CHAPTER EIGHT

A PEASANT SOCIETY AT SEA:
MEN, LEADERS, AND PROVISIONING

8.1 The problems and the sources

In wartime, the cost of manning and provisioning dominated a sailing navy’s resource consumption. In peacetime, maintaining a permanent force of warships and their guns usually constituted the largest portion of its expenditures, but when it was fully mobilised, recruitment of men, wages, and food became dominant. As an example, the Swedish navy spent 364,376 daler silvermynt (dsm) on wages and provisions to its men in 1644, a year when the whole navy was mobilised for war against Denmark. Because at least one third of the crew consisted of soldiers, paid by the army, the real cost of keeping a fully mobilised fleet at sea was close to half a million dsm. The cost of building and fitting out the ships (of around 25,000 tonnes) which served at sea in 1644 had in round figures been three quarter of a million dsm; the copper guns, known in numbers and calibres but not in weight, likely cost somewhere between 250,000 and 350,000 dsm. The ships and the guns had been acquired over decades, yet the cost of one single year of operations equalled around half the entire amount of capital invested in material assets.1

Naval manning was not only a quantitative problem. Seaman skills were critical because ships could not sail without a number of highly qualified seamen. But the number of men also mattered, as much of the work on deck and at the guns required unskilled muscle power as

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1 Cost of wages and provisioning in 1644, Rikshuvudböcker, vol. 70. The cost of shipbuilding, repair, and outfitting in the same year was 59,147 dsm. The total cost of the warships and their outfitting is (with much uncertainty) calculated from 23 warships built under contract 1618–54, while the cost of outfitting is calculated from costs recorded during the contract period 1615–28 (see chapter 6). The real average value of the ships was lower, because many ships were not new or recently repaired. The cost of guns is a rough estimate of how much the guns recorded as existing in 1643 would have cost at the prize for bronze guns recorded in 1647, 66 dsm/skeppund (see chapter 7). The cost of hiring Dutch armed merchantmen in 1644, including payment and provisioning to the crews, was 735,835 dsm, Rikshuvudböcker, vol. 70, fol. 657.
well as skills for a particular task in a team, rather than long experience at sea. Unskilled men were paid less than skilled seamen, but the cost of provisioning was usually the same. Frequently, early modern navies operated with forces far below their nominal strength of warships because they could not find skilled seamen or could not afford to pay and provision a large number of men for all their ships. Wars at sea were often decided by exhaustion and financial strength rather than by decisive battles. To channel the resources of a society to manpower and provisioning of a battle fleet operating in a strategically important sea was a challenging political and administrative problem for any European state.

Warships and fleets did not only require men. They also required men with several types of skills and men able to lead, instruct, and coordinate men with different skills and tasks. Men with these scarce abilities must be available at short notice, at the right place, and in sufficient number when a fleet needed to be mobilised for service. Early modern states with naval ambitions required access to skilled seamen, to experienced masters able to manoeuvre sailing ships, to pilots who could navigate along coasts and in the open sea, and to men who could direct gun crews. States also needed men able to lead and coordinate the crew of a warship and command the several warships which formed a fleet. Men with these competencies could be linked to the state with organisational methods. The state could train and employ men permanently for a particular naval task, or it could make agreements with men with necessary skills that they should turn up for service when required. States with viable maritime societies could usually find most of its personnel in these environments and could hire or conscript suitable men when required.

To develop organisational capabilities to mobilise a large number of skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled men and a cadre of leaders was probably the most challenging problem for early modern navies. Because no early modern state could afford to keep a fully manned navy in permanent service, navies had to be able to integrate external human resources with their core competencies. They had to do that quickly in order to gain advantages in competition with adversaries, and the mobilised men had to trust that they would be paid for their service within a reasonable period of time. Naval provisioning also required special organisational capability to handle large resources in concentrated periods of time. Failures in provisioning caused lack of men and widespread illness, which restricted naval operations.