Rolf Strootman, Floris van den Eijnde and Roy van Wijk (eds.)

Empires of the Sea. Maritime Networks in World History

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In 1627-28, during the siege to the port-city of La Rochelle, Cardinal Richelieu (1585-1642) stated that "the one who masters the sea would rule the world." His sentence testifies to the contemporary awareness that successful empires rose trough sea power. The main goal of this collective book of essays is to discuss how this concept of empire, based on sea dominance, arose and evolved from Antiquity to the Early Modern period.

But what is the meaning of "empire," especially regarding the sea? Can it be applied to Pre-Classical and Classical Greece, Ptolemaic Egypt, Medieval Genoa and Denmark, Early Modern Melaka, Portuguese Asia, Sweden or the Dutch Republic? This discussion is often associated with the "Imperial Turn," a much-debated topic regarding Land empires, which is not commonly used regarding sea empires. The aim is to produce a first reflection on the topic of empires that were built on and sustained their power trough sea dominance, mainly in military or commercial terms. The book is composed of fourteen chapters and is divided into three sections: the Mediterranean part, the Northern European examples and the Early Modern Oceanic cases.

As the editors stress, until the end of the 18th century, most world sea empires were not its core essentially European but mainly Mediterranean or Asian. This is especially the case of the Portuguese, Dutch and English maritime empires in Asia. Instead of ruling from strong institutions in Europe, they were much more based on intermediaries, brokers and translators. Networks of merchants, soldiers and missionaries were more important than the orders from the centre to the periphery, an outdated concept. In several empires the relevance of multipolarity and of "freelance" enterprises becomes evident. Others were based on networks and the tenuous boundaries between official and non-official empires. The chronological approach helps to understand the evolution on the concept of "maritime empire."

In his essay about Mycenae in the Aegean between the 17th and 14th centuries BC, Jorrit M. Kelder highlights that archaeological evidence from Greece and Egypt points to the intense commercial relations between both places. These maritime contacts were

determinant in the building of Mycenae maritime dominance in the Aegean, although the concept of empire cannot be applied to this context. Almost the same conclusion can be drawn from Floris van den Eijinde article on Athens in the Archaic Period (700-480 BC). It is hard to observe in this age a first Athenian maritime empire, when other Greek competitors, such as Aegina or Corinth, were more powerful. Thucydides (460-400 BC) also wrote that the Athenians only became sailors when they were forced by Persian invasions. But this does not mean that Athens naval power was not increasing in the North Aegean. Competition between three families in Athens shows that the creation of the first settlements away from home (the *klerouchia*) in the Hellespont or the occupation of islands such as Lemnos and Imbros, should not be disconnected from Athenian increased naval power by the end of 6th century BC. Also, as Roy van Wijk underlines, when studying the contested hegemonies of Athens, Thebes and Persia in the Aegean during the 360's BC, even successful thalassocracies, such as Athens in the 5th and 4th centuries, were no match for the resources of lands empires such as Persia. Tracing back Epaminondas (418-362 BC) plan to transform Thebes into a thalassocracy able to rival Athens, Wijk argues that Thebes failed to build a maritime structure. This was due to the lack of support from Persia and to Epaminondas inability to convince many members of the Second Athenian League to rebel against Athens, even arguing that the First League was used by Athens to fuel its maritime ambitions.

Still, for all these cases we are dealing with thalassocracies and not maritime empires since their power and scope of action was not only based on the sea. A different case comes when Rolf Strootman analyses the Ptolemaic dynasty. As a Hellenistic state that raised from the partition of the empire created by Alexander the Great (356-323 BC), the Ptolemies were far from being just a Greek-Macedonian dynasty ruling only Egypt. Considering the wars and rivalries with the Hellenistic Seleucids, the Ptolemies became maritime in their essence. Not only did they rival the Seleucids in Syria, but they also contested with them hegemony in the Aegean. This, in turn, lead to attempts of military and commercial domination in the Eastern Mediterranean stretching from Egypt to Cyrus, Anatolia, Thrace and even to the Black Sea. Ptolemaic rulers extended their influence to the whole Red Sea, Nubia, modern Lybia, and also established a garrison in Socotra, in the Indian Ocean. This enabled contacts with Maurya India, as well as with Ceylon. Therefore, it is possible to quietly term the Ptolemies as an empire, and one whose aim was at controlling sea routes for military and commercial purposes. Such is also the example of Medieval Genoa, as studied by Thomas Kirk, although in a different way. Starting from the 11th century on, Genoa was gradually able to impose trading routes across the entire Mediterranean. Commercial relations were established with punitive raids against modern Tunisia and with the establishment in Egypt. The Crusades were also an opportunity to rival the Venetian in the Levant and to extend Genoese presence into the Byzantine empire and the Black Sea. From the 13th century until the beginning of the 15th century, the Republic also settled its merchants in

Seville and Lisbon, enabling Genoese participation in the maritime trade with Northern Europe. But domestic rivalries between families meant there was no coherent rule of the Mediterranean colonies. This factor explains the Genoese collapse due to the Ottoman expansion and why, only in the 16th century, with the aristocratic Republic, Genoa recovered its major role in the European economy. So, Medieval Genoa case could be termed empire if we consider it to mean a set of networks of trade.

Sailing North, Marco Mostert approaches the linguistic factor and its relevance in the rise of maritime empires during the Middle Ages in the Northern seas of Europe. For a maritime empire to be successful a common language or understanding needs to exist among maritime communities, such as merchants and sailors. Thus, Latin, French, Danish and German became the *lingua franca* in the Northern seas in different times during the Middle Ages and served as factors of connectivity. In his chapter on Medieval Denmark, Thomas K. Heeboll-Holm regards the Valdemerian period (1157-1332) as possibly the one in which a thalassocracy existed. Heeboll-Holm underlines the importance of Danish control over the entrance of the Baltic and also the royal campaigns in Northern Germany, Estonia and Livonia that helped to create the Danish thalassocracy. The "Germanization" process did not collide with this merchant and military expansion. Still, the emergence of the Hansa economic power, lead to the overthrown of the Danish thalassocracy from 1250 onwards. But, if for Medieval Denmark, the concept of maritime empire may not be fully applied, it fits better to 17th century Sweden *Dominium Maris Baltici*, studied by Olaf Morke. Since Sweden left the Kalmar Union with Denmark and Norway in 1523, the Swedish Monarquia mixta tried to contain Danish power in order to transform Sweden into a viable state. It is hard to deny the 16th century historical narrative of the Swedish as the true Goths and the famous *Carta Marina* of 1536 as an attempt to portray Sweden as the Lutheran power fated to successfully oppose Orthodox Russia. Still, Morke shows that the Swedish dominion of Northern Germany, Estonia and Livonia, during the 17th century, was linked to the financial and political supports from the Dutch and the French. This is especially the case for the connection with the Dutch Republic since 1614, considered as the main power in the Baltic during the 17th century. So, the Swedish domain should be considered as a second grade and as a borrowed empire.

In his study about Early Modern Mercantilism in the Indian Ocean, Anjana Singh points out that connectivity in the Indian Ocean was present long before the arrival of the Europeans. Noting Admiral Zheng He (1371-1433) expeditions, Singh observes that they cannot be seen as an attempt to impose a Chinese rule in the seas of Asia since, prior to the arrival of the Portuguese, no Asian power tried to rule the entire Indian Ocean. Even the Portuguese and their "Estado da Índia" were never able to control all nautical routes within Asia, despite the imposition of the "cartazes" system. The Portuguese maritime empire in Asia followed a model very different from that of the commercial companies later created by the Dutch and the English. At stake were two forms of maritime empire, a more formal one controlled from the Realm (the

Portuguese), and a more merchant-warrior system (the Dutch and the English), that only in 18th century evolved to inland domination. Yet, this interpretation is somehow challenged by Cátia Antunes study on the transnational networks in the Portuguese maritime empire. Focusing on several developments in Portuguese historiography, Antunes sustains that the Portuguese Crown was unable to fully control its empire. Instead, the local communities ran it on a much more regular basis. Analysing the cases of Ouidah, in the Western coast of Africa, Goa shadow empire in the gulf of Bengal and the case of Macau, she detaches the informal networks of trade and power created by local actors that ruled in these areas, much more than Lisbon. Antunes concludes that these networks were agents of globalization: the informal empire that justified the formal one.

Studying the case of Melaka between 1400-1528, Peter Borschberg shows how the Melaka sultanate built a thalassocracy. Profiting from its strategic location in the straits, Melaka became the trading zone for several merchant communities and maritime cultures. Before the Portuguese conquest, Melaka sultans organized a complex administrative system to tax the trade within the city. Still, Borschberg stresses that Melaka cannot be considered a state in European terms and very hardly an empire, unless empire means a web of commercial networks. Analysing the "reluctant empire," as sometimes VOC is called, Remco Raben underlines that the Dutch presence in Asia was essentially a thalassocracy. Approaching VOC as just a commercial venture because it was regarded as a Company of merchants in Europe, is missing the critical point that the Dutch were perceived as another European state in the seas of Asia due to highly armed actions. However, this idea disappears once research is made on VOC´s structures in Asia. In order to succeed in imposing their commercial networks and later their territorial expansion, the Dutch were forced to adapt to the local reality. Soldiers and slaves were recruited from all shores of the Indian Ocean and a multiracial society was created in Batavia as a path to fuel extraction revenues and to territorial expansion after the downfall of maritime incomes in the 18th century. Although this is not directly mentioned by Raben, one may conclude that the Dutch followed the previous example of the Portuguese. Studying the pirate networks in the Caribbean, Kris Lane essay can be considered as an approach to informal empires in the Caribbean. She explains how the Caribbean pirates were replaced by the raiding activities of the Spanish *conquistadores*. After the arrival of the French and the English, religious tones of Protestantism served to oppose the Spanish rule in the Caribbean, giving rise to a new buccaneer era. This is especially the case of the Dutch, who took the pirating war in the Caribbean to a new scale. By then and from 1650 onwards, the buccaneer actions never ceased to develop until there was a full English Royal Navy campaign to hunt down the once supported pirates. But, as Lane demonstrates, this campaign only succeeded after 1714 and it is hard to deny the continuity between Spanish, French, English and Dutch buccaneers.

Thus, the book provides a first reflexion on the topic of sea empires using the tools of Comparative and Global History. In each case, the difficulty of using the concept "empire" to define all historical realities becomes evident. Instead, for most of the examples, the concept "thalassocracy" fits better, at least for the initial stage of several cases. Yet this topic can be deepened with other cases that might be interesting for future approaches. Regarding Antiquity, the most obvious would be the analysis of Phoenician, Carthaginian and Roman sea empires. For the Middle Ages, studies on the Byzantine empire and on Islamic empires (the Umayyads, the Abbasids, the Fatimids or the Mamelukes) or even on Tang China, would be very interesting. For the Early Modern period, the cases of the Ottoman empire, for both the Mediterranean sea and the Indian Ocean, the Omani, in the 17th century Indian Ocean, the Spanish maritime empire in its "Mar del Sur," meaning the maritime empire in the Pacific, and also the French case, could also contribute to deepen this discussion. The book succeeds in the drawing the attention to the relevant topic of maritime empires and how they evolved during History, although a further dialogue with other non-Western maritime traditions, such as those from Islam, Indian or Chinese civilizations, would certainly enrich even more this inquiry.

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