

A WORLD AT SEA

Maritime Practices and Global History

EDITED BY

LAUREN BENTON

NATHAN PERL-ROSENTHAL



A World at Sea



THE EARLY MODERN AMERICAS

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*Lauren Benton and
Nathan Perl-Rosenthal*

PENN

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Introduction: Making Maritime History Global

Nathan Perl-Rosenthal and Lauren Benton

The oceans are a dangerous place for human beings. Our land mammal bodies make us poor swimmers; we are prone to drowning and hypothermia. Ships and their crews bring organisms to shore, from the tiny bacillus to the Eurasian horse, that can quickly disrupt our communities. Yet for all their dangers, oceans have always been essential to human life. From time immemorial they have served as a source of food, a path for news and trade, and a medium for mobility.

The tension between the dangers of the ocean and our collective reliance on it became visible on a global scale in the formative period from 1450 to 1900. Ships and sailors in this period knitted together the parts of the world in a “first globalization.” Unprecedented transfers of people, ideas, microbes, and goods across aqueous spaces generated new wealth and initiated or deepened networks of exchange across regions. With connection also came the startling human misery created by overseas conquest, the spread of disease, and coerced migration. In these transformative centuries, the seas became truly global—a condition reflecting not just worldwide connections but also the composition of a global regulatory order rife with inequality and violence. Even though most early modern populations never got anywhere near a coast, let alone onto the water, the maritime world reached them: the seas lay at the geographic margins of the land, but they were at the heart of global conflicts and transformative processes.¹

This volume seeks to sharpen and expand our understanding of how the maritime world, broadly construed, contributed to the early modern era’s global transformations. The chapters build on familiar stories about the growth of maritime commercial endeavors and the regional integration of ocean basins, but they move well beyond the usual topics and approaches to

maritime history. They have multiple points of departure: the shared properties of early modern maritime spaces, seafarers' need to adapt to the hazards and perils of the sea, and the challenges of controlling and governing aqueous space, among others. But all of them probe how processes spanning land and sea shaped new patterns of global ordering in the early modern era.

Our volume identifies several kinds of processes as particularly important in anchoring maritime worlds to broader transformations. First, we highlight ways in which the regulatory order of the seas emanated from strategies of land-based polities and their agents, while at the same time responding to shifting patterns of conflict at sea. The section entitled "Currents" presents chapters that explore the imperial institutions and structures organizing maritime life and reacting to challenges to order. By "institutions" and "structures" we refer not only to phenomena that historians usually describe with those terms but also to patterns of cultural practice and legal engagement that gave rise to informal and unofficial regulatory processes. Second, we draw attention to the importance of the changing information order of the seas. The second section, "Dispatches," comprises studies of documentary practices that bundled and conveyed information about sea voyages, encounters, and conflicts. The emphasis in this section is on how maritime contexts adapted existing terrestrial routines and genres while also adjusting to the explosion of new information gathered on and about the seas. Third, the volume highlights change and conflict at the water's edge. The final section, "Thresholds," features chapters that examine the relationship between littoral geographies and the transformation of sociolegal practices spanning land and sea. They probe, too, the political symbolism of the land-sea divide as a threshold of power. Each of the three sections contains perspectives from multiple ocean regions, and every chapter is either explicitly comparative or situated within a multioceanic frame.

Together the chapters chart a new course for thinking about maritime history as global history. They show how practices in different maritime contexts around the early modern world forged significant convergences in processes organizing trade, labor, violence, geographic knowledge, and law. These convergences often took shape around attempts to manage and regulate—or cross—the divide between the sea and the land. Efforts to extend terrestrial governance onto the water, or to manage and police the shoreline, for instance, reconfigured states and societies everywhere during this period. Variations in physical geography, legal culture, and socioeconomic structures put their stamp on fundamentally similar maritime trends, including the formation of land-sea regimes, across regions and polities.²

This variation-in-unity makes maritime history an especially powerful lens through which to examine processes of global ordering in the early modern era, encompassing everything from the remaking of political communities to the refashioning of individual lives.

Maritime History's Global Turns

Since maritime history emerged as a recognized area of study in the late nineteenth century, it has taken multiple transnational, global, and oceanic turns. These turns are part of what gives the field such potential as a lens on global transformations. Yet the sheer multiplicity of global engagements that point in many compass directions at once can also be an impediment to moving the field forward. Reckoning with previous attempts to write global history on the ocean is the first step of charting a new course for maritime history.

Most maritime histories of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries highlighted two subjects: navies and commerce. Naval history tended to be the province of nonprofessional scholars—stereotypically, an aging retired naval officer writing the history of his own ship or service—though this body of scholarship also included serious amateur monographs, detailed naval biographies, and significant collections of naval history documents that remain valuable references to this day.³ Naval history had a conservative bent overall. Important nineteenth-century studies of the French revolutionary navy, for instance, presented a thoroughly counterrevolutionary argument that the Revolution had nearly destroyed French naval power.⁴ But the field's conservatism was often tempered by a serious interest in the life of ratings (nonofficers) and curiosity about the technological dimensions of shipbuilding and provisioning that would not be unfamiliar to social historians today.

A second powerful current in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century maritime history writing flowed from studies of seaborne trade. Before the advent of professional history in the United States, a robust amateur tradition already existed of histories of local and regional commercial ventures.⁵ When professional history of early modern empires developed around 1900, it took the history of overseas commerce as one of its primary subjects, alongside the topics of imperial politics and administration. Scholars such as Charles Boxer and J. P. Oliveira Martins placed maritime ventures at the center of narratives of Iberian expansion, for example, and G. L. Beer, Charles McLean Andrews, and Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr., among others, devoted considerable attention to maritime matters in their broader treatments of the first British empire.⁶

In the postwar decades, a more specialized scholarship on maritime commerce began to appear. Some, like influential studies by Bernard Bailyn and Richard Pares, connected commerce to imperial and interimperial currents of colonization and warfare, while other works explored oceanic patterns of trade, such as Huguette and Pierre Chaunu's *Séville et l'Atlantique* and, later still, K. N. Chaudhuri's pathbreaking *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean*. Unlike naval histories, studies of commerce rarely probed the lives of seafarers, in part reflecting the limitations of merchants' records in this regard. Yet many of these works were highly attuned to questions of law and jurisdiction: Pares and the Chaunus, for instance, highlighted tensions over illicit interimperial trade, and Chaudhuri insisted that Indian Ocean seaborne trade formed part of a broader phenomenon of Asian commercial capitalism.⁷

These two oldest strands within maritime historiography had the virtue—from the vantage point of contemporary scholarship—of being oceanic in scope, and even precociously global. Naval history, though firmly inserted within national historiographies in one sense, was in another sense resolutely border crossing. Naval historians followed vessels, officers, and enlisted men wherever they traveled, revealing connections not just within but also across oceans. Many naval historians, too, regarded their subject with a comparative eye: an empire or nation's sea power could only be understood, after all, in relation to other naval forces. Many historians of maritime commerce were also decidedly global in their orientation. Some of the earliest works closely examined the high-value, long-distance operations of European trading companies, such as the Dutch East and West India Companies, the French Levant Company, and the British East India Company.⁸ Such studies sketched world-spanning histories a century before “global” became a byword among scholars.

The twenty-five years from about 1970 to 1995 saw the emergence of a third strand within maritime history, the social and labor history of seamen. The historiography on this topic developed roughly simultaneously on both sides of the North Atlantic as part of the social history turn of the 1960s and 1970s, with counterparts in other world regions. In Anglo-American scholarship, Jesse Lemisch's pathbreaking 1968 *William and Mary Quarterly* article on mariners in the coming of the American Revolution remains widely cited fifty years later. A similar turn took place in Europe during the 1970s: in France, Alain Cabantous undertook painstaking work on the seamen of northwestern France. Jaap Bruijn, holder of the Netherlands' only university chair in maritime history, began to publish on social history topics (though initially for a popular audience).⁹ These forays opened into wider social histories of the sea

in the 1980s and early 1990s. In the United States, Marcus Rediker and Daniel Vickers studied the lives of English merchant seamen and Massachusetts fishermen, respectively. Pablo E. Pérez-Mallaina, whose early work had focused on traditional naval topics, produced an important study of daily life aboard the Spanish galleon fleet. Toward the end of this period, some scholars on both sides of the Atlantic began to take an interest in the lives of women connected to the maritime world and to study the lived experiences of enslaved and freed people in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds.¹⁰

Much of the new social history of mariners was strikingly regional, even local, in orientation. Mariners in these studies were mainly rooted in local communities, and the research typically stayed within a single ocean. A burgeoning literature on Polynesian mariners and coastal Southeast Asian communities, for instance, broke the mold of European-centered histories of seafarers but remained regionally inscribed.¹¹ For some scholars of the Atlantic world, focusing on the everyday lives of mariners served to illuminate local, small-scale communities. Cabantous and Vickers, for instance, drew on probate inventories and vital statistics, types of documents deeply rooted in place and of a kind that imparted a strong local flavor to their histories even when they studied populations that were mobile by profession. Rediker's turn toward representing Anglo-American mariners as protoproletarians advanced a view of shipboard life as a crucible of class struggle, an emphasis that had its own provincializing effect as it inscribed an Anglocentric model of industrial labor within a global narrative of radical opposition to capitalism and modernity.¹²

The past twenty-five years have seen a dramatic expansion of maritime history, but also a powerful renewal of ocean regionalism. The appeal of oceanic frameworks can be traced in good measure to the persistent influence of Fernand Braudel's two-volume masterpiece, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, first translated into English in the mid-1970s.¹³ Braudel's work traveled in so many directions, from environmental to material to cultural history, that we often lose sight of its central innovation: an ocean-centered approach to cultural and social history. The enduring power of this approach is visible in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean historiographies, Mediterranean studies, Pacific history, and literatures on scores of smaller sea regions. In each of these areas, the Braudelian perspective positions maritime flows within regions as central to cultural and political developments. Even as practitioners in these fields have critiqued Braudel's notions of regional cultural unity, ocean regionalism has still proven a powerful organizing principle for research in maritime history.¹⁴

The renewed ocean regionalism has, in the first instance, given us a far richer understanding of the social history of the sea. We now have a far better view of the complex seafaring communities that flourished before European contact in the Caribbean, Polynesia, East and Southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean. We know, too, that the practices and commercial-military networks of these communities did not recede in the face of European intrusions.¹⁵ Robust new histories of maritime bondage and the relationship between enslavement and maritime life has taken shape in multiple ocean basin contexts, especially the Atlantic and Indian Oceans.¹⁶ Building on the early work of Chaudhuri and others, older oceanic histories of commerce have reemerged as histories of capitalism and its regional variants, including innovative global commodity studies and credit histories connected with maritime trade. There has also been a limited cultural turn in the social history of mariners, with gender and race gaining greater analytic power and the cultural worlds of maritime workers coming into sharper focus.¹⁷

New areas of inquiry within maritime history have also opened up through (and occasionally against) the focus on ocean regions. There is innovative research on imperial practices, movements of coerced labor, and maritime environmental change.¹⁸ Another new strand of research has followed the circulation of information and currents of vernacular knowledge.¹⁹ Still another area of sustained focus, only dimly perceived in the field's earlier iterations, is the history of law at sea: recent works explore oceans as legal spaces, analyze ships as "vectors of law," and uncover the way distinctive legal regimes took shape as jurists and mariners turned an arcane arena of jurisprudence, prize law, into an element of regional and global ordering.²⁰ Maritime violence, especially piracy, emerges in these law-framed histories as deeply connected to contests over imperial power. Meanwhile, naval history, much enriched and not a little transformed by the infusion of social history, and now increasingly expanded to incorporate forms of privateering and strategies of governance, remains a mainstay of the field while becoming more attuned to the cultural currents and political movements shaping the views of naval personnel.²¹

Maritime Practices, Global Processes

Building on these foundations, this volume seeks to capture maritime history's still-unrealized potential as a vehicle for world history. A growing list of research topics and an explicit ambition to connect histories of ocean regions

do not yet equate to a clear collective enterprise. The chapters in this volume reveal the value of making three additional analytic moves in order to forge a truly global maritime history. The first analytic move is an explicit focus on the contributions of maritime practices to patterns of change on a planetary scale. In the category of maritime practices, we include social, economic, and cultural actions on the seas (such as sailing techniques) as well as practices that extended into oceans but originated or reverberated in landed communities (for example, maritime commercial regulations). Our emphasis on practice embraces the promise of maritime social and cultural history from below, while encompassing institutional change and interpolitical contexts. A second move is to insist on a comparative dimension to the study of practice, in order to reveal the links between local and regional histories and global trends. This work has already commenced with a series of recent edited collections offering comparative takes on topics such as governance, trade, piracy, and forced migration across the seas.²²

The third analytic move involves sustained attention to processes spanning land and sea, with an understanding that the influence extended in both directions. The approach brings into view, for example, both efforts to cast imperial power over the seas and the regulatory effects of ubiquitous maritime routines. The oceans were certainly distinctive places in many respects. Yet as the contributions in this volume show, the people on them were closely and intimately tied to land-based societies, polities, and cultures. Many regional historians stop their research at the water's edge; some have mistaken the heightened drama of conflicts at sea for a difference of kind. The specialized vocabularies, conventions, and legal practices of maritime pursuits have given further impetus to a view of the world beyond the shore as radically different from that of the land. More than a few maritime historians, meanwhile, have wandered into a version of maritime exceptionalism, staking unexamined claims that global change originated on the seas or that the origins of particular strains of radical politics or labor solidarity emerged first among sailors. Recovering the close linkage between processes on land and sea is crucial if we are to position maritime history as a significant part of the new global history.²³

Studying maritime practices on a planetary scale with a focus on the ways in which such processes by their nature span the land-sea divide has the potential to transport maritime history from its relatively quiet corner into an analytically central position within world history. The practices of seafaring, if we are willing to extend our vision to be able to see it, were that rarest

of rare things: truly global phenomena constitutive of deep structural change at vast scale in the early modern world.

We organize this volume in sections corresponding to three sets of especially formative processes spanning land and sea. “Currents” takes as its subject processes of institutional change that organized maritime actions in increasingly global dimensions. Unsurprisingly, given the importance of empires in this period, the structures are first and foremost imperial or para-imperial. The section opens with Carla Rahn Phillips’s chapter on maritime recruitment in the Spanish empire. Phillips explores the range of impetuses that led young men to go to sea, from financial rewards to social pressure. Her essay shows that maritime recruitment, though it had its particularities, was not radically dissimilar from other forms of labor mobilization in the early modern world. In the second essay, Adam Clulow and Xing Hang offer an intricate study of how two Southeast Asian kingdoms sought to navigate a struggle for maritime power and authority between Dutch and Chinese actors in seventeenth-century East Asia. At issue in their chapter is the troubled process by which metropolitan regulatory systems were pushed outward into maritime spaces, where they composed new, still uneven regulatory processes. Matthew Taylor Raffety’s essay provides an overview of trends in European maritime law as a phenomenon with global influence. Using a genealogical approach that views European maritime legal regimes as having common roots, his chapter explores how this multifaceted legal regime developed in Europe’s proximate seas and projected its complex and uneven influence around the globe.

The three chapters explicitly track institutional connections across the putative divide between land and sea. Maritime labor practices and recruitment, as Phillips shows convincingly, developed in close relation to broader labor legislation in seafaring polities. Her essay draws evidence primarily from the Mediterranean and Atlantic ports of Spain but clearly suggests that similar stories could be told about every region that made significant use of maritime labor. The contribution reminds us of the intricate institutional layering that went into the rise of increasingly global processes for finding, deploying, and disciplining maritime labor. Raffety’s chapter centers not on the spread of law in the abstract but on the ways in which a transoceanic legal order emerged from shared medieval legal practices and specific metropolitan institutions (especially British admiralty courts) to become the preeminent law of the sea. Raffety in part follows other studies seeking the origins of oceanic legal ordering in projections of metropolitan law and uneven treaty regimes, but his chapter cautions that European ambitions to design a

universal law of the sea, however fitful and uneven, must remain part of this story.²⁴ Clulow and Xing offer a particularly vivid illustration of how maritime matters crossed the land-sea divide: their chapter focuses on two early modern states, Cambodia and Ayutthaya (Siam), that did not have significant maritime domains. Yet as the authors show, both states sought to stretch their regulatory authority into maritime spaces in order to manage trade relationships and control potentially destructive conflicts among trading partners.

The chapters in this section sketch the emergence of an oceanic regulatory order that was being woven and projected through intersecting state practices spanning land and sea. The new global history is intent on avoiding the kinds of diffusionist narratives characteristic of earlier histories such as stories of the British or French or Dutch empire penetrating and integrating the globe. Current scholarship aims to recover instead a polycentric and polyphonic history of early modern global transformation. One of the puzzles created by this polycentric view of the early modern world is how to explain the emergence of global regulatory orders. How did diverse polities come to share so much—not just in their external relations but also in how they functioned internally? These essays emphasize the ways in which systems of maritime labor recruitment, seafaring legal institutions, and regulatory authority over maritime spaces crossed the divide between early modern states' internal and external operations. As states of all stripes (and many kinds of state-like bodies) competed with one another for authority and control in and around the water, they found themselves pulled internally in similar directions. The projects of regulating oceans and projecting power onto them did more than just order the oceans; they emanated from domestic political change and also rebounded onto political communities. Efforts to control the seas, including through maritime warfare, had some distinctive properties, to be sure: claiming a patch of water was not the same as claiming a patch of land. But the larger story, as these chapters convey in different ways, is that polities had to integrate the military, technical, and social logics of the maritime world into the heart of their policymaking if they hoped to survive and thrive.

The second section, "Dispatches," explores the intersection between distinctly maritime forms of knowledge and trends in the use and deployment of knowledge in the early modern world more broadly. The three chapters in this section approach their shared problem from different empirical bases. Margaret Schotte's chapter examines navigational science and the development of education for the maritime professions. Her focus is squarely on mariners and the administrators who sought to channel and replicate their knowledge.

David Igler explores visual and ethnographic knowledge through the story of a Pacific Ocean voyage and the friendship that grew up on the seas between two shipmates, one Polynesian and one European. Igler examines the way intimate, cross-cultural maritime exchanges fostered the production and transmission of useful knowledge. Nathan Perl-Rosenthal's chapter analyzes the complex processes by which eighteenth-century mariners used a particular kind of document—the private letter—to develop knowledge about the national identities of crews and ships in the wartime Atlantic. Here “official” knowledge came to reflect the categories known to captains, mariners, merchants, and captives describing the origins of men on ships and the political affiliation of voyage sponsors.

The trends traced in this section unfolded against the backdrop of twin revolutions in government and science that swept the European world during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This period saw the birth of new forms of politics and bureaucracy that had distinctive demands for specialized kinds of knowledge and informed the rise of new sciences (including racial science and forms of “big science”). Vernacular knowledge about the seas was entering these circuits—though historians have only begun to understand the connections.²⁵ As Schotte and Perl-Rosenthal suggest, maritime knowledge-making in this period could act as a forerunner or testing-ground for the development of new forms of knowledge in and for early modern states. Navigation was one of the first areas in which European empires, eager to develop powerful naval establishments, sought to encourage the recognition and application of “useful” knowledge. The need for knowledge in this area went well beyond the technical information required to build and repair warships. Official interest in knowing the nationalities of ships influenced the development of tools for identification at sea that could be deployed in courtrooms and custom houses. New problems of knowledge at sea led to the creation, in multiple instances, of new epistemologies.

Maritime knowledge-making was not just a precocious case of what would later become common on land. The three authors in this section examine closely the ways in which maritime vicissitudes put European documentary practices, broadly construed, to the test and altered them in the process. Perl-Rosenthal shows how commercial and personal letters—technologies designed for communication over long distances—were adapted by privateersmen and admiralty courts to the new and unintended purpose of identifying nationality. Schotte analyzes how states sought to codify and render accessible mariners' practical knowledge of ships, seafaring, and geography—and, as her opening

anecdote suggests, the ways in which systems of record-keeping imagined for terrestrial processes proved unequal to solving problems at sea. In his examination of the cross-cultural interaction between Kadu and Choris, Iglar reveals how the technologies of illustration and ethnographic description, thoroughly established on land and in the metropole, became subject to experimentation once they were deployed on a Pacific Ocean voyage.

A fresh picture of European empire and its knowledge practices begins to emerge from these essays, which cover a wide geographic swath, from European waters to the Caribbean to the Pacific. Early modern European empires are often depicted as weaker versions of their later incarnations: too feeble, in this period at least, to effectively exercise power or acquire reliable information at a distance.²⁶ These chapters show not weakness or lassitude on the part of European states or actors but a kind of hyperactive pursuit of knowledge in multiple arenas. This supercharged knowledge-making and knowledge-seeking posed its own challenges. New ways of packaging navigational information, identifying ships, and depicting native peoples, often developed on the fly, clashed repeatedly or combined with older ways of accomplishing the same goals. Governments and bureaucracies often had difficulty assimilating the resulting information in a useful manner. The results hampered imperial governance in many cases, not just because of the state's incapacity to manage so much information but also through the hyperactivity of the very actors who were supposedly charged with creating and collecting useful knowledge.

The third section, "Thresholds," homes in on the link between maritime or littoral geographies and the transformation of sociolegal practices in the early modern period. In this section, the physical interface between land and sea moves to center stage. In general terms, the "threshold of the state" was a significant site of early modern political thought about the constitution of communities and their relation both to external relations and to nature.²⁷ The shoreline and littoral gave physical form to the idea of the state's threshold. Coastlines, beaches, sea passages between proximate shores, bays, and estuaries—these spaces were at once barriers and transitional zones, often styled as places of cultural encounter and unstable political control.²⁸ As later studies of the creation of borders have shown, practices of crossing such zones shaped their political meanings, not the other way around.²⁹ These chapters probe such processes in the early modern world. The authors also open questions, now increasingly familiar from environmental history but still emergent in maritime history, about the constraints and effects of the natural world on human behavior. They suggest the possibilities of studying the synchronic

formation of types of maritime liminal zones, with attention to distinctive local sociolegal worlds they helped to create.

Thresholds—of the state and of geographies—feature in several chapters as projections of political power along coastal corridors and in proximate seas. Catherine Phipps examines debates and practices in Japan during the long nineteenth century aimed at control of coasts and coastal waters, and considers how such strategies fit within the broader politics of fashioning Japanese sovereignty and confronting the perceived dangers of European and American imperial power. Her chapter asks us to look away from Commodore Perry's arrival in Japan, the usual set piece for probing emerging views of Japanese sovereignty, and to consider instead how policies aimed at the control of coastal waters shaped Japan's borders and strategies for extending and consolidating state authority. Jeppe Mulich, in his essay, analyzes maritime marronage (the escape of enslaved people by sea) as both a social phenomenon and a political problem in transimperial borderlands. Grounded in local sources from the Danish Caribbean, his study shows how competing polities sought to control and channel such mobility to their advantage. The third essay in this section, by Lisa Norling, offers a global survey of "women who got wet" in the early modern fisheries. Norling provides a geographically sweeping yet also granular look at the kinds of work these women did and their relationship to the working worlds of land and sea. Her emphasis is on enduring and widely shared divisions along gender lines of the vast labor force whose work spanned ships and various kinds of shore communities.

All three chapters emphasize the complex sociopolitical character of coastlines and littoral zones in the early modern world. Phipps, picking up some of the same threads as Clulow and Hang, argues that coastal waters represented a crucial area for the definition of sovereignty by the nineteenth-century Japanese state. She suggests that the nature of the marine space itself—at the junction between a terrestrial sphere controlled by the Japanese state and maritime spaces under effective European control—made it central to the negotiation of Japanese sovereignty. Mulich's essay centers on the particular set of sociolegal and administrative problems posed by the archipelago geography of the Caribbean. Its patchwork of jurisdictions, with contradictory rules regarding property in persons, created an interpolity borderland, one whose character was partly shaped by the movements of enslaved people. This marine sociolegal geography, in turn, stimulated the formation of unexpected cross-polity relationships among colonial elites. Lisa Norling emphasizes the role of the littoral as a particularly sharply defined example of an ecotone—a

transitional area from one environment to another. The typically rich natural resources of these zones combined with repeating practices of gendered labor to produce a socioecological pattern of global reach and local variation.

The littoral was not only a distinctive social space, these contributions suggest: the recurring processes that formed the shoreline contributed to elements of global ordering. The interpolity relationships in coastal waters and politically divided archipelagoes existed in settings beyond Japan and the Caribbean. In other island chains in the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, and elsewhere, thickening interactions simultaneously gave form to borders and made them porous in specific ways. Coastal waters were crucial to the formation of sovereign power in regions as diverse as colonial North America, South Asia, and the English Channel. The ecotone of the water's edge, too, represented a global phenomenon. As Norling shows convincingly, the bodily needs of families and the physical properties of the seashore led families in seafaring coastal communities around the world to organize their labor by assigning women particular, often strikingly similar, roles.

A World at Sea

Individually, the contributions of this volume develop new insights and topics in global maritime history; collectively, they point the way to a new perspective on the maritime world's significance in global history. The authors affirm the value of using the thickening processes of information sharing, navigation, and conflict (for instance, over captives or natural resources) as starting points for studying ocean regions. When we do so, instead of beginning from seemingly familiar oceanic labels—Pacific, Indian, Atlantic, Mediterranean—we uncover surprising regional formations, corresponding to overlooked but historically significant forms of geographic imagination, regulation, and capital accumulation.³⁰ A second insight that emerges from these essays is the promise of focusing on the institutions and practices used to extend control over ocean spaces, and their interaction with efforts to collect and communicate knowledge generated on the seas. These practices engaged imperial agents as well as families or companies dependent on seafaring, and they encompassed the actions of vulnerable and destitute groups, from slaves engaged in maritime marronage to struggling shipboard and coastal laborers to women workers. As several of the chapters in this volume suggest, we still have much to learn about the cultural, institutional, and informational practices of these laboring worlds and the global processes they generated.

But the chapters make clear that these processes compose a framework for analysis that is both global in reach and socially intimate. Finally, several chapters call for renewed attention to the ways in which the maritime world contributed to paradigmatic shifts in the period such as the development of “big science” and novel patterns of political association (such as interimperial collaboration). Moving beyond a view of ships or ports as vectors and points for transmitting political ideas makes it possible to see how maritime practices left their mark on the political formations of the period, including empires, micropolities, confederations, nation-states, and regions.

Studying the oceans and seas as sites of experimentation, innovation, governance, and disruption promises to produce a truly global history of maritime change. Transformations on the seas did not take place only in a few familiar ways, such as through long-distance trade, cross-cultural relations, migration, and war. Seafaring itself generated global processes and patterns that stitched together regions, spanned the land-sea divide, and profoundly influenced terrestrial polities and societies. These processes made the early modern world, in ways both tangible and metaphorical, a world at sea.

Part I

Currents

Chapter 1

Why Did Anyone Go to Sea? Structures of Maritime Enlistment from Family Traditions to Violent Coercion

Carla Rahn Phillips

Anacharsis, the Scythian philosopher, said, “There are three kinds of people: *the living, the dead and those who sail the sea in ships.*” That was in the Heroic Age and, at a later date, Dr Johnson said, with equal authority and force, that it passed his comprehension why anybody with the wit to steal enough money to get himself decently hanged should ever go to sea.

—Richard Armstrong, *The Early Mariners*

Anacharsis in the early sixth century BCE and Samuel Johnson in the late eighteenth century CE were in complete agreement about the unnaturalness of seafaring for a land-based species such as ours. Nonetheless, countless generations have gone to sea, and some individuals have made a career of seafaring, which begs the question, “Why?” This essay will address that question, focusing primarily on the ways and means that European shipowners and governments in the early modern period found crews and officers, although it will include some evidence from other times and places. The focus will be on individuals engaged in seaborne occupations, rather than members of seafaring communities on land or the broad range of humanity that traveled by sea at one time or another through choice or necessity. For that reason, women will be absent from the story, although they were important participants in families and communities earning their living from the sea and as heads of state setting policies for the enlistment of mariners and the regulation of seaborne commerce.

The ways and means of maritime enlistment ranged widely from enthusiastic free choice to the most violent forms of coercion. Geographical location, personal inclination, family traditions, and economic incentives influenced many individual decisions to go to sea, at the positive end of the spectrum. Kidnapping someone for sea duty with no legal justification anchored the negative end of the spectrum. Between the two extremes lay a wide variety of personal, economic, legal, and other considerations that induced men and boys to go to sea for the first time. Other incentives, both positive and negative, influenced the decision to continue with a maritime life.

Historians frequently distinguish between civilian and military seafaring, especially after the late eighteenth century, as the merchant marine came to be largely separate from official navies. For the early modern period, that makes little sense. Both civilian and military voyages drew from the same pool of vessels and potential crewmen, and the same individuals and ships could serve at different times in fishing, trade, piracy, or warfare. As a Spanish merchant marine captain noted as late as the nineteenth century, “the merchant marine and the navy have identical interests to promote, and instead of divorcing themselves they complement one another. They are like two bodies with a single soul.”¹ Less romantic and more pertinent to this essay, sailors in the merchant marine were the primary source of additional labor for navies. Perhaps the most important difference between civilian and military recruitment was that the former relied primarily on economic incentives, whereas the latter relied primarily on legal incentives, especially during wartime.

I have been studying Spanish shipbuilding and seafarers in the early modern period for some years now, focusing on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Oddly enough, Spain is not usually considered among Europe’s seafaring powers, though the global Spanish empire depended on seaborne trade, communication, and defense for more than three centuries. My current research deals with Spanish galley service in the Mediterranean, based on newly restored registers in the archive of the Naval Museum in Madrid.² The officers, sailors, soldiers, and oarsmen arrived on the galleys for a variety of reasons. Examples from their experiences and those of sailors on oceangoing vessels form a major part of this essay. The argument also draws on fifteen studies about European seafarers in various parts of the world from 1570 to 1870,³ and another recent collection devoted to seafarers’ lives, though not all of the authors deal with enlistment.⁴

To establish a framework to consider the many modes of maritime enlistment, one helpful approach is a lengthy philosophical article by Scott

Anderson that discusses the concept of coercion from St. Thomas Aquinas to the present. Among other issues, Anderson considers the extent to which coercion or attempted coercion can influence a decision to act, and how that decision relates to free will.⁵ In other words, if an individual decides to act based on some degree of positive or negative coercion, to what extent can that act be considered voluntary? Such questions have engaged philosophers and ethicists much more than historians, but it is useful to be aware of them in studying maritime enlistment, in part because the degree of free will in the decision to enlist could easily affect an individual's subsequent experiences and behavior at sea.

To keep in mind the full range of reasons that men and boys went to sea, this essay will consider the various influences on maritime enlistment along the same spectrum, beginning with the positive and ending with the negative. The discussion will fall under several general headings, although some overlap is unavoidable: Proximity to the Sea; Family Traditions; Economic Incentives; Legal Requirements; and Beyond the Law. A brief conclusion will gather the various threads of the argument together. The examples will focus primarily on Europe, in the hope that European patterns over several centuries can suggest questions and issues of relevance to governments as well as individuals trying to crew vessels in other times and places.

Proximity to the Sea

The most obvious positive incentive for going to sea was geographical location. It is reasonable to assume that a population living on or near a coastline would develop a seafaring tradition. Portugal faced the Atlantic Ocean, with numerous ports large and small, and drew on virtually every region for its seafaring population.⁶ In northeastern North America along the Atlantic coast, seafaring was an essential part of local economies in early colonial times. Daniel Vickers noted that all of the sailors from the region grew up no more than five miles from the sea.⁷ Nonetheless, geography was not destiny. Norway, for example, has an extensive coastline and depended on the sea for trade and communication in the early modern period, but after the Middle Ages foreign shippers and crews dominated Norwegian trade and fishing.⁸ Finland has an extensive coastline on the Gulf of Bothnia, but a very small number of ports. Farther south, although the Southern Netherlands included the major port of Antwerp, the local population was not known for seafaring in the early modern period.⁹ Even Iceland, surrounded by the sea and with a

population heavily dependent on fish for food, relied on outsiders to supply the fish and provide seaborne transport. Only the northwest coast of Iceland had a seafaring tradition before 1800.¹⁰ In short, geographical proximity did not necessarily induce a population to develop a seafaring tradition.¹¹

One reason is that agricultural productivity was so low in the early modern centuries that the vast majority of Europeans had to work the land to provide enough food to survive. Even in coastal areas with a strong seafaring tradition, the percentage of the population earning a living from the land was nearly always much larger than the seafaring population. That was also true in colonial New England, where many seafarers began and ended their working lives as farmers.¹² In another example, Spain has extensive coastlines on the Bay of Biscay, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Atlantic Ocean. Nonetheless, the men listed in an official registry of mariners in 1740 comprised less than 1 percent of the population of the coastal provinces, most of them in the port towns, and an even smaller percentage of the total Spanish population.¹³

On the other hand, limited coastlines did not prevent some areas from developing a robust seafaring tradition. The Holy Roman Empire was largely landlocked, but the active ports in the German states on the Baltic and the North Sea linked the empire as a whole to seaborne trade and fisheries and attracted sailors from surrounding regions as well.¹⁴ Some sailors from inland areas of the empire may have been attracted to seafaring because they lacked sufficient access to farmland; others may have viewed life at sea as a more exciting prospect than farming or as a surer way to make a living. In short, the incentives—both positive and negative—of geographical location cannot fully explain why men went to sea, though they undoubtedly played a role in many individual decisions.

Family Traditions

Another obvious example of a positive incentive for going to sea was family tradition. For residents of coastal areas, a career at sea would have been a logical choice for men and boys, generation after generation. Presumably, many could not have imagined another way to make a living and gladly followed their fathers, uncles, and brothers to sea. We should realize, however, that not every male in every generation would have been suited or attracted to a life at sea. Would unwilling boys have nonetheless been persuaded to go to sea by their families? The degree to which family expectations and pressures can be considered coercive is open to argument. Reluctant maritime recruits

may have followed family tradition without considering that they were being coerced to do so. Scott Anderson's discussion of philosophical debates about coercion rules out "by stipulation, such things as mere disapproval, emotional manipulation, or wheedling."¹⁵ Those very attitudes and behaviors, however, are favored weapons in the emotional arsenal of family relations. Anderson himself acknowledges that coercion "seems also to be an indispensable technique in the rearing of children."¹⁶ Historians looking at family traditions of seafaring should consider that emotional coercion—both positive and negative—may have influenced some individual decisions to go to sea, and we cannot assume that all such decisions were made with a full heart.

One of my recent projects dealt with a Spanish armada dispatched in 1581–84 to fortify the Strait of Magellan and drive pirates and interlopers from Brazil.¹⁷ King Philip II formed the armada after Francis Drake's peacetime raids in the Americas and his own successful claim to the vacant throne of Portugal. The armada was designed to prevent other opportunists from following Drake's example and to demonstrate the king's resolve to defend Portuguese Brazil as well as Spanish territories in the Americas. The commander of the Armada of the Strait, Diego Flores de Valdés, was a nobleman from Asturias on Spain's northwest coast and a member of a distinguished seafaring clan. The head of the clan, Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, had ousted the French from La Florida in 1565 as the capstone event in a career at sea. Flores had served with distinction in that encounter, and an array of nephews, brothers, sons, and in-laws of the Menéndez clan enlisted to serve in Flores's armada in 1581. There is no question that family tradition was a positive factor in their enlistment, perhaps the most important factor. The disproportionate number of Asturians in the armada, and their family relations, are not apparent from their names alone, but the career trajectories of individual men, as well as their marriages and other documented interactions, emphasize the importance of familial connections. Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa, who accompanied the armada as the governor-designate of the colony he hoped to plant at the Strait of Magellan, wrote lengthy complaints to the king about the horde of Asturians who were loyal to Flores and wanted to destroy plans for the colony. It is easy to dismiss his complaints, because Sarmiento accused nearly everyone of turning against him at one point or another. Nonetheless, the horde of Asturians was real, and they undoubtedly had both geographical and familial incentives to enlist.

Virtually all of the 722 mariners recruited for the expedition came from a seafaring tradition, but those not connected to the Menéndez clan were