

ROUNDTABLE

View from the Seas: The Middle East and North Africa Unbounded

History, Geography, and the Sea

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Maritime history has grown exponentially in recent years. Seen as a remedy to the ideological straightjackets of nation-state and area studies paradigms associated with modernization theory, a methodological orientation towards the sea offers the historian the advantages of an interactive transnational approach, and places matters of the environment and material culture before stories of kings and battles. Crucially, it focuses on flows, routes, mobility, and exchange rather than fixed identities and linear trajectories.

“A historical study centered on a stretch of water has all the charms but undoubtedly all the dangers of a new departure.” Thus wrote the great historian Fernand Braudel in 1946, as he was about to release his first masterpiece, devoted to the Mediterranean, before the world.¹ In 2016, seventy years later, one could begin a work with almost the same formula—for these words, paradoxically, remain just as relevant in the wake of the recent flurry of sea-centered studies as they did to their avowed forefather coming out of his German war camp. Indeed, today’s trailblazers of Mediterranean history, Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, describe sea history as “novel,” “exciting,” and “unpredictable,” by virtue of its characteristic “scope and methods.”²

In fact, the foregrounding of the sea as a unified, coherent space and a special vector of historical becoming runs all the way back to the institutionalization and professionalization of the historian’s craft in the early 19th century. G. W. F. Hegel first theorized this most vehemently: despite common wisdom, water is not “a creator of divisions,” he affirmed in his influential lectures on the philosophy of history (but also elsewhere in his corpus), it is rather the “uniting element,” connecting together peoples, places, and things into a compact whole, and a vector of civilization.³ The Mediterranean in particular holds pride of place in the Hegelian world historical drama, as the center of the Old World and the spiritual fount of Europe.⁴ Indeed, Hegel goes so far as to turn this insight pertaining to the historical consequence of the aquatic element into a general, abstract principle, whereby the concept of Europe is defined in its very essence through its connection to maritimity: “The European state,” he writes, “is truly European only insofar as it has links with the sea.”⁵ Leopold von Ranke, too, however counterintuitive this may seem to readers aware of the usual way in which the birth and evolution of the discipline is narrated, posited the coherence and centrality of the Mediterranean.⁶ In parallel, Carl Ritter, a colleague of both Hegel and Ranke at the University of Berlin

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(that truly remarkable incubator of the modern order of things) and the first holder of a university chair in geography, also articulated a vision of the world in which seas, like all relevant geographical entities, are organic divisions of the world. In fact, he is often credited with the first formulation of the Mediterranean as a proper geographical region.⁷ Hegel, Ranke, and Ritter therefore collectively and simultaneously were some of the first scholars to theorize the concept of the sovereign Mediterranean, gifted with special geographical coherence and historical becoming, thus laying the foundations for Braudel's thesis over a century later. Moreover, this production of the idea of the Mediterranean in particular, and the concept of what I have termed the "sovereign sea" in general, was integrally connected to the parallel forging of a new concept of Europe.⁸

In revealing a centuries-old lineage to sea-centered scholarly focus, the point is not to deny or confirm the originality of a particular study—and indeed, the number of historians proclaiming the novelty of their work is only equaled by those denouncing it as manicured usurpation. In Pierre Vilar's amusing phrase: "The trade of history has something in common with the detergent industry: in both, novelty is frequently passed off as real innovation."⁹ Rather, the task is to think through the particular genealogies that go unaddressed by the persistent claims of rarity and originality, and to explore the potentialities that the approach may contain.

It is useful here to remember two crucial lessons on geography (and history) from Edward Said's many insights. The first is the point of departure for the argument of *Orientalism*:

I have begun with the assumption that the Orient is not an inert fact of nature. It is not merely *there*, just as the Occident itself is not just *there* either. We must take seriously Vico's great observation that men make their own history, that what they can know is what they have made, and extend it to geography: as both geographical and cultural entities—to say nothing of historical entities—such locales, regions, geographical sectors as "Orient" and "Occident" are man-made.¹⁰

The second forms a central element in *Orientalism*'s sequel, *Culture and Imperialism*:

Imperialism after all is an act of geographical violence through which every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control. For the native, the history of colonial servitude is inaugurated by loss of the locality to the outsider, its geographical identity must thereafter be searched and somehow restored.¹¹

In other words, geography too is discursively constituted, and it is a terrain replete with the presence of power.

Placing the sea at the center of historical analysis allows us to question some lingering yet outdated, singularly state-centered cultural and spatial categories, extending the critique of geographical naturalism and realism to its global reach. In positing the centrality of the sea in the modern order of things, it is also incumbent upon us to recognize that other peoples and periods saw the world and its "seven seas" differently—and that this matters. Maritime history, precisely by virtue of its repeated claims to novelty, is an appropriate arena in which to think through the crucial question of space and time, and their impact on historical writing. And the sea will continue to be full of potentiality if and when it helps the discipline of history as a whole to "get from space to place in a fairly short stretch of time," to echo the title of one of Edward Casey's classic interventions, and to realize, with Henri Lefebvre, that "there is such a thing as a history

of space,” and with Gaston Bachelard, that such a history must begin with a “poetics of space.”¹²

The moral of maritime history should therefore be to resist the geohistoricist instinct of replacing one objective space for another—because there is nothing less political or ideological in the notion of “the sea” than there is in the notion of “the nation-state.” This is illustrated by the sheer existence of passionate advocates and critics of mediterraneanism (typified by Taha Husayn, to take an Arab example, who saw in the Mediterranean a geohistorical device to deorientalize Egypt) or by the simple observation that the Ottomans did not label nor even conceive of the Red Sea as such. Rather, the *raison d’être* of maritime history should be to reframe how space is conceptualized and narrativized in the first place. This was true of Fernand Braudel already, for whom the Mediterranean was not simply *a* sea, but a “complex of seas” that extended over the many neighboring land and sea masses (from Africa to Northern Europe and Asia, from the Atlantic to the Red Sea and beyond), in which “the plural always wins out over the singular.”¹³ Similarly, Paul Gilroy’s Atlantic is a story of modernity where time is nonsynchronous and space is fractal.¹⁴ Finally, perhaps the most evocative inspiration in maritime writing (and the perfect companion to Edward Said’s pronouncements above) is Epeli Hau’ofa’s radical reframing of colonial “islands in a far sea” as the pre- and postcolonial idea of a “sea of islands.”¹⁵

It is in this sense—and this is one of the major theses of my book, *The Red Sea: In Search of Lost Space*—that the sea is relevant to much more than a small subfield of the discipline; indeed, it is central to the human saga in all its inescapable diversity, and to the many ways we can understand and relate to it.

NOTES

¹ *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. S. Reynolds (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1995), 2:19.

² Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, “The Mediterranean and the ‘New Thalassology,’” *American Historical Review* 111 (2006): 722.

³ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History—Introduction: Reason in History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 159.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 171–72.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁶ Leopold von Ranke, *The Ottoman and the Spanish Empires in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. W. Kelly (Philadelphia, Pa.: Lea and Blanchard, 1845), 4.

⁷ Carl Ritter, *Geographical Studies*, trans. W. Gage (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1863).

⁸ For more on these questions, see Alexis Wick, *The Red Sea: In Search of Lost Space* (Oakland, Calif.: University of California Press, 2016).

⁹ Pierre Vilar, “Marxist History, A History in the Making: Towards a Dialogue with Althusser,” *New Left Review* 1/80 (July–August, 1973): 65.

¹⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 4–5.

¹¹ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 225.

¹² Edward Casey, “How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena,” in *Senses of Place*, ed. S. Feld and K. Basso (Santa Fe, N.Mex.: School of American Research Press, 1996), 13–52; Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. M. Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

¹³ Fernand Braudel, *Les mémoires de la Méditerranée* (Paris: Éditions de Fallois, 1998), 32.

¹⁴ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993).

¹⁵ Epeli Hau’ofa, “Our Sea of Islands,” in *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works*, by Epeli Hau’ofa (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 27–40.