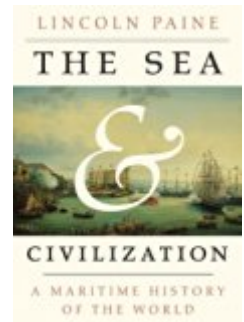


Lincoln Paine. *The Sea and Civilization: A Maritime History of the World.* New York: Knopf, 2013. Illustrations. xxxv + 744 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4000-4409-2.



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The Sea and Civilization is, precisely as the blurb describes it, a monumental work. In just six hundred pages of text, Lincoln Paine covers a remarkable historical span beginning with the first maritime migrations fifty thousand years ago and ending with the United States Navy in the twenty-first century. To describe maritime activity in this period, the author has combed through a huge array of works that are collected together in an impressive bibliography that runs to close to fifty pages. While its scale sets the book apart, this is also a work of the highest possible quality. One straightforward way to critique a general history is simply to hone in on the specialties of the reviewer with the expectation that no such study will get everything right. Not only are Paine's descriptions invariably accurate but *The Sea and Civilization* is also jammed with wonderful details--the Song dynasty's human-powered paddle-boats are a favorite example--that continually surprise the reader. It is also a beautifully written, lavishly illustrated, and superbly edited study that succeeds among its many other achievements in

solving the great riddle of the general history, whether or not to include notes, with a masterful compromise (endnotes numbered according to the pages of the text) that satisfies the academic reader without cluttering the narrative.

In his introduction, Paine declares his hope that *The Sea and Civilization* will inspire further work. Quoting the great naval historian Nicholas Rodger, he writes that even it "should fail altogether, [such a study] may still have the merit of stimulating other and better scholars" (p. 10). This is far too modest; Paine has produced what will become a standard work that will appeal to scholars, students, and general readers for years to come. *The Sea and Civilization* is precisely as Felipe Fernández-Armesto, and a more qualified judge one cannot imagine, attests on the back cover "the best maritime history of the world" currently available.

No book that aims to cover so much in so few pages can possibly satisfy all readers and any approach to such a vast task comes with particular

advantages and drawbacks. This is the case with *The Sea and Civilization*, which is compelled to make some trade-offs for its scope. Paine has set himself the goal of, according to the blurb, writing a “world history through the lens of maritime enterprise.” The book thus aims to be comprehensive and whenever he can the author opts to add in more information, another part of the world, another naval battle, another trade route. This comes at a cost for individual chapters, which are stuffed with information. This seems less of an issue for the earlier chapters, which usually examine a single region across a number of centuries, but it means that later chapters, which narrow the focus to a single century while expanding the geographical parameters to encompass most of the world, have a great deal of work to do.

Chapter 15 (“The Birth of Global Trade”) is an example of the latter. Commencing with an overview of the Spanish and Portuguese empires, it then jumps to a two-page account of the Japanese invasion of Korea in 1592 before taking us into the Mediterranean and then skipping across to Russian waters. After a short description of flat-bottomed riverboats, the chapter turns to the first attempts to create state navies in Europe before concluding with a discussion of the Spanish Armada. The result of this encyclopedic approach is that while all are engaging, some of the chapters feel, in the absence of a central theme or thread, somewhat disjointed.

The attempt to take in as much maritime activity in as much of the world as possible also means that individual topics seldom receive as much attention as they would, for example, in a more thematic analysis. Such is the case with that perennial companion of the maritime merchant, the pirate. Given the scale of the work and the fact that Paine gives considerable coverage to the rise and fall of states, pirates are not neglected, receiving by my rough count at least fifty references, but these are widely scattered and do not cohere together into any sort of systematic discussion.

This treatment, while perhaps inevitable in an account of this kind, means that the seas sometimes appear more as open expanses plied by ever-increasing numbers of merchant and naval vessels than as complex legal and political spaces.

As has become clear in a slew of recent studies, pirates existed in the spaces in between. This applied first to the ethnic makeup of pirate bands, which were often strikingly diverse. To cite one example, the huge *wokou* or *wakō* pirate fleets of sixteenth-century East Asia, one of many such groups to receive just a handful of sentences, were controlled by Chinese maritime entrepreneurs but they drew in a wide range of recruits from Japan and other parts of Asia. Far from the lawless actors they are sometimes imagined as, pirates operated, as Lauren Benton has so clearly shown, in the spaces created by overlapping legal orders, freely adopting and discarding legal identities depending on the exigencies of the moment.[1] The same could be said of their victims who pulled on the tangled jurisdictional threads that characterized the oceans in order to gain compensation for attacks. Thus it was not unusual for seventeenth-century Chinese mariners assaulted by the Dutch in Southeast Asia to take their claims to Japanese officials in Nagasaki for restitution. Because they operated on the edges of territorial politics, pirate chieftains also created unconventional maritime polities that raise questions about the “symbiotic relationship between commercial and naval power” that is conventionally ascribed, as in Paine’s account, only to Europeans (p. 5). This was the case with Zheng Zhilong, a pirate turned official, and especially his son Chenggong or Coxinga, who established what Xing Hang calls a “quasi-governmental commercial enterprise” that was able to challenge the formidable Dutch East India Company and ultimately to eject it from its prized colony on Taiwan.[2]

None of this is to say that Paine should necessarily have devoted more attention to pirates but rather that the accumulation of detail sometimes

overshadows some of the things that draw historians, and I suspect general readers, to the field of maritime history. It also means that some important continuities capable of tying different centuries together are missed and the otherwise excellent final chapter would have been further strengthened by a more detailed reference to the return of the familiar phenomenon of wide-scale piracy in the waters off Somalia.

The desire to be comprehensive also means that the reader gets little sense of the contours of the current debates in what is in fact a rapidly evolving and particularly exciting corner of scholarship. At times, glimpses of this come through as in the description of Zheng He's massive maritime expeditions, which are the subject of a fierce debate concerning their coercive nature, but the reader is seldom provided with a clear sense of the arguments raised by the two sides or the stakes involved. Much of what we once thought we knew about the field is now in flux and one need think only of Geoff Wade's articles on Zheng He or Tonio Andrade's recent analysis of the conflict between the Dutch and Coxinga over control of Taiwan, which presents a masterful intervention into the old debate over comparative military advantage on land and sea, or Sebastian Prange's brilliant 2011 article on politics in the premodern Indian Ocean as examples of scholarship that merit mention, however brief, in a text such as this.[3]

Such minor points pale, however, in comparison to the great achievement of this book. *The Sea and Civilization* belongs in every maritime history undergraduate course as well as in the bookshelf of any teacher who seeks to push their students beyond the shores and into the bustling and turbulent maritime world that Paine describes so beautifully.

Notes

[1]. Lauren Benton, "Legal Spaces of Empire: Piracy and the Origins of Ocean Regionalism,"

Comparative Studies in Society and History 47, no. 4 (2005): 700-724.

[2]. Xing Hang, "Between Trade and Legitimacy, Maritime and Continent: The Zheng Organization in Seventeenth-Century East Asia" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2010), 1.

[3]. Geoff Wade, "The Zheng He Voyages: A Re-assessment," Working Paper Series No. 31 (Singapore: Asia Research Institute, October 2004); Tonio Andrade, *Lost Colony: The Untold Story of China's First Great Victory over the West* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); and Sebastian Prange, "A Trade of No Dishonor: Piracy, Commerce, and Community in the Western Indian Ocean, Twelfth to Sixteenth Century," *American Historical Review* 116, no. 5 (2011): 1269-1293.

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