

RETHINKING THE OCEANS

Jeremy Black

The Boundless Sea. A Human History of the Oceans

David Abulafia, Penguin Books, 2020, £16.99

To Rule Eurasia's Waves. The New Great Power Competition at Sea

Geoffrey Gresh, Yale University Press, 2020, £25.00

A concatenation of trends and events has and is jet-starting the need to revisit and revise geopolitical assumptions, and not least those focused on the oceans, their strategic meaning, politically, militarily and economically, and their interaction both with each other and with the continents. These trends and events include global warming, with its impact in opening up sealanes to the north of Asia and America, the growth of Chinese naval power and pretensions, the impact of new technology, including the role of anti-ship missiles, smart-mines, and drones, larger container ships and the change accordingly in harbours and the Panama Canal, and much else.

These two books offer much for those interested in contextualising the moment. David Abulafia, an important and distinguished scholar of great intellectual range, insight and flexibility, deliberately does not concentrate on recent decades, but his *longue durée* offers a perspective through which to assess them. It is as if, having matched Braudel in his valuable discussion of the Mediterranean, Abulafia has gone on to surpass him by providing a more grounded globalism than Braudel's often diffuse, bitty and overly schematic attempt on global history.

With Abulafia, there is theme, thesis and scholarly exegesis. The particular strength is the writing with authority across a global range. That is most notable in the repeated insights stemming from an understanding of maritime archaeology and what it can contribute to a written record that is very limited for much of history and for many cultures. Thus, we have the benefit here of Abulafia scrutinising the finds held around the world in naval museums and other sites. His particular interest is trading vessels, not warships, for, as he makes clear, this is a maritime more than naval history, but trade of course was the underpinning of the latter, not only because it provided capacity, expertise and funds, but also as it gave strategic weight to particular areas and sites. Indeed, with Abulafia and a *good* atlas, you can follow the geography of naval history and understand why individual straits and harbours were, and remain, of great consequence.

In directing our attention to trade, Abulafia necessarily shows us the mechanisms by which links were created within the world, including, as he did brilliantly in his Mediterranean book, links between cultures, not least often hostile ones. These links were, as he repeatedly demonstrates, a matter of shared interests. Thus, slave sellers, slave transporters, and slave buyers, all created slave trades, both on land and at sea, with those in the Atlantic, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean being particularly important as maritime ones.

Again as with the Mediterranean book, both intermediaries and population flows are of great interest in creating a world of diasporas. The great waters of the world indeed emerge from his work in this light, for example when he discusses the movement of Austronesians into the South-West Pacific and also Madagascar, both formidable achievements, not least given the shipping of the period. So also with the navigational knowledge and aid. Deficiencies in both help explain the challenge of the oceans, and notably the problem of sailing across open waters. Indeed, this accounts for the general tendency to remain within sight of the coastline. Such a practice also helped provide the opportunity to take shelter on the coast from bad weather, including by running boats onto shore. Moreover, the coast provided opportunities to get fresh water and food. All of these were key constraints and factors in discouraging shipping from taking to open waters. Moreover, even if the latter led to success, it was not easy to record the knowledge of such a voyage so that the same trip could be repeated.

In Abulafia's excellent account, European expansion frequently becomes just another stage in these diasporas, as with Spaniards following that of Tainos in the Caribbean or Portuguese that of Arabs on the Swahili coast of East Africa. Moreover, many of these imperial presences worked through adopting or adapting to existing networks (and vice versa), as with the British use of Indian networks in the Persian Gulf.

As a result, this attractively priced book, which is excellent value for money, is one that throws much light on transnationalism, and notably so in terms of the shared interest that made both maritime systems and trans-oceanic empires. This approach very much subverts the crude adversarial, zero-sum, approach to empire, and, indeed, history, that has become so popular and influential as the Left seeks to wage a culture war across every front. In practice, theirs is a two-dimensional history, whereas Abulafia provides a three-dimensional alternative, one that is able to understand the values of the past, and to offer nuances in interpretation. The contrast between two-dimensional and three-dimensional systems and styles of analysis and exposition is crucial not only to modern culture, but also to the method, content and maturity of political thought and practice.

At the same time, Abulafia's work enables us to see how these processes of creating trans-oceanic systems were and are far from universal. He is searching on cultures that did not, as well as those that did; although, in every case, did and did not have a range of meanings, and should be seen

across a continuum of possibilities. Moreover, 'Did Not,' in terms of developing mercantile and naval capability, did not mean that purposes could not be gained by selling products and services to those who took the risk, physically, commercially and in credit terms, by coming as maritime traders. The Europeans who traded across the oceans had to offer something in order to insert themselves into existing commercial and fiscal systems, or simply to gain recognition. This was very much the case with China and Japan, as force could not provide the means. So also with India as, although force could destroy non-European warships and capture coastal positions, it could not determine trade routes.

Africa demonstrates the same. Europeans were not strong enough to overcome coastal polities such as Dahomey and had to persuade them to sell slaves. This, of course, is not a welcome narrative at present, and scholarly research on this topic does not tend to attract proportionate support. This, however, underlines the need to integrate into the debate on the present, a mature understanding of the past. Ironically, any presentation of Africa as simply a victim of the slave trade and international capitalism denies Africans agency and thus not only misrepresents the co-operation that was integral to the trade, but also downgrades the African capacity for agency. In contrast, the ability of coastal-based networks to use co-operation in order to tap slave sources in the interior served as an instance of the extent to which the oceans were not frontiered by a coast but, instead, interacted with a broad littoral zone. Moreover, aside from land routes, the oceans were made more significant by the extent to which river routes offered ready access far into the interior. This could be a matter of direct access by oceangoing vessels or of transshipment.

The significance of the oceans were greatly enhanced by the extent to which, prior to the changes brought by rail, the population across much of the world concentrated in littoral regions. Thus, about 75 per cent of the population of the Thirteen Colonies lived within 75 miles of the coast in 1775, and rivers such as the Hudson and the James, and bodies of water, such as the Chesapeake and Long Island Sound, also interdicted the continental mass. Ocean-going ships could sail to Albany, the Plate estuary and the very extensive river network that followed into it, notably the Panama and Paraguay rivers. The situation was different when there were no such rivers or bodies of water, as on the Pacific coast of South America. So also for California with the exception of San Francisco Bay. Any history of the oceans necessarily is one of oceanic cities, and vice versa, and it is no surprise that New York, Rio, Buenos Aires, Cape Town, Sydney, Auckland and Tokyo have been so important to the history of their countries.

Indeed, Abulafia's book leaves much room for thought about the contrast between such countries and those, such as France and Spain, with inland capitals. Here the significance of choice, including re-choices over the last 150 years, plays a role: London not Winchester, Delhi not Bombay or Calcutta, Washington not New York, or Philadelphia, Moscow not St Petersburg, Brasilia not Rio, Canberra not Sydney or Melbourne, Pretoria not Cape Town, and Beijing not Shanghai or even

riverine Nanjing. As more recently in Myanmar and Nigeria, the move to inland capitals is frequently one away from commerce and freedom, and toward the business of government, notably regulation and the politics of lobbying. Thus, the failure to open out to the oceans has often had consequences that were at best unfortunate and more obviously malign. Would not the history of Germany have been different if Hamburg had been its capital rather than Berlin.

It should not be assumed that maritime activity, especially beyond the range of coastal trade and inshore fisheries, was a necessary or even natural goal. Much depended on geographical factors, such as currents, the availability of harbours, and the fertility of the coastline, so that, for example, South-West Africa did not see much activity. However, Abulafia is no determinist, indeed being more subtle and searching than Braudel in that respect, and he draws attention to the particular role of mercantile entrepreneurialism, diaspora links, and political ethos. The absence of all three helped ensure that inland cultures such as Inca Peru and Aztec Mexico did not pursue such courses, while there was also a lack of interest in Manchu China.

The last offers an opportunity to bring in the book by Geoffrey Gresh, Professor of International Relations at the National Defense University in Washington. He focuses on the recent engagement by China in particular in a more assertive maritime capability system and ethos, and provides a geopolitical way to consider the resulting dynamics, one in which India and Russia are other key players. New shipping routes made possible by global warming are part of a changing context and the book to a degree is a call to arms for America and the liberal global order. In part, the challenge is presented as a move away from an Atlantic-dominant world. China is seen as the key challenger. Thus, on the Bay of Bengal, the development of a deep-water port at Kyaukphyu is being funded by China. This links to projected oil and gas pipelines and rail links that constitute a China-Myanmar Economic Corridor that will provide a strategic enabler for fuel imports that bypass the Malacca Straits as well as enabling China in effect to span from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean. This represents a maritime geopolitics different from the idea of a canal across the Kra Isthmus, and one that indicates China's engagement with a geopolitics that spans land and sea.

The content and tone in Gresh's thoughtful and important book are very different to those of Abulafia, and the scholarship is more that of the present-day. That ensures that they complement each other. To a degree, Gresh would benefit from taking on board Abulafia's subtle probing of the shared interests bound up in trade and the same point could be made about geopolitics.

Both scholars also raise important questions about how and how far interests and values change through time. For Western European states, from Denmark to Portugal, trans-oceanic roles were important to their history, identity and interests. These states are largely inconsequential in Gresh's book. That represents a challenge to current European commentators and politicians anxious

to assess how European societies can find valid maritime roles in a changing world, and what this task should entail.

(1959)

Jeremy Black's books include *Geopolitics*, *Naval Power*, and *Strategy*.