

# Nød-Ankere og Siæle-Roe

Seafarers, madness and faith in eighteenth-century Denmark-Norway

By postdoc Catherine Beck



Scholars have argued that religion played a vital role in how eighteenth-century seafarers coped with and made sense of their lives at sea. But what role did faith and belief play in how seafarers understood and responded to mental distress, or even *madness*, in the dangerous ocean environment in which they moved, worked and lived?

## Sea Storms and Devotional Literature

In 1730, Norwegian skipper Johann Hanssønn Heitman published a devotional book, named *Besværede Søe-Mænds Søde Siæle-Roe*. Known colloquially by northern fishermen as “Sjymainn”, the collection of prayers, hymns and religious reflections became a mainstay for seafarers in Denmark and Norway for the next 150 years. In his dedication, Heitman spoke to his opponents, who he imagined would criticize him for putting himself in the position of a spiritual teacher, when he was not a trained priest. These opponents, Heitman wrote, might otherwise call his book “*Søe-Farendes Tids-Fordriv*” or “*Nød-Ankere*”, sug-

gesting that a man without theological training had no right to prepare devotional texts.

But Heitman stressed, that the skipper of a ship had just as much responsibility for teaching the people under his command and guiding them in their *guds frygt*, as a priest. Even more importantly, his book was vital, because only another sailor could truly know the kind of distress and hardship that sailors faced in their lives at sea: “saa kan og en Søemand bedst vide, hvad Søemand kan være om hiertet, og hvad deres Suk og Bønner kan være, i hvad Slags Nød og Gienvordighed de stikke udi” (Heitman 1730; reprint 1800: pp. 15, 19).

The role of the dangerous ocean pervades Heitman’s reflections, as well as other devotional texts for seafarers in the eighteenth century. At sea, sailors were cut-off from the comfort and sustenance of the land, confined within the narrow limits of the eighteenth-century sailing ship, and exposed to tempestuous and fickle weather. The wind which sailors relied upon to carry them forward could fail to blow when they needed it,

or morph into a dangerous storm that could threaten the ship and the lives of every man onboard. As Heitman wrote: “Man seyler ikke altid for Vinden med godt Veyr; thi Vinden siges at være en let Fugl, foranderlig, stormende og ustadig” (p. 34).

Unsurprisingly, storms were an important part of eighteenth-century seafarers’ devotional literature, both as metaphors for struggles towards salvation and as physical experiences within the dangerous ocean environment. Both pietistic and more rationalist devotional literature for seafarers in the eighteenth-century prepared psalms and prayers for dealing with the anxiety and fear of these dangerous conditions, asking for God’s forgiveness and mercy to quiet storms and lead them safely home.

### **Mad Sailors and the Ocean Environment**

There is also another facet of this environmental context to sailors’ faith and their distress. The environmental and social conditions of sailors’ lives at sea exposed them to many of the factors, which the growing body of eighteenth-century specialist medical literature on insanity proposed caused *madness*. Theories about the nature of insanity in the period ranged from understanding it in terms of a deluded imagination causing a loss of *reason*, to a more materialist focus on the role of the nerves and disruptions to the senses or the actual organ of the brain.

Grief, fear, loneliness, exhaustion from hard labour, drunkenness and head injuries were all leading causes of insanity in civilian understanding, as well as ones to which sailors were particularly prone.

But the physical influence of the ocean environment, such as quickly moving between hot and cold climates, crossing the tropics, sunstroke, and even the effect of electricity and lightning during storms, had a particularly prominent role as the perceived causes of mania, melancholy and mental derangement for sailors.

The environmental context that shaped sailors’ faith, therefore, also molded their understanding of and responses to mental disorder, difference and distress. My previous research on the medical and legal records of the eighteenth-century British Royal Navy has revealed how the socio-environmental pressures of sea-service cultivated a kind of tolerance towards madness in the British seafaring community. However, until now, I have not analysed the role of belief and religiosity in seafarers’ madness, nor how the two powerful factors of faith and environment interacted in their lives.

### **Madness, Religiosity and Environment**

This interaction is at the core of my EU Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Post-doctoral project, which I began in February 2022 in the Department of Church History at the University of Copenhagen’s Faculty of Theology. “MADSEA. MADness, Religiosity and Environment: belief and materiality in community responses to mental difference and distress among early modern SEAfearers” investigates the history of *madness* ‘from below’, or how ideas about insanity were not only shaped by clinicians within the walls of asylums and psychiatric hospitals, but by ordinary people within communities.

The non-material and material aspects of peoples' lives, from belief and religiosity to physical environment, have driven individual and collective understanding, experiences and responses to mental difference and distress throughout history. Through shared cultures and experience, these community contexts can also extend across the national and political boundaries which have dominated studies in the history of madness and psychiatry.

Eighteenth-century seafarers provide a valuable frame for investigating the complexity of community responses to madness outside institutional and national settings. As a transnationally mobile group, their shared exposure to the ocean environment transcended national boundaries and the contingencies of sea-service has left us with a rich historical record of their lives. But the powerful influence of sailors' national religious contexts also gives us a framework within which we can test how different kinds of faith and religious practice shaped responses to mental difference, disorder and distress, as well as the experiences of sufferers themselves.

### **The Danish-Norwegian and British Navies**

The main source base for my project is the records of the Danish-Norwegian navy, particularly of the navy's courts, *Den Kombinerede Ret*. In my previous research on the British navy, I found that environmental factors dominated the understanding and treatment of mental derangement in the maritime medical treatises and logs of ships' surgeons. What we might consider to be more *emotional*

aspects of treatment, or even prevention, appeared mostly in the context of how to maintain the morale of a ship's crew, to prevent a kind of *contagious melancholy* taking hold and making them vulnerable to bodily diseases. Medical treatises recommended activities and entertainments to keep the sailors "cheerful", such as music, dancing, comedy performance, games and fishing. There was a striking absence in these recommendations of any mention of the role of religious provision in maintaining the spirits of a ship's company.

In the Danish-Norwegian navy, on the other hand, religious provision seems to have been seen as more important. For example, a published list of recommendations for the treatment of the sick and wounded on the king's ships listed the necessary provision of trumpeters, to play music and raise the crew spirits, directly followed by a requirement that each ship should carry a priest, suggesting that the two were considered to be closely linked in their role preserving the mental and physical health of the crew (København 1790).

Certainly, religious provision was much more formalized and heavily regulated in the Danish-Norwegian navy, than in the British. Unlike the British, the Danish-Norwegian navy issued a standard book of psalms and prayers for use on His Majesty's Ships, *Aandelige Psalmer og Bønner, Til Hans Kongel. Majestæts Skibs-Folkes Brug forordnede* (1710). The navy's *Søe-Krigs-Artikels* (1752: §262 & §263) also gave specific rules for the role of priests on board, including how they should deliver extra sermons to give the crew courage before battle or in

times adversity, as well as comfort their souls, especially when sick or wounded.

### **Questions to be answered**

So how did this difference affect the way mental distress or even *madness* were understood and treated? In the case of the British navy, religious provision may not have featured heavily in the formal side of understanding, treatment and care. However, the instances of madness I have found in records of the navy's courts martial reveal religious aspects in both the sufferers' experience, especially in the form of their delusions, as well as how sufferers, and their crewmates, used religious practice, like the reading of psalm books and bibles, to self-soothe or calm mental disorder and distress.

With the greater emphasis on religious provision in the Danish-Norwegian navy

and the pietistic devotional literature available for seafarers, such as Heitman's *Besværede Søe-Mænds Søde Siæle-Roe*, I expect to find similar, or even more, evidence of the role of religious practice and faith in instances of sailors' distress and madness.

I have already found that Danish-Norwegian naval surgeons more frequently used diagnoses that had a greater emphasis on the emotional side of mental disturbance, such as melancholy and nostalgia, than in the British navy. Does this reflect a greater interest in the internal emotional experience of mental disorder and distress among eighteenth-century Danish-Norwegian seafarers? And was this attention perhaps borne from the intrinsic role that their faith played in their lives?