

Rolf Strootman, Floris van den Eijnde en Roy van Wijk (ed.), *Empires of the Sea. Maritime Power Networks in World History* (Leiden; Brill, 2019) 440p., €119 ISBN 9789004407671

### Maritime Empires from Mycenae to Pirates of the Caribbean.

Within the field of imperial history, maritime empires have their distinctive characteristics. They can be described as dynamic, multilayered networks, based on a number of coastal and insular nodes, port cities, emporia and naval bases. At the same time, the use of naval power is an essential factor in most cases. In this volume, Rolf Strootman, Floris van den Eijnde and Roy van Wijk, all historians of the ancient Mediterranean, undertake a study of maritime empires of the ancient Mediterranean, in comparison with a number of examples from other historical periods and different geographical areas, including the republic of Genoa, medieval Denmark, and early modern Sweden, the early modern trading companies and overseas empires in the Indian Ocean, as well as the pirate networks of the Caribbean. The authors aim to analyze the political and economic motives behind the creation of maritime empires, as well as the internal dynamics, institutions, and the role played by different interest groups. Hence, they provide a comparative study of maritime empires in world history, something which has not been attempted so far. In particular, several of the contributions deal with questions concerning overlapping or competing empires, polycentric structures, and the role of individual agents, such as merchants or other entrepreneurs, or brokers.

The volume consists of thirteen chapters: an introduction by Rolf Strootman and twelve case studies, divided into three sections. The first five chapters deal with empires in the ancient Mediterranean, including the 'Great Kingdom' of Mycenae, and its increasing influence in the trade of the eastern

Mediterranean during the seventeenth century till the fourteenth century BC, the Athenian overseas interests in the Archaic period, the competing maritime empires of Thebes, Athens and Persia during the fourth century BC, and the Ptolemaic Sea Empire, during the third and second century BC. The Mediterranean section is completed by a chapter on medieval Genoa and its maritime empire. Chapters seven to nine deal with the northern seas, including the North Sea, the Baltic and the Northern Atlantic, during the middle ages and the early modern period. In chapter seven Marco Mostert focusses on the role of language in the maritime networks of the Viking Age, in particular the development of a lingua franca to facilitate the communication between speakers of very different native languages. Then, Thomas Heebøll-Holm describes the rise and fall of the empire of the Danish Valdemarian dynasty, which exercised dominion over the Baltic coast. Besides the role of the kings, he underlines the role of the nobility and merchant elites for the completion of the imperial project. Olaf Mörke finishes the section with a chapter on the empire of the Swedish Vasa dynasty and their domination of the Baltic.

In part three, titled 'The Oceans', three of the four chapters deal with the Indian Ocean between the fifteenth and eighteenth century, and one with the pirate networks in the Caribbean. The first chapter by Peter Borschberg deals with the Melakka empire during the fifteenth century, until the conquest by the Portuguese. The logic of this empire was not so much based on territorial conquest, but rather on acquiring status and

power and thus rising within the hierarchy of rulers. Anjana Singh deals with the activities of the European trading networks and companies. She shows that their presence was no teleological path towards eventual European domination, but rather a participation in a complex and highly competitive commercial surrounding. Only in the second half of the eighteenth century, the British East India Company managed to gain military control over vast parts of India and therefore started the period of colonial domination. Cátia Antunes, in her contribution, stresses the importance of local agents in the numerous port cities and nodes for the functioning of the Portuguese Estado da Índia. Many of them were acting in their own interest rather than in that of the empire. This leads her to employ the term 'shadow empire'. Remco Raben, on the other hand, focusses on the factor of military coercion in the governance of the VOC in Asia, in spite of the widespread idea of a 'reluctant' empire builder, and a predominantly commercial approach. Finally, the last chapter deals with the highly informal network of piracy in the early modern Caribbean. Starting originally as an aspect of the competition between different European powers, piracy became illegal in the late seventeenth century. A

system of overlapping, parasitic networks of violence developed, which consisted of ports where pirates and their intermediaries interacted.

The comparative approach over a large timespan and wide geographical scope of the book is an interesting choice and leads to several conclusions concerning the internal dynamics of maritime empires in a very general sense. However, on an empirical level, the choice of the case studies is somewhat unbalanced, and looks like the outcome of accidental academic networks rather than a thematic choice. You will find three clusters of studies in this book, one on the Mediterranean in antiquity, one on the Northern Seas in the middle ages and early modern period, and another on the Indian Ocean in the age of the European trading companies, completed with a few more extra chapters. Seen from this perspective, the title *Maritime Power Networks in World History* promises more than what the book actually delivers. The individual papers provide interesting syntheses of the state of art concerning the different cases, but they are somewhat hidden within the volume, also as a result of the somewhat generic title.

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