Global networks in maritime worlds 1400–1800

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Marine versus maritime worlds

This chapter examines oceanic networks spanning five centuries. It recognizes that oceanic worlds are modern cultural constructs, and understands them to be fractured and fragmented worlds that are intrinsically unstable. However, most of all, it acknowledges that our ideas of such worlds are coloured by outsider conceptions of the sea rather than emic or insider perceptions – articulated by littoral peoples or islanders – that is, of those living in and around the sea. Therefore, the chapter also makes a distinction between maritime and marine worlds.

Although both present vibrant waterscapes, the maritime distinguishes between large (ocean) and small (seas, bays, straits, gulfs, etc.) waterbodies, while the marine world dispenses with size, signifying an environmental continuum within which littoral peoples live and work. The marine world is mostly amphibian – peoples’ livelihoods demand an effortless movement between land and sea. The maritime world signals by contrast an expansive world forging links across waters, since its ambit – signifying seaborne connections generating maritime empires and cultures – is larger and links to world and global history, bringing marginal histories to the centre of historical research.

Maritime history’s relation to the history of explorations, to European expansion, and to imperial projects makes it more of an ‘official’ history with a seafaring perspective: sea voyages, trade, slavery, migration, port cities, piracy, privateering, navigation and ship technology, scientific exploration with maps and instruments, overseas shipping, trading and finance companies, fishing, maritime communities, and seamen. Its narrative is coloured by power projection at sea through the application of technology, this sees the deepening and widening of maritime contacts and market exchanges, cultural contacts, military conflict, migrations and social transformations rooted in improved transport and commercial knowhow. It provides a methodology for linking the local, the regional, the national, the transnational, and the global, with...
the possibility of comparing the small, the big, everyday life, material culture, and transactions in the most remote places around the world.4

It is evident the distinction between the two rises partly from the way we regard them: as space from the outside as opposed to place as in insider perception, or what Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell termed a ‘history in’ the sea of outsiders rather than a ‘history of’ the sea as experienced by people living in and around it.5 The divergence in popular perception between the two can be traced to fifteenth-century Renaissance geography, which distinguished between small and large bodies of water, marking seas and oceans as separate categories.6 Classical and medieval Europeans viewed the world as archipelagic – if not aqua pelagic – and this marine world, rather than the maritime, also predominated as commons for indigenous Americans, Asians, Australasians, and Africans.7 Egyptian, Persian, Greek, and Arab notions of the river-sea, the Indic Ganga-sagar and the Brazilian rio-mar display harmonies between land, river, and sea. Pacific islanders imagine their ocean as a sea of transits; in South Asia a putative sea – the Lauhitya Sagar (lit. sea) designating the lower Brahmaputra river – rules local consciousness; further east the emotive Sea of Melayu and the Jiaozhi Ocean mandate popular perception.8 Matt Matsuda comments: ‘An Oceanic history of the Pacific is very much a zone where tidal and maritime metaphors are appropriate as great confluences and individual vessels meet’.9 An Australian aboriginal painting of the early 1990s saw the region’s rivers as a ‘flood dependent’ ecosystem needing flooding to regenerate – ‘The water shows us the country’.10 Such histories are truly water histories – a global history of water.11 Thus, Alison Bashford suggests regarding oceanic histories as terraqueous histories where:

the early modern meaning of ‘terraqueous’ was expansive in terms of the description and comprehension of matter and processes. In its original usage in Anglophone texts, terraqueous matter could and did include ‘atmosphere, mass of air, vapours, and clouds’. The exchange of waters was in grand balance, dependent on the area of both land and sea.12

This endorses our view of the marine world as amphibian, as opposed to the maritime world, which presents a history of outsiders in the sea.

Maritime extent

The maritime world’s reach is larger because it necessarily extends into the interior. Upstream-downstream connections bring upland polities into the ambit of the sea; this is particularly noticeable in South and Southeast Asia with their long waterways. Cognitively speaking, the maritime also reaches the interior without fluvial passages since its frontiers expand and contract through networks. According to Fernand Braudel, a thousand frontiers defined space-time at various times in history, with Renaissance networks extending as far as landlocked Cracow.13 Inland Yunnan, with no navigable routes to the sea, used kauri shells (cypria moneta) as medium of exchange for over a millennium, and the interior Shan polity in upland Myanmar undertook seaborne missions to China around 120 or 132 ce.14 Oceania, perhaps the
most pelagic of spaces, spread across Southeast Asia, South America, and Australasia, but did not generate global networks until Vasco Nunez de Balboa ‘discovered’ the Pacific in 1513.

Global networks vary in scope, with the seventeenth century showing some of the sharpest variations. Doctrines such as *mare clausum* and *mare liberum* – and a territorialization of sea spaces – gained momentum as nations fought for maritime hegemony once the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648 established the European system of nation-states. Voyages through the Arctic Ocean for Northwest and Northeast passages as alternate routes to America and China were reflective of this trend but were abandoned by the 1630s as the seas became icy, resuming again only from 1741 after the Little Ice Age was over. The Ming-Qing transition reflected the global seventeenth-century crisis, yet the Qing also expanded into Eurasia at this time. Warfare increased as borderlands, with attendant climatic pressures, were brought into the ambit of emergent states. Tsarist Russia exploded into Siberia, creating a small Northeast-Asian Pacific-centred economy. Tokugawa Japan and Choson Korea escaped the worst effects of the crisis because they had fewer global networks; Japan’s economy and population expanded, but the eighteenth century saw a slowdown. Vietnam, with its extensive maritime networks, split into Trinh and Nguyen domains between 1600 and 1800. The Ottoman economy slowed down after 1600. Safavid Iran experienced bullion shortage and declining silk exports from the second half of the seventeenth century; Mughal India, central in global networks at that time, showed signs of a climate crisis. There was a ‘seventeenth-century crisis’ in Southeast Asia as formerly expansive polities, nodal points on the Maritime Silk Road, declined.

Clearly, the extent of the maritime is difficult to assess. Moreover, although water covers two-thirds of the world, seas and oceans enter our consciousness only partially. European industrialization from the second half of the eighteenth century and the subsequent rise of nation-states marginalized pelagic spaces, reorienting production and wealth to the continental sphere in the Americas, Asia, Australasia, and Africa by the nineteenth century. The situation from 1400 to 1700 was different, however. Mercantilism saw seas as equal to land in generating career opportunities; there was a race to control waterbodies. As size equalled power, seas became central to the political imaginary of mercantilism. Yet for indigenous peoples, seas remained part of the marine world, although commercial networks brought them increasingly into the ambit of global trade.

**Defining ‘global’**

Equally problematic is the definition of the term ‘global’. The difficulty lies in the problem of scale – sub-global, semi global, and pan global – and the attendant complexities arising from their application to specific spaces. The recently edited *Oceanic Histories*, a comprehensive account of world history focuses not on land but on the 70 per cent of the earth’s surface that is covered by water: the Indian, Pacific, and Atlantic Oceans, and the world’s seas from the Arctic and the Baltic to the South China Sea and the Sea of Japan or Korea’s East Sea. While this pan global reach is easy to identify, others are not. Sub-global can reference the ‘Atlantic system’ or the ‘Arab world’,
while semi-global references the spread of Austronesian culture into the Pacific and Indian Oceans, the Arctic world system with specialized biotechnologies spreading across the northern seas and displacing Paleo-eskimos, Amerindians, and Vikings, and finally, the old Afro-Eurasian system linking Europe, Africa, and Asia.

The many types of history encompassed within the term ‘global’ again compound the problem. It becomes a challenge to rethink the relevance of space, spatial dynamics, and the interplay of scales, for instance. In transnational history, in contrast to history that is spatially defined as national history or otherwise geographically defined, there is no clear cut, predefined space in which such a history takes place. It can be exercised on a sub-world scale – a regional one – and the challenge is to practise and spatially frame transnational history, establishing the relation between perspectives of radically different scope: global, international, intercultural, national, regional, or local.

Embedded within transnational history, networked history:

- can actually be seen as an umbrella perspective that encompasses a number of well-established tools and perspectives such as historical comparison, (cultural) transfers, connections, circulations, entangled or shared history […] all of these tools or perspectives stress the importance of the interaction and circulation of ideas, peoples, institutions or technologies across state or national boundaries and thus the entanglement and mutual influence of states, societies or cultures. According to such a definition transnational history is a perspective of study; it does not claim to be a specific method.

Transnational history bridges the national, the sub-national (regional), and the global by exploring actors, movements, and forces that cross boundaries, penetrating the fabric of nations. Both kinds of history writing displace the nation to a certain extent. Since the nation is no longer the central frame-working device for history, alternative narratives and scales of analysis are essential. The identification of global poles helps in framing alternate views.

Global poles

Braudel’s économie monde, translated by Immanuel Wallerstein as ‘world economy’, is an autonomous economic space, but not necessarily ‘global’ in the modern sense. It features dominant cities at different times in history – sixteenth-century Antwerp, seventeenth-century Amsterdam, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century London, twentieth-century New York, twenty-first-century Shanghai – and a networked political-economic space such as the fifteenth-century Ming world, the sixteenth-century Mediterranean world, the seventeenth-century Spanish Atlantic world, or the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British Empire. World economies have existed simultaneously: the Persian Gulf and Red Sea economies in antiquity, the multipolar medieval Indian Ocean economy, and the fifteenth-century Venetian and Ming commercial worlds are examples. World economies do not necessarily generate ‘hard’ centres as the Afro-Eurasian world system detailing Asian, African, and European world economies from 3500 BCE demonstrates. This system displays several cores
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during its history: Egypt, Sumer, and West Asia; thereafter China, North India, North Africa, and the Mediterranean; subsequently Cordoba, Byzantium, the Red Sea/Persian Gulf region; thenceforth Fatimid Cairo, Chola south India, Song China; and finally, a West Asian core ceding way to two smaller cores centred on Istanbul and Cairo in the fifteenth century presaging the decline of Africa, a fragmented India with regional cores, and a unitary China. The Afro-Eurasian world system occupies the largest space and the longest period within this schematic, its networks remain consistently prominent.

Early biological dispersal between Africa and Asia occurred through and across small, coastal societies rather than through large inland centres on overland trade routes, ‘soft’ centres predominating in this exchange. The play of maritime networks is evident from the fact that African crops influenced the South Asian mainland earlier than they did in Arabia, suggesting that the Indian Ocean arena, rather than overland zones, was one of the earliest regions facilitating long-distance biological exchanges. An undisclosed cultural break between Africa and Europe via Arabia is inferred, since ancient African sesame reached Egypt about 1300 BCE, probably via India and Mesopotamia and not through land routes. Carl Sauer notes:

Tropical Africa did not get its planting culture out of India by way of the Fertile Crescent. The bananas, for instance, could not take the northern route. The passage westward can hardly have been in any other manner than by skirting the Indian Ocean. Along it there was no winter cold and the arid stretches were broken at intervals by alluvial strips watered from highlands. The southern rim of Arabia, from the Straits of Hormuz to those of Bab el Mandeb, along the coasts of Oman, Hadhramaut, and Yemen, may be a great lost corridor of mankind.

Abyssinian durum wheats – seen as uniquely Italian – seem not to have reached the Mediterranean until after the fall of the Roman Empire. The obstacle between Ethiopia and the Mediterranean was in part climatic, between summer and winter growth seasons, and was only gradually overcome by irrigation and the breeding of winter races of wheat. Asiatic planting and fishing culture expanded across waters, as shown by their spread across the islands of the Pacific and their penetration of tropical Africa, the Mediterranean, and of Western Europe.
Africa to China; the Orthodox Christian Athanase Nikitin’s travels across the Indian Ocean, however, saw him relegated to an outsider, neither Christian nor Muslim.

From antiquity, the Persian Gulf-Red Sea region linked to the Latin world through Syria and the eastern Mediterranean and to the Indic-Sinic worlds through the Indian Ocean. Here Southeast Asia was a crucial connector. An ‘age of commerce’ marked the ninth-century Indian Ocean, intensifying into another age of commerce in Southeast Asian waters in the sixteenth century. Further east, Ryukyu islanders connected Japan with the wider Asian world until the sixteenth century. Other nodes more limited in size, time, and scope existed: in the central Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka connected China to Rome and acquired a sea of its own, the Sea of Si-lan.

Hubs in Central Asia connected Asia to Europe through the overland Silk Route until the seventeenth century. Abu-Lughod’s thirteenth-century Central Asian world (zone VII) linked eight world economies covering Europe, North Africa, the Persian Gulf-Red Sea region, and Asia. Within Central Asia were globalized zones such as landlocked Yunnan networking with the Indian Ocean world. According to Andre Gunder Frank, Central Asian networks were important, but India and China remained global poles, losing their comparative advantage only from the seventeenth century, as opposed to Wallerstein’s thesis of a modern world system privileging only sixteenth-century Europe. For both Atlantic and Pacific regions, thoroughgoing social and economic integration occurred later, European mariners forging direct connections among the sub-regions of both basins only in the sixteenth century. Cross-cultural interactions provided a foundation for a genuinely global periodization of world history. Research on silver flows, for example, highlights the significance of interoceanic exchange in this period. Seen this way, the early modern world was not so much a collection of distinct, bounded sea and ocean basins as the site of intricate emerging networks of global communication and exchange of objects, artefacts, and commodities.

Pitfalls of periodization

While the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea saw the earliest ‘global’ networks – the first peopled by Persians, Romans, Arabs, Indians, and Chinese, and the second by Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Persians, and Carthaginians – the Atlantic and Pacific basins showed little significant social and economic integration before the sixteenth century. This makes periodization tricky. When historians address the past from global points of view to examine processes crossing the boundary lines of societies and cultural regions, such problems become acute since:

There is a plurality of competing spatial frameworks at any given time. Patterns of cultural exchange and transnational spaces cannot be contained in one fixed category of space, and the traditional notion of space as a container in which historical change unfolds constricts the view of the intertwined processes of global integration and fragmentation. It does not capture the dialectic of flows (for example, migration, capital, goods, ideas) and the attempts to control them by various forms of territorialization (such as nation-states, regions, cities as

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portals of globalization, supranational structures, identity politics, transnational networks, and so forth). Secondly, since notions of space, as well as the relevant spatial frameworks, have changed over time, no single spatial entity can be postulated as the dominant one for all periods in the past. [...] In a nutshell, the ‘spatial turn’ recognizes the constructed nature of space, acknowledges the simultaneity of various spatial frameworks and the centrality of both the historical actors and historians in defining spatial orders.35

Despite arguments that west-African mariners travelled frequently to pre-Columbian America, it seems likely that the only recurrent transatlantic voyaging before 1492 was that of Scandinavian mariners, pre-Columbian Bristol explorers that are only now entering academic discourse, and perhaps European fishermen. Whatever contacts they produced did not generate sustained interactions; the Atlantic Ocean basin began to move toward social and economic integration only in the post-Columbian period.36

The Pacific Ocean basin was the site of frequent interaction well before modern times; more so than the Atlantic. Scholars saw the Pacific divided into Near and Remote Oceania: “This is one ocean people have really lived in, not simply sailed across’ from early times.37 Austronesian mariners populated almost all of the habitable islands of the Pacific Ocean, introducing a distinctive complex of food crops and domesticated animals: taro, yams, bananas, breadfruit, dogs, pigs, and chickens. Their descendants, commonly referred to as Polynesians, Micronesians, and Melanesians, interacted both among themselves and with peoples in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South America. Some Micronesian and Melanesian peoples traded frequently and perhaps even regularly with merchants from Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Okinawa, the Ryukyu Islands, and possibly Japan as well. Between about 400 and 700 CE (long before most scholars would recognize an integrated Pacific Ocean basin), sweet potatoes reached the Pacific islands from South America and became important to the Maori population of New Zealand, where the staple crops of tropical Polynesia did not flourish.38

Despite these trans-oceanic interactions, there was no integrated Pacific Ocean basin before the sixteenth century. Polynesians were unable to play the role Phoenicians and the later Greeks did in the Mediterranean, linking civilizations together and stimulating derivative urban systems.39 O. H. K. Spate, writing ‘to seek to explicate the process by which the greatest blank on the map became a nexus of global commercial and strategic relations’, noted ‘there was not, and could not be, any concept “Pacific” until the limits and lineaments of the Ocean were set: and this was undeniably the work of Europeans’.40 Jerry H. Bentley disagreed, arguing that, from the sixteenth century onward, global interactions increasingly undermined the coherence of distinct maritime regions from this time, making the problem of spatial boundaries acute. He cited J. H. Parry as resolving this problem by enlarging Europe’s writ: ‘All the seas of the world are one’, as European mariners merged them all into a global European lake.41

Did this global economy see convergence, divergence, or fragmentation? In Kenneth Pomeranz’s view, the ‘great divergence’ occurred only from c.1800 when pre-Industrial Revolution China, a dominant economic power, experienced resource
exhaustion, leading to ecological bottlenecks for all advanced regions throughout the world’s largest landmass, i.e. across Eurasia. Certain regions of Northwest Europe (initially England) managed to escape ecological ‘cul-de-sacs’, because they accessed the vast resources of the New World, leading to the ‘Great Divergence’. Lynda Shaffer privileged southern Asia rather than China or South Asia; using the term ‘southernization’, she referenced a multifaceted process lasting from the fourth to the eighteenth centuries, beginning in southern Asia and spreading to East Asia, the Middle East, Africa, the Mediterranean, and Northwestern Europe. James Belich et al. noted four great divergences throughout history: domestication of the horse in Eurasia 4,000 years ago, textile exports by India and China c.1000 BCE, Islam’s expansion in the early seventh century, and the ‘rise of the west’ from c.1400.42

**Fifteenth-century developments**

This century unarguably heralded the First Global Age of 1400 to 1800. Far from being a period of economic stagnation presaging transition within Europe, it laid the fundamentals of the modern states system there and of the global economy throughout the world.43 Its distinction from earlier global ages lay in the linking – through Iberian networks – of four worlds: the European, the Caribbean/Central American, the African, and the Asian through the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic and Indian Oceans by 1498, when Vasco da Gama landed in India. This century also generated short-lived networks with long-term consequences: three decades of Ming voyages across the Indian Ocean terminated only in 1433, linking the Sinic world with the Gulf and East African shores through trade, diplomacy, and tribute across the China seas and the Indian Ocean. Yet another was the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453, bringing Islam, the Turks, and Central Asia closer to Europe by way of the Adriatic. A third was Bartolomeu Dias’ rounding of the Cape of Good Hope in 1488, a navigational feat presaging 500 years of imperial links between Europe and Asia. The last was the foundational Columbian discovery of the Americas in 1492.

Columbus’ achievements, and those of Vasco da Gama, had not only, as Alexander von Humboldt was later to observe, ‘extended the circle of what is known’, they had also ‘opened further the prospect of what still remains to be overcome’.44 Because of America’s self-evident ‘newness’, its discovery became a model and a metaphor for other projects, and a crucial, rhetorical, component in the battle between the ancients and the moderns. The Columbine vision was represented as a shift in man’s (sic) understanding of his relationship both with his fellow men and with the natural world, thus Jules Michelet’s famous remark that ‘[t]wo things belong to this age more than to all its predecessors: the discovery of the world, the discovery of man’.45 However, the ‘impact’ of the discoveries was not limited to the understanding of the natural world. One of the features of the Enlightenment project which came to be called ‘the human sciences’ was the attempt to provide a clearer vision of a supposedly constant, if also highly complex, ‘human nature’ simultaneously on a number of different fronts: in social theory, botany, biology, anthropology, medicine, psychology, and economics. The European ‘discovery’ of America played a central role in this
enterprise. At one level it, as Humboldt said, had simply ‘multiplied the objects of knowledge and of man’s contemplation’. If philosophy was, as René Descartes suggested, a form of travel, then the ‘discovery’ could be seen not merely as a turning point in the history of the natural sciences, but also an event in the history of moral philosophy. ‘Never’, wrote Humboldt, ‘has a purely material discovery, by extending [man’s] horizon, produced so extraordinary and lasting a moral change’.46

Sixteenth-century changes

Maritime history after the sixteenth century resolves into global history. As triangular trades linked European, African, Caribbean, and American societies and economies, the Atlantic became a tightly integrated zone of communication and exchange.47 In addition, the reconnection of the old Afro-Eurasian world through maritime activity added further to the process of globalization.48 The Pacific Ocean entered into – and integrated further – this global maritime economy. Spanish Manila, founded in 1571, functioned as a hub for bringing Atlantic silver into the Indian Ocean world through the Pacific, obscuring older Chinese networks that had integrated Manila within Asia; networks about which we know very little. Portuguese Macau, dated to 1557, was a smaller hub with three navigational branches. These were, first, the Macau-Melaka-Goa-Lisbon run, with Portuguese ships bringing in Chinese porcelains and designs. Second, the Macau-Manila-Mexico-New World silver run, with Mexican and Japanese silver entering the Indian Ocean economy through Portuguese networks. Finally, the Guangzhou-Macau-Nagasaki run, with the Portuguese becoming monopolistic middlemen, shipping Chinese silks to Japan in exchange for silver (since piracy by Chinese and Japanese nationals had led to a Ming ban on direct trade with Japan).

These silver flows also impacted on Europe and Ottoman domains, causing the contentious ‘price revolution’.49 Dennis Flynn and Arturo Giraldez comment:

> a fact that cannot be overemphasized is that Ottoman trade was intimately connected with an intercontinental trade matrix linked with the Chinese marketplace, a matrix that literally enveloped the globe […] Slot […] concludes that ‘much of the commerce in the Persian Gulf was directly related to the Levant trade’ and that ‘low grade Ottoman or Persian [silver] money was being sent subsequently to India to be melted down and converted into better coinage’.50

The year 1571 heralded truly global networks; the amount of Spanish-American silver transported by galleon from Acapulco to Manila roughly equalled that shipped across the Atlantic and through the Indian Ocean, while even larger quantities travelled overland from Europe to points east. A large percentage of world silver mined between 1500 and 1800 ultimately flowed to China in exchange for silk, satins, porcelains, and lacquerware that made its way to Europe and the Americas as well as to the Indian Ocean world, where Indian chintzes and Persian miniatures formed objects of export.51 Beginning in the sixteenth century, economic, environmental/ecological, epidemiological, demographic, and cultural evidence demonstrate the geographical
connection of all three ‘one-thirds’ of the surface area of the globe (split between the ‘thirds’ of the Pacific Ocean, the Americas and Atlantic Ocean, and finally Afro Eurasia and the Indian Ocean).52 We tend to forget, however, that the date 1571 also signalled the foundation of another port city – Nagasaki – by Omura Shimatada. By connecting the extreme east of the Indian Ocean to global networks, Nagasaki became the official point of contact between Japan and the outer world for over two centuries.

Seventeenth-century globalization

By the mid-seventeenth century, triangular trades linked the fortunes of Europe, Africa, and the Americas, the Manila galleons forging a significant connection between the economies of Spanish America and East Asia through the Pacific.53 In the Atlantic, a triangular slave trade appeared, linking Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, and the New World. From the Caribbean, sugar from plantations worked with African slave labour entered global trade as commodity. There were smaller, shorter-lived networks such as Ottoman networks – contested by strong Persian networks – in the Indian Ocean. In 1601–3 in Achin, Martin de Vitre of Saint-Malo saw merchants dressed in the ‘Turkish style’ from ‘Negapattam and Gujarat, Cape Comorin, Calicut, the island of Ceylon, Siam, Bengal […] living) six months here to sell their merchandise’.54 Nor were Turkish networks restricted to the eastern Indian Ocean. De Vitre’s vessel passed the Comoros Islands, where the crew saw people from diverse ‘nations’: Arabs, Persians, and others, most wearing the Ottoman turban, many speaking Portuguese. In Achin, ‘Ces Turcs en apparence extérieure portent le turban et tout le reste de l’habillement turquesque’.55 Augustin de Beaulieu’s visit there during 1619–22, 20 years later, does not mention Ottomans; they had suddenly disappeared.56 At the same time, territorialization of oceanic space saw strengthening of other ‘national’ networks. The Portuguese Empire in Asia retreated in face of growing English and Dutch power, presaging the beginnings of factory towns and settlements, and a resurgence of the slave trade.57

We do not know how far indigenous networks held out in the Indian Ocean. Some argue that by the late seventeenth century, once local traders were forced out from the Indian Ocean trade, structural holes left by their absence were filled in by private English traders, mainly ship captains, piggybacking on indigenous networks as well as on official East India Company networks. Their interests (the outcome of protests against the restrictive mercantilist model that was disintegrating) paralleled official company trade. Their activities transformed the nature of East–West trade in a short period from a simple dyadic structure to vastly more complex multilateral networks of exchange, ultimately leading to the emergence of densely connected global markets.58

Eighteenth-century departures

The exploration of the South Pacific was a significant departure in this century. Tales from Oceania of ‘cargo cults’, stories of Samoans and Trobriand Islanders, cannibals, natives, blue lagoons, and ideas of the ‘noble savage’ entered the cultural imaginary. The exploratory voyages of James Cook and Louis Antoine de Bougainville generated
trade and exchange. As Matsuda writes: ‘the “Pacific” has been historically reimagined many times: from an ancient Polynesian and early modern Magellanic space of transit, to an Enlightenment theater of sensual paradise’.

Plantation economies would appear from the end of the nineteenth century in Melanesia as Australians began to settle there.

In the Indian Ocean, European imageries of the ocean as cultural continuum and zone of opulence receded. As the colonial economy gathered pace, Asian factory towns morphed into colonial port cities, becoming gateways, and military, political, and economic bases for penetrating and controlling hinterlands, and linking these in turn to distant markets. A century of ‘Free Trade’ started. Many trading areas experienced a resurgence of intra-regional trade; trade in staples such as rice overtook the luxury goods’ trade across the Indian Ocean. New networks appeared, among them Armenian networks linking New Julfa to the China seas, indicating a ‘long eighteenth’ or even a ‘Chinese’ century.

Co-operation was a defining marker of this century as the decline in Portuguese power in the Indian Ocean led to increased collaboration between Europeans. Partnerships between Anglo-Spanish-Danish-French-Portuguese non-state actors intensified on the Coromandel coast. The Danish attempt to enter the Manila trade from Tranquebar in 1745 through a nexus between Spanish, French, and Danish traders was initiated by Joseph François Dupleix when he became commander at Pondicherry. This was a splendid example of collaboration: the Danes provided the ship, the former French vessel the *Restancier*, earlier registered in the name of a Marakkaray (Muslim) merchant, and now renamed the *Dansborg*. A Hindu Chettiar provided the cargo, and the ship’s officers included a Danish captain, a Scots supercargo, and two Portuguese *mestícos*. French-Portuguese private traders collaborated from Chandernagore in Bengal to East Africa, often under company aegis. The partnership between French Superintendent Dupleix and Tempest Milner, the latter employed by Portuguese private traders from Lisbon, reveals the way France piggybacked on Portuguese commercial networks to Mozambique between 1731 and 1741. This established a direct Chandernagore-Mozambique run in 1738 – bypassing Pondicherry and Île de France (Mauritius), the two official French hubs between India and Africa – linking the Bay of Bengal with the East African coast.

This was also an age of conflict. Most of Asia, with the exception of East Asia, faced political unrest and conflict during the latter half of the eighteenth century, among which the Anglo-French wars in south India are especially well known. War over silver started as quasi-national monopolies broke down over sourcing areas. Supplies of silver had been closely monitored when Spain monopolized access to New World silver. Spanish America produced more than 150,000 tons of silver during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, much of which went to China. Demand in China, already ‘silverized’ by the sixteenth century, raised the price of silver there by 1700 to 50 per cent above that paid in the rest of the world. The immense ‘Mexican Silver Cycle’ boom of 1700–50, which stimulated trade routes worldwide in an ‘echo effect’, is attributable in large part to the pressure of demand in China. The French tapped into Spanish networks for silver in Europe; outgoing French vessels stopped at Cadiz in the 1720s to load New World silver on board, using Portuguese networks
to free ride on Spanish silver networks. Lines between official monopoly and open trade started disappearing. French and English ships brought in New World silver from Acapulco via Manila into the Coromandel coast in India, the excess silver causing a glut.

Networked financial interests led to a linking of the seas, so much so that minor Mediterranean ports transformed into dynamic networked ports. A relatively peripheral region such as South Castile came to be connected to Asian, Mediterranean, and Atlantic markets through the mercantile firm of the Marseille-based Roux Brothers, who used the Spanish port of Cartagena as the gateway to landlocked Castile. Unknown coins were melted into local currencies, resulting in the growing familiarity of moneychangers and dealers with the many currencies of global trade.

A southwest Indian Ocean trading bloc, largely based on slaves and Indian cotton, emerged by the end of this century with Cape Town functioning as an Indian Ocean port city. This bloc deserves attention since southern African studies fall outside the remit of works on the Indian Ocean world, the region being located outside the monsoon zone, which constitutes the canonical core of Indian Ocean studies. Moreover, the southwest Indian Ocean segued into other oceanic worlds. Global networks outstripped the limits of the Indian Ocean world: migrants from both east and west landed at Cape Town, and a southeast African slave trade funnelled captives to the Caribbean and Brazil. As scholarship on global systems expands, so too does the recognition that such processes exceed hemispheric, oceanic, continental, or indeed any other intellectual boundaries, undoing the myths of continents, oceans, and empires.

Mozambique became a French stronghold for the slave trade to Cape Town in this century. Mariners sailing east of Madagascar reached the Mascarene Islands, selling wheat and wine and buying sugar, coffee, and large quantities of Indian cloth with which to trade on the East African coast for slaves, ivory, gold, and rice. The Mascarenes became a bulking centre for trade in the western Indian Ocean, and, together with ports on the African coast, a major site for slave vessels sailing around the Cape and across the Atlantic. After putting the surviving slaves ashore at Saint-Domingue, the captain of a slave ship removed its extra decks and grated hatches, dismantled the stoves, closed the ports for air just above the waterline, and cleaned out the hold, before packing it with sugar, coffee, cotton, and indigo destined for France. This trade climaxed in 1789–90, when about 46 ships, carrying well over 16,000 slaves, circumnavigated the Cape, almost all bound for the sugar and coffee plantations of northern Saint-Domingue.

British occupation of the Cape in June 1795 ended the French slave trade from East Africa. Once the French withdrew, a newly resurgent Portuguese elite simply took over the trade, forging links with the Atlantic world through Rio de Janeiro and New York. After Spain sided with France in the revolutionary wars in August 1796, merchants from Montevideo and Buenos Aires began to exchange cattle hides, salted or dried meat, tallow, and, particularly, silver dollars for slaves brought to Île de France from Mozambique and Madagascar. The silver was used to buy handwoven cotton cloth from India, a common means of exchange in Mozambique. While cloth was exchanged in the interior for slaves and ivory, the silver was sent to India to
manufacture jewellery and silver rupees. Silver dollars served as legal tender, allowing merchants at Mozambique to trade with the Cape and other ports. However, this global trade also stimulated a demand among consumers in Mozambique for rare and exotic items that, like Potosí silver, came from the faraway Andes: llama wool, swan feathers, and the skins of animals such as the puma, chinchilla, and otter.

The Atlantic world saw a resurgence in the commodities trade to Europe, augmented by piracy and smuggling in response to the winds of ‘Free Trade’. French, English, and Dutch privateers ventured into the areas previously held by the Spanish Crown. Mid-eighteenth-century Dutch-Spanish networks of private firms broke down the obsolete mercantilist model of the Caribbean trade and imposed what Ana Crespo Solana terms the export-oriented ‘Baltic’ model of an intensive plantation-style production system using slave labour in former Spanish-held domains. Imports of Puerto Rican tobacco into the port of Amsterdam between 1780 and 1785 registered a jump to 1,300,000 pounds, as opposed to only 100,000 in 1740.

The eighteenth century, regarded as an incipient nationalist age in Europe, saw national crossovers becoming more common at sea and within colonies in Asia. European companies were never tightly bounded entities; nationality stopped east of the Cape with various ‘nations’ operating as factors, sailors, shippers, and captains. Nor were their settlements tightly enclosed ‘national’ spaces. Gondolpara within French Chandernagor belonged to the Danish Company from 1698–1714; from there the Danes collaborated with the French in shipping and freight. Pierre-Philippe Rocquefeuil’s commercial correspondence during 1755–7 shows him to be a Frenchman working for a Portuguese joint-stock company. ‘L’affaire Abdullah’ reported a ‘Malay’ pirate ship with English, French, and Portuguese crew attacking a French Company ship in the Bay of Bengal on 2 February 1793. The Malay raider – part corsair, part brigand, and part trader – was none other than a Frenchman named Lourant de St Severin who had part Malay parentage and who, instead of returning to France, had settled in the Bay. On 8 May 1793, when the English East India Company pressurized the Pondicherry Council of the French to institute proceedings, a condemnatory proces verbaux was initiated. A legal regime consolidated itself across oceans, overthrowing older spaces and their customary laws.

**Into the nineteenth century**

New spatial arrangements at sea were a feature of the nineteenth century. Indian Ocean port cities such as Aden, Ayutthaya, Melaka, and Hoi An declined as new geographies appeared. Jeremy Prestholdt notes that as coal revolutionized mobility, sailing ships were gradually phased out and steamships emerged, the latter freeing the societies of the Indian Ocean rim from monsoonal rhythms. Since steamship service integrated distant reaches such as Natal into older networks, coal expanded the Indian Ocean region. Railways linked port cities with small communities and burgeoning cities across the interior. An imperial amalgam of oceanic space appeared, enabling the movement of troops and goods between the colonial port and its distant metropolis.
creating in the process a trans-oceanic network of naval stations and maritime bases located not only at key choke points, but also along critical sea-lanes.71

By the early nineteenth century, Indian cottons linked Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas.72 In easternmost Southeast Asia, the Iban of Mindanao, their traditional maritime livelihoods threatened by Dutch and English shipping, transformed into pirates in the Sulu Sea.73 In the remote northern Far East, now conceptualized as Northeast Asia, Russia’s maritime moment captured the seal and otter hunting grounds of the Ainu and Aleut peoples, displacing large chunks of the Siberian population. ‘The history of Russian interaction with the Pacific Ocean testifies both to the power of the saltwater medium to connect and transform human societies as well as the stubborn foothold of entrenched practices when confronted with new environments’.74

The nineteenth century is the time when progressively newer environments entered the imperial geographical imagination. Islands, already ‘discovered’ as pit stops, now became not only relay points in global trade, but also incarceration points. Despite their early engagement with Southeast Asia, the Andaman Islands became fatally fastened to British imperial projects in the Indian Ocean: first as constabulary patrolling the ocean against Chinese, Malay, European, and Nicobarese piracy; then ‘to padlock the access to the Indian Ocean’ from the Melaka Straits; and finally as penal colony.75 Changuu Island off Zanzibar, known as both Prison and Quarantine Island, functioned similarly.

Islands have been, paradoxically, both prison and paradise. The island metaphor was most pervasive as tropical Eden. The ‘happy’ or ‘fortunate’ isles in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans and in the Caribbean captured popular imagination.76 Mauritius and Madagascar with their exotic flora became botanical laboratories for replication in European parks. It is noteworthy that between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, plays and novels featuring islands, such as William Shakespeare’s The Tempest, Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, and Robert Louis Stevenson’s Treasure Island proliferated. Captain Nemo, the great anti-hero of Jules Verne’s nineteenth-century science-fiction novel Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea, is an Indian prince whose participation in the anti-British revolt of 1857 forced him to go underground (or undersea). Yet, the island motif was also overturned in the nineteenth-century Pacific. After the abolition of slave trading and the establishment of independent societies throughout the Americas, whaling, plantation agriculture, and trade in sandalwood, sea slugs, and labour enmeshed almost all of the Pacific islands and Australia into a larger oceanic economy.77 The coming of the French, British, and German empires, joined by the Japanese and Americans, saw Asian maritime voyages and the extensive migration and trading networks around the entire region of today’s Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia being gradually closed out and cut off through the imposition of colonial territories, exclusive zones, and strategic transits. Matsuda noted that these narrative elements of empire were emplotted in ‘lost world’ literary and artistic romances. He describes how they issued from Bougainville in the thrall of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but were given substance by tales of paradise and possibilities by histories such as that of the Bounty, reinvented as vanishing cultures by Herman Melville, Stevenson, and Pierre Loti, and immortalized as sensual melancholy by Paul Gauguin in Tahiti and the Marquesas.78
Conclusion

This overview of global networks has revealed various regimes of de- and re-territorialization, with corresponding new spatialities that proliferated between 1400 and 1800. Questions remain, however. Why did the global economy need a centre for the maintenance of order, since capitalism itself could create order and organize the market? Did a single centre always mark it, or could it also display multiple centres? Although I have highlighted Asian centres, maritime historians adhere to the view of a single ‘culture of capitalism’ rising out of commercial centres in Europe and the Americas. Maritime activities were vaguely associated with a pro-business attitude in port cities that led to policy changes removing continental obstacles to trade. This narrative is deeply embedded in a larger liberal perspective of the rise of the West on the back of mercantile, and thus maritime, development, and is one of the core assumptions of maritime history. It is largely derived from Braudel, who privileged urban centres, seeing towns as motors of history or ‘archipelagos of towns’ (i.e. urban relay points or a string of conglomerations linked by long-distance trade). In reality, a single centre is hard to discern. Spain’s Atlantic empire experimented in mercantilism with four concurrent centres: Seville as official point of the Spanish Atlantic trade, Cadiz as silver and derivatives market, Potosí as silver source, and Manila as silver re-exporting point. It generated the creation of the Spanish dollar, founded on plunder but amounting to the most persistent and universal currency ever, and thus a foundation of economic modernity. The British Empire, stretching from Aden to Adelaide, was held together by London and Calcutta.

Several Atlantics composed the Atlantic world – notably Dutch, Spanish, and British, with smaller French and Portuguese zones – with corresponding cores and substantial heterogeneity and divergence, leading David Armitage to conceptualize this world as composed of three circuits. These are cis-Atlantic (exploring nation, state, region, or a specific institution within an oceanic context), trans-Atlantic (comparative dimensions of an individual ocean), and circum-Atlantic (oceans as a geographic and historical whole and their history as an arena or zone of exchange, interchange, circulation, and transmission). This three-fold classification provides a national or regional history within an Atlantic context, a transnational history of the Atlantic world and, third, the international history of the Atlantic world.

The Iberian Atlantic is seen as an incubator of modernity, site of experimental knowledge production and large-scale urbanization, economies of scale, massive transatlantic voluntary and involuntary migrations, and well-developed commercial and banking networks. It shows also the development of modern concepts of religious toleration. Its colonial urban centres are regarded as global economic engines with the importance of cities such as Potosí, Mexico City, and Cartagena in an emerging world economy.

What sustained trade networks during 1400 to 1800? Connectivities leading to enhanced connections certainly did, information networks deepening these webs. These constantly configured the maritime world; toward the end of this period, Pacific transits and Indian Ocean sojourning communities were displaced by crosscutting diasporic networks spanning oceans. The latter remade oceanic spaces while,
at the same time, they generated various discourses on universalism. Yet overriding
these networks there was also a very specific Black Atlantic, created not through trading networks but through the movements, ideas, and aspirations of marginal peoples.

In the course of the nineteenth century, this global order broke down. A phase transition to a new system became visible, increasingly accompanied by chaos and conflict, although co-operation had initially characterized this period. The phase transition substantially changed the nature of networks from the mid-nineteenth century onward. At the same time the idea of an oceanic community also appeared. The notion of the Atlantic world as a European marchland ceded way to the idea of an Atlantic community connecting Europe, North America, the Caribbean, Latin America, and West Africa, one bound together by the ties of western civilization. Pierre Chaunu claimed the Atlantic was the first ocean (as opposed to Braudel’s Mediterranean) to have been regularly crossed, and the first to find itself at the heart of an economy, indeed of a civilization. Alison Games noted that although this ocean became, in fact, an organizing principle through which scholars investigate the histories of the landmasses it links, the Atlantic does not have the coherence that has been identified for the Mediterranean. Nor, indeed, is it possible to speak with confidence of an Atlantic system or a uniform region.

Attempts to write a Braudelian Atlantic history – one that includes and connects the entire region – remain elusive, driven in part by methodological impediments, by the real disjunctions that characterized the Atlantic’s historical and geographic components, by the disciplinary divisions that discourage historians from speaking to and writing for each other, and by the challenge of finding a vantage that is not rooted in any single place. But if a broad vision of the Atlantic such as the one Braudel sought for the Mediterranean is elusive, it nonetheless remains desirable. Scholars working in the field of Atlantic history have demonstrated the explanatory power of this geographic region as a unit of analysis: Atlantic perspectives deepen our understanding of transformations over a period of several centuries, cast old problems in an entirely new light, and illuminate connections hitherto obscured.

Such an organizing principle, although it had earlier existed for the Indian Ocean, was irrevocably lost in the nineteenth century as colonial economies appeared and the ocean lost its character in light of profound changes, while the Pacific Ocean transformed into a theatre of super power rivalry.

Notes


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55 ‘These Turks wear the turban and all the other outward manifestations of Turkish clothing’ (author’s translation). See Lombard, ‘Martin de Vitre’, p. 8.
56 Lombard, ‘Martin de Vitre’, pp. 6, 8.
70 Procès Verbaux, 22MIOM/22, Centre des Archives Outre Mer, Aix en Provence, France.
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