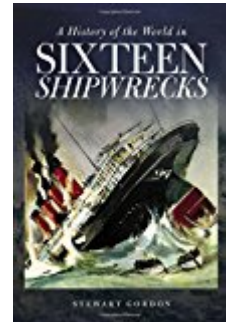


**Stewart Gordon.** *A History of the World in Sixteen Shipwrecks*. Lebanon: ForeEdge, 2015. 290 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61168-540-4.



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In his well-received 2008 book, *When Asia was the World*, Stewart Gordon provided an accessible and entertaining entry point into Asian history that situated it within the larger commercial and intellectual networks of the Eurasian world between ca. 500 and 1500 CE. His newest work, *A History of the World in Sixteen Shipwrecks*, is even more ambitious in both its chronological and geographical scope, for its global perspective spans the period from 6000 BC to the present. As he did in *When Asia was the World*, here too Gordon manages the daunting task of covering so much territory and time by focusing on a series of discrete case studies. While a different individual, most often an international traveler, was at the center of each chapter in the earlier book, the chapters in *A History of the World in Sixteen Shipwrecks* instead deal with different kinds of boats or ships. The result is an engaging introduction to maritime history that explores the impact of specific types of ships on their regional economies and the gradual emer-

gence of “a single global maritime world” by the twentieth century (p. ix).

Gordon begins his overview of the role of ships in human history with the dugout, a canoe made out of a single tree trunk. One example of a dugout from Nigeria dates back to about 6000 BC, but equally old examples can be found from Europe, he explains. Gordon next describes how dugouts are made, and then goes on to discuss the migration of people from Southeast Asia to the Pacific Islands by means of dugouts. Despite the advances in this technology, resulting in the impressive Polynesian outrigger, Pacific dugouts were rapidly superseded in the nineteenth century by European ship-building methods. The chapter on the dugout ends with a short reflection on its importance as a vessel: it was a boat that was invented independently in many parts of the world, but generally operated within small, local settings.

Similarly for each type of ship, Gordon covers topics such as building techniques, the region and period in which that ship flourished, the purposes

to which it was put, the goods or peoples it may have transported, its strengths and weaknesses as a form of transportation, and the maritime network it created. The chapters follow a chronological sequence and include a range of nautical vessels from the Nile barge to the modern cruise ship, with a variety of others along the way, such as the Bremen cog, the Spanish galleon, and the early twentieth-century passenger ship.

What we do not learn much about, however, is shipwrecks--the book's title is misleading in this regard. The author acknowledges in his introduction that he has "widened the traditional definition of a shipwreck from the destruction of a ship by storm or collision" (p. viii). Most chapters do begin with a brief account of a specific vessel, but not all of them were wrecked. The famous seventh-century ship found at Sutton Hoo, for example, was buried intact (chap. 4); while the dugout from Dufuna was probably deliberately submerged in order to keep it from drying out and cracking (chap. 1). The HMS *Victory*, a British warship, was destroyed in battle in 1744 (chap. 11); the *Lucy Walker*, a Mississippi steamboat, suffered an engine explosion in 1844 (chap. 12); and the *Exxon Valdez* was damaged in 1989 but subsequently repaired (chap. 15). In two instances, no actual ship can even be identified. Letters preserved in the Geniza collection indicate that one Jewish merchant must have sunk at sea in the Indian Ocean (chap. 6), while the memoir of an Englishman describes the ordeals of slavery that he faced after his ship was attacked and boarded in the Mediterranean (chap. 9). This book is not in fact about shipwrecks per se, but rather the varieties of ships that have existed in human history and the maritime worlds which they helped shape.

Inevitably, perhaps, given the kind of documentation and evidence that survives, much of the book deals with ships from Europe and the United States. Asian vessels are covered in only three chapters: one ostensibly concerned with the

Arab dhow (chap. 6), a second with indigenous Southeast Asian boats (chap. 5), and the third rather tangentially with Chinese ships (chap. 7). Compared to other chapters in the book, we get notably less information in the Asia section on ships as artifacts. Chapter 6 focuses on the Aden-to-India trade as gleaned from Geniza documents, when it could instead have explored an actual vessel like the ninth-century Belitung wreck--an Arab ship that was carrying a large load of Chinese ceramics, a replica of which was recently built in Muscat and sailed to Singapore. Gordon does examine one of several important discoveries from Southeast Asia in the past two decades, the Intan shipwreck of c. 1000, with particular attention to the metal ingots and metal objects aboard the vessel (chap. 5). The larger geopolitical context of Mongol expansionism forms the backdrop for "Kublai Khan's Fleet" on the attempted invasions of Japan in the late thirteenth century (chap. 7), with only a paragraph on Chinese trade--Chinese shipping and maritime commerce is given short shrift overall, as are Chinese export ceramics, a burgeoning field of interdisciplinary interest.

But these are specialist quibbles, and *A History of the World in Sixteen Shipwrecks* is clearly intended for a general audience. The American clipper ship *Flying Cloud* and other historic vessels mentioned in it are hooks meant to draw us into a variety of riverine and ocean settings, and to thus serve, in Gordon's words, "as windows into maritime and larger worlds" (p. viii). This enjoyable and educational book exposes the reader to diverse seascapes, social terrains, and political developments, as well as considerable information about trading patterns. In its geographic breadth and temporal length, it provides an admirable example of history writing on a world-historical scale. The title of the concluding chapter, "Maritime History as World History," would be an apt subtitle to *A History of the World in Sixteen Shipwrecks* as a whole. This book will be especially appreciated by people with an interest in global per-

spectives, a curiosity about the impact of ships on human history, or a fascination with riverine and ocean-oriented societies.

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