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## Reviews

DAVID ABULAFIA, *The Boundless Sea: A Human History of the Oceans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. xxxii, 1050; color figures. \$39.95. ISBN: 978-0-1999-3498-0. doi:10.1086/719139

David Abulafia has written a book that is encyclopedic in scope, magisterial in detail, and appears as boundless as the sea itself. It presents a feast of histories and delectable stories of navigators, “discoveries” or “re-discoveries,” sailors, adventurers, pirates, navies, privateers, financiers, traders, missionaries, conquerors, and many others that fill the thousand pages of this book. The research draws from his own previous work, from hundreds of works of other specialists, and from the extensive collections of museums and libraries in several different parts of the world. There is something in it for everyone, whether it be the experts on particular oceans and seas, or for a relative newcomer to the field of ocean studies, such as myself.

To be sure, this is a “human history of the oceans,” to be distinguished from the more recent historical and social scientific exploration of the oceans from the environmental, climactic, or the vertical perspectives that some call “wet ontologies.” Others seek to triangulate ocean, land, and atmosphere to grasp the hydrological cycles that shape historical conditions on land and sea. Abulafia sees the seas and oceans as passages of connection for human endeavors—and also dis- or mis-connections, given the astronomically high rates of failure for each success. I believe he succeeds in showing that maritime connections have shaped human history for many thousands of years, perhaps to a much greater extent than most terrestrial histories have acknowledged.

Abulafia begins his story from archaeological sources of modes of oceanic travel from 65,000 years ago of Melanesian seafarers and the relatively more recent Polynesian navigators who charted much of the Western Pacific three thousand years ago. He provides little-known information on trade along the Arabian Sea coasts between the Indus Valley and Mesopotamia based on the voyagers’ knowledge of monsoon winds before the first millennium CE; this same knowledge also shaped the patterns of agriculture which generated surpluses for the trade. Early Malay and Tamil voyagers who sailed between Madagascar and the Chinese coast left their cultural traces in language and customs, and the Greek author of the *Periplus* from the Alexandrian empire in southwest Asia recorded the routes and stories of travelers between trading centers along the Arabian Sea.

Much more information is of course available from later periods for activities on the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans, but the great value of this book lies in bringing together the most important maritime routes and activities in world history that have heretofore been studied separately. These include the Indian Ocean trade (or what the Chinese government now calls the Maritime Silk Route), the Columbian exchange, the early modern European trading companies and their conquests, and the global trade and wars of the twentieth century. Abulafia also presents many more detailed histories, for instance, about the role of “New Christians” (Jews converted during the Inquisition) across the Portuguese and Dutch empires, about the disastrous shipwrecks and ghastly killings on the Western Australian coast from the Dutch Indies long before Captain Cook made his voyages, and so on. Among the most interesting for this reader is the detailed information about voyages to the northern Atlantic and Arctic by the Scandinavians over the last two millennia. The book reveals the impenetrability of these places, not only because of climatic and geographical factors but also because of the hostility and resistance by the populations, which included not only the Inuit but also native North Americans, about whom there was knowledge in the Norse sagas long

before Columbus. As we approach the modern period, tales of massacres, slaughter, mutual raiding, piracy, slave traffic, and other acts of human decimation litter the pages even as the “Age of Discovery” advances scientific knowledge and technology connects all the oceans, although it divides the world.

To be sure, the extensive coverage makes the work occasionally feel like a global history textbook as it covers long historical sequences—set off by watery arrivals and developments—of inland politics, economic competition, and social restructurings. The relationship between these sequences and the seas is not always clear. Another factor that cries out for inclusion in such a study today is the environmental and climactic impact of human activities on the oceans and vice versa. Finally, the more traditional narrative style adopted by Abulafia leaves us with significant gaps in understanding structural factors—such as “war capitalism” or control of trade and financial networks—that have driven these movements across the oceans.

On the one hand, there is a somewhat Whiggish celebration of the pioneering and adventurous spirit on the oceans that has contributed to human civilization; on the other hand, there is pain and sorrow for the inhuman condition of the slave trade and the incalculable destruction and bloodshed that have trailed this spirit. There are other studies that seek to fill this gap—by developing analytical structures that link the goals of oceanic voyages to the horrors that are perpetrated, although the parameters of these studies are perhaps necessarily more limited. One is reminded of the classic work of Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, which demonstrates how the transportation of sugar and slave labor across the oceans transformed global capitalism, or the more recent work of Sven Beckert, who does something similar in the *Empire of Cotton*. These works arguably can be seen as analytical exercises within the broad canvas that Abulafia presents and the publication of *The Boundless Sea* ought to enable more such explorations.

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FABIO ACERBI and GUDRUN VUILLEMIN-DIEM, *La transmission du savoir grec en Occident: Guillaume de Moerbeke, le Laur. Plut. 87.25 (Thémistius, “in De an.”) et la bibliothèque de Boniface VIII*. (Mediaevalia Lovaniensia Series 1, 49.) Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2019. Paper. Pp. viii, 254; color and black-and-white figures. €37. ISBN: 978-9-4627-0169-4.  
doi:10.1086/719343

Is it possible to tell the story of the transfer of knowledge from Byzantium to the West by focusing on a single manuscript? After reading this comprehensive and well-written book, we must answer in the positive. With thorough scholarship—and graceful writing—Fabio Acerbi and Gudrun Vuillemin-Diem (†) tell a marvelous story of the Greek manuscript Laur. Plut. 87.25 and its later fortune. This manuscript was produced during the eleventh and twelfth centuries in Constantinople and contains the text of Aristotle’s *De anima* and Themistius’s paraphrase. Going against earlier scholarship, Acerbi and Vuillemin-Diem demonstrate that this manuscript was the model for William of Moerbeke’s medieval Latin translation of Themistius’s paraphrase and was part of the papal library of Boniface VIII (d. 1303). The authors’ demonstration is impeccable. After an introductory chapter, Acerbi and Vuillemin-Diem provide for the first time solid paleographical, codicological, and philological data supporting their thesis (chaps. 2–7). Their analysis, though difficult for unacquainted readers, proves their argument beyond any possible doubt.

Chapter 8 is the real gem of this wonderful book. Here Acerbi and Vuillemin-Diem provide a scrupulous study of the origin and fate of the papal library (with a special emphasis on the