

DAVID ABULAFIA

**Papathomas Professorial Fellow of Gonville and Caius College
Professor of Mediterranean History in the University of Cambridge**



David Abulafia is Professor of Mediterranean History at Cambridge University and Papathomas Professorial Fellow of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. He is a Fellow of the British Academy and a Member of the Academia Europaea. He is a Fellow of the Legatum Institute, a think-tank in London that has been running courses on the history of capitalism (broadly defined), and is a member of the Academic Board of the newly founded University of Gibraltar, which will be developing courses on heritage.

David Abulafia's interests embrace the economic, social and political history of the Mediterranean lands in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, especially southern Italy and the Italian islands (viewing Italian history from an unconventionally southern perspective). However, he has interests in maritime history well beyond the Mediterranean. A major interest is the opening of the eastern and western Atlantic in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century, with particular emphasis on the encounter of Europeans with native peoples, the subject of his book *The Discovery of Mankind: Atlantic Encounters in the Age of Columbus* (Yale University Press, 2008).

He has written a history of the Mediterranean from 22,000 BC to AD 2010 entitled *The Great Sea: a human history of the Mediterranean*, published by Penguin (in the UK) and by Oxford University Press (in the USA) in 2011 (paperback edition, 2012; updated, 2014). Here he concentrates on those who moved back and forth across the sea, and the goods and ideas they brought with them, as well as the port cities they created and the islands on which they perched. In 2011 he received the Mountbatten Literary Award from the Maritime Foundation for this book; and in 2013 he was awarded a British Academy Medal 'for a landmark academic achievement' represented by the book.

His current work takes him beyond the Mediterranean, deep into the oceans, the subject of his next book for Penguin.

Writing the History of the Sea

Maritime history is now much in vogue. To a considerable extent, its attraction lies in what most historians insist on calling its 'transnational' character – 'transnational' being a term one should probably avoid, as it makes rather little sense the further back one goes in time, before the emergence of the nation-state. However, there is a growing dissatisfaction with purely national histories, which often draw artificial boundaries around the area being studied, since few national boundaries have remained the same

in the last hundred years. Still, the idea that studying maritime spaces will enable one to break free from the national histories, extolling the achievements of particular peoples and dynasties, that for long dominated writing about the past, has obvious attraction in an age of globalisation. Out of this have grown new ways of studying maritime history, which has long been anchored elsewhere.

The concern of the more traditional maritime historian may well be the intricacies of navigational techniques, ship construction and naval tactics that dominate the pages of *The Mariner's Mirror* and other excellent journals of maritime history. Advances in maritime archaeology, particularly the excavation of shipwrecks, have transformed knowledge about shipping in the ancient, medieval and early modern world, from China and Japan to the Caribbean. These remain important technical underpinnings for the new type of maritime history. However, the same is true of financial instruments used by merchants, or the archaeology of warehouses, slave-trading stations, and the rest of the physical infrastructure of trade, all of which helps us understand long-distance connections across maritime spaces.

Nowadays, then, the emphasis has shifted away from the more technical aspects of maritime history towards an understanding of the subject as the history of inter-connections across open spaces, with a strong emphasis on trade but also on cultural interactions, migration and the imposition of imperial rule, often the by-product of that trade. The fascination of maritime history is thus seen to lie in the relationship between physically distant places that might have had a more intimate relationship with one another than places that lay close together but interacted weakly, as a result of physical, political or religious barriers.

Now has maritime history been written in the past? This lecture looks at the Mediterranean, enclosed seas in some respects similar to the Mediterranean ('Mediterraneans'), and the oceans and discusses various approaches that have been or might in future be adopted to maritime history.



the Mataro cog from the maritime Museum in Rotterdam - a unique 15th c model of a trading ship