

What Did Danish Fisheries Look Like Five Hundred Years Ago?

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Imagine standing on the Danish coast in the year 1550. The sea is teeming with life, and fishers are landing catches on a scale that wouldn't be matched again before the 20th century. Thanks to advances in archival research, archaeological excavation, and genetic analysis, we now know the structure and scale of historical Danish fisheries. The evidence reveals that by the close of the Middle Ages, Danish fish catches had reached levels that would not be seen again until the early twentieth century, when motorized fishing vessels revolutionized marine extraction.

My talk offers an overview of these findings, tracing when, where, and how much was drawn from the sea in the late medieval period. But it also asks deeper questions: What factors led to the collapse of these remarkably productive fisheries in the seventeenth century? And why did recovery prove so elusive until the modern industrial era? Ultimately, what does the past reveal about the present?