The Routledge Companion to Marine and Maritime Worlds, 1400–1800

Claire Jowitt, Craig Lambert, Steve Mentz

Why the medieval sea mattered

Publication details

Susan Rose
Published online on: 21 May 2020

How to cite: Susan Rose. 21 May 2020, Why the medieval sea mattered from: The Routledge Companion to Marine and Maritime Worlds, 1400–1800 Routledge
Accessed on: 05 Oct 2023
2

Why the medieval sea mattered

Susan Rose

In a poem written around 1430, *The Libelle of Englyshe Polycye*, the poet exhorts the rulers of England to keep the sea (the usual medieval phrase for defence at sea) both for the wealth brought by trade and for the security of the realm and people. The writer had no doubts that the sea mattered and that a maritime policy was essential for the well-being of the realm:

Here beginneth the Prologue of the processe of the Libelle of Englyshe polycye, exhortynge alle Englande to kepe the see enviroun and namelye the narowe see, shewynge whate profete commeth thereof and also whate worshype and salvacione to Englande and to alle Englyshe menne.¹

Was this perception widely accepted by both the rulers and people of England? Were trade and defence the primary areas where in fact the sea mattered? Did other realms share these concerns?

The constraints of geography have an important influence on perceptions of the sea. As Norbert Ohler pointed out in *The Medieval Traveller*, Europe includes far more islands and peninsulas than any other continent; this means that the average distance from the sea of any European location is 212 miles. In Asia, it is 469 miles and in Africa 419 miles.² In England, no place is further from the sea than around 71–2 miles depending on how the measurement is calculated. It thus seems best to attempt to understand the importance of the sea to states and rulers in the medieval period in relation to Europe rather than worldwide. Comparing the attitudes of states and rulers bordering the Mediterranean with those of states bordering northern waters, the Channel, the North Sea, and the eastern Atlantic, will also highlight any differences between policies and attitudes in contrasting locations. The wealth of material available makes it fruitful to study the views of English kings and their people on this matter, and to contrast them with those of the Republic of Venice, a state in which the ruling classes would have (in all probability) thoroughly approved of the ideas expressed in the *Libelle*. The Venetian Republic was established in the last days of
the Roman Empire on low-lying islands in the lagoon at the head of the Adriatic as a refuge from the Lombards and other Germanic invaders. This state owed its very existence to the security provided by its surrounding waters. From these early beginnings, it became a prominent merchant city and centre of maritime expertise with interests reaching from the Sea of Azov to the Low Countries.\(^3\)

**England’s rulers and the sea**

Since at least the sixteenth century, the English have considered themselves a maritime people dwelling on an island: the classic expression of this island identity is perhaps that in John of Gaunt’s speech in Shakespeare’s *Richard II*:

\[
\text{[...]} \text{This sceptred isle} \\
\text{This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars;} \\
\text{This fortress built by nature for herself} \\
\text{Against infection and the hand of war;} \\
\text{This happy breed of men, this little world;} \\
\text{This precious stone set in the silver sea,} \\
\text{Which serves it in the office of a wall} \\
\text{Or as a moat defensive to a house} \\
\text{Against the envy of less happier lands.}^{4}
\]

In the popular mind, the supreme English hero is Horatio Nelson, dying in the moment of victory as battle raged on his vessel HMS *Victory*. Sea battles dominate the narrative in most English wars from the late sixteenth until the twentieth century. At no point before the early seventeenth century, however, was England truly an island nation. The land frontier with Scotland ran through frequently disputed territory and was the scene of much violence. The Marches between England and Wales divided lands fully under the sway of the English Crown from areas where English rule was weak and often disputed. As we shall see, English rulers before the sixteenth century had a much more complex relationship with the sea and its role in the successful defence of the realm and the establishment of English prosperity than later monarchs in the heyday of the expansion of the power and the wealth of Great Britain.

At the beginning of the eleventh century, England was ruled as part of a northern empire centred on the North Sea and Baltic. Cnut seized the Crown of England in 1016, and added those of Denmark in 1018 and Norway, including the southernmost counties of Sweden, in 1028. This was the apogee of the power of the Danes or Vikings whose first raid into English territory was that on Portland in 789, followed by the sack of the monastery on Lindisfarne in 793. For more than 200 years afterwards, England and its various rulers had been confronted with a sea-borne enemy from the north. Coastal raids were followed by invasion, settlement, and the eventual emergence of a new Anglo-Danish society. Rulers like Alfred of Wessex raised their own fleets to defend English lands but with limited success. The sea was a source of fear and danger not a ‘wall’ or a ‘moat’. The events of 1066, the successful invasion of Duke William of Normandy, and the destruction of the Anglo-Saxon monarchy, can
be seen as merely the last elements in this continuum. They make particularly clear the role of the sea in the way things unfolded. Harold Godwinson called out the ship service of his thegns against the threatened Norman attack, but was eventually forced to let the fleet disband after many weeks of patrolling, since the crews were not willing to spend any more time away from their lands. The invasion up the Yorkshire Ouse of his rebel brother Tostig and his ally Harold Hardrada of Norway, who had previously been cruising in the North Sea, was defeated on land at Stamford Bridge outside York. Similarly, the forces of William the Conqueror were unchallenged on their crossing from Saint-Valéry-sur-Somme and won a crushing victory at Hastings. The role of the sea as a ‘moat’ was limited at this early period by the enormous difficulties in finding, intercepting, and fighting an invasion fleet at sea. In effect, it was the highway by which enemies made their approach.5

A similar view that travel over the seas for trade was often a highly risky endeavour seems to emerge from the relatively scant evidence surviving from the same period. A manuscript written in the early eleventh century claims that a merchant, who was rich enough to have crossed the open sea three times at his own expense, was entitled to the status of thegn.6 Clearly, this was not a common achievement. Overseas trade was largely focused on the luxuries listed in the Colloquies of Aelfric, ‘silk, precious gems and gold, wine and oil […] sulphur glass and the like’. In the Colloquies, the dangers are also described: the merchant explains,

I go on board a ship with my wares and go overseas […] And I buy valuable goods […] and bring them you with great danger on the sea and I suffer shipwreck when all my goods are jettisoned and I scarcely avoid death.7

The implication is of rare visits to the fairs across the Channel, rather than wider more sustained trade in necessities or staples.

In relation to defence, the period after the conquest shows only a gradual shift in the priorities of the Crown. Despite the fact that there is a popular modern belief that, after 1066, England was seldom threatened by invasions from overseas until the time of Napoleon, for contemporaries the fear of foreign invaders remained and grew after the loss of most of the Norman possessions of the kings of England in the early thirteenth century. At the end of the reign of King John, Louis the Dauphin led an initially very successful incursion into England. Highly destructive French raids on coastal towns from Bristol to Orwell occurred in the fourteenth century, especially in the last years of Edward III’s reign. Fears of invasion were especially strong in 1385–6 when the French assembled a fleet of between 900 and 1,200 ships at Sluys manned by between 50,000 and 60,000 mariners and soldiers.8 England undoubtedly at times felt itself to be vulnerable to attacks from sea-born enemies against whom defence was difficult.

Warfare, whether against the Welsh princes, the Scots, or the French, was also an increasingly important aspect of English royal policy from the twelfth century onwards. It always had a maritime element. Edward I’s castles in Wales were intentionally placed on estuaries or inlets on the coast, such as at Conway or Harlech, so that they could be easily supplied by water, usually from either Bristol or Irish ports. English armies marching into Scottish territory likewise needed to maintain contact with the south,
most easily done by sea, to obtain food, arms, and other necessities. Vessels were arrested by the Crown for all Edward’s Scottish campaigns, since bringing supplies overland was both dangerous and difficult due to the nature of the terrain. Berwick was frequently fought over because it was a safe harbour on the somewhat treacherous east coast. On the west coast, ships from as far away as the Cinque Ports were used to support royal expeditions. For example, in 1300 vessels from these towns conveyed siege engines to Caerlaverock castle on the Solway Firth, which was only accessible by water for weapons of this nature. None of Edward’s campaigns against the Welsh or the Scots could have gone forward without the significant logistical support of ships called up to the service of the Crown. English kings also needed this support to an even greater extent when contemplating or undertaking any military action in France whether in defence of English territory, particularly in Gascony and other royal lands in southwest France, or when invading the lands of the French king. Well over a hundred expeditions across the Channel, whether to northern France or on the longer route to Bordeaux and its environs, were mounted by the English Crown from the late thirteenth century to the mid-fifteenth century. Men, arms, food, and other supplies were conveyed in this way, as well as grain for the population of the Duchy of Aquitaine. Major expeditions like that prior to the battle of Crécy in 1346 involved large numbers of both ships and men. For the Crécy expedition, 747 English ships from 89 ports in England and Wales, 15 from Bayonne, 14 from Flanders, and nine from elsewhere were arrested to serve the Crown. Very nearly 16,000 mariners operated these ships. These figures are based on the accounts of the Treasurer for War and thus are reasonably reliable. The great majority of the ships and mariners involved were trading vessels, and their crews arrested for temporary service to the Crown; only 25 were royal ships.

Battles at sea were relatively uncommon throughout the period; the defeat of a French fleet bringing reinforcements to the Dauphin’s English expedition in 1217 off Dover was exceptional, being fought on the high seas rather than in an estuary or off a port. The news of the victory of the English fleet at the battle of Sluys in 1340 was bruited throughout Europe by the device of placing an image of the victorious Edward III on board his 

**Cog Thomas**
on the obverse of the English gold noble. Edward also circulated his own account of his victory in a letter including the grisly fact that the corpses of 30,000 Frenchmen had been found washed up on the coast of Flanders. At this encounter, and the later one with a Spanish fleet off Winchelsea, the usual collection of merchant ships was stiffened by the presence of small numbers of royal ships. English kings had owned vessels in the past, but Edward III was the first to build up a considerable fleet including a group of ships built at his order with its own administrative system in charge of repairs, victualling, and the payment of crews. Henry V followed Edward’s example. From 1410 onwards, Henry created a squadron of royal ships, which included his four ‘great ships’, designed and built primarily as war ships, the earliest known English examples. The most notable of these was the 

**Grace Dieu**, probably the largest clinker-built vessel ever constructed, which was intended to challenge carracks (large sailing vessels hired by the French Crown from the Genoese) in battle but which was not in service until after the threat posed by these vessels had passed. The remaining royal vessels included carracks captured from the Genoese and a collection of cogs, barges, and balingers, which differed little, if at all, from those
Why the medieval sea mattered

used in trade. It is not fanciful to regard this squadron as an embryonic royal navy. Its further development was halted by changes in the strategic situation in the Channel and the declining power of the monarchy at home – at Henry's death, France and England were notionally a dual monarchy; later in the century, civil war in England dominated affairs – not by any belief that keeping the sea was unnecessary. Sir John Fortescue made one of the strongest contemporary justifications for the expense of a standing royal navy in 1471:

[I]t is necessary […] that the king always keeps some great and mighty vessels for the defeat of an army when any shall be made against him upon the sea. For then it shall be too late to have such vessels made.16

Fortescue's words might well have influenced Henry VIII's adoption of policies usually seen as the origin of the Royal Navy. In his reign, following on from the initiative of Henry VII to recreate a small squadron of royal ships, the Crown built and operated a substantial number of ships and set up the administration necessary to manage them. This is the navy celebrated in the Antony Roll of which the Mary Rose was one of the largest ships.18 The illustrations in the Roll show the large number of gunpowder weapons carried by these ships utilizing the crucial innovation of the gunport. This allowed for the firing of the broadside, the prime ship-killing weapon of the sailing navy. The developments in rig are also shown, with three to four masts the norm. The three sections of the Roll show 56 vessels in all from great ships like the Mary Rose of 700 tons capacity to small 'row barges' of 20 tons.

Medieval English monarchs could not ignore the role of the sea, whether as the route of invaders, or as a moat. The precise understanding of its importance, however, varied as the strategic situation changed. Where did threats originate? What ambitions for expansion did the English monarch have? How secure was the monarch? On another level, there were also practical considerations, which influenced the extent and success of 'sea keeping'. Intelligence about the whereabouts of an enemy fleet was always hard to come by. Even if the collection of an invasion fleet could not be hidden from other seafarers or local people, it was harder for any spy to communicate in time the fact that it had sailed. It is also the case that the round ships, most commonly cogs, which made up the bulk of shipping in English waters by the thirteenth century, lacked a ship-killing weapon. Ships propelled largely by oars were used in northern waters, whether they were the few so-called galleys of Mediterranean design, or the balingers built by English and Breton shipwrights. Ships of this type, however, despite their greater manoeuvrability, were not as seaworthy as cogs in the weather conditions often found in northern waters. They were also more expensive to operate, needing a larger crew and having less cargo space. The boarding actions, which constituted the most common tactic in war at sea at the time, could and did result in the capture of vessels and their cargoes, and the death of mariners. Ships, however, rarely sank in the course of a battle. The most effective method of 'sea keeping' was to send out patrols to deter any enemy from setting sail; if this failed, defence most often became a matter of bitter fighting on shore after the enemy had made landfall. The detailed account of a raid on Poole in 1405 by a combined force of French and Spanish
galleys, commanded by Don Pero Niño, leaves little doubt about the fierceness of the encounters during raids. Casualties were heavy on both sides. Poole itself was destroyed, and the ground was left carpeted with arrows. Not until the second half of the sixteenth century did improvements in ship design and the development of effective gunpowder weapons pave the way for the actions between opposing fleets on the high seas of the seventeenth and later centuries.

There were many petitions in parliament in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries demanding better 'sea keeping' from the Crown. The proceeds of the impost on imported goods known as tonnage and poundage regularly granted by parliament to the Crown in the fifteenth century were always said to be intended for the keeping of the seas. As well as clearly hostile actions by naval forces under state control, the issue of sea keeping also related to the vexed issue of commerce raiding or 'piracy'. The degree to which attacks on commercial shipping was an aspect of the general lawlessness of the sea or a policy encouraged to a greater or lesser extent by rulers, a kind of 'privatised' warfare, is disputed. The interests of traders and mariners could be in conflict with those of the Crown but violence at sea was not simply ignored. There were legal avenues through which compensation for losses could be sought, and schemes to deter marauders. In 1442, the Commons put forward a fully worked out and costed scheme detailing precisely the type and number of ships and men required to keep the seas; the cost came to £4568 6s 8d for a force of eight large ships, eight barges, eight balingers, and four pinnaces crewed by 2,260 men at sea for six months. There was little chance of this scheme being implemented, given the state of royal finances at the time, but its existence and acceptance by the Crown gives an indication of how parliament and the Crown took seriously the need for some sort of maritime defence.

The issue of attacks on merchant ships also illustrates the links between sea-borne trade and defence. England's oversea trade had expanded greatly throughout this period. Initially, exports were dominated by raw wool, although woollen cloth became the most important commodity by the late fourteenth century. Imports included a wide range of goods varying from luxuries such as wine, to necessities for the expanding cloth industry, largely dyestuffs including woad and the fixative, alum. Virtually all goods entering or leaving England came by sea. Some idea of the number of sea-going vessels available in English ports can be gained from the numbers arrested for royal expeditions. In 1322, 284 ships were arrested for the campaign in Scotland manned by 10,000 mariners; it is estimated that 4,065 individual ships took part in royal expeditions between 1322 and 1360. At a difficult time for the Crown in 1442, 94 ships took the Duke of Somerset's expedition to Gascony. These arrests disrupted trade, as merchants bitterly complained, but are a clear indication that England had a flourishing 'merchant marine'. Most vessels, however, were confined to short voyages across the Channel and North Sea. The only longer voyage frequently undertaken by a good number of ships was that to Bordeaux for wine. Voyages to the north, particularly Iceland, and to the east to the Baltic concerned much smaller numbers of ships. Imported foreign goods found a ready market; the cargo lists of vessels docking in Bishop's Lynn (now King's Lynn) coming largely from ports in the Netherlands in 1322–3 reveal a wide range of goods including stockfish, steel,
timber including masts and spars, fur, wax, pitch, resin, mushrooms, onions, and salt.  

Ships docking at Southampton in the fifteenth century, including Venetian galleys and Genoese carracks, carried wine but also iron from Spain, fruit, oil, and assorted luxuries. All these goods were widely distributed whether by smaller coasting or river vessels or by carters overland. For the Crown, however, England’s overseas trade had become a vital source of finance. Customs dues levied at the ports provided the Crown with a liquid and elastic source of income; no other easily collectable and available source of revenue had the same advantages. If the primary duty of a ruler was to protect and defend the realm and, as in the case of England, a major part of that defence depended on the use of maritime resources, then sea-borne trade had particular importance. The customs system provided much of the necessary finance. The ships and mariners engaged in trade were also the great majority of the ships and mariners needed for defence. The writer of the Libelle in many ways put his finger precisely on the principal ways in which the medieval sea mattered to England. Both the profit and the salvation of England were intimately linked to the need to keep the seas; he was even correct in focusing on the narrow sea (the Channel) since this was the route by which the great majority of English trade came, and the one most likely to be followed by any invader. The keeping of the sea was no easy task given the constraints placed on English rulers by technical, financial, and strategic considerations but it was something that could hardly be ignored.

The Republic of Venice: maritime defence and trade

The close bond between the city of Venice and the sea was dramatically symbolized every Ascension Day when the Doge was rowed across the lagoon in his ceremonial barge, the Bucintoro, to San Nicolò on the Lido to wed the Adriatic by casting a golden ring into the water. The Republic was faced with the same imperatives as England – trade and defence – but perhaps to an even greater degree. Trade was the lifeblood of the Republic, and the safety of trade and the security of the people depended on keeping the sea. The policies followed by the rulers of the Serenissima were, however, rather different from those of the English Crown, influenced largely by the different nature of the state itself and its origins. For Venetians, the sea and the waters of the lagoon were their first line of defence. Their earliest role was as boatmen only rarely venturing beyond the lagoon and the rivers leading inland. From around 1000 CE, however, the Venetians began to engage in longer distance trade until, by the later fourteenth century, their galleys and round ships traded in ports along the sea-lanes from Tana on the Sea of Azov to Bruges in the Netherlands. The form of government that developed in the city-state that acted as the base for these traders has been described as ‘aristocratic’. Its aristocrats, however, all had close connections to trade, which was also the source of the livelihood of the majority of the people. This government was, from the beginning, greatly concerned with the waterways, channels, sandbanks, and tides in the lagoon. Especially important were the ‘mouths’ at San Nicolò, Chioggia, and Malamocco which separated the protected waters of the lagoon from the open sea. The Magistrato del Provego established in 1224 dealt with keeping clear channels and canals in the lagoon and within the city. The Guardians
Susan Rose

of the Lidi looked after the ‘mouths’, replaced in c.1407 by the Admiral of the Port, who also dealt with the lighthouses on San Nicolò and at Malamocco, and the highly trained and expert guild of pilots who guided vessels across the lagoon. The whole area of the safe operation of vessels, the responsibilities and rights of the crew, and the equipment needed on different types of ship were also taken into account.31 Two doges, Giacomo Tiepolo in 1199 and Ranieri Zeno in 1255, wrote codes of maritime law that made this explicit.32

As overseas trade became of great importance to the Venetians from the eleventh century, the government of the doges also made strenuous efforts to exert Venetian control over the eastern shores of the Adriatic and to establish trading bases on the all-important route to Constantinople. In 1081, the Venetians supported the Byzantine Empire in its war against the Normans from Sicily by defeating a Norman fleet off Durazzo. The following year, the Golden Bull guaranteed their position in Constantinople as the favoured trading partners of the empire. By the thirteenth century, along the route to the east there were Venetian bases at Zara, Ragusa (Dubrovnik), Modon, and Coron in the Peloponnese, Candia in Crete, and Negroponte on the island of Euboea.33 Analysis of the importance of Corfu to the security of Venice and the profitability of its trade shows the importance of these bases. Venice lost control of the island for much of the thirteenth century. This left its galleys vulnerable to the depredations of Albanian pirates, made it hard to maintain her control of Ragusa, and also made defence against attacks from the Genoese much more difficult both in the 1340s and in the war of Chioggia in 1378–81.34 After the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453, it was plain that they were the main rival of Venice for the dominance of sea routes in the eastern Mediterranean. The loss of Negroponte to the Turks in 1470 was a clear indication of the dangers faced by the Serenissima. These were made plain in 1499, when one of the largest fleets ever assembled by Venice fought the ‘deplorable’ (so-called by Venetian commentators) battle of Zonchio against the Turks. Within a matter of months the Venetians had lost control of Modon and Coron the ‘twin eyes of the republic’, their bases on the Peloponnese, and in 1503 signed a treaty with the Ottomans that led to the loss of control of further cities in this area. The leading statesmen of the Republic were unfortunately at this point, in Lane’s words, ‘thinking more in terms of territory than of sea power’, and the territory was in northern Italy not in the Balkans. Without these bases, Venetian vessels were always vulnerable and their trade open to attack. This apparent turning away from prioritizing the interests of sea-borne trade in favour of closer involvement in the politics of the Italian mainland can be seen as instrumental in the decline of the Serenissima.35

In earlier centuries, however, sea-borne trade had been at the heart of Venetian policy. Lane, describing the way Venetian government, the Signoria, worked, wrote, ‘the planning body for overseas shipping became the council in charge of foreign affairs. It frankly avowed purpose was to help Venetian merchants make profits’.36 This body, the Senate, organized and largely controlled the way in which trade was conducted. Cargo carried by the great galleys was treated somewhat differently from that carried in round ships, which were used for bulk cargoes and were not regulated by the state to the same extent as galleys. These were all built to a standard design in the state shipyard, the Arsenale, from the early years of the fourteenth century. The
Republic also took steps to ensure adequate supplies of suitable timber and hemp. Other state-run facilities included the Tana or ropewalk, and communal ovens to bake the biscotti, which were an important element in the diet of galleymen. The voyages of the galleys were also tightly controlled. Before 1329, many of the galley convoys sailing to the east were treated as war fleets with both the capitano (in charge of the whole enterprise) and the patroni (commanders on individual galleys) employed by the Signoria, although there were also less tightly controlled ‘private’ voyages. The route, stopping places, and handling of the cargo were all decided on by the capitano, on orders from the Signoria for communal fleets. After 1329, the position of patrono on each galley was auctioned to the highest bidder but the voyage itself was still tightly controlled by the state. The registers of the Senate make clear the scores of detailed orders that were sent to the capitano of these fleets. In 1349 in April, for example, the Senate set out how crossbows should be stored on galleys going to Romania (the Byzantine lands); each galley should have 30 good quality crossbows, 15 in the quarters of the merchants and the remainder in the general armoury. Shortly after this direction was issued, all galleys going to Ragusa were ordered to leave immediately (hac nocte), even if undermanned, and to seek further crewmembers if needed at Ragusa.

These registers and other sources make clear that as far as Venice was concerned there was no real distinction between trade and defence when it came to maritime matters. Venice lived by sea-borne trade and thus the defence of the Republic was almost coterminous with the defence of trade. The system of armed galleys running on regular routes to a regular schedule was very successful, in terms of both the prosperity of individuals and the state. It was possible to insure cargoes carried on Venetian galleys as early as the fourteenth century, although some merchants thought this was unnecessary, so secure was transport in these ships. At the end of the sixteenth century, insurance premiums of between 3½ per cent and 4 per cent were usual on the route between Venice and Alexandria or Syria.

The Venetian system of sending out convoys of galleys at known times following known routes could, however, have unfortunate consequences in time of war. In 1264, during the first Genoese-Venetian war, the Genoese admiral Grillo trapped Venetian trading vessels bound for the markets of Romania and Oltremare in the narrows of the Adriatic off Durazzo. The protecting fleet of war galleys had been lured away to the south on the assumption that the Genoese were making for Acre. Grillo was able to capture the entire Venetian fleet with the exception of one large round ship, the Rocafortis, thus depriving the Venetians of an entire year’s trade with their most profitable market. This war, and the conflicts which broke out on four further occasions between 1253 and 1381, all had their origins in the bitter rivalry for the control of sea-borne trade in the Mediterranean between these two maritime city states. These were wars where almost all the fighting took place at sea, consisting either of actions between large fleets of galleys or of the capture of individual trading vessels and their valuable cargoes by sea raiders. The political background to these conflicts might involve the support of land-based allies as was the case in the final conflict in 1378–81, the so-called war of Chioggia, but all were largely defined by events at sea. It can be argued that there was a long history of war at sea in the
Mediterranean; Greeks and Romans had both possessed and used fleets of war galleys. More plausibly, the geography of the region and the pattern of trade in this area in this period, particularly after the success of the First Crusade and the establishment of the states of Oltramare, strongly favoured the use of certain sea routes. Along these routes, there were straits and narrows that provided good opportunities for an ambush of an enemy fleet. Maritime states developed the means and the desire to profit from these routes and were prepared to fight for dominance. Galleys with their large crews and ability to manoeuvre under oars were well suited to the boarding actions usual in these waters as in the Channel. The larger higher sided round ships might be able to flee from an action largely involving galleys but were not so useful in an attack.

While commerce raiding was always prevalent in the Mediterranean, it is also noticeable that the set piece engagements, actions that can rightly be called fleet actions, were much more common in this area than further north. In these engagements, the galley was also the weapon system of choice. They were sufficiently seaworthy to cope with the usual range of weather conditions in this sea. If the weather became very bad, shelter could usually be found in a small nearby port. The large crew served as marines as well as oarsmen. Many would be equipped with crossbows for the initial phase of a boarding action; gunpowder weapons were not prominent before the later sixteenth century. Galleys were also less expensive to build than the large round ships. The Venetian and Genoese fleets fought each other in about 14 actions of this type in around 130 years. The Genoese were also involved in the crushing defeat of the Pisan fleet at Meloria in 1284. It might be argued that in some encounters there was very little actual fighting. In 1266, news reached the Genoese fleet anchored off Trapani in Sicily that the Venetians were only 18 miles away at Messina. The Genoese fleet adopted the classic defence of turning their galleys stern first to the shore and chaining them together. However, the crews were disaffected and had no faith in their commander. As the Venetians came in sight, most of the Genoese crew threw themselves into the sea to escape. The entire squadron of 27 galleys were captured by the Venetians more or less without any attempt at defence, perhaps acting as some slight recompense for the Venetians’ own defeat at Durazzo in 1264. Other engagements, however, were bitterly contested. The encounter in the Bosphorus in February 1352 between the Genoese and a combined Venetian, Greek, and Catalan fleet led to heavy casualties on both sides and continued after dark in very poor weather.

It is clear that during the fourteenth century the design of the galleys used in war changed; a third oarsman was added to each bench thus increasing the speed possible under oars for short distances. The size of the fleets also increased, with between 70 to 100 vessels being deployed on each side. At the Bosphorus, the Genoese commander had 60 vessels at his command while Venice and her allies had 89 vessels in total. At Zonchio in 1499, Antonio Grimani, the Venetian commander, had at his disposal a force of 44 light galleys, 12 great galleys, four very large round ships, a further ten smaller round ships, and a miscellaneous group of 26 other vessels, some 96 in all. Another squadron of light galleys commanded by Andrea Loredano, which arrived as battle commenced, reinforced Grimani’s fleet. The opposing Ottoman forces were rumoured to number as many as 260 ships, including 60 light galleys, 30 small oared
vessels or _fustes_, three great galleys, two very large round ships, 18 smaller round ships and 127 miscellaneous craft. This engagement was unusual in that the main fighting took place between the very large round ships in each fleet and the outcome was decided by two opposing vessels of this type being engulfed in flames and burned to the waterline. Fury was aroused in Venice when reports arrived that their galleys had refused to obey orders and had not carried the attack to the Ottomans.43

It must, however, not be imagined that Venice and Genoa were the only Mediterranean states, before the arrival of the Ottomans, which maintained fleets and were prepared to pursue their objectives largely by war at sea. The Muslim Caliphate newly established in Egypt in the second half of the seventh century mounted two prolonged naval assaults on Constantinople in 673–9 and 717–18. Its forces benefitted from Muslim control of Sicily, Cyprus, and Crete in the ninth and tenth centuries, much as Venice itself benefitted from her similar control of bases in the Adriatic in later years. The activities of corsairs constituted a constant threat to sea-borne trade in the Mediterranean with raiders coming from ports large and small, Christian and Muslim, sometimes acting with at least some sort of sanction from a ruler, sometimes pursuing only personal gain. Genoa pursued an active policy of expanding her trading activities by sea with as much fervour and determination as Venice. She too established trading bases in the eastern Mediterranean, most notably her colony at Constantinople at Pera, across the Golden Horn from the city itself, and at Caffa in the Crimea.44

**Maritime war in the western Mediterranean**

Particularly in the western Mediterranean, rulers were prepared to use war at sea as a very important element in their attempts to extend their domains and conquer other states. This is the case with the rulers of Aragon-Catalonia in the thirteenth century. David Abulafia has questioned whether merchants or monarchs inspired the great success of the kingdom in extending both its territory and its trade in the western Mediterranean, but it was royal policy that seems to have been the defining factor.45 During the reign of James I of Aragon, in 1229–31, Majorca was conquered from Muslim rulers ensuring the consequent rise of both Barcelona and the city of Majorca as important trading cities. The organization of a war fleet had made the conquest itself possible. This experience and the maritime expertise of the Catalans bore further results in the reign of Peter III, James’ son. Peter became embroiled in the struggle for rule over Sicily with Charles of Anjou because Peter’s wife, Constance, was the daughter of the last Hohenstaufen ruler of the island. The Aragonese Crown and Charles were already rivals for dominance of the western Mediterranean. In 1282, the Sicilians rose in rebellion against Charles in favour of Constance and Aragon. The ensuing war of the Sicilian Vespers bought to the fore the reliance of both the Angevins and the Aragonese on naval warfare for pursuing their claims to the right to rule Sicily. Both sides built large fleets of galleys. The accounts for the construction of vessels for Charles at Marseille are the earliest detailed accounts for the construction of these ships and provide much useful technical information.46 The Aragonese fleet was commanded by Roger of Lauria, about whose expertise as a naval commander
remarkable claims have been made, suggesting that he is worthy to rank with both Edward of Woodstock, known as the Black Prince, and Nelson. It is certainly true that he commanded the galleys of the Aragonese Crown during a remarkable series of sea battles between 1283 and 1300. The details of these battles, which vary from chronicle to chronicle, might be uncertain, but some overall conclusions can be drawn. All were fought in sheltered waters near land; the battle of Malta in 1283 was fought inside the Grand Harbour itself, others took place in the Bay of Naples and one off Cape Orlando in Sicily. The battle of Las Hormigas took place off the rocky coast of the Costa Brava not far from Rosas. Lauria’s forces were attacking the supply lines of Philip III of France, who had invaded Aragonese territory in support of his uncle, Charles of Anjou. It seems that Lauria was able to engage the French at first light and successfully capture the majority of the French fleet, the remainder either fleeing or being burned. This was quite a feat in the dim light of dawn or possibly even before sunrise off an inhospitable coast.\(^47\) It is notable that these battles were an important element in a bitter struggle for control of the Kingdom of Sicily. In the fourteenth century, having established itself as a maritime power, Aragon either ruled directly or had great influence in not only Aragon–Catalonia itself, but also in Valencia, the Balearic Islands, Corsica, Sardinia, Sicily, and the Duchy of Athens. This collection of territories allowed its traders to dominate major trade routes; from the late thirteenth century, the sea power of Aragon–Catalonia was effectively used as a means of achieving a rapid extension of the realm and its importance in Southern Europe.

**Conclusion**

This comparison between England and Venice has brought to the fore the ways in which the sea mattered to both states. Other states, particularly on the Mediterranean littoral, had similar attitudes. In the north, after the period of Viking domination, which culminated in the northern empire of Cnut, maritime power and maritime trade were arguably of less concern to the great majority of rulers. We have looked at English attitudes and it is clear that, as might be expected, most trade involved transport by sea, following established short sea routes and showing very little in the way of innovation and experiment until the later fifteenth century. English monarchs were often careful to pay attention to the concerns of the rulers in the major market for English exports, the Netherlands, but paid only intermittent attention to the safety of the passage by sea to these markets. The outcome of Robert Sturmy’s disastrous expedition into the Mediterranean in 1457–8 in which he lost his life when attacked by Genoese ships off Malta, perhaps, did not encourage voyages further afield in search of trade.\(^48\) The mysterious Bristol voyages to ‘Brasil’ in the 1480s clearly had little impact on Crown policy or public opinion.\(^49\) To many people, the chief importance to the Crown of overseas trade was as a ready source of finance in the form of customs duties. The defensive role of the sea was appreciated to some extent, but it was the logistical support to land armies provided by ships that was seen as of most value. The deliberate exploitation of sea power by the Crown was rare and intermittent until more purposeful development becomes evident in the early sixteenth century. The attitudes of other states in the same region were perhaps even less positive. The
Why the medieval sea mattered

fragmented nature of French royal power in much of this period meant that kings did not directly rule much of the Channel coast. This is particularly the case with Brittany, which was home to a strong maritime community but where the ruling duke often followed his own policies, not necessarily in accord with those of his nominal suzerain. Normandy was part of the lands of the English Crown from 1066–1205 and later from 1417–43, as was the Duchy of Aquitaine from 1152 to 1453. Philip IV of France founded a royal shipbuilding yard at Rouen in 1293–5, the *Clos des galées*, which might seem to betoken a sharp change of attitude, but little came of it. This initiative was probably inspired by Louis IX’s building of Aigues Mortes, on the small portion of the Mediterranean coastline in control of the French Crown at this time, as a base for war galleys and for the supply of his crusade in 1248. The galleys built at Rouen seem to have followed the design of Mediterranean ships like those built by Philip’s cousin Charles of Anjou and were not suited to conditions in northern waters. The French monarchy largely owed any success it had in maritime warfare to vessels hired from Castile or Genoa, something that also serves to emphasize the superiority of southern European states in this aspect of warfare. As far as state control over merchant shipping is concerned, to some extent the Hanseatic League in the Baltic controlled the conditions under which the ships belonging to member states sailed on trading voyages. It was active in frequently blocking the free access of alien trading ships to its ports and perhaps intervened in this aspect of maritime affairs more effectively than any other northern state. Even so, there was nothing closely comparable to the system set up in Venice.

There is, therefore, a considerable amount of evidence to support the contention in this chapter’s title; clearly, the sea mattered in medieval times but not to the same degree to all people and states at all times. The maritime city states of the Mediterranean are the supreme example of peoples whose prosperity and existence as independent entities was bound up with their relationship to the sea. As the Council of Rogati in Venice recorded in July 1377, in regard of the galley traffic, when choosing a *capitano* for a convoy ‘*in hoc pendet salus et vita nostra*’ (On this depends our safety and our life). Other larger states in the region might have expressed themselves less forcefully on this subject but were still concerned to maintain and profit from both war and trading fleets. Further north, a sustained interest in maritime matters among rulers was unusual. After the decline of Viking adventuring and raiding, it is fair to say that far more attention was paid to land armies than to ships that could be used in warfare. One reason for this apparent imbalance could be that in the medieval galley, particularly the trireme galley developed in the fourteenth century in the Mediterranean, states and rulers had a weapon well suited to the boarding actions of the day, especially when also carrying the expert crossbowmen or *almugavars* who formed part of the crew of Aragonese vessels. The round ships of the north were less easy to handle in this kind of action, while the oared balingers popular with Bretons as well as English mariners never seem to have been as effective in a fight as the Mediterranean galleys. The attitudes of English monarchs and other rulers in this region to both the provision of a state-run navy and to the expansion of sea-borne trade outside ‘home waters’ changed in the course of the sixteenth century when the design and handling qualities of sailing ships and skills in navigation improved greatly. Moreover, at much
the same time, a true ship-killing weapon, carried by ships of this type, was developed in the broadside fired by cannon. These developments were the necessary precursors to the growth of interest in the sea as a theatre of war and as the high road to far-flung regions of the globe.

Notes

Why the medieval sea mattered


24 Lambert, Shipping the Medieval Military, pp. 82, 173.

25 TNA, Exchequer Accounts Various, E 101/54/4.

26 Details of all ships mentioned in documents listing fleets in the pay of the Crown and in the Customs records can be found in the database The Merchant Fleet of Late Medieval and Tudor England 1400–1580 www.medievalandtudorships.org/.


28 Full details of goods imported into Southampton and their distribution can be found in Michael Hicks, English Inland Trade 1430–1540: Southampton and its Region, Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2015.

29 Lane, Venice, p. 57.

30 Lane, Venice, p. 101.

31 Lane, Venice, pp. 16–18.

32 Lane, Venice, pp. 47, 94.


36 Lane, Venice, p. 125.

37 Rose, Medieval Naval Warfare, pp. 7–10.

38 Lane, Venice, pp. 49, 128.

39 ASV, Senato Misti 1349, fols 19v–20r, 28v.

40 Lane, Venice, pp. 141, 381–2.


42 Rose, Medieval Naval Warfare, pp. 100–7.


50 ASV Regeste di Rogati 1377–81.
Bibliography

Manuscript sources

The National Archives of the United Kingdom, (TNA) Kew

Exchequer Accounts Various E101/54/4

Archivo di Stato di Venezia, (ASV)

Regeste di Rogati 1377–81
Senato Misti 1349–54.

Printed and secondary sources


The Merchant Fleet of Late Medieval and Tudor England 1400–1580 www.medievalandtudorships.org/


