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Connected oceans: New pathways in maritime history

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Abstract

The Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans and the Mediterranean Sea are no longer studied as distinct oceanic regions but interrogated as variegated worlds, interconnected in multiple ways. This Forum explores the various ways in which maritime history has been dealing with this trend. It shows how the notion of oceans as interactive spaces requires maritime historians to look beyond the shoreline by placing the interconnectedness of sea and land at the centre of their analysis. Focusing on littorals and port cities, the five ers in this Forum investigate the sea as zone of cultural encounter and vehicle of economic exchanges, and thereby illustrate how oceans connected people and ideas across the globe.

Keywords

Atlantic Ocean, connected histories, connected oceans, global history, Indian Ocean, Pacific Ocean

This Forum is the outcome of the international conference ‘Connected Oceans – New Avenues of Research in Maritime History’, which was held at the University of Porto, 8–12 June 2015, and was designed to survey current trends and debates in maritime

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history.¹ In recent decades, the history of the sea and oceans has received growing attention, and there is no sign that the stream of original monographs, edited collections, and special issues will run dry in the near future. As specialists from various disciplines have discovered the oceans as a field of historical enquiry, bringing along fresh perspectives and ideas, the contours and scope of maritime history have changed significantly. No longer seen as an atemporal backdrop to human history, the sea has been reimagined as a socially constructed and politically contested space, filled with cultural meanings and its own histories.² The Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans and the Mediterranean Sea are no longer studied as distinct oceanic regions but interrogated as variegated worlds, fragmented and interconnected in multiple ways. With the catastrophic consequences of climate change looming on the horizon, the mortality of the sea becomes visible as environmental historians are charting the impact of human activities on marine ecosystems from antiquity to the present.³ The Porto conference provided an opportunity for participants to chart the various courses that maritime history has taken in the decade since Kären Wigen observed that ‘maritime scholarship seems to have burst its bounds; across the discipline, the sea is swinging into view’.⁴

The five essays in this Forum reflect on one of the central themes discussed in Porto: the manifold ways in which the oceans connected people, economies and cultures across the globe. It was the burgeoning interest in studies in global history that brought the oceans into the academic spotlight, which is hardly surprising given the lasting importance of maritime connections for large-scale or global patterns of interaction and exchange. While maritime history does not necessarily require a global scope or perspective, it has, as Amélia Polónia has noted, become a ‘gateway to global history’.⁵ Neither the tuna, herring and cod that fishermen were hunting, nor the currents and winds that guided the routes of merchants, took any notice of the arbitrary borders of humans. It is therefore precisely this focus of maritime and oceanic history on ‘human interaction along geographical settings that do not match national, continental, or other culturally and politically defined boundaries’ that turns it into such a fertile field for studies in global history.⁶ The sea is an environment that has for millennia nurtured exchanges and



1. The Porto conference built on a conference held in Hyderabad five years earlier. Some of its results were published in Rila Mukherjee, ed., *Oceans Connect: Reflections on Water Worlds across Time and Space* (Delhi, 2012).
2. Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthun, *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean* (New York, 2004).
3. Poul Holm, Tim D. Smith and David J. Starkey, eds., *The Exploited Seas: New Directions for Marine Environmental History* (St. John’s, Newfoundland, 2001); Jeffrey W. Bolster, *The Mortal Sea: Fishing the Atlantic in the Age of Sail* (Boston, MA, 2012).
4. Kären Wigen, ‘Oceans of History: Introduction’, *American Historical Review*, 111, No. 3 (2006), 717–22; at 717.
5. Amélia Polónia, ‘Maritime History: A Gateway to Global History?’, in Amélia Polónia and Maria Fusaro, eds., *Maritime History as Global History* (St. John’s, Newfoundland, 2010), 1–20.
6. Dominic Sachsenmaier, *Global Perspectives on Global History: Theories and Approaches in a Connected World* (Cambridge, 2011), 99.

transfers across territorial boundaries and vast distances – as the contributions to this Forum illustrate.

This notion of the ocean as interactive spaces requires maritime historians to look beyond the shoreline. For maritime connections generated dynamics that affected not only coastal regions and seafaring communities, but also the hinterland, as the circulation of goods, people and ideas across the oceans transformed economies and brought political change. Michael Pearson, who opened the ‘Connected Oceans’ conference, long ago challenged any rigid land/sea divide as a false dichotomy, stating that ‘a maritime historian has to face the question of how far inland must we go before we can say that the ocean no longer has any influence’.⁷ It is in this spirit that this Forum places the interconnectedness of the sea and the land at the centre of its investigation: in what ways did oceanic routes integrate coastal stretches as well as hinterlands into wider systems of interaction? What was the role of port cities and merchant communities in the formation of cross-oceanic networks of exchange? To what extent did environmental factors determine political or economic processes? And what were the implications of global economic changes on individual ports or regional port-systems?

Rila Mukherjee opens the debate with a study of the often-neglected role the Bay of Bengal played in the early maritime exchanges of the wider Indian Ocean world. Looking beyond the traditional story of economic integration, she uncovers a variety of cultural contacts and transfers through which the Bay was connected with littorals in the East Indian Ocean and Southeast Asian seas. More than that, in particular the southern and western parts of the Bay, Mukherjee argues, had long been part of trans-maritime passages, linking the Indian peninsula with the south Asian seas and creating ‘cultural routes that withstand time’. In a survey of two seventeenth-century Indian Ocean port towns, Madras and Surat, Radhika Seshan shows how local merchants acted for European traders and companies as gatekeepers to regional markets and authorities. Highlighting the multitude of interactions and engagements surrounding the emergence of new cross-oceanic networks, her article underlines how port cities functioned as ‘points of multiple intersections’ of the sea and the land, connecting people who crossed the seas with those who populated the hinterland. Following a similar line of investigation, Amândio Barros moves the story further east in a discussion of the crucial intermediary role that Macao’s Portuguese merchant community played in the formation of Spanish–Chinese trade relations and in the voyages of the Manila Galleon. He conveys a sense of the informal practices and illegal schemes of transnational cooperation that enabled Portuguese actors in Macao, and Spanish agents in Manila, to establish commercial networks that crossed political boundaries and would span the globe for centuries.

The ways in which port cities were integrated into regional as well as global systems of exchange are also central to the essays of Filipa Ribeiro da Silva and Ana Catarina Garcia, which take us from the history of the Pacific and Indian Oceans to that of the Atlantic. Ribeiro da Silva examines major shifts in the configuration of the port systems of Atlantic Africa between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. Through an analysis of the volumes of shipping, she assesses the impact of the transatlantic slave trade, as well as other political and economic dynamics, on the various connected and interdependent

7. Michael Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London and New York, 2003), 27.

ports along Africa's western littoral. Finally, Catarina Garcia provides a comparative study of four colonial ports in the Atlantic and Caribbean, giving leeway to another trend in maritime history: the study of empire-building. Her article examines the various economic, military and topographic factors surrounding the founding and development of the Portuguese port towns Angra on the Azores and Funchal on Madeira, and the British ports of Bridgetown and Port Royal on Barbados and Jamaica, concluding that environmental factors were of crucial importance for the successful development of these imperial outposts.

Another facet that unites the studies presented here is their attention to the interplay of local and global dynamics. It is in this sense that this Forum on 'Connected Oceans' builds on Sanjay Subrahmanyam's notion of 'connected histories', which considers the dynamic between 'the local and regional' and 'the supra-regional, at times even global' – a key characteristic of early modern history.⁸ Whether focusing on economic connections or cultural transfers, or a combination of the two, the five authors explore the manifold ways in which global processes manifested in different local constellations, or how they were constituted by them. In combining global and local perspectives, they thus align with Patrick Manning's view that 'our research framework needs to account explicitly for the global as well as the regional level of experience'.⁹

The topics explored in this Forum do not, of course, exhaust recent trends and debates in the field of maritime history. This was also testified to by the diversity of research projects presented at the conference in Porto, three of which are included in the form of research notes in this issue of the *International Journal of Maritime History*. Eberhard Crailsheim explores the social mechanisms through which merchant groups in early modern Seville and Manila established the level of interpersonal trust that allowed them to forge globe-spanning trade relations. Going in a very different direction, Ana María Rivera Medina presents 'E-port. Atlantic Cartography, XIVth–XVIIIth centuries', a project in digital humanities that illustrates the benefits of using new technologies when working with historical maps as primary sources.¹⁰ Studying the changing cartographic representations of coastal areas and port cities in the Atlantic, the interdisciplinary 'e-port' project has created a database of more than 800 ports, which is also available to other researchers under the open access scheme. José Luís Gasch-Tomás, Koldo Trápaga Monchet and Ana Rita Trindade – who all work on the research project 'ForSeaDiscovery'¹¹ – examine the shipbuilding policies of the Spanish Empire in the early seventeenth century. Their investigation is guided by the wider research questions of 'ForSeaDiscovery': to what extent did shipbuilding cause deforestation in the Iberian Peninsula during the early modern era? and how did it compare to other causes of forest clearance, such as agriculture or rising demands for timber due to population growth?

8. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia', *Modern Asian Studies*, 31, No. 3 (1997), 735–62; at 745.

9. Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past* (Basingstoke, 2003).

10. 'E-port. Cartografía Atlántica. Siglos XIV–XVIII', <http://e-port.linhd.es/>

11. 'ForSEADiscovery – Forest Resources for Iberian Empires: Ecology and Globalization in the Age of Discovery', <http://forseadiscovery.eu/>

However, investigated here primarily as a zone of cultural encounters, as a means of economic interaction, as sublime space of human imagination, the sea also needs to be treated as an object of analysis in its own right. One particularly promising area for further research lies beneath the blue surface – in the connection between human activities and marine life, between maritime and environmental history. Historians and marine environmentalists alike complain about the almost complete lack of marine environmental history, particularly for the early modern period. As stated by Colazingari:

Humanity has interacted with the marine environment since the earliest times. However, man only very recently began to gain effective working access to the depth of the oceans – intervention being limited to the surface because of the lack of proper technology.¹²

The social, ecological, and economic value of the ocean is beyond doubt. As a supplier of goods, it provides considerable amounts of food, minerals and energy resources. As a means of transportation, it facilitates trade, tourism and transfers. As a source of renewable energy, the oceans comprise a potential that mankind has just begun to exploit (tidal electricity generation, wave energy converter and ocean thermal energy conversion). Acknowledging the economic relevance of the sea justifies the increasing interest in studying it from an environmental point of view. Simultaneously, since humans have only recently acquired the technological capacity to systematically and exhaustively extract resources from the oceans, environmental concerns about the preservation of ocean resources also demand attention. These aspects have been dealt with by a number of research projects that deserve further mention. One of the most important of those, and one of a few with a historical trajectory, is the ‘History of Marine Animal Populations’, a global initiative to study past ocean life and how it was impacted by human interaction with the sea.¹³ The project forms part of the ‘Census of Marine Life’, an interdisciplinary and international programme that has assessed and estimated the abundance, distribution and diversity of ocean life, past, present and future. Another example is the ‘Estuarine Living Marine Resources’ project conducted by the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration from 1985 to 2000 and which developed a comprehensive database of 122 species – from fish and shellfish over migrating birds to coastal shore wildlife – inhabiting North-American estuaries.¹⁴ More recently, the ‘Oceans Past Platform’ (OPP) brought together historians, archaeologists, social scientists and marine scientists to engage in dialogue and collaboration with ocean and coastal managers in order to develop a better understanding of the value of marine resource extraction to European societies.¹⁵

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12. Marco Colazingari, *Marine Natural Resources and Technological Development: An Economic Analysis of the Wealth from the Oceans* (New York, 2008), 1.
 13. *History of Marine Animal Populations* (HMAP), Census of Marine Life, <http://www.coml.org/projects/history-marine-animal-populations-hmap>
 14. *Estuarine Species Database for the NOAA Estuarine Living Marine Resources Program*, The National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science, <https://coastalscience.noaa.gov/projects/detail?key=107>
 15. *Oceans Past Platform*, COST Actions – European Cooperation in Science and Technology, http://www.cost.eu/COST_Actions/isch/IS1403

From a historical point of view, the universe of topics in maritime or marine environmental history seems almost infinite: questions of biodiversity, marine ecosystems, consumption patterns, marine resource depletion, energy production and hazardous waste management are but some of the topics that might be explored. However, evaluating long-term changes and environmental processes is invariably a difficult, if not almost impossible, task. In order to forge new pathways of research, maritime historians will have to continue being creative in gathering new source material and extracting fresh information from existing evidence. And while historians will need to uphold their thorough contextual and textual analysis, they also will need to make available source metadata and create calibrated digital datasets. This should go along with a willingness to use new methodologies made available by other disciplines, for example for means of modelling and visualisation. Such a collaborative approach could allow for analysing environmental and geological changes, along with the social and economic mechanisms responsible for these changes, and their long-term consequences. Testing hypotheses based on interdisciplinary methods and creating significant samples that can be processed by mathematical, ecological or geological modelling are some parallel strategies designed to overcome the difficulties environmental history faces due to the lack of consistent historical data. Establishing a functioning cooperation between the different disciplines is therefore paramount for such a set-up, and it presents one of the biggest challenges for maritime historians.

Author biographies

Amélia Polónia is Associate Professor, and Director of the Master's Program in African Studies, at the University of Porto. Vice-President of IMHA, her scientific interests include port history, transfers and flows between oceans, informal mechanisms of empire building, maritime communities and the environmental impact of the historical uses of the seas. She is the co-editor of *Beyond Empires: Self Organizing Cross Imperial Networks vs Institutional Empires, 1500–1800* (Brill, 2016), with Cátia Antunes; *Maritime History as Global History* (IMEHA 2011), with Maria Fusaro; and the author of 'The Environmental Impacts of the Historical Uses of the Seas in the First Global Age', in *EOLSS* (Eolss Publishers, 2014).

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Daniel Lange is a doctoral fellow in the EU-funded doctoral programme 'TEEME – Text and Event in Early Modern Europe' at the Freie Universität Berlin, and the University of Kent, UK. He was awarded an MA in history and economics by FUB, and has worked there as an assistant lecturer, and at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, as a researcher. His research interests lie in the social and cultural history of early modern Europe, notably the manuscript journals and voyage narratives of late-seventeenth-century English seafarers, through which he explores the intersection of piracy and autobiographical writing.