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SEA AND OCEAN BASINS AS FRAMEWORKS OF HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

JERRY H. BENTLEY

ABSTRACT. Since the mid-nineteenth century, historians have taken national states as the principal focus of their scholarship. Since the mid-twentieth century, they have increasingly recognized the importance of large-scale historical processes that transcend the boundaries of national states, and they have identified large-scale zones of interaction that help to bring these processes into clear focus. Sea and ocean basins show considerable promise as frameworks for the analysis of some historical processes. They would not serve well as the absolute or definitive categories of historical analysis because their contours and characteristics have changed dramatically over time with shifting relationships between bodies of water and masses of land. But they are especially useful for bringing focus to processes of commercial, biological, and cultural exchange, which have profoundly influenced the development of both individual societies and the world as a whole. *Keywords:* economic integration, historical analysis, maritime regions, ocean basins, sea basins, social integration.

For more than a century European and Euro-American scholars have treated history as a property belonging almost exclusively to national states. Leopold von Ranke and his followers lived in an era of dynamic state building, and they focused their scholarly attention on the institutions, constitutions, foreign policies, and political experiences of national communities. Even though more recent scholars have broadened the scope of historical analysis to include social, economic, and cultural themes, they have most commonly placed their studies in the framework of national communities. By the early twentieth century, scholars in China, India, and other lands had begun to adopt the European and Euro-American view of history as the property of coherent national communities in the analysis of their own historical experiences (Duara 1995).

Since World War II historians and other scholars have become increasingly aware that the focus on national communities distracts attention from large-scale processes that have deeply influenced both the experiences of individual societies and the development of the world as a whole. In combination, mass migrations, campaigns of imperial expansion, cross-cultural trade, biological exchanges, transfers of technology, and cultural exchanges have left quite a mark on the world's past. Adequate study of these processes requires historians to recognize analytical categories much larger than national communities, and a growing body of scholarly literature demonstrates the usefulness of such large-scale approaches to the past (Bentley 1996b). The recognition of large-scale economic regions, for example, has been a foundation for the investigation of cross-cultural trade and the formation of world systems (Wallerstein 1974–1989; Curtin 1984). Similarly, the recognition of large-scale ecological zones has underwritten influential studies of biological diffusions and their consequences (Crosby 1972; McNeill 1976; Crosby 1986). Though less developed as an approach, the

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analysis of large-scale cultural communities also shows promise for purposes of understanding processes of cultural exchange (Bentley 1993; Voll 1994).

On the next-to-last page of their critical look at conventional metageography, Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen raised the possibility that “maritime regions” and “communities oriented around the world’s major seas” might serve as alternatives to national states and the various other terrestrial constructs that scholars, public officials, and the general public have traditionally taken as natural or coherent world regions (Lewis and Wigen 1997, 204). This suggestion was not entirely new: It came almost fifty years after the original publication of Fernand Braudel’s analysis of the Mediterranean basin (Braudel 1949, 1972). Braudel’s vision of the sea as an avenue of integration has had considerable influence on historical scholarship and has inspired other sea-based studies, such as those of K. N. Chaudhuri on the Indian Ocean basin (1985), Anthony Reid on island southeast Asia (1988–1993), and Philip D. Curtin on the Atlantic Ocean basin (1998). But it has not prompted a general reconception of social space or historical geography, so an effort to provoke further discussion seems very much in order. Moreover, the suggestion of Lewis and Wigen arises in the context of contemporary instability, as established geopolitical blocs dissolve, new formations emerge, and global interactions undermine even the world’s fundamental unit of political organization, the national state. Fresh conceptions of social space and historical geography may well improve on received categories in reflecting the dynamics that have shaped the world’s development.

Granting that received constructs such as continents, civilizations, areas (as in “area studies”), and even nations are exceedingly problematic (Rafael 1994; Duara 1995; Palat 1996; Lewis and Wigen 1997; Wallerstein 1997; Cumings 1998), can alternative constructs organized around sea or ocean basins serve as more useful categories for purposes of conceptualizing the world and understanding its historical dynamics? Scholars at Duke University have launched a genuinely exciting project entitled “Oceans Connect: Culture, Capital, and Commodity Flows across Basins” to explore alternatives to traditional geographical conceptions and conventional frameworks of historical analysis by focusing on interactions across the world’s major bodies of water and integration around sea and ocean basins. The Web site for this initiative, [<http://www.duke.edu/web/oceans/>], highlights “trans-oceanic relationships and exchanges” in explaining its approach, and the Oceans Connect subtitle specifies “culture, capital, and commodity flows” as major themes of the project. This approach has strong potential to dissolve artificial and sometimes absurd distinctions among supposedly coherent and ostensibly distinct regions (Europe or Asia) by drawing attention to systematic and long-term interactions conducted across bodies of water (the Mediterranean Sea or the Black Sea). Attention to maritime regions is a welcome development because it helps bring focus to historical processes of commercial, biological, and cultural exchange that other geographical constructs often obscure (Bentley 1996a, 1998).

Yet efforts to view the world through the optic of sea and ocean basins must consider problems inherent to the project as well as limitations to its usefulness. The

contours and characteristics of maritime regions sometimes change dramatically with shifting relationships between bodies of water and masses of land. Thus sea and ocean basins come into clear focus as units of analysis to the extent that human societies engage in interactions across bodies of water, and they become a less useful focus as societies pursue their interests through other spaces. From the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, for example, the Atlantic Ocean basin was a tightly integrated zone of communication and exchange, as triangular trades linked societies and economies in Europe, Africa, North America, South America, and the Caribbean. During the nineteenth century, however, after the abolition of slave trading and the establishment of independent societies throughout the Americas, European peoples increasingly pursued mercantile and colonial interests in Asian and African lands, while Euro-American peoples turned their attention to the development of interior continental regions. Interactions across the Atlantic Ocean did not come to an end by any means, but they did not influence the development of European, African, and American societies as deeply as they had in the previous three centuries (Karras 1992; McNeill 1992). Given the constantly changing relationships between bodies of water and masses of land, there can be no question of reifying maritime regions into permanent and stable units of historical and geographical analysis.

Like other approaches, maritime analyses are also susceptible to partial and partisan uses. Braudel himself undertook his famous study partly out of regional pride, seeking to counterbalance scholarly assumptions that in the sixteenth century the Mediterranean was becoming a backwater to the Atlantic (1949, 1972). Recent studies on the Atlantic Ocean basin also indulge in partial analyses. Paul Gilroy has offered a penetrating study of the African diaspora under the rubric of the "Black Atlantic" (1993), which in fact in Gilroy's treatment takes the form of a black Anglophone Atlantic that does not consider the quite different experiences of black Lusophone, Francophone, and Hispanophone communities. Meanwhile, historians of "Greater Britain" and European expansion posit a *de facto* white Atlantic that brings British imperialism and migration into clear focus but makes little or no place for peoples of American or African ancestry (for only a few prominent examples of this body of scholarship, see Bailyn 1986a, 1986b, 1996; Canny 1994; Armitage 1999; Pocock 1999). The point here is not that partial perspectives are useless: To the contrary, they have good potential to cast important issues in high relief. By indulging the particular interests and concerns of specific ethnic or racial identities, however, they also occlude the larger historical dynamics that arise from interactions among peoples of different societies.

While recognizing the difficulties posed by these analytical and interpretative snares, I concentrate here on several other problems: the temporal boundaries of large-scale maritime regions, their spatial boundaries, and the relationships of maritime regions both to each other and to the larger world. These problems are thorny and would probably stymie any effort to make sea and ocean basins the fundamental categories of historical and geographical analysis. In fairness, it should be

pointed out that no one has called for a totalizing metageography based on maritime regions: It would be pointless to do away with the myths of continents, civilizations, areas, and national states only to replace them with an equally misleading myth of sea and ocean basins. But even if there is no effort to make sea and ocean basins a holy grail of historical and geographical analysis, any project to construct maritime regions needs to devote careful consideration to the relationships between individual regions and the larger world.

One issue that calls for attention has to do with the temporal boundaries of sea and ocean basins. At what point would it be reasonable to posit meaningful integration of “maritime regions” and “communities oriented around the world’s major seas” (Lewis and Wigen 1997, 204)? There is abundant evidence that humans plied the world’s waters at early dates and initiated exchanges that shaped the societies of all peoples linked. Analysis of stone tools on Flores Island (Indonesia) strongly suggests that *Homo erectus* used watercraft as early as 800,000 to 900,000 years ago (Morwood and others 1998), although, admittedly, large-scale trade, migration, and interaction did not begin until much later. Archaeological evidence shows that during the third and second millennia B.C.E., trade passed regularly between the Indus River Valley and Mesopotamia, some of it probably through the Arabian Sea (Ratnagar 1981). The eastern Mediterranean was a busy avenue of trade from the third millennium B.C.E. (Casson 1991), and commercial records report a fleet of forty ships transporting cedar logs from Lebanon to Egypt about 2600 B.C.E. (Rowlands, Larsen, and Kristiansen 1987). Between 1500 B.C.E. and 1000 C.E., Austronesian seafarers undertook a remarkable series of voyages and migrations that enabled them to establish communities from Rapa Nui (Easter Island) to Madagascar. Captain James Cook called their Polynesian descendants “the most extensive nation on earth,” and Cook did not even know about the Polynesians’ cousins in Madagascar (Lewthwaite 1967; Bellwood 1987; Finney 1994b).

Do early migrations and trade warrant the establishment of sea and ocean basins as categories of historical analysis for ancient times? The issue hinges on the degree of social and economic integration between human communities over the waters. “Integration” is a frequently invoked but particularly loose and undertheorized concept. There is no conventional standard, such as the Richter scale or Moh’s scale of hardness, by which to measure social and economic integration, even on a relative rather than absolute basis. Yet the major themes of the Oceans Connect project—“trans-oceanic relationships and exchanges” and “culture, capital, and commodity flows across basins”—presume some degree of social and economic integration. In the interests of forging a rough working tool—if not a proper standard—it may be useful to think of integration as a historical process that unfolds when cross-cultural interactions bring about a division of labor between and among interacting societies or when they facilitate commercial, biological, or cultural exchanges between and among interacting societies on a regular and systematic basis.

Undoubtedly, some early maritime interactions had extensive repercussions that fueled processes of incipient integration. In the Mediterranean basin, for exam-

ple, Phoenician, Greek, and Roman merchants successively organized distribution and exchange networks that encouraged the building of states and the division of labor long before Braudel's age of Philip II (Cunliffe 1988; Casson 1991; Aubet 1993; Sherratt 1993a, 1993b). Similar processes of incipient integration may be datable to the late centuries B.C.E. in the South China Sea (Wang 1958) and to the seventh century C.E. for the larger Indian Ocean basin (Chaudhuri 1985; Hall 1985; Hourani 1995).

In the Atlantic and Pacific basins, however, it is much less convincing to posit any significant degree of social and economic integration before the sixteenth century C.E. Despite spirited arguments that west African mariners traveled frequently to the pre-Columbian Americas (Van Sertima 1976), it seems likely that the only recurrent transatlantic voyaging before 1492 was that of Scandinavian mariners and perhaps European fishermen, and whatever contacts they produced did not generate sustained interactions (Phillips 1988, 164–184). Sporadic encounters undoubtedly took place, but they did not result in a division of labor, nor did they lead to regular commercial, biological, and cultural exchanges. Thus, by the guideline suggested above, the Atlantic Ocean basin began to move toward social and economic integration only in the sixteenth century.

The Pacific Ocean basin was the site of frequent interaction well before modern times—much more so than was the Atlantic—although my sense is that the Pacific also did not experience social and economic integration until modern times. Austronesian mariners populated almost all of the habitable islands of the Pacific Ocean, and in most of them they introduced a distinctive complex of food crops and domesticated animals, including taro, yams, bananas, breadfruit, dogs, pigs, and chickens (Bellwood 1987). Moreover, their descendants, conventionally referred to as Polynesians, Micronesians, and Melanesians, interacted both among themselves and with peoples in east Asia, southeast Asia, and South America. Islanders from Samoa, Tonga, and Fiji traded, intermarried, visited, allied, and fought with one another for centuries before European mariners ventured into the Pacific Ocean. Some Micronesian and Melanesian peoples traded frequently and perhaps even regularly with merchants from Malaya, Indonesia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Okinawa, the Ryukyu Islands, and possibly Japan as well (Lewthwaite 1967). On the other side of the ocean, inhabitants of Rapa Nui had at least sporadic contacts with the peoples of coastal South America, especially Peru. Between about 400 and 700 C.E.—long before most scholars would recognize an integrated Pacific Ocean basin—sweet potatoes reached the Pacific islands from South America. Sweet potatoes quickly spread throughout Polynesia and beyond to New Caledonia and Vanuatu. They found a place in diets throughout the Pacific islands, and they were crucially important to the Maori population of New Zealand, where the staple crops of tropical Polynesia did not flourish (Yen 1974). In spite of these transoceanic interactions, however, it would be premature to speak of an integrated Pacific Ocean basin before modern times. Though frequent, early interactions there did not generate a division of labor, and outside the central Pacific (embracing the Samoan, Tongan, and Fijian

archipelagoes) long-distance transactions took place mostly through down-the-line networks rather than direct interactions that might have facilitated commercial, biological, and cultural exchanges on a regular and systematic basis.

Thus, for the Atlantic and Pacific regions, thoroughgoing social and economic integration is a process of modern times. By the late sixteenth century Spanish and other European mariners were beginning to establish direct connections among the subregions of both the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean basins. By the mid-seventeenth century triangular trades were linking the fortunes of Europe, Africa, and the Americas, and the Manila galleons had forged a slender but significant bond between the economies of Spanish America and east Asia. By the nineteenth century whaling, plantation agriculture, and trade in sandalwood, sea slugs, and labor had brought almost all of the Pacific islands and Australia into a larger oceanic economy.

For scholars who deal with the period after the sixteenth century, however, when both the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean basins were showing clear signs of social and economic integration, the problem of temporal boundaries fades before the problem of spatial boundaries. Like the issue of temporal boundaries, the question of spatial boundaries poses difficulties for efforts to view the world primarily through the lens of sea and ocean basins. Overlap between maritime regions was already an old story by the sixteenth century: Hellenistic mariners spilled out of the Mediterranean into the Indian Ocean by the third century B.C.E.; and, according to Strabo, in the early first century C.E. as many as 120 ships a year departed Roman Egypt for India (Miller 1969; Casson 1989; Begley and De Puma 1991; Casson 1991). Another old story was the organization of large maritime regions into subdivisions that allowed mariners to take best advantage of winds, currents, and climatic conditions. By the eleventh century merchants were organizing maritime trade in the larger Indian Ocean basin around three coherent subregions—the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and the China seas (Chaudhuri 1985; Abu-Lughod 1989).

But after the sixteenth century global interactions increasingly undermined the coherence of distinct maritime regions, making the problem of spatial boundaries much more acute. J. H. Parry resolved this problem by enlarging the writ of Europe: "All the seas of the world are one," he declared, and in his treatment European mariners merged them all into a global European lake (Parry 1981, xi). Without endorsing Parry's Eurocentrism, I agree that the opening of the world's waters and the globalization of exchange after the sixteenth century complicates efforts to construe the world in terms of distinctive sea and ocean basins: To some extent, maritime history after the sixteenth century resolves into global history. Recent research on silver flows highlights the significance of interoceanic exchange in the early modern world. Dennis O. Flynn and Arturo Giráldez have argued that the amount of Spanish-American silver transported by galleon from Acapulco to Manila roughly equaled that shipped across the Atlantic and through the Indian Ocean, while even larger quantities traveled overland from Europe to points east (Flynn and Giráldez 1994, 1995a, 1995b). A large but indeterminate percentage of world silver mined between 1500 and 1800 flowed ultimately to China in exchange for silk, porcelain, and

lacquerware that made its way to Europe and the Americas as well as to lands of the Indian Ocean basin (Bjork 1998; Frank 1998). In this light, the early modern world was not so much a collection of distinct, bounded sea and ocean basins as the site of intricate emerging networks of global communication and exchange. Indeed, from this point of view, efforts to construct distinct sea and ocean basins as the principal geographical units of modern history may even appear to verge on a functional reinscription of the myth of continents, by which the Atlantic world signifies greater Europe, the Indian Ocean basin represents greater Asia, and the Pacific basin figures as the exotic playground of intrepid European explorers and whalers displaced by Euro-American and east Asian capitalists.

Although they would be awkward as the fundamental categories of historical and geographical analysis, maritime regions nevertheless have tremendous value as constructs that bring large-scale historical processes into clear focus. Alternative frameworks, including continents, civilizations, areas, and most especially national states, have structured conceptions of the world so thoroughly that scholars generally do not even recognize the depth of their influence. But these received constructs make limited provision for processes of commercial, biological, and cultural exchange that have profoundly influenced the development of human societies—or at least scholars who employ these frameworks have not usually preferred to examine processes of exchange. Sea and ocean basins, however, have figured historically as some of the principal avenues of commercial, biological, and cultural exchanges, so judicious deployment of maritime categories has strong potential to highlight these processes and their effects (Finney 1994a). Maritime optics bring focus to processes such as the Columbian exchange (Crosby 1972; McNeill 1994), the Atlantic slave trade (Conniff and Davis 1994; Thornton 1998), the organization of plantation societies in the Americas and Oceania (Curtin 1998), the formation of diaspora communities (Gilroy 1993), migrations of European peoples to the Americas and other temperate regions (Crosby 1986), indentured-labor migrations of mostly Asian peoples to the Americas and to tropical regions around the world (Emmer 1986; Emmer and Mörner 1992; Northrup 1995), and the construction of global networks of trade, communication, and exchange (Frank 1998).

Furthermore, sea and ocean basins sometimes serve as a context in which the experiences of local maritime regions take on greater clarity or deeper significance. James Francis Warren's analysis of the Sulu sultanate illustrates this point (1981, 1998). During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Sulu Sea was a buffer zone between the Dutch-dominated waters of Indonesia and the Spanish sphere of influence in the Philippines. Warren traces currents from several different waters in showing how Taosug mariners built and maintained a maritime buffer state based on trade and slave raiding until Spanish naval campaigns, British steamships, and Chinese migration transformed the conditions that enabled the sultanate to flourish. Sea and ocean basins would also make appropriate contexts for the study of local maritime regions in the Baltic, the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, the Caribbean, the China seas, the Indian Ocean, and other waters.

If area studies offered a vision of the world that reflected the political, military, and economic concerns of the cold war era, as many critics have charged, studies that revolve around maritime regions and emphasize processes of exchange no doubt mirror an era of globalization. Accordingly, analyses that focus on the historical experiences of sea and ocean basins have the potential to serve as legitimizing genealogies of contemporary globalization. Some scholars may well exploit this potential and make studies of historical globalization the handmaiden to an ideology of globalism that endorses or promotes the contemporary capitalist style of globalization. That, however, is clearly not the only option available to students of maritime regions. If large-scale processes and cross-cultural interactions have long been important ingredients in the development of human societies, they are susceptible to analysis and critique as global realities that constitute a part of the longer historical context of contemporary globalization.

Perhaps the challenge for studies of sea and ocean basins is to probe the connections and dynamics fueling processes of integration in individual maritime regions without losing sight either of local experiences or of the global interactions that sometimes conditioned the experiences of the regions themselves. After all, history unfolds on different levels—local, regional, continental, hemispheric, oceanic, and global—and processes of integration and differentiation maintain a tension at all levels. In the lack of stable, nailed-down categories capable of supporting historical and geographical analysis at all times and places, sea and ocean basins offer particularly useful alternatives to earlier constructs because of their capacity to bring focus to so many large-scale processes of social and economic integration.

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