The four-volume *The Sea in History* is the product of the Paris-based Association Océanides, which bills itself as a multidisciplinary project with three objectives: “to provide scientific proof that the oceans are at the heart of political, economic and social issues, to enhance the overall policy of the seas, and to train future generations.” Conceived in 2010 and published only seven years later, the set includes English and French essays by some 260 different scholars from forty countries.

According to general editor Christian Buchet, professor of maritime history at Catholic University of Paris, the intent was not to write a maritime history of the world, but to answer three basic questions: “Is the sea the differentiating factor in the overall development of populations? What developments can be attributed to the sea, both in general history and in the history of specific entities, particularly political entities? How did the sea modify the course of history for the population in question?”

As a reviewer of this quartet of books—3,618 pages, perhaps 1.7 million words—I had to devise my own set of questions. Chief of these is how well *The Sea in History* answers its own questions and, flowing from this, what is its intended audience, and how well do the books hang together. First, though, one must recognize that this is an unprecedented compilation of scholarship about how different people in different places and at different times have used—or prepared themselves and their communities to use—the sea.

Buchet and his collaborators have done an outstanding job of recruiting many of the best maritime historians working today, and the erudition on view here is impressive. I learned a lot I never knew, and was reminded of much I had forgotten. The authors were given free rein in how they approached their subjects, so some articles have an extremely tight focus, such as Giulia Rossi-Vairo’s biographically-oriented “Manuel Pessana et l’organisation de la flotte portugaise au XIVème siècle” (2.322–31), about a Portuguese admiral from Genoa, while others, like Richard T. Callaghan’s “The Taíno of the Caribbean: Six Thousand Years of Seafaring and Cultural Development,” are sweeping. Such variety gives the set an interesting texture, but it forces one to consider whether this is the best way to show that the sea is “the differentiating factor in the overall development of populations.”

**The Leading Question**

Certainly the sea is a differentiating factor in the development of people who live in proximity to it. But it is not necessarily, as Buchet asserts in his “General Conclusion” (published in French and English in each volume), “the single most powerful impetus to create a positive impact on historical trajectories.” There are many counter-examples. The settlement of Oceania by Pacific islanders proceeded by fits and starts over three thousand years. Periods of dramatic expansion and colonization of remote islands were followed by centuries of contraction, when long-distance voyaging, at least to undiscovered lands, was not the norm. Which periods should be regarded as positive, and which negative? More obvious, while Europe should be regarded as positive, and which negative? More obvious, while Europe operated as political entities—used the sea. Yet while evidence of the sea’s influence on “the overall development of human populations” crops up here and there, it is overshadowed by the attention to naval affairs and material trade and its administration (see Buchet, “General Conclusion”). There is little evaluation of the ways in which maritime enterprise has determined how art, literature, music, language, religion, law, philosophy, foodways, and other manifestations of our cultural life and humanity spread, mixed, and shaped societies and our impulses.

More concerning, while Buchet shows a clear (if overly optimistic) appreciation of the environmental threats to the world ocean, only Patrick Alderton, “Oil and Water;” Ingo Heidbrink, “Fisheries;” and Mark Maslin “Climate Change and World Trade;” address these directly. Given Océanides’ mandate “to provide scientific proof that the oceans are at the heart of political, economic, and social issues,” and the parlous state of the world ocean—a problem to which maritime historians no less than industry, military establishments, and the
general public (if not politicians) have turned their attention in the past decade—this is a surprising shortcoming.

The Audience
As is evident from the retail price of each volume and the 60:40 mix of English and French essays, The Sea in History is not published for a popular audience. Most essays are written by specialists for specialists, and it is unlikely that many of the contributors will find chapters in any of the other volumes of interest or use. As a result, this collection is indistinguishable from other collections of monographs on maritime history published by Boydell and other academic presses.

Here, the devil really is in the details. It is not clear that such a compendium needs more than one essay (much less three or four) on Venice, on Genoa, or on military orders to make the point that the sea was “the differentiating factor” in their histories. After all, in the case of these medieval entities, we are hardly in uncharted waters.

A collection of this sort calls for a broader vision. What is possible in the scope of a survey is evident from several excellent articles that cover enormous swathes of territory and sweeps of time. Of particular interest for the parallels between them are Barry Cunliffe’s “The Importance of the Sea for Prehistoric Societies in Western Europe,” and Mark J. Hudson’s “The Sea and Early Societies in the Japanese Islands.” Two pairs of surveys offer comparable chronologies but overlap unnecessarily: Pierre-Yves Manguin’s “L’Insulinde et la mer avant l’arrivée des Occidentaux,” and John Miksic’s “Ships, Sailors and Kingdoms of Ancient Southeast Asia;” and, more curious still, two contributions by Emmanuel Desclèves, “Développement maritime de la civilisation océanienne” and “Le modèle maritime polynésien ou l’océan source de stimulation intellectuelle.” Both regions deserve a far more detailed examination than can be given in a dozen or so pages, even by leading lights in the field. But if they deserve two articles apiece, their scope should be more clearly defined.

Nor must a survey cover long periods or vast areas. Sandra Blakely’s “Maritime Risk and Ritual Responses: Sailing with the Gods in the Ancient Mediterranean” and Paul Kennedy’s “The Sea and Seapower within the International System” sketch large-scale topics in brief but vivid strokes.

Ship-Shape and Bristol Fashion?
In his “General Conclusion,” Buchet wrestles with the rationale for dividing the series into four volumes based on a traditional Eurocentric chronology. As an alternative not taken, he suggests that “we can define not four eras but two which have presided over human destiny: the era of ‘the Mediterranean,’ and the era of the Atlantic (1.702). By Mediterraneans (plural), he means more or less discrete maritime regions the history of which have unfolded in more or less distinct ways. The problem with adopting either of these chronologies is that both are Eurocentric in the extreme. And while there are some fascinating articles on extra-European affairs—Alioune Dème’s “Fishing and interactions between the Middle Valley of the Senegal River and the Senegalo-Mauritian Atlantic coast during the last millennium BC,” and Heather McKillop’s “Early Maya Navigation and Maritime Connections in Mesoamerica,” to give two of the more exotic examples—a Eurocentric bent is apparent across all four volumes.

More than half the articles in The Ancient World deal with some aspect or other of the Mediterranean, compared with three articles on the Americas, one on northern Europe, nine on all of Asia (including Mesopotamia, which gets two), and one on Africa. In The Medieval World, 42 of the 75 articles concern Mediterranean and European maritime activities, while nearly two-thirds of the articles in The Early Modern World are about European maritime activities. The Modern World is more globally balanced, but the emphasis is on the perspective from nation-states.

The organizing principles differ from volume to volume. The table of contents for The Early Modern World has a three-tier hierarchy; The Ancient World chapters are divided among “Pre-historical Case Studies” and “Historical Case Studies,” and the latter are further divided by region. For The Middle Ages and The Modern World, the tables of contents are simply lists of articles, with little logic of either theme or chronology, especially the latter.

Early on in volume 4, for instance, we get the following sequence: “Germany, 1870–1914: A Military Empire Turns to the Sea” (Michael Epkenhans), “The Imperial Japanese Navy, 1937–1942” (Richard B. Frank), “The US as a New Naval Power, 1890–1919” (Kenneth J. Hagan), “World War Suspended and Resumed: Russia, 1919–1940” (Gunnar Åselius University), and “Freedom and Control of the Seas, 1856–1919” (Gabriela A. Frei). We then leap to “UNCLOS and the Modern Law of the Sea” (Sam Bateman), discussion of which began in 1956, revert in time to “New Navies and Maritime Powers” (Steven Haines), which treats the late nineteenth century, and then lurch back further still to “Britain, 1815–1850: Naval Power or Sea Power?” (Andrew Lambert) and “Free Trade, Industrialization and the Global Economy, 1815–1914” (Kevin Hjortshøj O’Rourke).

This erratic organization makes it difficult to follow the various story lines, whether thematic, chronological, or geographic. This is exacerbated by the lack of cross-referencing (apart from Buchet’s “General Conclusion”), a hit-or-miss approach to notes and bibliography (it was at the authors’ discretion), and the lack of any sort of index, although this last issue is less of a problem for the eBooks of individual volumes.

These criticisms aside, however, The Sea in History is a notable contribution to the study of maritime history, and the editors’ conclusions to the individual volumes offer especially valuable insights. Most academic libraries, especially those without robust maritime history collections, should certainly acquire The Sea in History. Yet an affordable one-volume collection of twenty-five or thirty of these essays—organized thematically—would also do much to further Océanides’ goal “to enhance the overall policy of the seas and to train future generations.”

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