

Introduction: Maritime Empires in World History

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Among the numerous empires in world history, several were of a maritime nature—the Classical Athenian Empire, the Venetian Empire, the premodern Portuguese Empire, and the modern Japanese Empire, to name but a few well-known examples from disparate periods and regions. Relying on naval power rather than land armies, and availing themselves of (pre-existing) trade networks, maritime empires often were less centralized and state-like than land-based empires.¹

The volume *Empires of the Sea* seeks to rethink preindustrial maritime empires by understanding them as dynamic, multilayered networks connecting several interest groups and brokers located on these networks' coastal and insular nodes, *viz.* in port cities, emporia or naval bases. Particularly in Mediterranean studies, network approaches have opened up new research avenues for the study of transregional economic exchange, cultural interactions, and religious change; these approaches are now themselves in need of new objectives and directions. One of our aims is to foreground the element of power politics and coercion to the existing focus on culture and economy. The emphasis that current empire studies place on cultural and political diversity as a principal characteristic of empire has made one historical question increasingly urgent: how were these heterogeneous sociopolitical patchworks controlled and integrated over large distances and in the face of changing historical circumstances?

Past empire studies often departed from the model of the modern colonial empire linked to the European nation state. The last decades however have seen the publication of a number of volumes dealing with a much wider variety of empires, often in a comparative perspective in order to recognize common characteristics and trends.² This interest springs from the relatively

1 The connection between trade networks and naval imperialism is explored by Abulafia 2014.

2 The pioneering study by Eisenstadt 1963 is still impressive because of its wide scope, but outdated because of its modernist, Weberian insistence on “bureaucracy” as a major element in the typology. Sinopoli 1994 is a review article and a fundamental text for the current world historical, comparative approach to empires (and because of its clarity, also a great text to discuss with undergraduates). See further e.g. Alcock *et al.* 2001; Motyl 2001; Hurlet 2008;

recent realization that, empires, together with city states, were the most common forms of political organization, and that most empires in world history were not European.³ These comparative empire studies have focused either on land empires or bundled together various types of empire. By contrast, this volume will examine one specific form of imperial domination, and one that has hitherto received little attention.⁴

Our interest in the phenomenon obviously is based on the conviction that it makes sense to create analytical typologies of groups of empires unified by specific “system-forming features”.⁵ A list of (overlapping) categories can be easily compiled. It could include centralized, city-based empires (e.g. the Babylonian, Songhay, and Aztec empires); pastoralist confederacies (the Xiongnu, Seljuk and Comanche empires); military land empires (the Achaemenid, Seleucid, and Sasanian empires in Antiquity; the Timurid, Mughal and Qing empires of early modern Eurasia), entrepreneurial empires (the early Spanish Empire in the Americas, the Dutch and English seaborne empires in the Caribbean, the eastward expansion of early modern Russia, and the nineteenth-century American “West”), modern colonial empires, and so forth. However, the only type of preindustrial empire that has actually been recognized as distinct and studied for its specific traits and dynamics has so far been the “nomadic” or “pastoral” empire.⁶ But to my knowledge not even nomadic empires have been studied comparatively, nor have they yet been brought together in an edited volume dedicated specifically to this type of imperial polity.⁷ Like nomadic empires, maritime empires are prime candidates to be grouped as a comprehensive category. They too have never been studied from a comparative perspective.

Münkler 2005/2008; Morris and Scheidel 2009; Burbank and Cooper 2010; Bang and Bayly 2011a; and most recently Gehler and Rollinger 2014.

3 For empire as the dominant form of political organization in Afro-Eurasia before 1500, see Darwin 2007.

4 For matters of definition, see the next section.

5 Areshian 2013, 5.

6 I use these terms of course for convenience: pastoralist cultures are never entirely nomadic, and empires created by so-called nomads usually adopt the features of a sedentary polity with remarkable speed, co-opting non-nomads as administrators or ambassadors. These empires nevertheless do seem to constitute a distinct type of imperial polity with specific shared traits such as the pivotal role of (multi-ethnic) “warbands” created around a charismatic leader. For the particularities of “nomadic” empires see Forbes Manz 1989; Barfield 1989 and 2001; Allsen 2001; Di Cosmo 2004; Hämäläinen 2008; Wink 2011; Hope 2016.

7 But this may be expected to come from the ERC-funded research project *Nomadic Empires: A World Historical Perspective*, under the direction of Pekka Hämäläinen (nomadicempires.history.ox.ac.uk).

The present volume developed from a one-day conference at the University of Utrecht on premodern maritime empires, 16 January 2015, convened by Floris van den Eijnde, Roy van Wijk, and myself.⁸ For this conference we tentatively defined “maritime empires” as systems of political and/or economic control that employ naval (trade) routes as their main arteries of connectivity and communication. Maritime empires aim primarily at controlling ports, coastal regions and islands rather than large land masses. For warfare, and coercion in general, they rely on naval power more than on armies. They should ideally emphasize sea power in their representation and do not necessarily have to be centralized states. This means that in order to be a meaningful heuristic concept, ‘maritime empire’ should signify more than just an empire whose territories are so dispersed that they are dependant on maritime lines of communications. The Spanish Empire in the Americas, for instance, to our mind qualifies less as a maritime empire than the VOC empire in the East Indies, or the chain of fortresses and emporia created by Medieval Genoa in the eastern Mediterranean.

Who created naval empires and why? In what ways are imperial networks based on sea routes different from inland empires based primarily on roads? What institutions did these empires develop to secure continued control over sea routes? What interactions took place between “global” sea empires and local populations? Who acted as brokers? What happened when two or more imperial projects competed simultaneously in the same region, as they did for instance in the ancient Aegean, the late medieval Mediterranean or the early modern Indian Ocean? How did political and economic aims coincide or interact? Were sea empires more trade-driven than land empires? How resilient were sea empires? Were they able to change their networks of power in reaction to changing geopolitical circumstance and internal threats? More questions could easily be added to this list, and the present volume will answer only a number of them.

Recurrent themes in the contributions are *overlap*, *polycentrism*, *brokerage* and *entrepreneurship*, as we will see in the last section of this introduction. But before having a closer look at maritime empires as a distinct type of empire, and the traits they share as suggested by the contributions to this volume, we will first briefly review some recent trends in the study of premodern empires.

⁸ We are grateful to Utrecht University’s strategic program “Institutions for Open Societies” for its financial support of this conference. Thanks also to Amber Brüsewitz for her invaluable help in organizing this conference.

Looking at Diversity and Change: the Imperial Turn

Empires are extensive, composite polities, often created through conquest and characterized by internal political and cultural diversity.⁹ As Thomas Barfield put it, empires are “organized both to administer and exploit diversity”.¹⁰ To deal with diversity, imperial rulers often employ universalistic ideologies.¹¹ Compared to the European-style nation states of the modern age, empires seem delicate political systems under constant pressure from centrifugal forces and in danger of becoming overextended. Yet seen from the long-term perspective of world history, empires, together with city-states, arguably belong to the most effective and most common forms of political organization. Empires, moreover, were instrumental in the emergence of early forms of globalization, connecting disparate societies over vast geographical distances and facilitating economic and cultural exchanges between them. Empires encourage or enforce migration (soldiers, colonists, slaves) and produce “cosmopolitan” identities and languages (e.g. Aramaic, Greek, Persian, Han Chinese, Portuguese, Spanish, Russian or English).¹² This new awareness of the predominance and importance of “empire” in world history is sometimes called the “Imperial Turn”.¹³

Recent studies of premodern empires emphasize that rather than administrative unity, political and cultural *diversity* is the essence of empire. Rather than approaching empires with a “unitary” theory of statehood, Bang and Bayly follow Michael Mann in understanding empires as open-ended systems, “constituted of multiple overlapping and intersecting sociospatial networks of power”.¹⁴ By directly or indirectly adopting Mann’s network perspective, scholars increasingly see premodern empires as negotiated enterprises based on

9 See the references in n. 1.

10 Barfield 2001, 29.

11 Liverani 1979; Pagden 1995; Bang 2011; Bang and Kołodziejczyk 2012; Strootman 2014b; Lavan, Payne and Weisweiler 2016. The centrality of ideology can be considered a characteristic of empires: Alcock and Morrison 2001.

12 See Fusaro 2010, esp. 275–278.

13 Not to be confused with the so-called “New Imperial History”, which is mainly concerned with re-evaluating the historical significance of the British Empire; see e.g. Ferguson 2003; Black 2004a. The renewed interest in empires is also clear from the feeling that empire somehow is “back” in the form of supranational polities superseding the nation state (see e.g. Hardt and Negri 2000; Maier 2006; Colomer 2007; Zielonka 2007; and Marks 2012), and from the success of recent popularizing treatments, often presenting imperialism in a positive light (e.g. Ferguson 2003; Turchin 2006; and Chua 2009).

14 Bang and Bayly 2011b, 4; cf. Mann 1986, 1.

both coercion and reciprocal exchanges.¹⁵ For despite the fact that empires can be extremely violent when they encounter resistance or rivals, imperial lords generally prefer to access resources by co-opting local rulers and elites. This often leads to shifts in local power balances or even the establishment of new elite groups. This means that empires are *entangled systems*—a term borrowed from Tilly, that has been used by this author to explain the interdependence of cities and empires in the Hellenistic world.¹⁶

Students of empire must therefore develop a keen eye for the agency of indigenous elites and other local interest groups, and also for the “between-culture traveler”, the bilingual individual or group, such as traders and soldiers, acting as broker between disparate societies.¹⁷ This means that some indigenous elites participated in imperial projects, benefiting from the rudimentary forms of globalization created, or enhanced, by big empires. Other elites did not benefit or were superseded by groups protected by the imperial dynasty. These disempowered elites often became enemies of the empire.¹⁸

Ancient historians in particular tend to distinguish between “empire” and “hegemony”. The distinction is misleading. It derives from the application of modern concepts of imperialism and colonization to premodern and early modern empires. But the colonial empires created by modern European states provide a poor model for understanding the role of empires in world history. Comparative empire studies suggest that Eurasian empires before 1800 were always largely or partly hegemonic. Indeed, already in 1941, Rostovtzeff stated that imperialism is not only the pursuit of territorial expansion; it is also the search for political hegemony and the wish to play a leading role in the political life of the civilised world.¹⁹ Willem Vogelsang suggested that Achaemenid rule in Central Asia was best described by the word “hegemony”, which he defined as “recognition by local rulers of the overlordship of the [...] sovereign, with personal ties established by marriage or other connections, cemented by gifts.”²⁰ This describes only one form of hegemony or “sphere of influence”

15 Bayly 1988; Hintze 1997; Ma 2000; Barkey 2008; Ballantyne 2012; Faruqi 2012; Noreña 2012; Glatz 2013; Strootman 2013 and 2014a; Waerzeggers 2014.

16 Strootman 2007; 2019; cf. Tilly 1994.

17 De Swaan 2001; Bochner, Furnham and Ward 2001; Rothman 2010.

18 Superseded elites could react to their exclusion by developing a pronounced indigenous culture in opposition to their more successful peers, as e.g. the Maccabees did in second-century BCE Judea—a form of “glocalization” that can be understood, too, from the dynamics of imperial interactions (Strootman 2006).

19 Rostovtzeff 1941, I.

20 Vogelsang 1992, 304–305.

that premodern empires have employed: “indirect” rule through vassal rulers.²¹ The protection of dependent but autonomous cities was another form of hegemonic rule,²² as was the establishment of tributary satellite states in frontier regions, but the repertoire is much larger. Another way to describe the political diversity within empires is by speaking of empires as *composite entities*, combining a variety of methods to access resources.²³ Robert Kallet-Marx adds a temporal dimension by arguing that the integration of the Greek world into the Roman Empire was not the sudden imposition of Roman “rule” but a fluid, complex process of mutual adaptations and negotiations; but he still insists on a distinction between “hegemony” and “empire”.²⁴

Thus, premodern, especially central Eurasian empires have been reconceptualized as (1) fluid networks of personal relations, (2) negotiated (or “transactional”), entangled systems, and (3) composite entities. This allows us to get beyond the traditional center-periphery template based on the model of the sovereign nation state.²⁵ For preindustrial empires, the control of people and resources usually was more important than the control of territory per se. Karen Barkey described the Ottoman Empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a “hub-and-spoke structure” of relations between the dynasty and localized elites, pointing out that “the basic configuration of relationships between the imperial center and local sub-centers was constructed in a different fashion for each relationship, resulting in a patchwork pattern of relations with structural holes between peripheries.”²⁶ These relations were subject to constant change. As Terence D’Altroy wrote, “[t]he outstanding feature of preindustrial empires was the continually metamorphosing nature of relations between the central powers and the societies drawn under the imperial aegis.”²⁷

21 Best known perhaps in the form of the so-called “client kings” of Late Republican and Early Imperial Rome, see for this phenomenon Hekster 2010, and for its Hellenistic background Strootman 2010.

22 Strootman 2011.

23 Goffman and Stroop 2004.

24 Kallet-Marx 1995.

25 Wallerstein’s center-periphery model is on the wane more generally; for a fundamental critique of its use to understand cultural interactions in the Sumerian-period Near East, see Stein 1998. Criticism of the nation state model and history writing has been pithily expressed e.g. by Subrahmanyam 1997; Smith 2005.

26 Barkey 2008, 1 and *passim*; cf. Motyl 2001, defining empires as “hierarchically organized systems with a hub-like structure—a rimless wheel—within which a core elite and state dominate peripheral elites and societies by serving as intermediaries for their significant interaction and by channeling resource flows” (p. 27).

27 D’Altroy 2001, 125.

The Imperial Turn has thus dismantled the politicized view that tended to associate even ancient imperialism with European colonialism,²⁸ and thought of indigenous agency primarily in polarized terms as active and passive resistance to exploitation by a “foreign” power.²⁹ This is of course not to say that imperialism was never a form of exploitation; violence is at the core of virtually every empire in history; as Raben shows in his contribution, this can even be said of the allegedly mercantile sea empire of the Dutch VOC in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As Prasenjit Duara rather bluntly, but rightly, put it with regard to the various *different* empires emerging in what is *now* the Republic of China: the task of the world historian, is to “rescue history from the nation”.³⁰ The Imperial Turn replaced the understanding of empire as an evolutionary dead-end with an awareness that empires dominated world history until the late eighteenth century, and that most empires in world history were not European but Mediterranean and Asian.³¹ The resulting dissociation of premodern, and early modern non-Western, empires from the bordered nation state also enabled a better understanding of the universalistic ideology that characterizes most empires, as well as their ambiguous “borders”, which often were ill-defined, permeable and constantly shifting (or even entirely non-existent).³²

Maritime Networks: the Mediterranean Paradigm

As we have seen, a major advance made by recent empire studies, is the realization that empires can be understood as networks of exchange, operated by particular interest groups and individuals. As network polities, empires are no longer the stagnant stone colossi of the older literature and popular imagination. Instead they are more often seen as complex webs of interaction, subject to ever-changing internal and external power relations.³³ Rather than being based on institutions, empires rely on chains of intermediaries, brokers and

28 See Strootman in this volume.

29 Pitts 2010; in defense of this view, see Dirks 2007.

30 Duara 1997.

31 See Darwin 2007; Mikhail & Philliou 2012.

32 Strootman 2007; Bang & Kołodziejczyk 2012; Lavan, Payne, Weisweiler 2016; cf. n. 11, above.

33 For the significance of interimperial exchanges—competition, conflict, diplomacy—between empires for their respective developments, see e.g. Lieven 2000; Faroqhi 2004; Barkey and Batzell 2011.

translators that link the central power to its local agents and allies. Internally, empires are as much based on negotiation and local conflicts as on top-down coercion. Empires accordingly can in some cases be shown to have been multipolar. Thus, awareness of the dynamic nature of personalized networks, to repeat an earlier observation, offers historians an alternative for presumed hierarchies of centers and peripheries. How does this pertain to maritime empires specifically?

Connectivity has been a central theme in Mediterranean history since Fernand Braudel insisted seventy years ago that the Middle Sea was a relative unity in its ecology, economy and culture.³⁴ In opposition to Braudel, Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell half a century later argued that ecological diversity, cultural fragmentation and social uncertainty were the essential features of the preindustrial Mediterranean.³⁵ The once popular concept of “Mediterraneanism”—the idea that Mediterranean societies because of their maritime connectivity share important cultural traits (“I also have a moustache”, as Horden and Purcell ironically summarized the to their mind superficial concept), particularly that they are all rooted in a similar moral system of honor and shame—have since become the subject of fierce, and still ongoing debate.³⁶ Related to these debates is the current emphasis on economic regionalism and cultural “localism”.³⁷ Today, the Mediterranean is often seen as a patchwork of interconnected “small worlds” such as the Adriatic, Aegean or Levant—a point taken up by Kelder in the first contribution to this volume.³⁸

34 Braudel 1949.

35 Horden and Purcell 2000a.

36 The foundational text is Campbell 1964, a study of the moral values of the North Greek mountain community of Sarakatsani, soon followed by the epoch-making volume Peristiany 1966, which included contributions by *i.a.* Pierre Bourdieu, Julian Pitt-Rivers, and J. K. Campbell himself; the volume compared disparate societies in e.g. Kabylia, Cyprus, Greece and Andalusia to underpin the notion of the Mediterranean’s exceptional high degree of interconnectivity. Horden and Purcell 2000 as we saw turned against this notion. The essays collected in Harris 2005 again respond to Horden and Purcell’s views. Also see Morris 2005, claiming in support of the Braudelian view that the Mediterranean is a geographical unit after all. Lichtenberger and von Rügen 2015 gather new approaches to Mediterranean studies, including the important view that Mediterranean seas can be meaningful “seascapes”, instead of mere passageways between landscapes (C. von Rügen); see in the latter context also Beaulieu 2016, on perceptions of the sea in ancient Greek culture.

37 See Reger 2011 and 2013, cf. e.g. Dougherty and Kurke 2010; Whitmarsh 2010; Blake 2014. Recently, Bonnier 2016 has shown that in Classical Antiquity allegedly ‘remote’ areas around the Corinthian Gulf in fact were better integrated than previously assumed, despite the mountainous nature of this region.

38 Cf. below, n. 49.

Recently, Cyprian Broodbank has successfully brought together different perspectives by studying the “pre-Classical” Mediterranean in both its diversity *and* unity.³⁹ The dynamic, “multicultural” complexity of the early modern Mediterranean meanwhile has been compellingly charted in the work of Molly Greene.⁴⁰

Be all this as it may, it is clear that the ancient Mediterranean, one way or another, was covered by a dense web of sea and land routes that encouraged the exertion of naval power and the development of maritime empires (although this notion has its critics, too).⁴¹ This high degree of connectivity persisted through the medieval and early modern periods, despite the popular notion that a breach was introduced by the Islamic conquests of Late Antiquity.⁴² The empires of the Athenians, Ptolemies, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, Genoese, Venetians, Catalans, Umayyads, Abbasids and Ottomans were all based to a significant degree on naval networks and sea power.⁴³ It probably was the Mediterranean’s character as an assemblage of comprehensive sub-regions that made political control of sea routes possible from an early stage on.

Network theories from modern sociology have been widely applied to ancient Mediterranean societies and economies.⁴⁴ For Irad Malkin, a network approach was a crucial tool in understanding the development of supra-local identities in the Archaic period.⁴⁵ Most of all, maritime networks have been

39 Broodbank 2013.

40 Greene 2001 and 2011.

41 See e.g. Starr 1989, who argues that in Antiquity the exercise of “sea power” was restricted by lack of resources and the limited seakeeping qualities of galleys (p. 5–6). For an overview of successive “thalassocracies” in the Mediterranean, see Abulafia 2014. On sailing routes also see Arnaud 2011, emphasizing the constantly changing nature of ancient sailing patterns.

42 See e.g. Goldberg 2012a on the medieval Geniza, Jewish merchants based in Egypt who operated a Mediterranean-wide trade network and acted as brokers between Muslims and Christians; on Christian-Muslim-Jewish (economic) interactions in the Medieval Mediterranean see further Goldberg 2012b; Michienzi 2013; Fromherz 2016.

43 On the concept of “sea power”, see below. For the Mediterranean as the *mare nostrum* of medieval Islamic empires see now Picard 2018. The empires of the Athenians, Ptolemies and Genoese are discussed in this volume by respectively Van den Eijnde, Strootman and Kirk.

44 Landmark publications include Collar 2007; Constantakopoulou 2007; Malkin, Constantakopoulou and Panagopoulou 2009; Malkin 2011; Manning 2011. In Ancient history, network analysis has been specifically applied to the study of religious developments; for the state of the debate see Woolf 2016.

45 Malkin 2005; 2011.

studied by archaeologists who examine cultural (ex)change by looking at material culture.⁴⁶ As is to be expected, network approaches to the ancient Mediterranean have of late become the subject of criticism and even suspicion. This is due to the realization that the evidence before the modern age may not always be sufficient to reach the required level of sophistication, and also because the result sometimes is more descriptive than analytical (in addition, perhaps, to sheer overexposure to elaborate, computer-generated graphs at conferences). The study of maritime networks however seems to have gained new momentum through a recent focus on port cities: superconnected hubs of land *and* sea routes that not only serve processes of connectivity and (proto) globalization, but are often also perceived by contemporaries as having this function. Civic identity in port cities like Rotterdam, Shanghai, Singapore, Marseilles or Izmir often is defined in maritime and/or international terms.⁴⁷ Moreover, port cities in history can frequently be associated with empires.⁴⁸ In this volume, the port cities approach is represented by the contribution of Cátia Antunes. A network approach to empires can be useful in understanding these still badly understood entities even without the availability of “big data” because research can focus on the dynamics of the relationships between the social actors who constitute the empire. Such an approach does not require the high level of sophistication aimed at by the social network analysis of contemporary societies.

Networks are *complex* systems. Ties between nodes (individuals, communities, polities) can be either “strong” or “weak” depending on the measure of complexity of relations that connect them (called “degree” in Social Network Analysis), and both have advantages and disadvantages.⁴⁹ Several nodes can link up to become strongly interwoven “clusters”; this can lead to powerful collective action but also to stagnation or the closing of the system for outside influences.⁵⁰ Networks moreover are *dynamic* systems. The direction and nature of networks that empires try to create or control will usually shift over

46 See e.g. Robinson and Wilson 2011; Alberti and Sabatine 2013; Knappett 2013; Fenn and Römer-Strehl 2013; Blake 2014. Cf. Collar *et al.* 2015. For the actual sailing routes, see Arnaud 2005 and 2011; Beresford 2013.

47 Recent popularizing publications on Dutch maritime identity suggest a growing interest in this subject, at least in the Low Countries by the Sea (cf. e.g. De Meer and Schokkenbroek 2013; Linmans, Rommelse, Van der Zee 2016).

48 See for instance on port cities and their significance for the functioning of the Roman Empire Schörle 2011; Rice, Wilson and Schörle 2012; Arnaud 2014. I was not able to consult the recent volume Höghammar, Alroth and Lindhagen 2016.

49 The fundamental text is Granovetter 1973; cf. Strogatz and Watts 1998; Kadushin 2012.

50 On these well-connected “small world” networks, see Strogatz and Watts 1998; Watts 1999.

time. Initially successful ties can become unsuccessful within two or three generations, for instance when a dependent “conquest group” turns into a privileged power elite that intercedes at court for the sake of its own interests and clientele.⁵¹ Unsuccessful connections may however be abandoned by a dynasty by developing ties with other interest groups, thus creating new alliances.⁵² It seems that the ability or inability of imperial dynasties to do so can cause either their endurance or downfall. As Karen Barkey and others have shown, the relative success of the Ottoman Empire—the longest existing empire under a single dynasty in world history—may well be the result of the dynasty’s ability to shift networks, recruit new agents and find new powerful allies among its ethnically diverse populations.⁵³ In the case of maritime political systems, ecological changes or changes on a macroeconomic level can also render ties obsolete. Harbors may silt up. Natural resources may become exhausted. Trade routes in the hinterland of port cities may be relocated due to shifting power relations or climate change, passing by once-prosperous ports.

The rise of a network approach to empire moreover has led to the awareness that in history often several imperial networks can share the same geopolitical space. This notion of imperial overlap stems from the study of so-called nomad empires. Pekka Hämäläinen’s examination of the concurrent control of central Texas and northern Mexico by both the Comanche tribal federation and the Spanish Empire in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries offers the most compelling analysis of this phenomenon.⁵⁴ The idea of criss-crossing imperial networks and overlapping hegemonic spheres seems to be particularly well-suited for understanding maritime power structures, too.⁵⁵ Examples of overlapping empires are the Antigonid, Seleukid and Ptolemaic empires in the Hellenistic Aegean; the Ottoman and Venetian empires in the eastern Mediterranean; and the Spanish, British and Dutch empires in the early modern Caribbean.

In the next section we will have a closer look at maritime empires as a type of imperial polity, and their principal defining features.

51 Duindam 1995, 79; for the theory of power structures and the role of brokers and agents, see Elder-Vass 2010.

52 Barkey 2008, *passim*; also see Heebøll-Holm in this volume, describing a successful attempt by the old elite to resist this mechanism.

53 *Ibidem*.

54 Hämäläinen 2008.

55 Cf. Raben, this volume: “maritime empires have the fascinating quirk that they allow other, sometimes competing networks to operate within its sphere of influence.”

Maritime Empires, Sea Power, and Naval Warfare

At the beginning of this chapter, maritime empires were tentatively defined as systems of political and/or economic control that employ sailing routes as their main form of connectivity. They aim at controlling ports, coastal regions and islands rather than at conquering large land masses, and for warfare and coercion they rely more on naval power than on armies. It seems that like land empires, seaborne empires can often be associated with particular, geographically bounded regions characterized by extensive coastlines, and an abundance of (natural) harbors and/or islands. This includes e.g. the Aegean (the Athenian Empire), the Adriatic Sea (the Venetian Empire), the Caribbean (the early Spanish Empire), the Baltic Sea (the Danish and Swedish empires), and the Java Sea (the Dutch East Indies Company). An additional characteristic could be an empire's self-identification in words or symbols, especially at its center, as crucial for its success on the sea. This is something we see in for instance Ptolemaic Alexandria or seventeenth-century Amsterdam. In the fifth century BCE, the Athenians made their sea power, or "thalassocracy" (θαλασσοκρατία, *thalassokratia*), part of their collective identity, and saw their control of the Delian League as a prerequisite for democracy.⁵⁶ In the United Kingdom, "Rule Britannia!" is still the exuberant highpoint of the Last Night of the Proms.⁵⁷

Which imperial polities qualify as "maritime"? Can, for instance, the peer polity network of Mycenaean palaces in the Bronze Age Aegean be considered "imperial"?⁵⁸ And what about the "Pirates of the Caribbean" in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? The entanglements of freebooting buccaneers and the European seaborne empires are well-recognized.⁵⁹ But can "pirate"

⁵⁶ Engels 2016, and cf. Wilker 2016; also see further Kopp 2016, who takes a more skeptical approach to a possible Athenian concept of "thalassocracy" (2016 apparently was a good year for the semantics of Classical θαλασσοκρατία). Rüdiger 2012 discusses *thalassokratia* in the context of the revival of empire by the Frankish monarchy but concludes that a concept "maritime power" does not exist in medieval European texts. The bottom-line is, that in ancient and medieval writings, *thalassokratia* was no technical term and in its English rendering can be applied freely to maritime empires and other polities who control the sea.

⁵⁷ For an analysis of the song's proto-imperial, naval overtones, see Armitage 2000, 173.

⁵⁸ On this question see Kelder in this volume; cf. *id.* 2010 and 2012; on Mycenaean maritime networks in the Aegean, see Tataron 2013.

⁵⁹ See e.g. the contributions in Colás and Mabee 2011, examining the role of private entrepreneurs in the establishment of empire; and Hanna 2015, emphasizing pirates' roles in establishing trade links with the American hinterlands for the emerging British Empire; cf. from a broader perspective Thomson 1994. The entanglement of piracy and imperialism in the early colonial world, and pirates' involvement in trade and interimperial

networks themselves be understood as organizations of the imperial type (considering the supralocal and transcultural nature of these networks which seem to have been geared towards organizing both trade and collective violence on an international scale)?⁶⁰ Are late seventeenth-century pirate fleets, temporarily assembled to raid the Spanish Main, essentially different from early nineteenth-century Comanche war parties raiding the Mexican interior (and who are now widely seen as having created an empire of the “nomadic” type)?⁶¹ Among the topics discussed in this volume, the Mycenaean traders-*cum*-raiders and Caribbean buccaneers constitute one end of a continuum that on its opposite side has more clear-cut examples of (dynastic) imperial polities, for instance the Ptolemaic and Portuguese empires. In between, we introduce some more unusual suspects, such as the fourth-century Boiotians, the multipolar island system in the northern seas during the Viking Age, and the powerful sultanate of Melaka that dominated the Malaysian straits in the sixteenth-century. What all these empires have in common, is that in accordance with our working definition they had strong coercive means at their disposal, and even may be said to have *specialized* in exercising organized violence. The capability and readiness to wage war is anyway a *sine qua non* of “empire”.

Many historical empires had war fleets, exercised sea power and fought naval wars. Not all of them can be seen as *maritime* empires. The international supremacy of the British Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries obviously was based on superior naval fire power. But the empire itself was at the same time very much land-based. The Ottoman Empire in its Classical Age by contrast may have been *more* of a maritime empire than is usually assumed—and not just in the Mediterranean, but in the Indian Ocean as well.⁶² Hellenistic Rhodes on the other hand, provides an example of a state (a *polis*) with overriding sea power but without an empire.⁶³

The concept of “sea power” was formulated by American navy captain Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914), who in his later career was a lecturer in naval history at the United States Naval War College. In his influential book *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*, published in 1890, Mahan analyzed

warfare, has parallels in the ancient and early modern Mediterranean, see e.g. De Souza 1999; Schulz 2000; Gabrielsen 2003; Greene 2011; Schwara 2011.

60 See Lane in this volume.

61 Above, n. 54.

62 Brummett 1993 and 2007; Casale 2010.

63 Gabrielsen 1997; Wiemer 2002.

the importance of naval power in the rise of the British Empire to global dominance. What concerned him most, however, was contemporary American access to international markets across the “great highway” of the high seas. Securing such access, Mahan argued, would require not only a bigger merchant fleet, but also, following British example, a strong navy and a worldwide network of naval bases to support and protect it.⁶⁴ His emphasis on naval superiority, as Chester Starr noted, “fitted magnificently into the bellicose, imperialist outburst of the late nineteenth century in the United States, Great Britain and Germany” (and also France and Japan, we may add).⁶⁵

Sea power has since become a separate object of study for both historians and policy makers.⁶⁶ The idea of a singular, superior “Western way of war” in land warfare as an explanation for the “rise of the West” in the (early) modern period has been utterly demolished in recent scholarship;⁶⁷ however, the astounding intra-European contest in enlarging the fire power of war ships that began with the Anglo-Dutch wars of the seventeenth century still merits further research in the context of Western Europe’s temporary global dominance between ca. 1850 and 1950.

Definitions matter. It used to be controversial to suggest that the city of Carthage controlled a maritime empire from the fifth to the third century BCE.⁶⁸ The use of rigorous definitions that demand of “empire” intentionality, centralization and direct, state-like governance was part of the problem. Such definitions are often based partly on *modern* European imperialism—most of all that of the British Empire—and partly on an idealized view of the Roman Empire as very centralized and homogeneous (an image first created by Victorian historians who believed that the Roman Empire resembled the British). Carthage, it was often argued, cannot have been an empire because its creation of a web of interconnected coastal entrepôts and strongholds in

64 “Mahan’s *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*: Securing international markets in the 1890s.” In *Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations*, Office of the Historian, United States Department of State (no date). At history.state.gov/milestones/1866-1898/Mahan, visited February 4, 2018.

65 Starr 1989, 3–4.

66 On Mahan’s influence, see Shulman 1991. See also the contributions to Baltrusch, Koppel and Wendt 2016, exploring sea power in the ancient Mediterranean, as did earlier Starr 1989.

67 See generally Lynn 2003, 1–27; Black 2004b, 66–103; Porter 2009, 23–54. Also see Börekçi 2006 and Ágoston 2014 on the Ottomans early participation in the alleged Western “military revolution” of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

68 See the discussion of earlier literature in Whittaker 1978.

the western Mediterranean was motivated by trade considerations, as were the reciprocal agreements made with local communities; and at least until after the First Punic War (264–241 BCE), Carthage never attempted to create substantial imperial provinces of the type later introduced by the Romans. Yet ancient sources frequently describe Carthaginian overseas activities in terms of empire-building. For instance, the Roman historian Justin wrote that the sixth-century Carthaginian leader, Mago, laid the foundations of an *Imperium Poenorum* in Sicily and Sardinia, and the Greek historian Diodoros described the Carthaginian presence in his native Sicily as the “*hegemonia* of the Phoenicians”;⁶⁹ the Battle of Himera in 480 BCE according to Herodotos was fought because the Carthaginians wanted to “enslave” the Sicilian Greeks by supporting the rule of tyrants in their cities (and of course because Herodotos wanted to suggest a link with the Battle of Salamis, which allegedly was fought on the very same day).⁷⁰ Greek authors described Carthaginian activities in Sicily not in economic terms but used the words *hegemonia*, *archē*, and *epikrateia*,⁷¹ terms commonly used to denote hegemonic control of one polity or society over another.⁷² C. R. Whittaker tried to solve this paradox by concluding that until the early fourth century BCE mutual agreements of reciprocity between Carthaginians and others, particularly in Sicily, gradually became unequal domination for political as well as commercial reasons.⁷³ The nature of Carthaginian imperialism changed after the First Punic War, when attempts were made to control territory in North Africa and Spain more directly.

The example of Carthage shows that it is not helpful to persist in using strict definitions, especially when these are obviously anachronistic or otherwise culturally inappropriate for the object of study. If a definition of “empire”, or here more specifically “maritime empire”, should identify some degree of “universal” commonalities, then this should be based on historical characteristics and notions. In the case of Carthage, we see that a clear distinction between economic and political motivations cannot be made, that the empire was hegemonic, and that before 241 BCE hegemony was exercised, not through territorial conquest, but by maintaining an armed control

69 Just. 19.1.1 and 18.7.19; Diod. 4.23.3, 10.18.6, and 12.26.3.

70 Hdt. 7.158 and 166.

71 Whittaker 1978, 61–62.

72 Desideri 2013; Erskine 2013.

73 Whittaker 1978, 88–89; see now also the contributions in Quinn and Vella 2014, examining the “Punic Mediterranean” as a more or less coherent system of cultural, political and economic connectivity. On Carthaginian “sea power”, see Rawlings 2010.

of maritime networks and establishing alliance with autonomous coastal communities. If we exclude the multifarious historical forms of “hegemony” and “indirect rule” from our definition, many well-known premodern empires may no longer qualify as such, including land empires such as the Persian or Mongol empires.⁷⁴

A relative high importance of economic considerations, intermingling with political and military ones, may be a specific characteristic of maritime empires. We see it perhaps in the Ptolemaic Empire of the third century BCE,⁷⁵ and certainly in the later Venetian Empire and the heavily militarized “merchant empire” of the Dutch East Indies Company in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁷⁶ Also a multipolar organization of power—though found in land empires as well (the Mongol Empire is a good example)—may be common to sea empires.

Overlapping Empires in Early Modern South Asia

In the previous section, the idea of overlapping empires was introduced—a notion that followed from the conceptualization of (maritime) empires as networks. Network lines can cross or be shared. One good testing ground is provided by the early modern Indian Ocean. Here the Dutch, Portuguese, and British vied for control of the same sailing routes. These European trade networks however were in fact often built upon pre-existing networks and did not replace local traders. As Jane Hooper writes, “[w]hen Portuguese, Dutch, English and French traders began frequenting the ports of Madagascar, they discovered populations already engaged in long-distance trade with groups throughout the Indian Ocean.”⁷⁷

This now more generally accepted view was first pointed out by the maritime historians Ashin Das Gupta and K. N. Chaudhuri. They both had begun their careers by studying the British East Indies Company, and were increasingly bothered by the relative absence of local actors in standard historical

74 Note that the support of friendly regimes in autonomous cities, be they tyrannical, oligarchic or democratic, is usually seen as a form of indirect rule if this is done by “accepted” imperial polities such as the Achaemenid or Seleukid empires.

75 Manning 2011; Strootman in this volume. Cf. Reed 2003, who shows that the principal items transported by maritime traders of Classical Athens were grain, timber, slaves, and provisions for military expeditions.

76 Knaap 2015.

77 Hooper 2011, 218; also see Singh in this volume.

narratives.⁷⁸ They subsequently began studying interactions in a more inclusive manner, pointing out the African, Arab, and Indian networks underlying British sea power.⁷⁹ The old image of a succession of hegemonic European powers controlling the early modern Indian Ocean—first the Portuguese, then the Dutch, and finally the British—is now no longer acceptable.⁸⁰

But whether colonial empires in the early modern period created new sea routes or consolidated preexisting ones, these could always be used by others as well. These others may have been local actors but also freelance agents from the homeland operating independently from the empire. As Cátia Antunes shows in her contribution to this volume, agents of the Portuguese crown managed also their own, unofficial “shadow empire”. European merchant vessels in South Asian waters of course not only came to bring expensive luxury goods back to Europe. They also participated in local trade, carrying cargo for non-European traders.⁸¹ There often were multi-ethnic crews aboard these ships even in the seventeenth-century. The Dutch East Indies Company employed Germans, Scandinavians, Chinese, Javanese, and Indians.⁸² Despite the establishment of naval bases and their strong fire-power, European powers had to broker deals with local rulers and elites.⁸³ They had to contend simultaneously with each other *and* with local traders and powers—including even the Ottoman dynasty, whose activities as a major maritime power in the Persian Gulf and beyond have been the subject of important new research.⁸⁴

All this is not to say that the Portuguese, Dutch and British empires in early modern South Asia were not empires;⁸⁵ they simply were not all-powerful, and they were not alone. Imperialism in this and other periods was a complex and often messy business.

78 Gupta 1967 and 1979; Chaudhuri 1965 and 1978.

79 Chaudhuri 1985 and 1990; Gupta 1994; Gupta and Pearson 1999. On the *Werdegang* of Gupta and Chaudhuri, see Mukherjee 2013; also see Margariti 2008.

80 If only for the fact that European trading companies until the mid-eighteenth century were not as powerful as conventional historical narratives by European historians have suggested; cf. Singh, this volume.

81 Fusaro *et al.* 2016.

82 Van Rossum 2014; also Knaap 2001; cf. Raben in this volume.

83 Hooper 2011, 217; cf. Subrahmanyam 1995.

84 See above, n. 62; a comparable situation existed in the Hellenistic Aegean, see Strootman in this volume.

85 Subrahmanyam 1993 and Raben, this volume; but see the criticism of Singh in this volume.

From the Black Ships of Mycenae to Buccaneers Going Dutch: Sea Empires in World History

The volume *Empires of the Seas* contains thirteen contributions, representing a wide range of regions and periods in preindustrial world history. Several of these are based on lectures at the Utrecht Conference, others were especially written for this volume. The overview we offer does not claim to be comprehensive. There are of course some obvious omissions. Several of the better known non-European maritime empires had to be excluded because they fall outside of the premodern focus of this volume. Among them the Omani system of hegemony along the coasts of East Africa: in existence since Omani forces drove the Portuguese from the coast between Lamu and Cape Delgado around 1700, a strong maritime power based on Zanzibar flourished most of all under the ruler Imam Seyyid Said (r. 1806–1856).⁸⁶ An interesting case study that is omitted, too, is the Japanese Empire between 1895 and 1945.⁸⁷

The present volume is divided into three parts. Part 1 gathers together five papers on the Mediterranean. As was suggested in this introduction, the Middle Sea arguably was home to the largest number of maritime empires before the early modern period, perhaps precisely because its subdivision into smaller geographic compartments and relatively extensive coasts invited large scale political control from an early age on. Contributions to this part range from the Bronze Age (Kelder), via the Archaic and Classical Aegean (Van den Eijnde, van Wijk), to the early globalization processes of the Hellenistic period (Strootman), and the later Middle Ages (Kirk). Part 2 contains three papers focusing on Scandinavian maritime powers in the Northern Seas, from the Viking “Sea Kings” in the Middle Ages and the medieval Danish kingdom (Mostert, Heebøll-Holm) to the seventeenth-century Swedish Empire (Mörke). With Northern Seas we mean the North Atlantic, the Irish Sea, the North Sea, the Baltic, and the White Sea. Part 3 takes us fully into the early modern period, and here the perspective broadens to include the Indian Ocean, the Caribbean, and the seas of Southeast Asia. Though this is of course the period of the so-called European overseas expansion, the five contributions in this part take either a non-western—to use for convenience that rather Eurocentric term—perspective (Singh, Borschberg), or look at cross-cultural interactions in the context of early European colonialism (Antunes, Raben, Lane).

86 Bhacker 1994, 60–82.

87 For an overview, see Myers and Peattie 1984.

Opening the section on the ancient and medieval Mediterranean, Jorrit Kelder discusses the role of maritime networks in the rise of Mycenae in southern Greece to its status as leading city in the Aegean from the sixteenth to fourteenth century BCE. Kelder argues that it was Mycenae's ability to dominate the maritime "small world" of the Saronic Gulf that enabled the Mycenaean to access, and finally control, the trans-Aegean trade routes linking Greece to Anatolia, and also to dominate the long-range sailing route to Egypt. Control of trade routes, in particular those to and from Egypt, enabled Mycenae to extend its political influence across the Aegean and into Anatolia, resulting in the formation of what may tentatively be called a Mycenaean "Great Kingdom".

In the next paper, Floris van den Eijnde investigates the origins of the Classical Athenian Empire. He shows that the Athenians were able to establish maritime hegemony in the Aegean with such relative speed and apparent ease after the Second Greek-Persian War (480–479 BCE) because they could avail themselves of preexisting networks centered on Athens. Van den Eijnde makes the important point of highlighting the crucial role of private entrepreneurs in exploring and establishing sea routes, drawing also attention to the dynamics of competition between the various aristocratic families involved in international trade during the Archaic period. Thus, when the Persians temporarily retreated from the Aegean after 479, Athens with its new fleet could successfully create its own maritime hegemony.

How strong Athenian power networks eventually would become is demonstrated by Roy van Wijk's contribution on the fourth-century BCE Theban attempts to break Athenian maritime hegemony. Van Wijk reconsiders the attempts of the Thebans to establish naval supremacy in the Aegean in the time of the so-called Theban Hegemony in mainland Greece (371–362 BCE). Theban naval ambitions of the 360s BCE against Athenian maritime dominance have often been regarded as a misguided folly that left no lasting imprint on history. Drawing attention to the outstanding geopolitical location of Boiotia, the region in which Thebes was located—with direct access to both the Aegean Sea and the Corinthian Gulf, and possessing some excellent harbors—van Wijk is able to show that Theban maritime aspirations were not unrealistic. What finally thwarted these ambitions, was a failure to obtain the (financial) support of the Persian Empire, which in the recent past had enabled the Spartans to temporarily overthrow Athenian maritime dominance.

The Ptolemaic Empire (ca. 323–30 BCE) arguably was the first naval superpower that expressed its dominance programmatically by a wide array of maritime imagery and symbolism. In his contribution, Rolf Strootman shows how the Ptolemaic Empire of the third century BCE was an extensive, universalistic network empire rather than a mere kingdom of Egypt. The Ptolemies

maintained a naval presence in regions as far removed as the Black Sea and the Red Sea. The focus, however, is on the Aegean as the main arena for inter-imperial conflict where the Ptolemies competed with their imperial rivals, the Antigonid and Seleukid dynasties, over the control of ports and sea routes. Like several other empires examined in this volume, the Ptolemaic Empire was to some degree an entrepreneurial enterprise, with powerful individual actors commissioned by the dynasty to establish new settlements.

The last paper in the Mediterranean section is Thomas Kirk's contribution on the Republic of Genoa and its empire during the later Middle Ages. Kirk critically evaluates the relative merits of conceptualizing the pre-modern Genoese polity as a (maritime or "commercial") empire. Discussing the role of both merchants and state actors in the creation of Genoese control of preexisting networks and patterns of trade, and the establishment of an assortment of colonial outposts, Kirk concludes that the results of these actors' endeavors were far from uniform. Genoa's coercive means were economic rather than military. The Genoese "Empire" was not a top-down structure, and commercial ties across the eastern Mediterranean often followed pre-existing social ties between families. Being a network system above all, the prominence of Genoa came to an end with the loss of its naval bases in Anatolia, the Aegean and the Black Sea to the Ottomans in the fifteenth century.

In the first of three contributions on the Northern Seas (Part 2), Marco Mostert, too, takes a critical approach to the possible conceptualization of the Viking maritime networks as (network) empires, as these were not always "systems of control" or based on conquest. He does observe however that the political and cultural diversity in the maritime networks of the Viking age was similar to that observed in pre-modern land empires. There were attempts at developing systems of political or naval dominance, employing trade routes and trying to control seaports, coastal regions and islands. Mostert specifically looks at the possible development of a *lingua franca* to enable communication between speakers whose native languages are different. He concludes that in the very complex linguistic situations existing in the medieval Northern Seas, pragmatic choices were made as to what language was used as *lingua franca*.

Next, Thomas Heebøll-Holm examines the rise and fall of the maritime empire of the Valdemarian dynasty (twelfth to fourteenth centuries). The empire created under Cnut the Great originally was as much Danish as it was English. The dynasty at first relied on the support and initiative of the Danish nobility, who had at their disposal warriors and ships, and were driven by a desire for profit from royal warfare and from trade, especially in the context of the "crusades" against the pagans living along the Baltic rim. Merchant elites from Danish towns also cooperated in the Valdemarians' imperial project. The

dynasty later co-opted foreign (German) allies and mercenaries to maintain and extend its control against an increasingly powerful and unruly nobility. However, the Germanization of the Valdemarian court and aristocracy alienated the Danish nobility with their strong overseas power bases, and this eventually eroded the foundations of the Valdemarians' Baltic empire.

Olaf Mörke takes us to the seventeenth century and the Swedish *Dominium Maris Baltici*, a term expressing the formal acknowledgment of Swedish supremacy over the Baltic Sea in a treaty concluded with the Dutch States General in 1614. The ambiguity of the term “*dominium*”, oscillating between “property” and “rule”, matched the complex nature of Swedish hegemony in the Baltic region. The Våsa dynasty's claim to empire in the seventeenth century was above all based on sea power and included a short-lived attempt at expansion into the Atlantic in competition with the English and the Dutch. The Våsa's did not, however, rule a centralized state. The Swedish kingdom was a typical *monarchia mixta*. The estates, in particular those of the high nobility, remained highly influential until 1718. The constant necessity to conciliate the interests of the crown and those of the estates shaped the development of the Swedish zone of influence in the Baltic in the early modern period. Mörke therefore concludes that Swedish dominance in the Baltic region was a kind of borrowed empire, because of its (financial) dependence on the estates and on the economic powers dominating trade routes in the Baltic and to northwestern Europe.

The five contributions in Part 3 are all set in the early modern period. Anjana Singh looks at the European powers that were active in the Indian Ocean in early modern times, examining the different modes of operations they adopted in the course of three centuries. She argues against the teleological historical narrative according to which the arrival of European traders in the sixteenth century led unavoidably to the creation of modern colonial empires in the nineteenth century. The Indian Ocean had been a well-connected maritime space since Antiquity, and the so-called “Age of Discovery” did not fundamentally impact the Indian Ocean trade system for several centuries. In fact, Portuguese, Dutch and British traders were merely three groups among many competing over access to seaports in the region, and often their survival was far from certain. It was only from the mid-eighteenth century that the British East Indies Company gained the upper hand over its European rivals, and subsequently gained control over parts of the Indian subcontinent, particularly along the northern coasts of the Bay of Bengal.

Peter Borschberg takes us to the Melaka Empire in southeast Asia. Based on the town of Melaka on the Malay Peninsula, the Melaka sultans from the early fifteenth to the early sixteenth century exerted control over populations in Malay, Sumatra,

the Riau Archipelago, and Borneo—lands and peoples far apart but connected to each other by the sea. Borschberg points out that pre-colonial Melaka was not a territorially defined polity evocative of a modern nation state. The Melaka Empire instead can be described as basically a network of patron-client relationships. Personal allegiances were used to gain access to maritime trading networks. Malay rulers were not preoccupied with the acquisition of territory, through conquest or otherwise. They rather sought to boost their status and thereby increase their position within the hierarchy of Asian rulers. To this end, the submission of other, lesser rulers was key. Interestingly, minor rulers (*rajas*, or “princes”) who paid homage, often voluntarily, to rulers higher up in the hierarchy, could acknowledge more than one overlord at the same time. The Melaka sultan himself may have been a vassal of sorts of simultaneously the Chinese emperor and the king of Siam.

Going beyond Wallerstein’s center-periphery model, Cátia Antunes discusses how recent historiography has emphasized the participation of local communities in the establishment and maintenance of the Portuguese maritime empire, as well as the institutional weaknesses of early colonial empires, which often were unable to effectively exert power in the distant territories over which they claimed sovereignty. Others again have highlighted the integration of self-organized networks of merchants, even though their economic interests could be contrary to those of the crown. These included non-European merchants and creole business groups operating also beyond the Portuguese sphere of influence. Antunes argues that informal networks and local communities were not solely responsible for the formation of the Portuguese maritime empire, adding herself a spatial component: the nodal gateways where colonial encounters took place, that is, seaports. It was from these various trade ports such as Ouidah and Macao rather than from Lisbon, that the Portuguese overseas empire emanated and was operated.

Departing from an older notion of the Dutch as “reluctant” empire-builders in early modern Southeast Asia, Remco Raben asks if there really can be something like a purely commercial empire. He concludes that the world of the Dutch East Indies Company (VOC) was in fact nothing less than a maritime empire based in large part on military coercion. It was “not a closed territorial system, but a network of connections and nodes along which enormous amounts of goods, people and ideas moved around,” Raben writes. The aims of the VOC were similar to those of any other empire: extraction of resources and the mobilization of manpower. Raben moreover shows that the VOC in a sense can be seen as an Asian power: the VOC not only collaborated with local rulers, but also adopted “a great variety of Asian institutions and repertoires of governance and extraction.”

In the final contribution, Kris Lane, too, draws attention to ports as bases and gateways while discussing the rise and fall of the “Pirates of the Caribbean”.

Pirates originally were the part-time, freelance agents of competing European powers. But piracy was outlawed and suppressed following a peak of “unsponsored piracy” between ca. 1650 and 1720, when these non-state actors established local bases, or “pirate nests”, and built up a system of overlapping parasitic networks that shifted in response to the weakness or strength of state repression. “To be profitable if not entirely sustainable,” Lane writes, “high seas raiding required reliable places to trade loot and refit, or simply to cash in.” These rendezvous points developed into multi-ethnic merchant enclaves, or even temporary pirate republics. They also helped the development of the colonial empires, as “the gaming tables of Port Royal, Willemstad, and Petit Goâve helped transfer stolen capital into the hands of merchants who in turn helped finance the rising sugar plantation complex that ultimately made uncontrolled piracy an undesirable side effect of imperial expansion.”

The index to this book was compiled by Pim Möhring and Marlous Pelger.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to emphasize that many of the general observations concerning maritime empires that were put forward in this introductory essay, actually were derived from this diverse collection of surveys—resulting from the contributors’ willingness to think about maritime empires as power networks, or of power networks as empires, even as this triggered also critical evaluations of the editors’ tentative assumptions that we asked the contributors to think with. I summarize these findings here.

There is first of all the model of *overlapping imperial spheres* that may be thought of as typical for maritime empires, and in addition the subsequent *interimperial competition* that was an important incentive for intra-imperial developments (Borschberg, Kirk, Lane, Mörke, Singh, Strootman, van Wijk). Three contributions pointed out the existence of unofficial “shadow networks” utilizing the same networks as the “official”, imperial ones (Antunes, Lane, Raben). The complex interweaving of economic, political and social motivations in the process of empire was emphasized by five contributors (Antunes, Borschberg, Heebøll-Holm, Kelder, Raben). Fourth, the notion of *multipolarity*, as opposed to the conventional center-periphery model (Antunes, Singh, Strootman). And finally, an important point that merits more research especially in the field of ancient empire studies: the phenomenon of the commissioned “*freelance*” *entrepreneur* who invests in an imperial project for personal profit (Antunes, Heebøll-Holm, Strootman, Van den Eijnde).

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