Cambridge Oceanic Histories

Edited by

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Across the world, historians have taken an oceanic turn. New maritime histories offer fresh approaches to the study of global regions, and to long-distance and long-term connections. Cambridge Oceanic Histories includes studies across whole oceans (the Pacific, the Indian, the Atlantic) and particular seas (among them, the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, the North Sea, the Black Sea). The series is global in geography, ecumenical in historical method, and wide in temporal coverage, intended as a key repository for the most innovative transnational and world histories over the longue durée. It brings maritime history into productive conversation with other strands of historical research, including environmental history, legal history, intellectual history, labour history, cultural history, economic history and the history of science and technology. The editors invite studies that analyse the human and natural history of the world’s oceans and seas from anywhere on the globe and from any and all historical periods.
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Introduction
Writing World Oceanic Histories

Sujit Sivasundaram, Alison Bashford and David Armitage

‘World Oceans Day’ was first proposed at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro; the United Nations General Assembly formalised it in 2008. It was proposed with a view to the ocean’s status as vital matter for humankind: ‘Our rainwater, drinking water, weather, climate, coastlines, much of our food, and even the oxygen in the air we breathe, are all ultimately provided and regulated by the sea.’ The oceanic past – indeed a shared oceanic heritage – was also foregrounded in a bid to make World Oceans Day meaningful: throughout history, the UN stated, oceans and seas have linked the peoples of the world through trade and transportation.1 It is clear from this effort that oceans do all kinds of discursive work for the UN, offering ways to make the world appear to be one. Indeed, UN materials shift constantly and tellingly between the plural oceans of the world and the singular ‘world ocean’. On the one hand, for example, World Oceans Day aims to draw attention to how ‘the world’s oceans – their temperature, chemistry, currents and life – drive global systems that make the Earth habitable for humankind’.2 On the other, the spin-off network Réseau Océan Mondial, based in Brussels, resolutely posits a single ocean, the world ocean. Its statutes define the key objective of a global network of oceanographers as working ‘towards achieving a healthy and productive world ocean and to encourage sustainable use of its resources’.3 Even more directly, a singular and shared ‘world ocean’ drives the Intergovernmental Oceanic Commission of the UN Educational, Social and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) under the slogan ‘One Planet, One Ocean’.4

Introduction: Writing World Oceanic Histories and recontextualise this genealogy, by showing how thinkers, narrators and historians have written of the sea beyond the Mediterranean—and, by extension, the Atlantic—over long periods before the rise of US- and Europe-based scholarship on seas. Many of our authors place the historiography of the *Annales* and the Atlantic, of Braudel and Baily, within a totally different intellectual ecology often with origins well before the twentieth century. Some also show how inhibiting these prevalent trends have been for generating historiographies for other tracts of water, for instance the Arctic or the Red Sea. And the longer genealogies of, say, the Pacific and Indian Oceans presented here question the claim that they derived, or should draw inspiration, from the Atlantic or Mediterranean, and argue forcefully that they should be considered as original model[s] for the historicising of oceans in their own right.

This recalibration of influence, and resurrection of alternative inspirations, should have effects not only for the specific oceanic histories treated here but also for the future of Mediterranean and Atlantic histories themselves. With these revisions in mind, the authors recognise and take full account of the fact that the accelerated writing of oceanic histories over the 1990s and 2000s paralleled and often intersected with that same environmental and global sensibility that gave rise to such a thing as an ‘Earth summit’ and a ‘World Oceans Day’ in the first place. In this regard, the book provides the most comprehensive, comparative and critical mapping now available of the distinct timelines and growth patterns in the historiography of oceanic history. Given the misunderstanding of the origins of ocean histories, it also considers what can be drawn from reading across these separated literatures now.

*Oceanic Histories* aims, through its various chapters, to answer the question: what is the historical and historiographical relationship between world histories, the world’s oceans and the world ocean? (This will also be the informing concern of the monographic series, ‘Cambridge Oceanic Histories’, that this volume inaugurates.) Oceanic historians, especially those rooted in a tradition of maritime scholarship, often claim a particular stake in a world history configured geographically and

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5 For consideration and critique, see W. V. Harris, ed., *Rethinking the Mediterranean* (Oxford, 2005); Pergreine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Mediterranean and the *longue durée*. The move early this century to promote a supposed *new thalassology* often assumed the primacy of Mediterranean models for oceanic history with frequent reference to Fernand Braudel’s work as germinal; more recently, the runaway institutional success of Atlantic history in the early 2000s, spearheaded by Harvard historian Bernard Baily, added another influential avatar. However, one running theme of this volume is to critique


economically: that is, in the historical geo-economics of a globe increasingly connected by large waterways and the exchange and commerce they facilitated. This is an approach to oceanic histories in which, broadly speaking, globalization took place in a maritime world connected forcefully, but certainly not solely, through the European empires and coastal polities in commercial relation with each other, and with regional maritime traders, labourers and navigators in different parts of the world.\(^\text{10}\)

While paying attention to the role of European maritime empires as drivers and conduits of world history, *Oceanic Histories* also foregrounds another tradition of world history-writing that concentrates attention on extra-European worlds on their own terms.\(^\text{11}\) For example, our authors examine the Middle Kingdom-centred Nanyang, the maritime Malay world, the seafaring traders between Arabia and India and the complex of colonial and Indigenous whalers and sealers in the Southern Ocean.\(^\text{12}\)

In both of these traditions of world history, some scholarship is squarely maritime while other parts are more oceanic. We suggest below some of the differences as well as the synergies between these proximate and overlapping approaches.

Many recent historians of oceans and seas identify their work within a tradition of transnational history-writing. This is unsurprising, because none of the oceans and seas align with any one polity and the move to their histories represents an 'escape' from the prevailing 'terracentrism' of traditional history-writing.\(^\text{13}\) But is 'transnational' the best indicator of the substance and method of oceanic histories? Perhaps not — not least

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\(^{15}\) Matt Matsuda, *Pacific worlds: A history of seas, peoples, and cultures* (Cambridge, 2012), is an exemplary use of the ‘trans-local’ within oceanic history.


reconstruction after it. More recently, political and economic concerns have generated parallel designators, such as the ‘Indo-Pacific’, or given new geopolitical heft to the Baltic and Black Sea as regions of international collaboration. While the nomination of such ‘worlds’ and areas suggests an underlying bias towards integration, their pluralisation, as a multiplicity of such worlds, reflects division, even competition, among and within them.

The ideological history of oceans and seas is most evident in the continuous geopolitical and epistemological battles over their naming. These can reflect the reactions of outsiders to, say, a South Sea deemed to be relatively calm or ‘pacific’ or a Black Sea perceived as either threatening (Aegean) or welcoming (Bosphorus). It can also be an attempt to insert cultural presence: note the debate about renaming the Indian Ocean as the ‘African’ Sea. Sometimes the names of bodies of water explicitly signal sovereignty, if controversially so: the Sea of Japan/Korea’s East Sea or the South China Sea, for instance. Sometimes, they do so by inference, flagging an orientation and therefore a presumed centre, as in the Nanyang or the Southern Ocean – south, that is, from imperial China’s standpoint – the East Sea (east seen from Korea) or the Southern Ocean, north of Antarctica but south of Australia. One history of the naming of the Atlantic Ocean signals a Mediterranean perspective of, and upon, the world; the ocean beyond the pillars of Hercules that enclosed all land, as Atlas supported the heavens. But the Atlantic had a simultaneously diminished and larger function in longue durée world history: from this standpoint, it shifted over the centuries from being the ocean that enclosed all land to the ocean that separated an ‘old world’ from a ‘new

world’. Similarly, the Mediterranean gradually moved from being the centre of the world within the Greco-Roman ecumene to simply one sea among many, with no presumed priority or predominance, flowing into the world ocean itself. And of course it was not the ‘Mediterranean’ to Arabic and Muslim observers until the term entered Arabic in the nineteenth century by way of European languages.

There is also a curious history in which regional nominations has shifted between watery and territorial spaces, part of the ‘terraqueous history’ of the globe. For example, ‘Australia’ became the name for the continent (in part due to its maritime circumnavigation between 1801 and 1803), yet in some old charts it is the ocean to its east that is labelled ‘Greater Australia’ or sometimes ‘Australia’. This great archipelago of Pacific islands came to be named for the water surrounding them – ‘Oceania’, now the formal UN regional nomenclature. To take another example, the *Mare Aethiopicum* of Antiquity was still in use as ‘the Ethiopic Ocean’ on nineteenth-century world maps. Over time it became the South Atlantic and then subsumed by the late nineteenth century into a holistic Atlantic, stretching almost from pole to pole. But modern ‘Ethiopia’ shifted to the horn of Africa, far closer to the Indian Ocean than the Atlantic: it is, ironically, land-locked. In counterpoint, it is curious to note how our planet is named Earth when 70 per cent of its surface is Ocean. In this regard, it may be exceptional among the known planets, but it is not alone within the solar system and beyond in having oceans, even if these extra-terrestrial ‘water worlds’ – on Mars or on Saturn’s moons, for instance – remain for the moment beyond the reach of historians.

Though divided by oceans and seas, the chapters here indicate clearly the fluid movement between them in the context of the world ocean and how their histories and material forms are entangled. In this way, the history of the Indian Ocean connects with the history of the Red Sea, the

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history of the Red Sea to the history of the Mediterranean, the history of the Mediterranean becomes the history of the Atlantic, the Atlantic of the Pacific, the Pacific of the Southern Ocean, and so forth. Strangely, though, the two oceans most physically distant from one another—the Arctic Ocean and the Southern Ocean—are closely combined, institutionally and historiographically, under ‘polar history’ and ‘polar studies’, as in the Journal of Polar Studies, for example, or at the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge; accordingly, we have linked them here.29

As maritime historians have shown, it was circumnavigators and merchant mariners, whalers and navies in peace and war, who directly experienced the world ocean: the waters of the eastern and western, northern and southern hemispheres. And as environmental historians discuss, the world ocean also belonged to the mammals and fishes who swam, fed, and migrated beneath it.30 As a research enterprise for hydrographers, the ‘world ocean’ has been essential to oceanography since the 1960s.31 It has also become a highly politicised entity, linked both to an environmentalist global ecology and to the global history of capitalism. The world ocean, some argue, was the natural entity that facilitated the world system of commercial globalisation.32 And the world history of that globalisation depended on diverse human ingenuity and capacity to pass over the sea and to live upon it.

The Naval and the Oceanic

The challenge of making the sea a home has been a perennial human quest. Its persistence comes from how the ocean is seen to teem with life but is still unfit for our species. To venture onto the ocean has long been seen as somehow unnatural, with shipwreck and drowning the fitting rewards for hubris in contravening our terrestrial destiny.33 Humans can swim, but only just. Swimming itself has a cross-cultural history including how European explorers of the sixteenth century such as Francis Drake attempted to frighten off Pacific islander swimmers who attacked

them.34 In much of the West, from the fall of Rome to the nineteenth century, there was an active prejudice against swimming. The quest to be with the sea means that those who cross the vast swaths of the world ocean have been cast as heroes. The challenge now combines with the prediction of a watery human future. As one set of authors notes, conceiving the sea in this way has been gendered: ‘Could the ocean then, be thought of as a source of all things, a kind of maternal sublime?’35

If such is the tension in human engagements with the sea, the ship has served as a vehicle for experiments in habitation: how to live on board ship; how to create, distil or transform social and cultural norms in such spaces; how to govern and legislate on a ship over prisoners, sailors or ‘natives’; how to control a ship so that it transfers materials, ideas, nature and people across locales; and, how to proclaim and dramatise a culture from the deck and ‘across the beach’ to a newfound land or indeed to go to war with other nations on the water. It is as if the ship becomes a floating piece of land, practically, socially and often legally.36 As the ship is given a name and biography, also a launch and decommissioning, along with flags, papers and nationality, it becomes akin to a person on the sea. On the casting of ships as alive, tales of Indigenous people who mistook European ships as birds or islands are many; they reveal as much about Euro-American projections and self-mythology as about indigenous cosmologies. When placed together with the difficulties of being at home with the sea, and the Foucauldian labelling of ships as classic ‘heterotopias’, it is unsurprising that epic moments of shipping have been commemorated with grandeur as alleged turning points in the human past.37

Take for instance, the over-confident ship-shaped memorial to Portuguese early modern ‘discoveries’, the Padrao dos Descobrimentos, at one of the most westward points of Europe, on the River Tagus as it flows into the Atlantic in Lisbon. The memorial originated in 1940 from an exhibition of the Portuguese World held to celebrate the birth of the Portuguese nation in 1140, a celebration which chimed with the country’s authoritarian Estado Novo.38 It was built in permanent form in 1960 to coincide with the death anniversary of Henry the Navigator. Set

32 For example, Peter Jacques, Globalization and the world ocean (Oxford, 2006).
36 Lauren Benton, A search for innocence: Law and geography in European empires, 1400-1800 (Cambridge, 2010).
in rose-tinted stone and cement and shaped like a Portuguese caravel, it depicts men, following Henry the Navigator who is at the prow, reaching in fervent pose for the sea. The monument itself is firmly rooted on the shore, and yet it stretches from the land to the water. If this ship takes its meaning from its physical setting as such a bridge, then a similar reading is open for another ship-shaped monument to epic ‘discovery’, the so-called ‘Sailing Ship’ monument in Emu Park in Queensland, Australia, which marked the Cook bicentenary in 1970. Here the element that plays a role is the wind: the ship is designed to ‘sing’ as the wind blows through it.  

If successful navigation is about rising above the elements and taming them so as to live at sea and to cross the sea, it is curious that ship monuments like these are still environmental signs. Indeed, such monuments serve as evidence of the multiply conflicted roles played by ships. For ship memorials are also found which are tokens not of achievement but of death on a vast scale. One example is the National Famine Monument or ‘Coffin Ship’ in Murkirk, County Mayo, Ireland. A bronze sculpture with skeleton bodies in the riggins, it commemorates those who left Ireland for the New World. It was built by the Irish government for the 150th anniversary of the Great Famine. In popular telling, sharks followed the ‘coffin ships’ for the number of dead who were thrown overboard.  

Memorials to the Middle Passage also point to the ship as a bearer of memories of enslavement, violence, dehumanisation and death. One instance of this is the slave ship which is a part of the African American Monument in the South Carolina State House. If such is the memory of ships, this volume asks: how should historians return to the ship from the perspective of the world ocean?

To begin such an enterprise, it is important to contend with the variegated dimensions of human engagement with ships. Ships have served as experimental sites for life at sea as much as spaces of death, and watery tombs beneath the waves continue to fascinate the public as well as archaeologists. Modernity could quite literally be shipped as much as shipwrecked. Ships are, as revealed even by their monuments, environmental projects. They are also legal personalities and even cast as figures, as is evident from the elaborate figureheads kept in many maritime museums around the world. Ships are material and artefactual and as some new scholarship reminds us they can be traded and exchanged, even shifting cultural signification in the process: Japanese sampan could become American Hawaiian vessels. As things, they are composites requiring labour to produce and maintain; Indigenous communities could raid a wrecked ship on their shores for precisely this reason, only taking what they valued and what they wished to recycle. The passage from sail to steam, and increasing containerisation has made shipping so successful that, though it is the main conduit of global trade, it has taken an invisible life when compared with air or land travel. However, this should not allow historians to forget how ships still fail and spill (oil and garbage for instance). In addition, the ship has been the vector of a ‘world hunt’. In the Southern Ocean, for instance, this began with a trade in seals and whales. That world hunt started from a human desire to exploit the seas’ resources and that desire in turn fed into, as is argued below, scientific, commercial and diplomatic concerns and programmes of order.

The social, political, legislative, economic and social and cultural histories of navigation are thus connected here with environmental history: it is important to insist on the mutually constitutive force of these historiographies. Otherwise the history of the ship is taken to mean the history of shipping techniques and technologies alone or simply the history of war; this does not get to the complexity of how the ship intervenes between humans and the sea or how it serves as an intensive site for working out power and submission. As one recent argument puts it, the ship is the perfect object which with to consider ‘transit’ and global connections and disconnection, and it serves as a topic of global microhistory. If so, the ‘transit’ is between places and terrains and among mediums. This transition is also evident in how ships can speak to nationalist idealisation as much as to the fragility of the human condition and how they can stand for some achievements cast as the greatest human triumphs as much as terrible calamity. The Indian state can thus glorify its boat-building culture as a bulwark of nationalism as much as Portugal has in...
the past. Meanwhile, in the Sea of Japan, what are called ‘ghost ships’ can continue to arrive on the coast of Japan with North Korean refugees, while another ship, the SS Meredith Victory, has been memorialised as a ‘Ship of Miracles’ for its humanitarian rescue of refugees in the midst of the Korean War.48

To undercut the imperial, military and national inclinations of much maritime historiography, it is important to highlight how many different cultures of navigation and boat-making have intersected in world history. While past historians have denied or ornamented the maritime culture of non-Western societies, or used assessments of boats as a staid measure of advancement, our authors instead highlight the fact that encounter was often from ship to ship rather than ship to beach. Pacific double-hulled canoes were not insignificant in size and capacity when placed next to the sailing vessels they met; they were comparable to European ships. Riverine Burmese war-boats meanwhile outstripped the Diana, the first steamship used in war, during the first Anglo-Burmese war (1824–26).49 Further, our authors deconstruct such stereotypes as the Muslim fear of the sea or the classificatory labelling of the Chinese ‘junks’ and Indian Ocean ‘dhows’, showing how such classifications were colonial products beneath which lay a dizzying range of traditions of manufacture and boat-making.50 Engagements with the sea have been surprisingly wide-ranging and even those empires which were once cast as landlubbers – for example, the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires – are now seen as maritime.51

The site of the shipyard is fast emerging as a key topic for world historiography, drawing in questions about modernisation, scientific exchange, migration, labour and capitalism. Until the early nineteenth century, shipyards like the Arsenal in Venice comprised the world’s largest industrial plants:52 a single ship of the line, like Nelson’s flagship Victory, could command a greater investment of capital than a contemporary factory. Indeed, tracking ships through cycles of making and

52 Frederic Chapin Lane, Venetian ships and shipbuilders of the Renaissance (Baltimore, MD, 1934), Robert C. Davis, Shipbuilders of the Venetian arsenal: Workers and workplace in the preindustrial city (Baltimore, MD, 1991).

unmaking, in turn, has been a way of following a long-distance trade in wood, between South Asia and Arabia for instance; and research on wood carries on to the present in order to determine the provenance and histories of ship parts in museums. In this way too, the history of the ship does not now assume that the ship is a stable subject of research.53 In the South China Sea, techniques of ship-making have a long history, taking in the important Sung period, propelling Chinese engagements with Southeast Asia. In the Southern Ocean, the ship-building of sealers from America and France was seen as an affront to the settled sovereignty of the British Empire. The ability to make a ship was in both these cases a means of state-making and, curiously, it was also a token of settlement and of power over land, even a claim to that land.

Oceanic Environments and Ecologies

The study of humans and their sea-going vessels has long defined maritime history. But what is the relationship between this field and oceanic history? While they overlap in clear and important ways, we suggest that it is an environmental approach that is the distinguishing point. Environmental history has helped turn a longstanding historiography of humans, vessels and exploration, toward analysis of complex relations between elements (winds, tides, currents), ocean life (mammals, fish, crustaceans, birds, plants), and human activity in and on the seas. Put another way, oceanic histories require the equivalent consideration of marine and maritime actors in all their complex relations with each other.

This approach is ecological in both substance and method, and inquires into past conjunctions of human and non-human life. Oceans are full of organisms, some still as strange to humans as the fantastic monsters of the sea on medieval and early modern maps. While maritime and economic histories have documented mariners’ and researchers’ interest in, and often dependence on, sea mammals, birds and fish, environmental historians have documented the human impact on marine ecologies.54 Whaling and fishing histories are especially significant, often

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The oceanic turn in environmental history indicates a larger cultural and political shift in which "blue" has, to some extent, succeeded "green". The "blue humanities" have engaged scholars in adjacent fields – literary studies and cultural studies – to create a rich conversation focussing on the sea, imagination and cultural production in the past and present.62 There is already an emergent 'sociology of the oceans',63 while oceanic histories might collectively present a blue history of the world, drawing inspiration from green histories of the world. 64 In this vein, there is a Pacific-centred 'Blue Revolution', focused on the management of fish stocks, to stand alongside the agricultural 'Green Revolution'.65 More broadly, the idea of a 'blue planet' has gained real purchase, an image that can more readily unify (and simplify) a deeply divided world polity than the continental distance and disparity of soil-based 'green' politics.


57 For example, Richard White, The organic machine: The remaking of the Columbia river (New York, 1995).


60 For example, Jeffrey Bolster, Putting the ocean in Atlantic history: Maritime communities and marine ecology in the North Atlantic, 1500-1800 (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 19-47; Bolster, 'The mortal sea: Fishing the Atlantic in the age of sail' (Cambridge, MA, 2012).


63 For example, Clive Ponting, A green history of the world: Environments and the collapse of great civilizations (London, 1991).

64 As proposed by Gregory T. Cushman, Guam and the opening of the Pacific world: A global ecological history (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 209-206 and Md Saidul Islam, Confronting the blue revolution: Industrial aquaculture and sustainability in the Global South (Toronto, 2014), among others.
This is largely because a blue, ocean-oriented environmentalism has the fact of the world ocean at its disposal, singular and shared: ‘Acting together for the Future of the Blue Planet’. UNESCO’s UN-oriented usage derives from and conflates the ‘one world’ idea from the political realm and the ‘one planet’ idea from the environmental realm. There is a long-standing history of the United Nations deploying and advancing both – hence, ‘World Oceans Day’.

**Water Spaces**

Oceans, then, have served as critical spaces in world history, for all kinds of projects of the imagination, governance and material exchange. Indeed, the waves which link the world’s oceans can stand for the diversity of these spatial endeavours. For scientists, waves can be described as populations, systems, events, rogues, tsunamis and formations which eat away at coasts or which are malleable and controllable. They are depicted as both male and as female. For writers, they are a source of terror and inspiration. As one scholar notes: ‘waves are phenomenological-technical-mathematical-political-legal objects’. They are now taken as indicators of climate change (will climate change generate more significant wave heights?) and there is even scepticism about applying northern science to the southern hemisphere of waves, which are exposed to more solar radiation than in the north, more oceanic connectivity and thus more swell. Waves have also been central to the way humans conceive of the sea as a boundary. They are a frontier to the undersea and crash upon the crossing point of the beach. As surfers know well, the surfed wave is a ‘convergence’ or ‘assemblage’, between mind, body and sea. The difficulty of theorising a wave as a space, given how it is always in an act of becoming, and as an object, because of its entanglement with a whole series of human framings, predictive models and intensive experiences, is a telling fact for a book about the comparative histories of oceans.

The seas located in this volume, like the waves which run across them, oscillate between objecthood and fragmentation, internal coherence and trans-oceanic connection, openness and closure. From Braudel in the 1940s to Ballyn in the early 2000s, many oceanic historians, especially

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64 UNESCO, *One planet, one ocean.*


undulations, spaces and scales continuously emerge and then merge with each other. Though entangled in history, there are certainly different historiographical tenors in each of these seas, for instance, the anthropologised Pacific or the frontiered Southern Ocean, cast as the ‘last ocean’. They even present in different colours: from the white ice of the Arctic to the medieval mapping which gave rise to the Red Sea as a name. The waters of these seas change in salinity; from the high salinity of the Mediterranean, arising as it does from a high ratio of evaporation compared with the extent to which freshwater is added through rivers and rains, to the low salinity of the waters of the Antarctic as icebergs melt or the brackish waters of the Baltic Sea with its many emptying rivers. Regardless, in thinking of these spaces of the world ocean and their inter-relations, it is helpful to adopt what has recently been called a ‘fluid ontology’, where coastal frontiers are margins constituted by land and fresh and salty water and amongst the most fertile regions of the world in terms of biodiversity and for the co-constitution of the human and the non-human. By symmetry, a fluid ontology should be applied to think not just of the coast, but the series of spaces – from ship to world ocean – over which the terraqueous realm extends.

Approached in this way, oceanic histories revise traditional spatial considerations in world historiography. Take this classic question: is global history in danger of taking the view from outer space? Such a question, with its suggestion of the vertical as methodologically imperial, looks utterly different when considered from the underwater. Maritime histories have too often ignored the seabed as ground. In this vein, maritime histories are cast as horizontal motion across a flat wave-less sea – a literally superficial view that does not penetrate beneath the surface. From the viewpoint of undersea historians, as with recent histories of mountainous and elevated zones, the vertical axis should be reinserted rather than dismissed and the surface of the sea should be seen as spatially changeable and rugged even as undersea currents and turbulences are brought to view. Oceanic histories of the submarine and subaqueous realm are thus a new way to write a history ‘from below’. From another perspective, a focus on the sea also critiques how area studies collapse into the history of subcontinents and large landmasses, ignoring their watery margins and in turn losing how forms of law, government, or racial and cosmopolitan thought and practice are crystallised at the water’s edge in the modern era, in the Qing empire, or in South Asian successor states in the eighteenth century for instance. This is relevant in considering how a sea like the Red Sea only becomes a passageway of transit between two regions studied separately by area studies scholars.

To think of seas is thus to add several more dimensions, planes and viewing points to the present global turn in historiography and at once to consider spaces as concatenations of the human and non-human. A specific theme which has generated great debate in world history is the nature of connection. On this score, the rise of oceanic histories intersected with postcoloniality, a critique of empires and nations which led into attempts to find a common ground of exchange between the dominated. This is apparent is such elaborations as the ‘Black Atlantic’, the Pacific as a ‘sea of islands’, or the ‘subaltern’ Indian Ocean. Yet an emphasis on such connectivity can achieve an end opposite to its aim, by privileging the cosmopolitan and the mobile in motion rather than the enslaved or the labouring lascars in place. It can naturalise a space of exchange and interaction which is disconnected from hinterlands, the confined, the subjugated and the particular.

One response to this critique is to track the evolution of fluid frontiers to more discrete edges, as the law and the state established their protocols over the oceans and as cartographers went about delineating the ocean with their compasses and sounding devices. As one set of authors write: ‘Coasts lost the quality of a margin and became an edge’. In such

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a narrative, connection veered into its opposite (and back again too) and this was very much in keeping with the spatiality of the ocean and its clashing and clashing waves. For terraqueous zones are changeable in their relationality and embeddedness. How to conceive of the boundaries and endings of connectedness, a key concern of the newest world historiography as it responds to its critics, is thus at the heart of oceanic histories too. In what follows, it is striking to see the Mediterranean undergoing repeated integration and disintegration and even ‘vanishing’ with modernity, or the Indian Ocean as a space over which narrators have sought to create unity despite their efforts being constantly challenged by plurality. Further, theories of the ‘Ming Gap’, though critiqued, are said still to hold in pointing to the mutable rhythms of Sino–Southeast Asian relations.

For too long the oceans have been conceived simply either as dead and without history or as inescapably other to the landlocked gaze. Indeed this tradition has played a particular role in an ocean like the Arctic. This emptying of the ocean is often said to be a Western and European tradition. Yet note what the Qianlong Emperor wrote to George III in 1793: ‘I do not forget the lonely remoteness of your island, cut off from the world by intervening wastes of sea. If the creation of edges between land and sea was tied to the positing of the sea as placeless and wasted, this was not a trope that was necessarily shared by all cultures. For instance, the genealogical tradition of Pacific islanders cast their islands as alive, arising out of the seas. For the Ainu, the chapter on the Sea of Japan/Korea's East Sea, below attends to Repun, the god of the Sea. But rather than taking the imposition of human frames such as the law, the state and metaphor, for granted, the task of oceanic histories is to trace how the emerging spatiality in fluid zones still bears the interruptions of the waves. The world ocean is not a set of spaces which is easily habitable, readily resolvable or smoothly narrated. In this sense, the elusive quality of the sea as itself an agent of history should still be kept in view, even as modernisation led to boundary-making in watery zones.

Oceanic cartography was a key mechanism of such boundary-making and sought to impose stillness on to the changeable medium of water. The success of oceanic maps depended on geographical points and features that could be assumed to be changeless. Many of the chapters in this volume trace the rolling out of scientific cartography in precisely this manner. For instance, the South China Sea moved, it is said, from mare liberum to a closed sea by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet despite the rise of a still view of the wavy ocean, mapping was tied to the paths of mobile ships. Recent work shows how the nature of the ships affected the resulting traces; ships themselves were scientific instruments of cartography. At the same time, oceanic mapping was also about tracking Pacific migrations and dealing with sea-borne ethnological puzzles. If this is so and ship-based scientific mapping was performative as well as evocative, about human absence as much as human movement, the maps generated by European mariners need to placed alongside the equally embodied sailing instructions, charts and tablets which are also discussed below, used and left by Chinese explorers, Arab mariners or Roman cartographers.

The spread of Western cartography over the seas never had the capability to set itself free from extant traditions, neither has it yet become universal in its reach, notwithstanding Greenwich Mean Time. For international debates carry on with respect to the legal regimes of seas stretching from the South China Sea to the poles and historic maps and evidence of contact are still used as evidence of presence, claims and sovereignty. In other words, oceanic histories, especially as they respond to the critique that it was European imperialists and later nationalists who named many of the world's seas, includes important new work that stretches the category of mapping out to include diverse ways of knowing maritime space. In this sense, the chapters below also fit oceanic mapping together with other oceanic knowledges, ranging from knowledge of weather and the sky to tellings of natural history and natural calamity, such as debates over the mythical sunken continents of Lemuria and Atlantis. In all of these spheres, there was a braiding of ways of knowing.
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Historical Temporalities of the Sea

Finally, how is historical periodisation affected by oceanic histories, and conversely how do we periodise oceanic histories? Notwithstanding historians’ lament over the dominance of national frameworks, it is a curious fact that historic ‘ages’ have sometimes been identified by oceans or the progression of world history through its basins, in a Hegelian circuit from a ‘Mediterranean Age’ to a ‘Pacific Age’ via an Atlantic era. ‘The Pacific Age’ or ‘Pacific Century’ is the most prominent example in which periodisation has accrued to an ocean, and new kinds and intensities of human activity on it. Atlantic historians similarly identified an Atlantic age, between the late fifteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with modernity itself. In other instances, canonical periodisation in world history has been called into sharp question by historians of the seas. For example, Kiriti Chaudhuri’s Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean (1985) challenged a world historiography of maritime commerce and traffic dominated by European expansion after 1500, by periodising his study ‘from the rise of Islam in the mid-seventeenth century. Conventional historical markers, often drawn from dynasties and diplomacy, rarely map comfortably onto the fluid histories of oceans and seas. Historical periodisation has often followed the determinations of territoriality and sovereignty, by evading such logics, oceanic histories can be not only transnational but also transtemporal in scope. As a result, they may be productively disruptive, especially as defences against the capture of oceanic regions by national interests or attempts to carve out geopolitical spheres of influence, whether in the post-Soviet arena or in the regional competition among Asian powers for instance in the Indian Ocean.

Before most of these watery regions had historians, they had histories, in the plural, most extending back millennia rather than centuries, as shown by the continuity of human migration and mobility in the Pacific, the Red Sea, the South China Sea and the Black Sea, among others. As many of the chapters below demonstrate, the deep histories of oceans and seas provide better frameworks for historical understanding than Eurocentric categories like modernity and Enlightenment. From such a terrestrial standpoint, ‘the sea which will permit no records’ could appear to be outside history and beyond time. This was the implicit claim behind a long series of attempts to place the prime meridian off-shore, in the eastern Atlantic or through the Bering Strait, before it was finally planted at Greenwich in the late nineteenth century. Even then, the oceans slipped the bonds of modernist webs of universal time. It has been hardly a century since time-zones were extended from land to sea: ‘Until 1920, oceans and seas remained timeless.’

Oceans may have been formally timeless, until recently, but they were enmeshed in multiple temporalities. Many students of oceans and seas claim longue durée ambitions for their studies, picking up the traditions of narration of Arab cosmographers, or explicitly and implicitly recalling Braudel. This is with good reason and application for some oceanic spaces, but for others plainly fails to encompass the incommensurable temporalities of non-Western cultures. Human history in the Pacific, for example, challenges historians to think in different temporal terms altogether: simultaneously tens of thousands of years (human movement into Papua New Guinea and the Australian continent), seven to eight centuries (human movement across Polynesia), five centuries (European maritime traffic) and two centuries (European colonisation). Just as significantly, comprehension of time past and passed across the sea is recounted generationally and genealogically by some Islanders, a productive challenge to historians considering oceanic pasts. Even in the Atlantic, that most time-bound of oceans, enslaved Africans experienced time quite differently from their masters and those who profited from their labour: the Atlantic, like parallel regions, was a sea of histories, not an ocean with a single history. Oceans were therefore arenas for the competition of time-scales and the negotiation of histories. Artificial efforts to demarcate and define them, whether by inscribing territorial limits, slicing them longitudinally with treaty zones or date-lines or bisecting them across the equator, were only writ in water.

It is also striking that oceans have served as sites for telling futures. The contemplation of rising levels of sea is not simply a recent phenomenon. Scientific debate around the long-term relation between land and sea, drawing on catastrophist and evolutionist geological models, attracted

88 Chaudhuri, Trade and civilisation in the Indian Ocean.
89 Kathleen Davis, Periodization and sovereignty: How ideas of feudalism and secularization govern the politics of time (Philadelphia, PA, 2008).
90 Herman Melville, Moby-Dick (1851), quoted in Blum. ‘Terraqueous planet’, p. 25.
and begin instead with three oceans – the Indian, Pacific and Atlantic – in rough order of the histories of attempts to integrate them, but also to displace the Atlantic in favour of other oceanic models. Then, the book proceeds through pairings of seas also with the goal of avoiding geographical determinism and narratives that spread outward from the false universal of Europe or of the Mediterranean. The novel juxtapositions in this section – for instance, the South China Sea with the Mediterranean, the Red Sea and the Sea of Japan – are designed to highlight historiographical similarities even across geographical expanses, while the more conventional pairing of the Black Sea and the Baltic should facilitate comparison between two regions which have recently experienced political efforts to reintegrate them after a century or more of historical division. Finally, the closing dialogue between the Arctic and Southern Oceans returns the book to two seas more often linked institutionally and intellectually despite their separation at greatest distance from each other. Readers and teachers using the volume can, of course, rearrange the chapters for their own purposes. Nonetheless, we hope our oceanic reshuffling will divert them from conventional tracks and suggest new visions of their oceans and their histories.

The seas that are narrated below are connected and disconnected, spatially intertwined with micro-ecologies and micro-geographies as much as the global plane. In a similar way, we expect that the series that this volume inaugurates will attend to a further cluster of spaces: ports and ships, straits, bays and islands and the underwater realm. All of these travel across, above and below the seas of this volume: ships and airplanes, telegraph lines and missiles, refugees and migrants, trepang and whales, monsoonal winds and El Niño, currents and underwater storms. Taken together, these seas constitute the watery horizons of our planet and a historiographical horizon too.

Our project is inter-disciplinary and methodologically capacious in historical terms. This is evident in how history itself is stretched out over time in what follows, in making the case that the origins of oceanic historiography are long and mult centred and that it overlaps with geographies, cartographies, astr onomies, ethnographies, climatic studies and natural histories. Though each of the sub-fields of oceanic historiography surveyed below has developed with a critical sense of its own distinctive flavour, there has been and continues to be a borrowing of concepts and methods. This borrowing at times has been detrimental to the emergence of original questions; and yet at other times the inability to talk beyond the divides of Atlantic, Indian Ocean, Pacific and Mediterranean history for instance, has closed down subjects and areas. To think critically about the relatedness and becoming of each of these seas is thus an

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See for instance, Tracey Banivanua Mar, Decolonisation and the Pacific: Indigenous globalisation and the ends of empire (Cambridge, 2016).


urgent concern, moving beyond the simplistic and dichotomous impasse which questions whether world historiography collapses everything into one or creates new grids of imperial, regional and national difference. To consider the world historiography of oceans in this way is also to take account of the environmental politics of our age and its implication of the need to think of the world ocean as a whole and as a commons. In keeping with the avowed spirit of ‘World Oceans Day’, it represents a historiographical commitment to plural seas and oceans as well as to the singular ocean itself.

Further Reading