

Book Review

LINCOLN PAINE

The Sea Civilization: A Maritime History of the World

Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2013 (First edition), xxxvi+744p

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To write a «maritime history of the world» or even to add this as the subtitle of a book on sea civilization is no trivial feat. It is only in the past two decades, or so, that humanity truly saw itself as part of one globalized world. Maritime historians had preceded public perception, however, although based mostly on the study of trade and human flows since the time of massive global geographical discoveries marking the start of Modern Times. The objective - and the historians' - view has been recently completed by the societal subjective, so this has been indeed an opportune time for Lincoln Paine's endeavour to link historically documented maritime trends with the new global consciousness. It is in this light that Lincoln Paine offers us his narrative of history through the main vehicle for the latest - as well as the earliest - transformation of the world: The Sea.

Containing our historic knowledge of shipping - including the merchant marine interface with the naval - within six hundred pages of main text- is a much more daunting task than drawing its figure on the sand, as in the quote from medieval geographer Al Muquadassi fittingly introducing us to this large, yet concise, maritime history expedition into time. Geography proper follows, as maps, placed even before acknowledgements, set the scene appropriately, albeit not immediately aiding the uninformed reader to comprehend their starting point before the reading is done. In terms of the remaining structure, the twenty core chapters of the book, plus introduction, are complemented by a - naturally long - notes section taking the reader into the next one, this of Bibliography. The latter contains no less than 1094 works within its 46 pages, showing the amount

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of past knowledge consulted and the effort contained in the making of a volume concurrently rich in information and wide in terms of historical coverage over thousands of years.

In such an endeavour, the choice of angle for viewing all things maritime throughout the historic period - and before it - is critical. The author's previous research background on the «hardware» of shipping has provided him obviously with most appropriate instruments for such a journey: Maritime eras are invariably crystallized in, as well as often defined by, the design of ships and of their equipment, be that a simple sail or oar - from where the story and the book begin- to more complex constructions of the various famous wrecks which tell - through their curtailed lives - the maritime history of their times in many instances through the rest of the volume. The analysis, however, is based on a broader philosophy, well beyond the included stories of ships built, sunk, discovered or captured, and is equally well set in the interesting introduction; the only relative weakness of the latter, experienced occasionally in some passages to follow, is the use of an English vocabulary a little too sophisticated - though stimulating as well as educating - for the average international reader. The use of the word *shippers* (pp. 544, 547) to denote shipowners of not so distant centuries - before which the two functions were in practice totally confounded - or in the present (pp.590), may be considered collateral to this.

The main chapters begin with an unlikely jump from the temporal to the regional. This brings us to Oceania, in many respects a topical focus in recent years, underlining the contrast with what the author has already defined as the Eurocentric view of many earlier maritime history approaches. The reader is quickly carried away into the islands of the Pacific by a vivid style that relays scholarly information easily, while the start of the adventure into maritime time transports us into an unexpectedly early era of successful planned sea voyages. A map of the stages of this maritime progress originating in the area would have been helpful, however, as our imagination is invited to navigate through the ocean in that distant past.

The next chapter signals the start of the journey into more conventional maritime waters of eras bygone, all in retaining the endearingly sophisticated style with which all precious details reconstruct the past of sea travels on which one quickly embarks through the captivating descriptions. At this point,

the suggestion to introduce a timeline somewhere at the start of the volume as a guiding preamble - or eventually later in the text within the illustrated insert - would seem a welcome aid to the uninformed traveller. Yet, the lively writing takes us successfully without ever tiring through the remaining eighteen chapters and centuries to the present day. There, in the final twentieth chapter, the avenues of the future are drafted optimistically after a quick review of the post-war period. One passing minor remark in this vast sea of flowing text would be on page 86, where the mention of the dispute over Homer's birthplace makes us ponder on the range of alternative interpretations in historiography. One other would relate to the absence - in the otherwise most comprehensive list of references - of Gelina Harlaftis' two seminal monographs on various aspects of the history in Modern Times of the leading shipping community since before the crisis of the 1970s.

The only substantial remark, however, one can make in this cascade of captivating chapters, eras, routes and ships, is that - with rivers flowing through many parts of the book with fluency - the inclusion at the start of the book of inland waterways into the marine, seems somewhat unfair to the former. Nevertheless, the overall emphasis on the sea clearly overwhelms this on its fresh water feeders, as does the sea itself sometimes when it loses its benevolence during natural phenomena though in that case with usually disastrous repercussions.

Let us not forget that the sea may not be all good. Despite his ability to take us along with enthusiasm in the long journey, the author does not let us lose perspective. The fact that the sea allowed «to develop the transatlantic slave trade» (p.4) is sinister enough by itself to make its qualification as «Mare Tenebrosum», mentioned in the same paragraph of the introduction, a fitting - for many of its victims - description. Even as conditions on board were improving in the previous era of great migration, a gripping phrase (p.532) reminds us of the fate of many before the Plimpsoll life-saving loadline campaign: «Greed had replaced disease as the greatest threat to passengers and crews». Although glorified under the forgiving light of our love for maritime history and adventure, the sea that unites, as we mostly want to see it, has been, throughout all times, at the same time - for too many a time - a mass of water causing death and destruction. The reader of *The Sea Civilization* will close the cover of the book, however, positively awed and not appalled; considering all the lives and fortunes the white crests have swallowed, this is an achievement of the author in its own right.