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English trading companies and the sea, 1550–1650

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When distributing its acts and ordinances in 1617, the Eastland Company, formed almost 40 years before to regulate English traders in the Baltic, carefully defined its membership criteria by specifying ‘that none be admitted unless he were a merchant’. It was not enough for an aspiring member simply to have undertaken an apprenticeship or to hold familial links with the corporation – new members had to prove they had been ‘beyond the seas merchant like’. Indeed, it was only by presenting demonstrable evidence of having actually ‘traded merchandises by crossing the seas’ that a merchant could join the corporation. Through passing beyond England’s shores and living in a foreign community overseas, young traders were deemed to have earned the necessary expertise to be part of the corporate body. As this suggests, in spite of holding a charter that specified privileges for trading in ‘Poland, Sweden, Norway’, the sea defined the character of the corporation, and the experience of travelling on the sea to lands beyond the sea separated its members from other Englishmen. In early modern England, being a merchant was intrinsically linked to notions of travel and movement, of crossing boundaries, and of setting forth from the British Isles to trade with lands that bordered seas that stretched uninterrupted to Cadiz, Constantinople, or Canton.

This chapter will examine how trading companies operated as maritime organizations and will question how being seaborne organizations and communities affected the ways corporations, their members, and their employees understood and sought to navigate the world. In the first section, the importance of maritime activity for trading companies is examined. The formulation of trading companies as purveyors of seaborne trade is discussed through an assessment of the privileges granted in their charters and their relationship to the shipbuilding and naval supply industry in England. In doing so, it presents an assessment of these organizations that highlights both the ways their merchant members understood the connectivity of international...
markets through maritime trade and their experience of ensuring necessary supplies for undertaking trade by drawing on this same interconnectedness for building and repairing ships. The second part of the chapter considers the ways trading companies used their great privileges as maritime organizations to establish, or attempt to establish, their control over maritime regions. Focusing specifically on the Muscovy Company's militarization of the North Atlantic fisheries and the East India Company's use of naval force around the Indian Ocean, it will show how trading companies sought to appropriate state-like powers to deploy military force in regions where states could impose the least control – at sea.

For English merchants, their unique experience, interest, and expertise as travellers beyond the sea was presented as justification for restricting participation in the form of institution that would come to dominate England's overseas activities – the corporation. From the 1550s, British trading companies were at the forefront of attempts to connect Britain's consumers and manufacturers with far-flung places. Sovereignty was delegated to these institutions in return for their active participation in the spaces between Britain and markets across the world. Although usually based in English port towns and administrating trading posts on foreign shores, the ability of these corporate bodies to bridge the world's oceans made their success possible. In doing so, they operated in maritime environments where overlapping jurisdictions, customs, currencies, and peoples were common and adopting flexible trading practices was essential for a company's success. For example, regions such as the Mediterranean, Indian Ocean, and Baltic Sea bordered a plethora of states but were often treated as single entities in the charters of trading corporations. As Maria Fusaro has suggested, these connected spaces provide an array of avenues for engaging with broader global narratives through a maritime lens. In the early modern period, ‘maritime travel became the medium which allowed the emergence of networks of global communication and exchange’ and it influenced the people, states, and economies connected through it. As organizations with dual interests at home and abroad, trading companies took on seemingly disparate responsibilities that included acting as regulator, diplomat, explorer, colonizer, and merchant.

It was as actors within this globally connected environment that trading companies emerged as maritime organizations, operating in the fluid spaces between empires. As this suggests, English traders and trading companies participated in relationships, commercial or otherwise, in which they were rarely the dominant party. European trading companies undertook their activities alongside and in competition with Asian, African, and American merchants – traders who operated within their own pre-existing institutional structures and frameworks – who made European domination of commerce impossible. Corporations were therefore operating within spaces of encounter and negotiation – in many cases only on the very edges of trading networks that were otherwise dominated by private traders and non-corporate actors. Even in circumstances where they could dominate a local market, corporations were necessarily engaged with networks of traders, producers, and consumers who were not regulated by their corporate controls. Indeed, it was these uncontrolled networks that allowed later entrants – such as the Scandinavian trading companies in China – to gain access to an already crowded market. In these environments, employees of
corporations living within 'European' settlements or alongside non-European peoples, it was essential that they undertook trade in a way that facilitated their integration into local markets and their establishment of relationships with traders and producers of goods. Both in cities at home and overseas, English merchants participated in social environments that were, to some degree, cosmopolitan or at least collaborative in nature, where the economic and cultural underpinnings of commercial success rested on cross-cultural exchanges. Once overseas, English merchants depended on integrating into local trading networks, a process that brought them into contact with local and regional traders as well as international trading diaspora. That is not to say, of course, that England’s merchants participated in, or created, a globalized economy. Instead, it is more useful to understand how individuals across the community of traders in England came to envisage themselves as participants in a series of exchanges that criss-crossed the globe – and were brought about through maritime connectivity. In this way, English merchants, as part of corporations or acting as private traders, were able to operate as part of a widespread diasporic community, connected through common behavioural standards and customs but disconnected from the state or any singular, centralizing authority. The role of trading companies was to provide structure and support for these traders, taking on responsibilities in governance that, at one time or another, regulated everything from their members’ speech to making declarations of war.

In order to effectively operate in this way, many English trading companies ‘were endowed with many of the characteristics of a state, including the capacity to wage war in furtherance of their interests’, a privilege that was utilized more often than not through the application of maritime violence. Indeed, trading corporations – especially in an English and Dutch context – have been presented by numerous historians as institutions central to the rise and development of European empires in the early modern era. From this perspective, the unique institutional structure that corporations provided are presented as a key means through which European people and states were able to take advantage of trading and colonizing opportunities across the world. Of special importance was the suitability of corporations for spreading risk for individuals, reducing the need for state support, and providing a framework to monopolize national engagement with a specific market. Organizations like these, and their European competitors, have been the subject of considerable study – especially in regards to their impact on international trade and as foundations for European empires. As Janice Thomson has argued, ‘mercantile companies were state-created institutions that used violence in the pursuit of economic gain and political power for both state and nonstate actors’, and that through corporations ‘rulers were able to exploit nonstate coercive capabilities in conquering or colonising larger areas of the globe’. Through these means, corporate actors were able to use their maritime authority and power to dominate maritime regions – often a prerequisite for territorial conquest on land. In this way, trading companies took organizational forms in which ‘the use of violence was subordinated to the rational pursuit of profit’. As maritime organizations, trading companies obtained privileges that allowed them to operate at sea in ways that would have been impossible for organizations acting within the borders of the English state.
The power deployed by these corporations at sea changed the way they sought to engage with international competitors and political authorities overseas. Whether for commercial or violent activity – sometimes undertaken by the same ships on a single voyage – the ability to deploy extensive naval forces became increasingly important for countries across northern Europe as they sought entry into and competed for valuable overseas markets. Yet, for states in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the cost of employing such shipping was exorbitant, further encouraging merchants, particularly through trading companies and joint-stock funding mechanisms, to develop naval forces under private rather than state control. Through these means, the vast majority of ships built in Britain during this period were constructed in private shipyards – both vessels intended for carrying goods across the Channel and those raiding Spanish possessions in the Caribbean. First through these organizations, and later through the state’s navy, sea power became a key strategy for maintaining Britain’s trans-oceanic mercantile access and control as well as imposing authority over distant colonies. For trading companies, their reliance on the sea for profits and purpose led them, not surprisingly, to oversee the deployment of vast fleets of ships from England’s ports – bringing English merchants and goods into contact with people and markets across the world.

Trading companies and the sea

As the example of the Eastland Company’s membership suggested at the start of the chapter, the sea was far more than simply an empty space between disparate ports – it was a means of constructing social identities. Through their passage from England to foreign shores, merchants crossed a barrier that was not simply geographic but also cultural, religious, and political. The experience of travelling ‘beyond the seas’ and integrating into economic networks in other parts of the world meant that merchants were differentiated from traders and retailers whose activities were restricted to domestic markets. Not surprisingly, as these merchants came together to establish corporations to oversee and regulate English trade with overseas markets, they maintained a perspective that understood the importance of the sea as a natural environment for traders and as a means of defining the specific privileges of the new organizations.

Trading companies such as the Eastland Company, Levant Company, and East India Company (EIC) all obtained rights and privileges to undertake activities that were not permitted to private merchants. Corporations were able to regulate the activities of members, export and import specific goods, develop their own laws and orders for employees to follow overseas, and, most famously, monopolize English access to overseas markets. Through the charters of these organizations, we can see how their authority was defined, in many cases, through geographies and activities that were distinctly maritime in nature. For example, the Levant Company’s charter granted ‘the only liberty, use and privilege of trading and trafficking and using feat of merchandise by and through the Levant Seas otherwise called the Mediterranean Seas’. It could be joined only by individuals experienced ‘in the said trade beyond the seas within the dominions of the Grand Signor or Seignory or State of Venice’.
Although the Ottoman and Venetian states were specified destinations, it was neither the goods from these regions nor, necessarily, access to them that the charter specified, but the conduct of trade via a maritime route through the ‘Mediterranean Seas’. Although this was not a universal feature of corporate charters, English merchants were, inevitably, maritime actors when accessing any foreign market, and many of the new corporations of the Elizabethan and Stuart periods were granted wide-ranging privileges covering vast swathes of land and sea.32

One consequence of identifying corporate privileges through the maritime practices of their members was that it was possible for different organizations to claim unique rights to operate in the same part of the world. By restricting the scope of its charter to the Mediterranean Sea route, the Levant Company was left in a difficult situation when challenged by other English companies who used alternative means to reach the same markets. Aware of possible competition from the newly founded EIC, the Levant Company was careful to obtain a new charter that extended their privileges to regions ‘lately discovered’ by their employees – namely Persia.33 Yet, by sending factors to Persia via the Mediterranean, passing through the Ottoman Empire, the Levant Company impinged upon the claims of the East India and Muscovy companies, who each held charters with privileged access to Persian markets via alternative maritime routes, via the Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea, respectively.34 Over the course of the 1610s, each company would seek to gain advantage over the others by obtaining further privileges, not from the English Crown, but from the Persian Shah Abbas I.35 The EIC was most successful in enforcing its claims, in part because its maritime link to Persia via the Indian Ocean was least dependent on the willingness of other territorial powers to allow access to Persian markets. The Levant and Muscovy companies depended on Ottoman and Russian support, respectively.36 In this situation, the maritime focus of England’s trading companies was a cause for competition between them as definitions regarding geographic reach that related to oceanic transport proved incompatible with participation in interconnected, global marketplaces.37

Even for companies established to undertake colonial activities, the influence of maritime experience and conceptions of overseas regions could have a considerable impact on how their privileges were presented.38 For example, the Newfoundland Company was granted rights in its 1610 charter ‘to inhabit and establish a colony or colonies in the southern and eastern parts of the country and isle or islands commonly called Newfound Land’. These lands included the coastal region most familiar to English fishermen from their voyages to the region, and described as ‘destitute and so desolate of inhabitants’. Rather than physical landmarks – the interior of the region had hardly been explored – the Company was given dominion over the coast within Trinity Bay and the Bay of Placentia ‘together with the seas and islands lying within ten leagues of any part of the sea coast’. Indeed, the purpose of the colony was also described as maritime in nature and was intended ‘to secure and make safe the said trade of fishing’ in the region.39 Here, in the colonially focused Newfoundland Company, in spite of it making territorial claims in North America, we find corporation once again understood and conceived of within a maritime perspective of international commerce and empire.40
Through their charters and activities, England’s early modern trading companies were influenced by the maritime structure of their members’ interactions with the world.\(^41\) In turn, by presenting themselves as maritime organizations, highlighting their unique experience of trading ‘beyond the seas’ to justify privileges that maintained their corporate organization, English merchants were also tying themselves to the idea that they were benefiting the commonwealth as supporters of not only overseas trade but also shipping, the sailing community, and the navy. In order to undertake their trades, it was important for merchants, and the companies that represented them, to have access to the resources necessary for their maritime activities. The scale of these activities can be seen, for example, in a 1609 list compiled by Trinity House (Table 19.1) that detailed how mercantile activities employed thousands of mariners and hundreds of ships.\(^42\) Not surprisingly, the merchants who used these vessels and relied on this labour understood shipping as an essential part of their own livelihoods and dedicated considerable time to ensuring their future supply of shipping would not be hindered. Indeed, it was through these organizations, that English merchants were able to spread the cost of shipping, reducing costs for protection, transportation, and aggression across activities ranging from fishing in the North Atlantic to trading in Japan.\(^43\) Through these activities, England’s trading companies were not only using the sea as a means of carrying goods and connecting distant markets, they were changing the nature of English experiences and engagements with maritime regions across the world.

One of the strengths of trading corporations, and of less formalized partnerships, was the ability to pool resources to fund longer voyages, hire more mariners, and acquire specialist shipping suitable for maritime conditions across the world.\(^45\) Requirements for merchant shipping ranged from smaller 5-ton to 100-ton vessels that plied routes across the Channel and to Spain and Portugal, to larger, ocean-going ships of 200 tons or above that were suitable for activities in the contested spaces of the Mediterranean, Caribbean, and wider Atlantic world. For voyages to Asia, the EIC

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**Table 19.1 Trinity House’s list of current English shipping overseas, 1609**\(^44\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Number of ships</th>
<th>Number of mariners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>East Indies</td>
<td>4 great ships</td>
<td>‘many mariners’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Mediterranean</td>
<td>50 great ships</td>
<td>2,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bordeaux</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caen, Normandy, Brittany</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany, Hamburg, Stade</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baltic</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muscovy</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Africa</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Countries</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Sea</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>700</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
required larger ships still, often specially made to meet the challenges of trans-oceanic navigation, that ranged upwards toward the 1,400-ton *Trades Increase*. Trading companies, as well as independent merchants, were making ever-greater demands on England’s naval supplies as well as on international markets to provide them with essential materials.

In order to meet these demands, trading companies were also responsible as key suppliers for vital materials for shipbuilding like timber, tar, pitch, and hemp. Traders to the Baltic, Scandinavia, and Muscovy, cooperating under the auspices of the Muscovy Company from 1555 and Eastland Company from 1579, obtained these items in exchange for woollen cloth, animal skins, lead, tin, cotton, coal, leather, ordinance, and saffron. Private traders too, such as a group of merchants from Newcastle who in 1622 obtained royal support to send their own ships to the Baltic independently of the Eastland Company, were attracted to the region by the high demand for shipping supplies in England. This same demand was also encouraging for proponents of colonial activities across the Atlantic world – in Ireland, Virginia, and New England – where shipbuilding materials were believed to be in plentiful supply. English colonies in these regions were tied to the sea, both as a means of transport and communication with the metropole, but also as an important source of economic activity. Detailed reports regarding the suitability of Virginia for colonization, for example, were clear in suggesting the plantation would ‘furnish and provide this Kingdom with all such necessities’ required for shipbuilding. One author, Robert Johnson, paid particular attention to the viability of the new colony as a source of shipbuilding supplies, suggesting that those available in Virginia ‘can hardly now be obtained from any other part of the world’. He was adamant that these supplies would ‘yield gold or silver in any our bordering nations’ and that Dutch and English shipbuilders were spending ‘about three hundred thousand pounds sterling every year’ on similar products. Not only would Virginian timber meet domestic needs, it would be bountiful enough to export to ‘Hamburg, Holland, or other places’ for ‘fifty per cent better cheap than from Prussia or Polonia, from whence they are only now to be had’. From Johnson’s perspective, the North American colony would not only help supply merchants with much needed shipping, but also contribute to a redrawing of the international landscape for naval supplies.

In addition to supplying commodities necessary for ship building, trading corporations also sought to increase the supply of fully built and equipped ships, or, at the very least, the facilities for repairing vessels. The most prominent actor in this area was the EIC, whose reliance on independent shipbuilders was quickly deemed inappropriate. By 1603, the decision had been made that the Company should develop its own shipbuilding facilities. The docks at Blackwall stemmed from the Company’s decision to launch a single large ship in 1607, expanding throughout the 1610s and 1620s and becoming a vast complex with a huge workforce that had constructed over 70 ships by 1640 (see Table 19.2). Later, with the decline of English trading companies in the North Atlantic as major commercial enterprises, private traders in England as well as international competitors, especially the Dutch, stepped in to provide shipping for carrying goods back and forth between developing English colonies and Europe.
Under the auspices of merchants and corporations, England’s stock of shipping increased in the early modern period, although it struggled to keep pace with its closest competitors. Viewed through the lens of merchants and trading companies, the challenges of naval supply in early modern England reveal an integrated perspective of trade and colonization. Whether considering the use of Virginian timber for shipbuilding that might have carried goods to markets as varied as the Moluccas or Muscovy, or the use of hemp from Poland to rig ships that travelled to Guinea or Greenland, the connectedness of early modern trade and empire becomes clear. Furthermore, this connectivity of maritime supply and maritime trade serves to highlight the maritime qualities of early modern trading companies and their merchant members.

‘The rule of the sea’

In addition to providing companies with the means to transport goods and people across the world, the maritime environment also enabled corporate actors a space to operate within that was beyond the reach of sovereign states. In the second part of this chapter, two examples where English corporations utilized their position as oceanic entities are examined: the Muscovy Company’s ‘occupation’ of the North Atlantic and the EIC’s application of naval power during commercial and diplomatic engagements with the Ottoman, Mughal, and Safavid empires. In each case, trading companies can be understood as entities operating within an environment where English conceptions of empire were developing rapidly, in terms of using discovery and access to claim authority in distant maritime regions, and as challenges to the limits of sovereignty held by the English state, foreign powers, and corporate bodies.

In the case of the Muscovy Company, the sea was understood, or at least presented, by the Company as a territory that could be claimed and controlled like any other. Having sent ships across the northern Atlantic region since the inception of the Company in 1555, the merchants who led the corporation saw no reason why exploration, trade, colonization, and fishing were not all perfectly acceptable avenues
English trading companies and the sea

for a trading company to seek profit. The sea was, after all, a domain that was integral to what it meant to be a merchant and the privileges of the organization. In the 1610s, the Company sought to supplement their struggling trade into Russia – a region wracked by political disturbances and war – by expanding its whaling activities in the North Atlantic. In 1612, the Muscovy Company was reported to have found 700 whales in the northern seas, killing 17 and returning to England with a rich stock.62 The next year, the Company had elected to defend the Greenland fisheries by force from Dutch, French, and Spanish ships.63 In 1615, the trading company’s fleet numbered 14 ships and was deployed aggressively in the region – three were sunk during encounters with the Dutch.64 In 1617, the Company ‘furnished sixteen good ships in warlike manner well provided’ and ‘at their own charge maintain his majesty’s right against the French, Spaniards, Hollanders and all other nations whatsoever’.65 The decision to use military force to occupy the northern Atlantic fisheries was a risky move on the part of the trading company, both in terms of the great charge of maintaining warships in the region and the attempt to claim the legal right to impose their rule over the seas in the face of English and international competition.

To maintain their profitable activities in the region and justify this new militarization of their fleet, the Company sought to establish legal claims to monopolize control of the region’s rich fisheries and was willing to invest in its own, heavily armed navy to drive off English and Dutch competitors. The Company presented an argument, described in detail by Sir Julius Caesar, which rested on the principle that they held a territorial claim over both lands and seas that employees of the Company had discovered. They maintained that fishing and whaling around Greenland had been ‘first begun and continued by the singular industry and charge of the Company of Muscovy Merchants of London’.66 Specifically, the Company highlighted how members had ‘endeavoured to discover the unknown part of those northern seas and by sending forth of ships and pinnaces from year to year’, and had travelled to ‘the east and west coast of Nova Zembla’. They also described how members had ‘at other times run along the coast of Groenland, discovered Cherry Island, and the part north and north-west from the Cape of Norway’. Through these voyages, the Company argued, ‘by their incessant industry, labour and travail, and a continual freighting through those seas, at their expensive charge’ they had ‘discovered a land called Greenland, where finding great plenty of whales they applied themselves to the fishing of the whale’.67 From the Company’s perspective, funding voyages of exploration and maintaining trade with lands across the North Atlantic was enough to support claims over both lands and seas frequented by its ships.

On the other side of the world, in the far warmer climes of the Indian Ocean, Red Sea, and Persian Gulf, the merchants of the EIC were similarly coming to terms with the potential diplomatic and commercial implications of their entry into these regions’ maritime ecosystems.68 Although the EIC’s ships were larger and more heavily armed than the ones used by English merchants trading to European ports or even in the Atlantic and Mediterranean, their main purpose was to transport goods safely alongside the factors who would sell them.69 That being said, the potential military application of the Company’s vessels was recognized by the corporation and, perhaps more importantly, by Mughal, Ottoman, and Safavid actors in Asia. While the
Muscovy Company sought to use its naval forces as a means of laying claim to vast swathes of oceanic territory, the EIC understood its maritime strength as a means of more effectively competing with other Europeans to gain access to the rich maritime trade of the region’s powerful states. Indeed, it was as a powerful maritime institution that the EIC was able to present itself as a potential partner, or at least important resource, to local rulers.70

The EIC’s relations with the Ottoman Empire in the Red Sea did not get off to a good start. In spite of long-standing English engagement with the empire’s Mediterranean ports, which many of its investors and employees had experienced personally through the Levant Company, the decision was taken to attack ships carrying Portuguese passes and block entry to the Red Sea to all shipping. By seizing control of this maritime space, the English Company sought to undermine Portuguese trade in the region, but the effort raised tensions between the corporation and the Ottoman and Mughal empires, whose subjects’ ships bore the brunt of the damage. Retaliation was swift, as the Ottoman Aga in Mocha began seizing English goods at the Red Sea port. In an attempt to obtain their release, the EIC’s commander, Thomas Middleton, sought to use a display of naval power to obtain their release – the Aga was unimpressed. The Ottoman administrator pointed out that while the Company ‘had the rule of the sea, so likewise he had the government of the land’.71 In spite of English attempts to impose themselves as rulers of the sea as a means of undermining perceived Portuguese dominance of the region’s trade, the necessity of maintaining positive commercial relations with occupants of its coastlines meant such efforts were far from effective. Indeed, it was by passing beyond the seas, in the manner of a merchant, that the EIC could be most effective in cementing its commercial position and even developing schemes to work with local rulers to undermine Portuguese competition in the region.

The EIC’s precarious position as a maritime, mercantile organization also influenced relations with the Mughal government in northern India.72 In 1612, the EIC sought to re-establish and advance English trade at Surat, a growing port and commercial centre, by obtaining permission to establish a permanent English factory in the town. From the Mughal perspective, the English merchants represented a maritime community that could supplement their income from trade in the region, but also one that was strictly restricted – in terms of its reach and authority – to the waters beyond the state’s coastline. For example, the Mughal administrator in Debull rejected Portuguese pleas to refuse access to English shipping on the basis that both the Portuguese and English dealt with shipping abroad and should thus be treated the same.73 In seeking to dominate oceanic trading from Surat, the EIC was buoyed by news that Mughal relations with the Portuguese, who the English understood to be their main competitors, were in rapid decline.

Amid English negotiations with the Mughal state, the importance of naval power as a means of demonstrating the value of the EIC was highlighted during a major encounter between the Company’s and the Portuguese fleets. On 25 November, the merchants Thomas Aldworth, William Biddulph, and Nicholas Withington received news in Surat that there were ‘4 galleons ready to depart from Goa on purpose to take or to fire our ships’. The rumour proved true, and five days later the ‘galleons with
6 frigates to each of them towing, came near our ships, who also weighed anchor, and met them in sight of us and many other people standing on the shore to look at them. The episode proved fortuitous for the EIC, and in the ensuing conflict the Company’s fleet ran ‘three of their four ships on ground on the sands thwart of the Bar of Surat’, in sight of Mughal dignitaries and the local population. By demonstrating their naval superiority over the Portuguese, the English positioned themselves as traders not only capable of increasing trading profits but also as a possible counterbalance to Portuguese naval strength.

In January 1613, Thomas Kerridge, a merchant who had spent time at the Mughal court, informed the EIC that ‘the Governor of Ahmadabad came to Surat to buy of our commodities for the king, with order that the English should be used with all kindness and permitted to trade in any nature they should require’. This included the right to settle factories. This order was confirmed shortly later in a firman ‘written directly to the English in the Persian tongue’. Kerridge believed that this agreement, as well as further concession at the port of Dabull, were a direct consequence of the English naval victory the previous year and noted how ‘Portuguese power is decreased and they disesteemed since their fight with our ships’. In the future, Kerridge suggested, local support would only increase as English naval force and trade would ‘bring them like profit’ and ‘doubtless they would expel the Portuguese’ once the EIC had proved themselves competent long-term partners. The EIC’s naval strength, as this episode suggests, was not a suitable means of imposing the English merchant’s demands on rulers in the Indian Ocean world, but it was a viable means of demonstrating the Company’s suitability as a maritime partner of the major political and economic powers in the region.

Shifting to the Persian Gulf, the EIC’s engagement with the Safavid state rested, in part, on the perceived strength of the English traders as a maritime power. Throughout the 1610s, the EIC had sent numerous merchants into the region, establishing a successful but relatively small commercial presence. This limited presence expanded quickly and dramatically in 1622 when an agreement was made between the EIC and Persia to launch an attack on the Portuguese-held town of Ormuz. Reports reached the English in 1621 regarding Portuguese efforts to restrict English access to the Persian Gulf as part of a broader strategy ‘for the rooting out of the English out of India’. In turn, the EIC ordered its own fleet to engage with Portuguese ships that had been harassing trade in the Indian Ocean. Proposed as a means of dispersing the Portuguese fleet and re-establishing commercial links into the Persian Gulf, the commanders of the fleet re-evaluated after receiving news that ‘the Persian had lain siege [to a Portuguese fortress at Ormuz] unto some seven or eight months, and lost some eight or nine thousand men in siege of it’. Whereas previously the EIC had been suppliants with little to offer for greater commercial access, the commanders reported that now their Persian counterpart ‘required our aid in these wars’ and recognized how the Company’s naval strength could shift the balance of power in the conflict. The Persian commander reminded the English that the diplomatic landscape had shifted, ‘telling us it was our enemy as well as his’ and offered ‘great privileges for the future good of our Masters’. Quickly, an agreement was reached for ‘the castle of Ormuz to be delivered to the possession of the English’ and the English offered naval
support to the Persian forces who soon gained possession of the town. Although the agreement with Persia regarding shared custody of Ormuz soon fell apart, this episode once again suggests how trading companies could utilize their capacities for maritime violence during negotiations for trading privileges. It was through their relationship to the sea, where institutional capacities enabled merchants to command forces normally reserved for sovereign states, that trading companies undertook activities that blurred the lines between commercial activity and imperial practice.

Conclusion

Whether the Muscovy Company’s or the EIC’s command of powerful naval forces, or the Levant Company’s or Eastland Company’s ability to impose regulations on merchants overseas, English trading companies benefitted greatly from their corporate privileges. Through this means, these corporations came to dominate large parts of England’s maritime commerce, especially for the longest distance trades to Russia, the Mediterranean, and Asia. In doing so, these organizations reinforced connections between their members and the sea, using maritime travel as a means of justifying controls on who could undertake specific trades, where they were allowed to travel, and even how they were expected to act once there. Proponents of the corporate model justified this by highlighting the ways that the delegation of powers to these organizations benefitted the English state and commonwealth – through increasing trade, ensuring good behaviour of merchants overseas, undertaking diplomatic activities, or boosting England’s naval supply.

Corporations did not have it all their own way. In 1615, Robert Kayll’s *The Trades Increase* laid out in detail how he believed such companies were contributing to a dangerous decline in the stock of ships and mariners in England. Fuelled by the news that the EIC had recently lost a 1,100-ton ship, the *Trades Increase*, during a voyage to Asia, Kayll argued that in spite of building more great ships that any other organization, these were either away in Asia or laid up at the docks in London. Furthermore, building these ships had led to ‘our woods extraordinarily cut down, in regard of the greatness of the shipping, which does as it were devour our timber’, and consequent difficulties for further shipbuilding. The trade had decimated the maritime community as well – Kayll estimated 2,000 mariners had died on voyages to Asia. In order ‘to redeem us out of this disaster’ and ‘repair our navy, breed sea men abundantly, enrich the subject, advance the King’s custom, and assure the kingdom’, the author proposed a simple solution: disband the EIC and invest England’s wealth, manpower, and shipping in fishing. Kayll’s attack, although ultimately fruitless, highlighted many of the ways England’s trading companies’ maritime identity and focus could be a double-edged sword. By stressing their separation from the English domestic environment, placing the sea as a border between themselves and the normal activities of citizens, trading companies could be undermined. In the second half of the seventeenth century, as the English state came to stake an ever-greater claim over the activities of Englishmen overseas and sought to regain delegated maritime powers and strength, trading companies began to lose many of the bargaining chips that had allowed them, for so long, to operate in the maritime spaces that merchants had sought to claim as their own.
Notes

1 Company of the Merchant Adventurers of York Archive [CMAY], Acts and Ordinances of Eastland Merchants, f. iii. Requirements for time spent overseas was reduced to two years in 1617. CMAY, Acts and Ordinances of Eastland Merchants, f. 5–7, 18 March 1617.

2 CMAY, 1/5/3/5/1. Letter from Thomas Pullson and Thomas Russell to the Mayor and Aldermen of the City of York, 2 September 1579.


12 The various ways merchants navigated these environments during this period are explored in S. Chaudhury and M. Morineau (eds), Merchants, Companies and Trade: Europe and Asia in the Early Modern Era, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.


14 Connections across England’s maritime experiences have started to receive more attention from historians. For example, H.V. Bowen, E. Mancke, and J. G. Reid (eds), Britain’s Oceanic...
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18 Pettigrew and Veevers, *The Corporation as a Protagonist*, pp. 7–19.


30 For an analysis of how companies undertook the governance of employees, see E. J. Smith, ‘Governance’, in W. Pettigrew and D. Veevers (eds), *Corporation as a Protagonist*, pp. 164–82.

32. The EIC certainly obtained the largest privileges geographically (everything reached by sea between the Cape of Good Hope and the Straits of Magellan) but other companies were granted much greater control over overseas territories. In America, it was typical for a company to receive a grant that covered a certain stretch of coast that stretched inward indefinitely, essentially as far as the Pacific coast of North America.

33. These details are taken from a copy of the charter obtained by Bristol's Merchant Ventures, who felt threatened by the Levant Company's increased powers. Bristol Archives, SMV/6/1/5/6, f. 6. Levant Company Charter, 1601.

34. TNA, SP 14/72, f. 209. Letter from John Chamberlain to Dudley Carleton, 29 April 1613.


36. The EIC was encouraged, in particular, by rumours that Abbas I was seeking to make a partnership with a European maritime power to export silk and circumnavigate the traditional route through the Ottoman Empire. BL, IOR/E/3/5, f. 10. Letter from Edward Connock to the East India Company, 2 April 1617. The EIC was similarly well positioned to counter the threat of interlopers, at least in the early decades of the seventeenth century. The greater threat to their monopoly came from company employees who sought to trade privately in contravention of the corporations' laws and regulations. See E. Erikson, *Between Monopoly and Free Trade: The English East India Company*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014.


40. However, it is worth noting that French firms (not trading companies in the traditional sense but large family businesses such as the Gainguers') were employing shipping, deploying people, and exchanging commodities on a scale that provided considerable competition to their English counterparts. See, J. F. Bosher, ‘The Gainguer Clan in the Seventeenth-Century Canada Trade’, in O. U. Janzen (ed.), *Merchant Organisation and Maritime Trade in the North Atlantic, 1660–1815*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998, pp. 15–51.


42. BL, Lansdowne MS 142, f. 304. The placement of English shipping, 1609.


44. BL, Lansdowne Ms 142, f. 304. The placement of English shipping, 1609. The details of shipping for coastal trade have been removed from this table.

45. This contributed to reducing transaction costs for international trade, see D. North, ‘Institutions, Transaction Costs, and the Rise of Merchant Empires’, in J. D. Tracy (ed.), *Political Economy*, pp. 22–40. The EIC’s charter, for example, justified the organization’s joint-stock model in part as a means of increasing England’s shipping. BL, IOR/A/2, ‘Charter for the East India Company, 1600’.

47 A similar trend was apparent in the United Provinces, where the Dutch East India Company was developing its naval capacity at a pace that far outstripped its English counterparts. By 1625, it employed around 3,200 people on its ships. J. de Vries and A. Van der Woude, The First Modern Economy: Success, Failure, and Perseverance of the Dutch Economy, 1500–1815, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 462.


49 Kent History and Library Centre [KHLC], U269/1/OE239a, m. 5682. Petition from the Eastland Company, 1622.


54 H. Stevens (ed.), Dawn of British Trade to the East Indies: As Recorded in the Court Minutes of the East India Company, 1599–1603, London: Henry Stevens and Son, 1886, pp. 6, 8, 27, 92.

55 BL, IOR/B/2, 24 August 1607; IOR/B/5, 29 April 1614; IOR/B/6, 30 July 1619; IOR/B/8, 19 September 1621; IOR/B/9, 2 September 1624 and 6 November 1624. Yet, in spite of these efforts, the EIC declined as a producer or employer of maritime resource. By comparison, between 1600 and 1635 the Dutch maritime labour market increased in size, almost doubling the number of people employed on Dutch ships from around 30,000 to close to 60,000 mariners. Much of this increase was fuelled by the massive growth of the VOC’s operations in Asia that went from employing fewer than 5,000 mariners in 1607 to around 17,000 in 1635. The Dutch West India Company (WIC) similarly drew on the international labour market to employ around 14,000 men during the company’s most active period. See J. van Lottum and J. Lucassen, ‘Six Cross-Sections of the Dutch Maritime Labour Market: A Preliminary Reconstruction and its Implications (1610–1850)’, in R. Gorski (ed.), Maritime Labour: Contributions to the History of Work at Sea, 1500–2000, Amsterdam: Aksant, 2007, pp. 27, 31. Indeed, the EIC’s shipping was modest in comparison to that of other merchants operating in the region. By around 1600, the Chinese Yüehkang trading network was serving all the major ports of southern China through the employment of almost 200 junks, which carried goods from across maritime Asia. See T. Tungho, ‘Chinese Overseas Trade in the late Ming Period’, in Proceedings, International Association of Historians of Asia, Second Biennial Conference, Taipei: Taiwan Provincial Museum, 1962, pp. 429–57. In just one example from this region, the Chinese ‘pirate’ and ‘sea lord’ Zheng Zhihong would come to command a fleet of hundreds of ships that was capable of defeating both Asian and European fleets in the 1630s. See D. D. Ho, ‘The Burning Shore: Fujian and the Coastal Depopulation, 1661–1683’, in T. Andrade and X. Hang (eds), Sea Rovers, Silver, and Samurai: Maritime East Asia in Global History, 1550–1700, Honolulu: Hawai‘i University Press, 2016, pp. 262–4.

56 See, for example, V. Enthoven and W. Klooster, ‘The Rise and Fall of the Virginia-Dutch Connection in the Seventeenth Century’, in D. Bradburn and J. Coombes (eds),
Early Modern Virginia: Reconsidering the Old Dominion, Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2011.

57 Data from Chaudhuri, English East India Company, pp. 232–3.


59 This separation has been a long-standing trend in the history of Britain’s empire, for example, K. R. Andrews, Trade, Plunder and Settlement: Maritime Enterprise and the Genesis of the British Empire, 1480–1630, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.


61 The Muscovy Company, like other English corporations, made these claims in an international legal context that was keenly debating the efficacy of ‘free’ or ‘closed’ maritime spaces. See, for example, M. Brito Viera, ‘Mare Liberum vs. Mare Clausum: Grotius, Freitas, and Selden’s Debate on Dominion over the Seas’, Journal of the History of Ideas 64/3, 2003, pp. 361–77.

62 TNA, SP 14/70, f. 49. Letter from the Earl of Northampton to James I, 2 August 1612.

63 TNA, SP 14/74, f. 171. Letter from John Chamberlain to Dudley Carleton, 27 October 1613.


65 BL, Lansdowne MS 142, f. 172. Sir Julius Caesar’s answer to the complaint of the Low Countries touching the fishing of whales upon the coast of Greenland, 13 January 1614. The Muscovy Company’s claim was presented in detail, see TNA, SP 14/76, f. 100a. The Muscovy Company’s True Declaration of the Discovery of the Many Lands, Islands, Seas, Ports, Havens & Creeks lying in the North-west, North, and North-east of the World, 28 March 1614.


67 The EIC was part of a process of interaction by European trading companies that made a substantial impact on local, regional, and international markets in Asia. See N. Steensgaard, The Asian Trade Revolution of the Seventeenth Century: The East India Companies and the Decline of the Caravan Trade, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1974.

68 From an international perspective, the English presence was still minor. In addition to their comparatively small production of maritime resources detailed above, between the East India and Levant companies, English merchants exported around half a million rixdollars to Asia in 1650, while the VOC carried almost twice as much bullion into these markets. See L. Blussé, ‘No Boats to China: The Dutch East India Company and the Changing Pattern of the China Sea Trade, 1635–1690’, Modern Asian Studies 30/1, 1996, p. 53. As Jaap Bruijn has put it, ‘the Dutch East India Company (VOC) maintained a vast network of shipping connections’ that transported goods back and forth between Europe and Asia as well as acting as a carrier within the inter-Asian trade. Between 1602 and 1795, the company oversaw 4,730 outbound and 3,358 homeward voyages. See J. R. Bruijn, ‘Between Batavia and the Cape: Shipping Patterns of the Dutch East India Company’, Journal of Southeast Asian Studies 11/2, 1980, p. 251.


70 BL, IOR/E/3/1, Letter from Lawrence Fernell and John Williams to Sir Henry Middleton, 16 May 1611.

71 For an examination of the Mughal response to increasing maritime trade, see J. Lally, ‘Maritime Expansion and (De)globalisation? An Examination of the Land and Sea Trade in Seventeenth-century Mughal India’, in M. Fusaro and A. Polónia (eds), Maritime History as Global History, pp. 73–94.


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76 The *firman* was an agreement granted by the Persian Shah that would last until his death that permitted English trade into Persian ports. See P. Good, ‘The East India Company’s *Farmān*,’ 1622–1747’, *Iranian Studies* 64/1–2, 2019, pp. 181–97.
77 BL, IOR/E/3/1, f. 176. Letter from Thomas Kerridge to the East India Company, January 1613.

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