 'Honour, community and hierarchy in the feasts of the archery and crossbow guilds of Bruges, 1445-81', *Journal of Medieval History* 37:1 (2011) 112. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmedhist.2010.12.008>.

7 Paul Lloyd, *Diet, Luxury and Social Identity in England, 1540-1640* (unpublished PhD-thesis; University of Leicester 2009) 194.

how, in households affluent enough to afford them, servants ate at separate tables, spatially divided from the master of the house and his family.⁸ In doing so, commensality served the very clear purpose of not only reflecting but enforcing the hierarchies that were deemed important. Through the use of different rooms, tables and seating arrangements, these distinctions were driven home.⁹ Historical research attributes a great complexity to commensality, with different occasions characterised by at times opposing commensal custom, all playing different roles in establishing and preserving group demarcations. However, the flexibility of commensal norms and the degree to which they could be and were deviated from, has received much less attention.

Maritime historians too tend to understudy the flexibility and deviations of commensality, as they focus more on commensality as sets of iron-clad rules. The divisions are then considered one of many ways in which the fundamental hierarchy aboard was ingrained in daily life. In this light, differences in diet between sailors and officers have been a regular staple of such studies, along with the practical organisation of meals, albeit less frequently.¹⁰ In exploring the realities of shipbound life, Dorothy Volo and James Volo emphasised how such differences reflected and enforced the overarching professional and social hierarchy dominating on-board life.¹¹ Herman Ketting, in studying various elements of life aboard ships of the seventeenth-century Dutch East India Company, reached similar conclusions: in almost every aspect of daily life these hierarchies were reflected, including at mealtimes. The incredibly isolated and spatially limited context of life aboard is seen as the main reason why the central hierarchy of shipbound labour was extended to all aspects of life, from sleeping arrangements to dining formalities.¹² So the commensal divides between officers and sailors are stressed as serving to confirm and enforce the hierarchies so central to

8 Raffaella Sarti, *Europe at Home: Family and Material Culture, 1500-1800* (Yale University Press 2002) 156-157.

9 Paul Freedman, 'Medieval and Modern Banquets: Commensality and Social Categorization', in: Susanne Kerner, Cynthia Chou and Morten Warmind (eds.), *Commensality: From Everyday Food to Feast* (Bloomsbury Academic 2015) 103 and Phil Withington, 'Company and sociability in early modern England', *Social History* 32:3 (2007) 300. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071020701425338>.

10 Peter Diebels, 'Voeding op de schepen van de VOC', *Leidschrift* 4:2 (1988) 41-64.

11 Dorothy Volo and James Volo, *Daily Life in the Age of Sail* (Greenwood Press 2002) 122 and 151.

12 Matthias van Rossum, *Werkers van de wereld. Globalisering, arbeid en interculturele ontmoetingen tussen Aziatische en Europese zeelieden in dienst van de VOC, 1600-1800* (Uitgeverij Verloren 2014) 117; Erving Goffman, 'On the Characteristics of Total Institutions', in: Erving Goffman, *Asylums. Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates* (Anchor Books 2017 [1961]) 16. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351327763>; and Herman Ketting, *Leven, werk en rebellie aan boord van Oost-Indiëvaarders (1595-1650)* (Amsterdam 2002) 144-145.



▲
Trajectory of an Ostend Company ship bound for Canton drawn by La Ville Pichard, lieutenant on the Arent, in his ship log of 1724. ©Antwerp City Archives (Felixarchief), c1c#5688.

the ship's functioning and survival.¹³ However, the commensal divisions elucidated by maritime historians are often limited to distinctions between officers and sailors, while the conflict aboard the *Sint-Elisabeth* already suggests a much more complex set of relationships featuring different officers, petty officers, sailors and various locations.¹⁴ The full complexity of such commensal relations and how they related to existing hierarchies remains to be fully explored.

The tendency of scholars to trace the central hierarchy through every single aspect of daily life aboard ships is often explicitly or implicitly based on sociologist Erving Goffman's seminal work on total institutions.¹⁵ These are defined as places of residence and work cut off from wider society, in which all aspects of life take place under the same authority and according to a strict schedule.¹⁶ The hierarchical divide between 'managers' (prison wardens, doctors, officers) and the 'managed' (inmates, patients, sailors) is expected to be reflected in, and enforced by, the structure of everyday life. As a result, deviations from these structures are to be avoided at all costs because they threaten the hierarchy key to the institution's functioning.

Yet opponents of the classification of a ship as a total institution emphasise that the isolation and spatial limitation of the ship is a side effect of the ship's nature as a technical artefact, not a functional necessity as is the case for total institutions as army barracks and prisons. In addition, unlike other institutions, officers on board of ships are to a large degree dependent on sailors' skills and labour to maintain the ship.¹⁷ The shipbound community is a hybrid community with a top-down hierarchy enforced on all aspects of daily life combined with a relative bottom-up dependence inherently limiting this enforcement. This provides an unparalleled view on the process of commensality and its functioning. While deviations from the rules governing daily shipbound life have been studied by historians interested in mutinies and social strife, transgressions of the more subtle rules of commensality have so far been overlooked.

This article seeks to address these lacunae by exploring the complexity of the commensal structure aboard Ostend Company East Indiamen. On these long-distance trading ships the social and practical importance of

13 Karel Degryse, 'Sociale en sexuele spanningen aan boord van de Oostendse Oost-Indiëvaarders (1715-1734)', in: Christiaan Koninckx (ed.), *Bijdragen tot de internationale maritieme geschiedenis*.

Collectanea Maritima 4 (KVAB 1988) 73.

14 Pablo E. Pérez-Mallaína, *Spain's Men of the Sea: Daily Life on the Indies Fleet in the Sixteenth Century* (John Hopkins University Press 2005) 142.

15 Van Rossum, *Werkers van de wereld*, 117; Goffman, 'On the Characteristics', 16; Ketting, *Leven*,

werk en rebellie, 144-145 and Jan Lucassen, 'A Multinational and its Labor Force: The Dutch East India Company, 1595-1795', *International Labor and Working-Class History* 66 (2004) 30.

16 Goffman, 'On the Characteristics', 17.

17 Heide Gerstenberger, 'Men Apart: The Concept of "Total Institution" and the Analysis of Seafaring', *International Journal of Maritime History* 8:1 (1996) 174. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/084387149600800110>.

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▲ Example of an average ship log, written by Pieter Valckenier, helmsman on the Concordia, 1728. Page detailing notes on 21, 22, 23 and 24 February 1728. ©Ghent University Library, BHSL.HS.1850.

such a structure was uniquely intense and crucial. Life and survival aboard these technically highly complex vessels deeply depended on collective and coordinated labour for very long periods, in which a solid social structure played an important role.¹⁸ It also examines how these rules could be transgressed or circumvented by individual actors to serve their personal goals. It hypothesises that, despite commensal rules being a reflection and enforcement of vital on-board hierarchies, they could and were bent by individual actors in pursuit of personal aims. Furthermore, it proposes a more flexible conception of the commensal structure in which such deviations were, to a degree, functional: the structure was able to bend temporarily, absorbing tensions and shocks without threatening existing hierarchies.

The Ostend Company or GIC (*Generale Keizerlijke Indische Compagnie*) held the monopoly on trade between the Southern Low Countries and the Indian coasts and Canton between 1722 and 1731. During its brief but highly lucrative existence, the GIC sent out 21 individual ships, with on average 95 people on board, their life at sea is the focus of this study. Historian Karel Degryse has argued that life aboard Ostend Company ships could be rife with tensions, both social and sexual, and could occasionally explode into conflicts, violence and sexual crimes, yet, his implicit call for further research has, until now, largely gone unheeded.¹⁹

The first part of this article briefly sketches the sources and methodology used. Next, the general diet on board is outlined before delving into commensality itself. The latter commences with a closer look at commensality among officers in the cabin. Next, divisions of tables, differences in seating arrangements and degrees of mobility are discussed. Afterwards, attention shifts down to the deck and below, as commensality among the rest of the crew is studied. Throughout the analysis attention will be paid to the organisation of commensality on a daily basis, as well as the degree to which individual agency allowed for deviation and how such violations were used by actors to pursue particular ends. The final section argues for a much more complex conception of shipbound commensality than before, in which both rules and deviations were functional in strengthening and maintaining professional hierarchies.

Sources and methodology

The main sources underpinning this research are Ostend Company ship logs, official reports of the journeys undertaken by Company ships, compiled by the highest officers on board.²⁰ Generally consisting of notes added on a

18 Van Rossum, *Werkers van de wereld*, 116.

19 Degryse, 'Sociale en sexuele spanningen', 69.

20 Roland Baetens, 'De navigatie bij de Generale Indische Compagnie', in: Ronald Baetens et al.

daily basis, these logs were specifically meant to function as extensive reports for the Company directors, who remained at the Company headquarters in Antwerp, to peruse.²¹ To serve in this capacity, logs included daily notes on the ship's course, speed and the prevailing winds.²² Sporadic notes on daily events could be added depending on what authors deemed interesting to report.²³ While written from the perspective of the ship's higher-ups and dependent on individual interests, these notes provide both a window on the practice of life on board, recording events that reveal agency, as well as shed light on how authors expected daily life to be structured.

All 24 surviving GIC ship logs were studied. These are preserved in the Antwerp City Archives and the Ghent University Library and span the entire period of the Company's maritime activities and report on 85 percent of its ships. Various officers kept individual logs, as a result some ships are covered by more than one officer aboard. In total, this amounted to entries on around 7,000 separate days on 17 individual ships. Relevant entries relating to food and meals were collected into a database, resulting in 640 entries being retained. The large majority of these, 437 entries, were concerned with provisioning: buying food, hunting or inspecting stocks. 203 however, or about 31 percent, dealt with events and habits relating to meals, allowing a closer look at daily meals and commensality. These were then grouped according to whether they shed light on the daily commensal structure (155 entries or 77 percent) or rather reported deviations (67 entries or 33 percent). The overlap between these categories is due to deviations which by their very nature shed light on what was considered the regular state of affairs. The first group was used to reconstruct the entirety of commensal structures, while the second group was further subdivided with regards to the cause of the deviations such as conflict, punishment, and reward.

The logs first and foremost served a maritime and administrative purpose. As captains and other high-ranking officers could be judged on how they led their ship and managed to complete the trading expedition, they were heavily incentivised to minimise or underreport conflicts and tensions aboard. Furthermore, only high-ranking officers and merchants kept such journals. While these hierarchically biased sources provide an exceptional view on the daily life of a certain segment of the crew, they also supply, depending on events and authors' interests, occasional glimpses of the lives of the rest of the crew, whose voices are so rarely heard in the available source material.

One exceptional document providing unique insight is the journal of Gerard De Bock. As a ship's clerk, De Bock was tasked with assisting

(eds.), *Nautische en hydrografische kennis in België en Zaïre. Historische bijdragen*. Collectanea Maritima III (KVAB 1987) 37-38.

21 Baetens, 'De navigatie', 22.

22 Ghent University Library (hereafter GUL), Fonds Hye-Hoys, BHSL.HS.1850 6.

23 Degryse, 'Sociale en sexuele spanningen', 69-70.

the supercargoes – merchants responsible for procuring the cargo – by meticulously recording all trade transactions as well as supporting them in any other tasks requiring writing skills. Appalled by goings-on aboard the *Sint-Elisabeth* (which sailed from Ostend to Canton and back between 1724 and 1726), he compiled a hybrid document between a ship log and personal diary.²⁴ He did not opt for brief daily annotations but instead made more spontaneous, sporadic and lengthier notes. While these provide more extensive and prosaic insights in daily life aboard, the document is not quite a personal diary. Its clearly stated goal was to provide the Company directors with a record of incidents on board, which also explains why this, to some degree very personal, document was preserved in the Ostend Company archives. Perhaps partly driven by personal vendettas, partly by professional ambitions, De Bock went out of his way to interpret the behaviour of the ship's top officers and merchants in as unflattering a light as possible. He often revelled in describing conflicts, unrest and tensions aboard. In doing so, De Bock sought to demonstrate his own insight and skills in trading and travelling, and perhaps successfully so, given his subsequent promotion to company merchant.²⁵ His interpretation of life aboard as at all times replete with tensions, conflicts and violence thus cannot be taken at face value. De Bock's focus on the sensational and the exceptional unavoidably brought with it a certain disregard for everyday routine. Entire uneventful weeks were at times ignored in the journal. Nevertheless, he provided a unique perspective on minor annoyances, uneasy tensions and crucial conflicts aboard, which feature much less prominently in the formal journals.

Commensality and everyday life aboard

Ordinary sailors had the most basic diet of all those on board, highly similar to that of other companies of seafaring nations. Breakfast was served at eight in the morning and consisted of gruel made by adding oil, molten fat, vinegar or beer to dry groats.²⁶ At noon (twelve o'clock) and in the evening (six o'clock) meat, bacon or stockfish was served alongside peas or ship biscuit, an easy to preserve type of very hard twice-baked bread requiring extensive soaking before being fit for consumption.²⁷ In theory, every week counted four so-

24 FAA, GIC#2397#8.

25 Karel Degryse and Jan Parmentier, 'Kooplieden en kapiteins. Een prosopografische studie van de kooplieden, supercargo's, en scheepsofficieren van de Oostendse handel op Oost-Indië en Guinea (1716-1732)', in: Christiaan Koninckx (ed.), *Vlamingen overzee. Flamands en outre-mer*.

Flemings Overseas. Collectanea Maritima VI (KVAB 1995) 163.

26 Roland Baetens, 'De voedselrantsoenen van de zeevarenden: de theorie getoetst aan de werkelijkheid', *Bijdragen tot de Geschiedenis* 60 (1977) 281.

27 Pérez-Mallaína, *Spain's Men*, 141.

called ‘meat days’ and three ‘fish days’, although, as on all ships of the time, this was contingent on stocks and could be altered according to needs.²⁸ In the first few weeks after departure, meals were more diverse as large amounts of potatoes, pumpkins, turnips and cabbages were loaded aboard either in Ostend or in Asian ports. As the weeks ground on, however, the basic diet once again became dominant on the two-year-long voyages.²⁹ It was supplemented by limited daily rations of brandy, unlimited access to weak beer and meagre supplies of water not used by the cooks.³⁰

While differences in status and hierarchy determined access to food, the sailor diet provided the blueprint for the nourishment of all others aboard and was upgraded per rank. Petty officers’ meals were regularly supplemented with bottles of wine.³¹ Officers not only had access to higher quality food (freshly baked bread or white bread rather than ship biscuits, stronger beer, higher quality meat) but also to much bigger portions.³² Low-ranking officers were given much more wine than petty officers, while high-ranking officers had unlimited access.³³ Finally, officers could buy their own ingredients, such as sugar, mustard and various types of cured meat, and request the officer cook to prepare special meals with these, such as pastries, spit-roast meat, and soup.³⁴ Following international naval customs of the time, sailors were dependent on very basic rations, while increasing rank equalled increasing dietary privileges.³⁵

Differences between officers and sailors went deeper than different diets. Muster rolls, lists of employees on board of each ship, feature both a cook for the crew (‘cock van d’Equipagie’) and a cook for the cabin (‘cock van de cayutte’).³⁶ This division between crew and cabin entailed more than logistics:

28 FAA, GIC#5809, Rekeningen, brieven enz. over Kapitein Perrenot Phoenix Cadix-Tranquebar, 1v.

29 FAA, GIC#5754, Concordia. Consumptieboek, 36r.

30 Carla Jordi, *De scheepsbemanningen der Vlaamse Oost-Indië-vaarders (1718-1733)* (unpublished PhD-thesis; Ghent University 1974) 84; Craig Muldrew, *Food, Energy and the Creation of Industriousness. Work and Material Culture in Agrarian England, 1550-1780* (Cambridge University Press 2011) 74. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511933905>; Marius Roessingh, ‘De watervoorziening op de schepen van de v.o.c.’ *Spiegel Historiae* 2:1 (1967) 21.

31 Baetens, ‘De voedselrantsoenen’, 276.

32 FAA, GIC#5754, 1v; Baetens, ‘De voedselrantsoenen’, 284; FAA, GIC#5747, Consumptieboek Marquis de Prié, 34r.

33 Christiaan Koninckx, ‘Voeding op zee in de 18e eeuw. Een kwantitatief en vergelijkend onderzoek’, *Marine Academie v.z.w.: Mededelingen* 24:1 (1979) 6; Ketting, *Leven*, 88.

34 FAA, GIC#5804, Inventarissen en leveranciersboekjes van de schepen, Peis, Hope, Leeuw, Arent, 264r; FAA, GIC#5748, Consumptieboek van den Duc de Lorraine, 20v; FAA, GIC#5814, Verzoekschrift herstel der Compagnie, 9r and 62r and FAA, GIC#5804, 65v; FAA, GIC#2397#8, 24v.

35 Charles Boxer, ‘The Annual Lecture 1962. The Dutch East-Indiamen: Their Sailors, Their Navigators, And Life On Board, 1602-1795’, *The Mariner’s Mirror* 49:2 (1963) 94. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00253359.1963.10657720>.

36 GUL, BHSL.HS.2008, passim.

cabin-cooks were consistently paid 25 percent more than their counterparts for the crew, had much more diverse national backgrounds and were directly hired as cabin cooks, while cooks for the crew more often started as assistant cooks before being promoted after a few voyages.³⁷ Moreover, ship inventories suggest cabin-cooks had a larger supply of basic cookery tools, such as pans and knives, and often of a higher quality.³⁸ Dietary inequalities between officers and non-officers meant they also handled sets of tools entirely unique to the more diverse and labour-intensive dishes they prepared for the officers, such as pie-shapes, skewers and teapots.

The cabin

A question of access

The term ‘cabin cook’ referred to the locus of mealtimes: cabin cooks only prepared meals for those members of the crew who consumed their meals in the cabin at the ship’s rear. Much like the rest of the ship’s high stern, where officers’ individual living quarters were located, lower-ranking crew members were unwelcome there, unless summoned.³⁹ Only officers, passengers, merchants and the chaplain were allowed to take their meals in this central room at the back of the ship.⁴⁰ If the captain or supercargoes had clerks to support them, they were also welcome. The rest of the crew had their meals on deck in fair weather or on one of the lower decks. This division between those ‘in’ and ‘out’ of the cabin was among the most fundamental on the ship and was dictated by iron-clad rules issued by the Company directors. Research on the Dutch East India Company has revealed that this division to a large degree determined which social bonds were made or sought out.⁴¹

Nevertheless, in practice, this division was not set in stone. Ship clerk De Bock’s own ongoing conflict over the time he spent assisting the captain rather than his direct superiors, the supercargoes, led to his banishment from the cabin in February 1725 by the latter. As a consequence De Bock, an officer himself (see appendix), had to work, eat and live alongside the sailors. Generally the captain and first supercargo were expected to make joint decisions on board, except those related to the material functioning of the ship, which was the captain’s sole purview. The other merchants held a particular position: they were considered among top officers in social settings while having a separate chain of command only overseen by the captain and

37 De Vriese, *Boten, broden en broeders?*, 126-127.

38 FAA, GIC#5804, 20r.

39 Jerzy Gawronski, ‘East Indiaman Amsterdam research 1984-1986’, *Antiquity* 64:243 (1990) 368.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00078029>;

Ketting, *Leven*, 85-86.

40 Baetens, ‘De voedselrantsoenen’, 275.

41 Ketting, *Leven*, 138.

the chief or ‘first’ supercargo. This ambiguity and fragile balance of power was used eagerly by the *Sint-Elisabeth*’s merchants to ban more and more officers from the cabin as tensions continued to flare. Only the mounting pressure of these officers persuaded the captain to directly challenge the merchants and restore customary access to the cabin.⁴² Once again all officers, merchants and their supporting staff, including De Bock, were free to use the cabin as originally prescribed by the Company directors. Thus deviations from the divide between cabin and crew, however temporary, could arise from personal resistance in order to signal discontent, or as a consequence of the power used by actors to bend existing rules as weapons to wage personal vendettas.⁴³

A question of tables

As customary, the supercargoes of the *Hertogh van Lorreynden* received specific instructions from the Company directors prior to embarking in 1732. Most instructions dealt with the sales and purchases to be made, but at the very beginning of the document the directors ordered the supercargoes and captain to ensure that the meal in the cabin was ‘well-regulated’ and to enforce the strict division between the ‘first’ and ‘second’ tables (see appendix).⁴⁴ Only specific members of the crew could eat at the first table: the captain, supercargoes, priest, first and second helmsmen, first and second clerks and first surgeon.⁴⁵ Other, lower-ranking officers were expected to have their meals at the second table.⁴⁶ As set out in the appendix, these were predominantly officers who were directly subordinate to members of the first table in their daily labour, such as assistant helmsmen, surgeons or clerks. This distinction was enshrined in very clear rules from the directors. Inventories confirm that these ‘tables’ were more than abstract tools to demarcate commensal units. They referred to actual physical tables: while cabins on GIC-ships without exception contained at least a (first) table, the second table could on occasion be no more than a bench.⁴⁷

Existing research suggests that many of the diners at the first table came from reasonably well-to-do and important backgrounds. The supercargoes in particular were often already successful tea, textiles or porcelain merchants before joining a trading voyage in company service.⁴⁸ Similarly, surgeons had to be officially recognised practitioners of some

42 FAA, GIC#2397#8, 28v.

43 FAA, GIC#2397#8, 28v.

44 FAA, GIC#5524, Carolus Sextus, 3v.

45 FAA, GIC#5524, Carolus Sextus, 3v.

46 Jordi, *De scheepsbemanningen*, 82.

47 FAA, GIC#5804, 181; FAA, GIC#5809, 27v.

48 Jan Parmentier, *Het gezicht van de Oostendse handelaar. Studie van de Oostendse kooplieden, reders en ondernemers actief in de internationale maritieme handel en visserij tijdens de 18de eeuw* (Oostendse Historische Publicaties 2004) 48, 231, 251 and 331.

standing before being considered.⁴⁹ Chaplains too had to hold a certain esteem, as they required the permission of both the diocese of Bruges and Rome to serve. Captains tended to be well-established as well: they often either had experience with commanding a vessel or had a close affinity with trade, reflected in commercial backgrounds or careers as merchants after their return.⁵⁰ Successful captains or supercargoes often went on to hold public office in Ostend, again indicative of their relatively privileged origins.⁵¹ It was much more rare for crew members from more modest backgrounds to work their way up through the ranks to become captains.⁵²

In practice, the mealtime division between high- and low-ranking officers was not immutable. As displeasure with the provided meals was met with accusations of ingratitude, ship clerk De Bock aboard the *Sint-Elisabeth* reported a violent disagreement between Captain Roose and first supercargo Spendelow at dinner on 30 April 1724. Afterwards, as Spendelow was rebuked by an officer for striking the captain, he lashed out at the officer, banishing him to the second table.⁵³ Clearly, the officer's customary place at the first table, set by the Company directors, could be denied as a tool in ongoing conflicts between crew members. Evidently, this measure was not devoid of power (im)balances. First supercargo Spendelow felt justified in mobilising his power to castigate the overly meddling officer. However, as the directors' instructions tasked both the captain and first supercargo with matters of the first table, the banished officer managed to nullify his dismissal, according to De Bock, mainly thanks to his personal friendship with the captain.⁵⁴

Not everyone had such a lucky escape, as illustrated by events on a different voyage several years later, aboard the *Arent* in early 1727. On 6 February, the ship's second-in-command, Pieter Cloux, had decided on a minor alteration to the ship's course without consulting Captain De Waele. A stern rebuke by the captain followed and an offended Cloux disappeared into the bowels of the ship, cursing. The following day, tensions came to a head as the second-in-command felt threatened by the captain. Reproaches and accusations were made by both captain and second-in-command, leading Cloux to call his captain a 'wicked liar' ('Valsche Leugenaer'), a 'scoundrel' ('schelm') and 'trash' ('kanaelie'), among other epithets.⁵⁵ The captain felt he could not let such insubordination pass, but did not desire to discipline his second-in-command excessively. He chose to banish him to the second table as a disciplinary measure.⁵⁶ This swift action earned him the compliments of Captain Larmes of the *Leeuw*, overall commander of

49 Jordi, *De scheepsbemanningen*, 24.

50 Degryse and Parmentier, 'Kooplieden', 164.

51 Degryse and Parmentier, 'Kooplieden', 156.

52 Parmentier, *Het gezicht*, 133.

53 FAA, GIC#2397#8, 5v.

54 FAA, GIC#5524, 3v; FAA, GIC#2397#8, 5v.

55 FAA, GIC#5802, folio 66r.

56 FAA, GIC#5802, folio 66r.

the voyage, confirming the perceived effectiveness of removing commensal privileges as a disciplinary measure.⁵⁷ It proved indeed effective: after a month at the second table, Cloux sent the captain a written apology for his behaviour and approached him, taking off his hat and thanking him for his forgiveness, purposefully in plain sight of the sailors on watch, thereby closing the matter.⁵⁸

Similar to the access to the cabin, the fault lines separating first and second tables were not unchangeable. They could be transgressed for a variety of reasons, from signalling discontent to administering punishments. However, in the end, commensal custom was highly resilient: deviations were often of a temporary nature and, before long, customary divisions returned.

A question of seats

Even at shared tables, sharp distinctions were expressed by means of seating arrangements. Unlike entry to the cabin or access to the first table, these arrangements were not determined by clear-cut rules set by the company directors. Left entirely to the discretion of the captain and first supercargo, the exact allocation of seats was a matter of custom.⁵⁹

A unique insight into how seats were arranged is provided by De Bock's journal, as it outlines how seating was rearranged among high-ranking officers in 1725, following Captain Roose's death of dysentery. A very distinct hierarchy of seats is revealed (see table). First, former second-in-command and new Captain Perenot offered the late captain's place of honour (seat 1 in the table) to first supercargo Spendelow. However, when the captain attempted to bestow the seat at Spendelow's right (2) on the second supercargo, the merchant refused, stating that this was too much of an honour and should be reserved for Perenot himself. So the merchant seated himself on the left of Spendelow (3), the captain taking the other seat (2). When three weeks later third supercargo De Waersegher rejoined the first table after being ill, a seating reshuffle was again in order. De Waersegher reclaimed his seat to the left of the place of honour (3), the second supercargo once again declined the honour of dining to Spendelow's right (2) and instead sat on the right of Captain Perenot (4). The chaplain, who had been seated there, was relocated to De Waersegher's left (5).⁶⁰ What emerges from De Bock's account is a very clear hierarchy of seats at the first table, in which physical proximity to the captain was key, followed by a preference for being seated at his right-hand side. To a large extent this was a continuation of the customs high-ranking officers knew from life on shore. Especially in the affluent families they often came

57 FAA, GIC#5802, *Journal van De Waele*, 67v.

58 FAA, GIC#5802, *Journal van De Waele*, 67v.

59 FAA, GIC#5524, 3v; Baetens,

'De voedselvoorraden', 276.

60 FAA, GIC#2397#8, 55v.

from, it was customary for the male head of the family to sit at the head of the table, while the position of the rest of the family and the servants was largely determined by their standing in the house hierarchy (older children sat closer to the head of the family than younger ones, and the same applied to high- and low-ranking servants).⁶¹ And, when no iron-clad company rules were available, the diners at the first table fell back on familiar dining customs.

While De Bock's testimony provides insight in customary seating arrangements, status and hierarchy, it is above all focused on deviations from the norm. One first obvious type of deviation occurred in the case of absences: when an officer was prevented from attending meals for whatever reason, his seat was never left empty. Rather, this often occasioned a minor reshuffle of seating arrangements in which 'promotion' to a more prestigious seat was suddenly possible. The chaplain was able to seize a relapse of De Waersegher to move from his own seat (5) to the merchant's (3).⁶² However, these were temporary arrangements: the merchant's return three weeks later, and the subsequent demotion of the chaplain back to the fifth place, led to the tensions with which this article opened. The chaplain had by far the most mobile position in such seating rearrangements. This was perhaps due to his distinctive position within the ship's hierarchy. Like the merchants, he was counted among the top officers in matters of commensality. Unlike the merchants, however, he did not gain authority from this position, but was entirely outside of the chain of command, having more in common with the passengers sometimes found aboard English or Dutch ships.⁶³ Being less crucial to either the ship's functioning or the trading potentially limited his power in settling matters of status and hierarchy among the ship's elite.

Deviations served a specific purpose in this case: the very reason the captain decided to forego the most prestigious seat was in an attempt to defuse the smouldering conflict between supercargoes and top officers, which had been escalating for months.⁶⁴ However, as attested by the second supercargo's subsequent refusal, violating commensal custom as a tool for settling conflicts could only go so far.

A question of ships

Mealtimes in the cabin attested to what Grignon dubbed 'segregative commensality', dividing officers from the rest of the crew and top officers from lower-level officers. However, these conditions defined meals on average

61 Sarti, *Europe*, 155.

62 FAA, GIC#2397#8, 55v.

63 Roelof van Gelder, *Het Oost-Indisch avontuur. Duitsers in dienst van de VOC (1600-1800)* (Uitgeverij SUN 1997) 41.

64 FAA, GIC#2397#8, 55v.

Stage	Seat (order of prestige)	Captain's seat table center (1)	Captain's right (2)	Captain's left (3)	Right of captain's right (4)	Left of captain's left (5)
Captain's death		First supercargo Spendelow	Captain Perenot	Second supercargo Erreboot	Chaplain Ferrari	Unknown
De Waersegher's first return		First supercargo Spendelow	Captain Perenot	Third supercargo De Waersegher	Second supercargo Erreboot	Chaplain Ferrari
De Waersegher's absence		First supercargo Spendelow	Captain Perenot	Chaplain Ferrari	Second supercargo Erreboot	Unknown
De Waersegher's second return		First supercargo Spendelow	Captain Perenot	Third supercargo De Waersegher	Second supercargo Erreboot	Chaplain Ferrari

Table : Evolving seating arrangements aboard the *Sint-Elisabeth* (based on: FAA, GIC#2397#8, 55v).

days only.⁶⁵ While historians have regularly stressed the uniquely isolated situation of the ship as a remote self-contained ‘wooden world’, captains, supercargoes and chaplains had the occasional opportunity to escape these surroundings, even on the high seas.⁶⁶

As Ostend Company ships almost exclusively sailed in convoys of two to five ships and coordination required frequent contact, captains often travelled between ships. While these could simply be short utilitarian meetings, they regularly included shared meals, a not uncommon maritime tradition.⁶⁷ These visits could encompass large parts of the day and thus several meals. The value of the opportunity and privilege to spend any amount of time elsewhere and in different company cannot be underestimated. By crossing to other ships for meals, captains, supercargoes and chaplains joined the local first table, thereby becoming the only crew members to have access to an enlarged social circle, including the top officers of the other ships.

Even among the top layer of the ship’s elite this prerogative was not distributed evenly. Captains were invariably included in the change of location, supercargoes were less frequently present, and chaplains moved but occasionally.⁶⁸ This seems to have been connected to a clear hierarchy among them: of the 36 recorded cases of commensality on another ship, captains were always present, supercargoes could only accompany captains and did so in 19 cases, and chaplains were only ever included alongside both captains and supercargoes in 7 cases.⁶⁹ This once again seems to confirm the position of chaplains in the social hierarchy as distinctly below supercargoes and captains.

Inviting guests of a similar social standing for a shared meal and entertainment was a treasured tradition in early modern Europe, and became more deeply entrenched by the eighteenth century.⁷⁰ Questions of status in relation to dining, so evident in the sources, reflect this trend. The continuation of on-shore sociability aboard a ship was evident in the transfer of the captain and supercargoes of the *Sint-Elisabeth* to the *Arent* in 1724 to attend an enactment of the biblical story of Jacob and Rachel, or the visit of Captain De Brouwer of the *Marquis de Prié* to the *Concordia* to watch the ‘farcical

65 Grignon, ‘Commensality’, 29–30.

66 Van Rossum, ‘Werkers’, 116; Gawronski, ‘East Indiaman Amsterdam’, 368.

67 Janet Macdonald, *Feeding Nelson’s Navy: The True Story of Food at Sea in the Georgian Era* (Pen & Sword Books 2014) 87–88.

68 GUL, BHSL.HS.1923, Journael gehouden op het schip genaemt De Marquis de Prié, 86r; FAA, GIC#5708, 16v.

69 FAA, GIC#2397#8-5505-5517-5520-5523-5524-5539-5549-5550-5617-5688-5696-5701-5704-5708-5709-5710-5765-5802 and UGA, HH, 1832-1854.

70 Felicity Heal, ‘The Idea of Hospitality in Early Modern England’, *Past & Present* 102:1 (1984) 77. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/past/102.1.66>; Stana Nenadic, ‘Middle-rank Consumers and Domestic Culture in Edinburgh and Glasgow 1720–1840’, *Past & Present* 145:1 (1994) 142–143. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/past/145.1.122>.

play of the wandering pilgrim' in 1727.⁷¹ Such occasional shared meals and events clearly fostered social connections between ships' respective elites. Unexpectedly large catches of fish, for example, frequently led one ship's elite to extend invitations to that of an accompanying ship. Their colleagues were regularly addressed as 'our friends' and 'our *Confraters*'.⁷² Evidently, they could easily bend the commensal rules in order to foster social bonds with other elites. However, Captain Nicolas Carpentier's unexplained repeated refusal to accept such invitations warns against exaggerating the power of commensality. Eating together could only shape society if individual actors allowed it to: their agency could severely hamper commensality's supposed power to (re)produce social relations.

Inviting the captain of another ship for lunch could serve more practical purposes than simply being diverting and fostering social cohesion. Amid the escalating tensions aboard the *Sint-Elisabeth* in 1724, a joint appeal was sent by the captain and first supercargo to the captain of the *Arent* to join them for a meal in which he could serve as an arbiter to help those aboard the *Sint-Elisabeth* settle their differences.⁷³ So, violating the commensal custom of first and second tables by means of the mobile elite could be consciously wielded as a tool to mitigate conflicts and tensions. However, the decision of the *Arent*'s captain Carpentier to only send his chaplain, and this is the only recorded event of a crossing without a captain, seems to suggest that not every member of the mobile elite was as eager to act upon his privilege to transgress commensal custom.⁷⁴

Beyond the cabin

However various and complex social distinctions were at mealtimes within the cabin, it was only a small part of the entire crew that had their meals in this exclusive venue. Sailors and petty officers were served their meals elsewhere. Sailors were divided into messes or *bakken* of about seven members who shared their meals either on deck in fair weather or just below deck during storms.⁷⁵ Sailors' *bakken* were named after the communal recipient in which a mess' food was served and out of which sailors ate with individually provided wooden spoons or personal knives.⁷⁶ This cutlery further amplified and reinforced existing hierarchies and inequalities. Petty officers, grouped in separate messes of similar sizes and organised according to their professional activities such as carpenters, sailmakers and overseers of sailor labour, supplemented this with their own personal cutlery. Officers at the first table

71 FAA, GIC#2397#8, 17v.

72 FAA, GIC#5708, 10v; FAA, GIC#769#1, Journaal van de Sint-Carolus, 17v; FAA, GIC#5802, 99v.

73 FAA, GIC#2397#8, 71v.

74 FAA, GIC#2397#8, 72r.

75 Baetens, 'De voedselrantsoenen', 275.

76 Diebels, 'Voeding', 48; FAA, GIC#5623, Factuurkopijboek, 111v.

were not supplied with low-quality cutlery, nor did they need to rely on their own tools. Rather, they were generally given high-quality pewter knives, forks and spoons.⁷⁷

In organising the division of *bakken*, the GIC likely followed the French or Dutch examples by putting these decisions into the hands of the ship steward or the captain.⁷⁸ Concerning Dutch voc ships, research has shown that ethnicity played a significant role in this process. *Bakken* regularly grouped together sailors of similar ethnic roots and, especially during the Company's seventeenth-century voyages, Asian cooks were often hired to cook specifically for the Asian members of the crew.⁷⁹ From the 1720s onwards, this practice of separate cooks fell into disuse. In contrast with their competitors from the Northern Low Countries, GIC crews were much less ethnically diverse.⁸⁰ More than half of all crew members originated from the port of Ostend itself and about 67 percent from the Southern Low Countries as a whole.⁸¹ Of the rest, about half (15.17 percent) hailed from Dunkirk, the sailor community which was intricately linked to that of Ostend, with many Dutch-speaking sailors having Dutch names and family ties to Ostend.⁸² So meals on the GIC ships were less ethnically diverse and one cook for the sailors sufficed. A likely form of exceptional sailor commensality is connected to the mobility of the ships' elite, as these transfers required sailors to row across the water. As no mention is made of rowing boats returning immediately, it seems that this handful of sailors remained aboard for as long as their captains, supercargoes and chaplains did, likely being served the ship's sailor rations alongside their colleagues.

Finally, while the nature of everyday or regular commensality seems to suggest the reproduction or, at the very least, the presence of clear hierarchical norms, commensal structures could also be rooted in more logistic considerations. This is most apparent when considering the petty officers who were directly involved with meal preparation: the cooks, the steward who was responsible for supervising supplies, and their respective assistants. As meals for the entire crew were served simultaneously and the functioning and course of the ship needed to be watched at all times, these culinary petty officers were likely made responsible for this watch. The Dutch East India Company in any case, sailing on similar routes with similar ships, solved this matter by

77 De Vriese, 'Boten', 185-186.

78 Bernard Capp, 'Naval Seamen, 1650-1700', in: Cheryl Fury (ed.), *The Social History of English Seamen, 1650-1815* (Boydell & Brewer 2017) 36; J.R. Bruijn, 'Voeding op de Staatse vloot', *Spiegel Historiae* 2:3 (1967) 176.

79 Van Gelder, *Oost-Indisch*, 157; Van Rossum, *Werkers*, 225.

80 Van Gelder, 'Het Oost-Indisch avontuur', 157; Jan Parmentier, *Oostende & Co: het verhaal van de Zuid-Nederlandse Oost-Indiëvaart 1715-1735* (Ludion Press 2002) 29; Karel Degryse, *De Oostendse Chinahandel (1718-1735)* (unpublished PhD-thesis; Ghent University 1972) 19.

81 Jordi, *De scheepsbemanningen*, 138-150.

82 Degryse and Parmentier, 'Kooplieden', 124.

Transport / 8528 — 6	
Over de factuere f. ^o 2. en 3. N. ^o 2. als volgt. 910 —	
1.	houthuypruit versceesen —
6.	Spieren —
50.	tonnen peck —
8.	schiedens bleek en 30. bladeren ^{de} met een partie oversch gemacht bleekverek.
Over de factuere f. ^o 8. 9 en 10. N. ^o 8. als volgt. 470 1/3	
21.	terre giasten —
11.	Luijwagens —
5.	Strijck bancken —
6.	Dijfels —
2.	Calmeepen —
3.	Coopere Lampen —
9.	Coopere maeten soo groote als cleene —
4.	Riemen (ardois en patroon pampier) —
2.	Coopere pompen —
4.	D ^o trachtors —
47.	holle en vlakke baken —
2.	mostart molens —
29.	Doop en Toitnaptiens —
290.	hoite leepels —
38.	ijer baenen —
6.	wijn tappen —
4.	houthe Water pompen —
8.	houthe borden —
2.	glas balcken —
185.	ijere halve ligger banden —
139.	aems banden —
688.	D ^o halve —
Over de factuere f. ^o 11. N. ^o 10. verbliven noch	
4.	Razieren Smek koolen 6. 16 —
/ 10114. 18 3	

▲
Record of purchase of, among others, 47 bowls and 290 wooden spoons for outfitting the first CIC expedition in 1724. ©Antwerp City Archives (Felixarchief), CIC#5623.

grouping culinary petty officers into a separate mess, who stood watch while their colleagues ate and shared their meal after the other crew members had finished.⁸³ The gathering of culinary petty officers in the so-called ‘cauldron watch’ (‘ketelskwartier’), devised by the GIC’s main competitor and model, strengthens the case for hypothesising that the Ostend Company used a similar arrangement of a separate commensality for cooks, stewards and their assistants.

Culinary petty officers’ commensality remains the densest to pierce. Possible differences in diet potentially set them even further apart from their fellow petty officers. While all petty officers shared an officially strictly prescribed and identical diet, research on eighteenth-century households has demonstrated that access to the cooking area could have its own advantages. While no evidence has been found of a maritime counterpart to kitchen maids’ access to ‘kitchen stuff’ on shore, such as leftover ingredients or fat, the existence of similar informal arrangements cannot be excluded.⁸⁴ Food supplies aboard were under sharp scrutiny by both the captain and the ship steward. Pilfering was not tolerated and punished severely.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, much like kitchen maids and cooks on dry land, culinary petty officers’ unique access to food made occasional illicit commandeering potentially easier than it was for other crew members.⁸⁶ Despite their differences in wages and the divergent quality of the ingredients they had to handle, cabin cooks took their meals together with the cooks serving the crew. How this unique commensality interacted with these inequalities (perhaps even in diet due to differences in ingredients and leftovers) and how this shaped sociability among culinary petty officers, calls for further research.

Conclusion

Mealtimes aboard GIC ships, much like all of daily life, were deeply shaped by existing professional hierarchies. Top- and low-level officers, culinary and petty officers and sailors were set apart from each other through a distinct hierarchy, which determined where they ate onboard and with whom. In addition, only a select few (captain, supercargo and chaplain) had the possibility to eat elsewhere, on another ship, and captains could use this privilege much more easily than supercargoes, while chaplains only rarely left the ship.

83 Diebels, ‘Voeding’, 48; Vilhelm Aubert and Oddvar Arner, ‘On the Social Structure of the Ship’, *Acta Sociologica* 3:1 (1958) 212. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/000169935800300118>; Parmentier, *Oostende & Co*, 138-142 and Jan Parmentier, *Thee van overzee. Maritieme en handelsrelaties tussen*

Vlaanderen en China tijdens de 18de eeuw (Ghent 1996) 20.

84 Sara Pennell, *The Birth of the English Kitchen, 1600-1850* (Bloomsbury Academic 2016) 120.

85 FAA, GIC#769#1, 10v.

86 Pennell, *The Birth*, 121.

This web of divisions, as demonstrated by the GIC-ships, has proven even more extensive and complex than the existing literature on commensality and daily life aboard ships has assumed. Often grounded in Goffman's work on total institutions, research has deemed the (re) enforcement of hierarchies between especially officers and non-officers in every part of daily life crucial to preserve the functioning of the institution.⁸⁷ This article has uncovered these commensal rules and how they confirmed, enforced and reproduced professional hierarchies to a much greater, broader and more elaborate extent than hitherto suspected. From access to the cabin, over access to specific tables and seating arrangements to differences among messes, it has revealed a fine network of hierarchies underpinning this key part of daily life.

However, it also shows that deviations from these rules could and did occur, especially among officers. These deviations took many forms: from bottom-up initiatives by actors to signal discontent to top-down expressions of power to either fight personal conflicts or mete out disciplinary measures. In addition, they could serve as a means of defusing tensions and restoring on-board peace or of fostering social cohesion across different commensal units on different ships. Commensal rules were less immutable than both company directors and (maritime) historians have assumed. This observation fits with those strands of literature that resist the classification of ships as total institutions, as the 'managers' (officers) were dependent on the labour and skills of the 'managed' (sailors), inhibiting Goffman's top-down enforcement of hierarchy. The very tension between top-down hierarchy and limited bottom-up dependency can help explain why the unique social context of the ship gave birth to an equally unique system of commensal hierarchy.

This system, built around the rigid professional hierarchy crucial for the ship's functioning, exhibited a much higher degree of flexibility and provided especially high-ranking actors with much more agency. As to a certain extent the lives of everyone aboard depended on the labour of the managed, top-level officers had much more narrow margins for conflict resolution and enforcing discipline than in less spatially isolated and bottom-up dependent contexts. In sharp contrast to similar situations on dry land, conflicts, whether due to insubordination or perceived slights in regard to status, could not be allowed to fester. Commensal rules and especially the possibility to deviate from them, made it possible to defuse tensions, vent frustrations or enforce discipline without resorting to violence or corporeal punishment that could acutely endanger the fragile balance of the shipbound community, and by extension the lives of all those on board.

If the commensal structure could be bent for a brief while, bringing tensions to a controlled simmer, order was generally soon re-established and reaffirmed, leaving the hierarchy, social order, functioning and survival

of the ship unthreatened and potentially even strengthened. Rather than being opposites, commensal rules and transgressions of these rules played complementary roles in maintaining the social integrity of the ship. While here uncovered in the specific context of the GIC-ships, this article calls for a reappraisal of deviations as a functional element of commensal rules in social settings throughout history, both at sea and on land.

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Appendix: Main professions aboard GIC ships and their commensal unit.

Rank	Profession	Job description	Commensal unit
Officers (officiers majors)	Captain	Overall command	First table
	Sub-captain	Assisting the captain	First table
	Helmsman*	Steering, navigation and oversight over loading	First and second: First table Third onwards: second table
	Lieutenant	Equal to first helmsmen	First table
	Surgeon*	Medical expert	First surgeon: first table Second surgeon and/or assistant: second table
Petty officers (officiers marins)	Sergeant	Hygienic oversight and enforcement	Petty officer messes
	Pilot	Charting the course	Petty officer messes
	Boatswain	Oversight on ropes	Petty officer messes
	Scheerman	Oversight on front mast	Petty officer messes
	Constabel	Oversight on weaponry	Petty officer messes
	Quartermaster*	Oversight on sailor labour	Petty officer messes
	Cooper and steward	Food preservation and barrel maintenance	Cauldron watch
	Cook	Food preparation	Cauldron watch
	Carpenter*	Woodwork	Petty officer messes
	Smith	Metalwork	Petty officer messes
	Sailmaker	Maintenance of sails	Petty officer messes

Appendix continued

Rank	Profession	Job description	Commensal unit
Sailors	Sailors	Manual labour	Messes
	Apprentice sailors	Sailors in training	Messes
	Boys	Junior sailors, unskilled chores	Messes
Other	Supercargo*	Buying and selling cargo	First table
	Chaplain	Spiritual care	First table
	First clerk	Administration	First table
	Second clerk	Administration	Second table

*Several aboard, hierarchical distinctions were made between 'first', 'second', 'third', etc.