

Introduction

An extraordinary military parade took place on 12 April 2018, yet it attracted little international attention. This demonstration differed somewhat from most military parades, which we would expect to showcase tanks and rocket launchers: this event, which was held in China, was dominated by ships.

During the parade, President Xi Jinping inspected thousands of soldiers and dozens of ships and aircraft. The spectacle lasted three days and coincided with the annual Boao Forum for Asia, the Chinese version of the World Economic Forum in Davos, which brings together leaders from the worlds of politics, business and academia. The star of this fleet review was the *Liaoning*, China's first aircraft carrier, a vessel acquired from Ukraine after the fall of the Soviet Union by a Chinese businessman who had intended to build a casino on it. After spending some years in development, the ship was finally declared combat ready and brought into use by the Chinese navy. The new *Jin*-class submarines also attracted a lot of attention with their ability to fire nuclear warheads to a distance of up to 7,000 kilometres. Chinese newspapers heralded the event as 'the biggest fleet review for 600 years'. Both the forum and the fleet review took place on the island of Hainan in the South China Sea.

Both events were all but ignored by Western media. Whereas the Davos forum and Russian military parades get a lot of attention, the Chinese navy fails to capture our imagination. In this book, I argue that these kinds of developments are crucial if we want to understand the emerging new world order. This fleet review is a lens through which we can view several distinct, important global shifts. It highlights a wider phenomenon, which I call hydrogeopolitics.¹ To better understand that term, we first need to take a step back. When it comes to international order, theories of power fall into two main schools of thought. According to the first school, world power revolves around control of the Eurasian plain, which is home to the greatest concentration of people, natural resources and prosperity in the world. Whoever commands that plain commands the world. The spiritual father of this 'Heartland Theory' is the British geographer Halford Mackinder.² For the second school, developed by American naval officer Alfred Thayer Mahan, world power depends on command of the oceans.³ One approach looks to the land, the other to the water.

My earlier book *The Rise of the East* studied shifting relations on the Eurasian plain, driven by the rise of major powers, each with different regional ambitions. I explored six of those powers in that book: Germany's *Ostpolitik*; Eastern Europe's *Intermarium*, led by Poland; Russia's Eurasian Economic Union; Turkey's neo-Ottomanism; Iran's Royal Road; and, most importantly, China's Iron Silk Road. Despite a certain amount of overlap between the different ambitions, they are nonetheless in competition. This dynamic points to a historic global shift. For centuries, the Eurasian plain was the heart of human civilization. That changed at the end of the fifteenth century, when Western European powers took to the sea. They moved both

westward, crossing the Atlantic Ocean to reach America, and east towards Asia, shifting the centre of the world first to Western Europe and later to America. Viewed from that perspective, the period of five centuries leading up to our own time can be seen as the 'Atlantic age'. That age is now coming to an end, as the ancient region reawakens. The control of land is once again taking centre stage in global relations.

What will that mean for the maritime world? That world is by no means obsolete. Since the beginning of the modern era, maritime power has been a crucial aspect of strong societies, and that is not about to change. The old naval powers, such as the United Kingdom, and especially America, are reassessing their place in the world, while new powers are emerging in the Persian Gulf and in Southern and Southeast Asia. India is in a particularly good position to become a great maritime power in the twenty-first century. Finally, a third process is under way: the emerging land-based powers of Eurasia are also turning their sights to the water. Turkey, for instance, is looking for oil in the Mediterranean Sea and doing deals to establish ports on the Red Sea. Even that quintessentially land-based power, Russia, is hoping that the melting North Pole could finally make it a maritime power. However, of all the emerging powers, the one with the greatest ambitions on water is China. China is building a new silk road – known as the 'Belt and Road Initiative' – along six overland routes. Two run through Russia towards Europe, a third heads south towards the Islamic world and a fourth is being built specifically to connect with Pakistan, while the other two routes focus on other countries in Southern and South East Asia. In addition to this overland route (the 'Belt'), the project also includes routes across water (known, somewhat counterintuitively, as the 'Road'). This book explores all these new routes and ambitions for the world's seas and oceans.

The Chinese military parade that took place in April 2018 offers a lens to help us examine those ambitions more closely. In the past, China was primarily a land-based power. Its greatest threat came by land, as nomadic tribes launched attacks from the Eurasian plain. The Great Wall of China symbolizes this historical focus on land. Even today, China continues to place its main emphasis on the land. The army of the Communist Party, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), was born of land conflicts with both the governing Kuomintang and the Japanese occupiers. In recent years, however, China has begun to look increasingly to the water; the Chinese government is well aware of the necessity of naval power in the modern era. Modern power is founded on prosperity, and the greatest prosperity comes from trade; as the majority of that trade is conducted by water, China must also become a maritime power. The country is therefore investing in its navy and establishing new maritime infrastructure. Chinese port infrastructure is being built along the borders of Eurasia in countries such as Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Djibouti and Greece. Western analysts refer to this as the 'String of Pearls' strategy.

Other countries are taking their own measures. America is the reigning naval power and has dominated all the oceans since World War II. United States maritime power has traditionally

revolved around control of the Atlantic Ocean, but America is adapting to the current eastward shift in the centre of gravity. As Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton spoke of America's 'Pacific Century'. Although her opponent Donald Trump has shelved President Obama's Trans-Pacific Partnership, he still retains a focus on East Asia through confrontation with China and North Korea and a new relationship with US allies South Korea and Japan. America is also engaging with emerging powers. American policy makers recently changed the region's name from 'Asia Pacific' to 'Indo-Pacific', demonstrating both that the Indian Ocean is a strategic part of that region and, more specifically, that the US expects India to play an important role in East Asia. Australian sources have been using the term Indo-Pacific for some time, and Australian leaders have stated that they would be glad to see India taking on a greater role. The United States army has also increased its focus on the Pacific Ocean, even going so far as to issue a strategic report stating that the US is a Pacific nation, thanks to its five Pacific states (Hawaii, California, Washington, Oregon and Alaska) and its control of various Pacific territories such as Guam and American Samoa.⁴

India is not a nation of the Eurasian plain. Despite its connection to that plain, it is not part of the region in the geographical or historical sense. India is an emerging world power, and as it continues its rise it will inevitably clash with China, but the partnerships and connections India creates will mainly be conducted by water. Notably, India is slowly but surely increasing its ties with Japan, and the Indo-Japanese alliance could turn out to be one of the most important partnerships of the twenty-first century.

New connections are also being made along other water routes. There may not be any world powers on the coasts of the South China Sea, the Arabian Sea or the Mediterranean Sea, but those bodies of water are home to emerging regional powers and trade hubs, such as Indonesia, the United Arab Emirates and various 'city states' around the Mediterranean Sea. Whereas *The Rise of the East* looked into the emergence of strong actors on the Eurasian plain, when it comes to the sea the focus lies elsewhere. Those same Eurasian powers also have ambitions for the water and, as we will see, this is causing other players to establish alternative – and even opposing – relationships.

China is in a good position to become the next world power, although it will be no easy task to knock America off its throne. America is adapting itself on the water; together with the old – and in particular the new – naval powers, it could establish an alternative order with the potential to remain dominant in this century. That order is made up of a ring around the Eurasian plain, which we will explore in this book.

(...)

Chapter 1

The philosophy of hydropolitics

It's a warm summer's afternoon, and you're on a beach somewhere – by the Mediterranean, the Caribbean or even our own North Sea. Despite the warmth of the day, when you step into the water it feels pretty cold. A few minutes go by, you acclimatize to the temperature, and you move deeper into the water until it comes up to your neck. The sea is calm, and you decide to lie on your back and gently float on the rippling water. That experience will be familiar to anyone who has ever swum in the sea. You allow your feet to float up and you cautiously slide backwards, relaxing your muscles just enough to stop you from sinking. You close your eyes and spread out your arms. The calm water lapping at your body holds you steady, and your mind turns inward. Your surroundings fade.

It feels as if you are enveloped by a great emptiness that embraces and surrounds you. The water supports your weight, so you don't have to think about that. Now you are immersed in something greater. That something is not cold, but neither is it warm. It is impersonal, and it surrounds you on all sides. Your own body no longer feels like an object with fixed boundaries, separate from every other object. It has become one with the water. You hear sounds: of children playing, of movements in the water. But you notice, too, that the sound is different. Usually it comes from a specific direction and immediately draws your gaze towards the source; there is a clear distinction between your body, 'here', and the source of the sound, 'over there'. In the water that is no longer the case, and not only because your eyes are closed. Under water, sound has no direction.

It seems to come from everywhere at once. It resonates in the water as vibrations, as echoes that approach from all sides. Sometimes it even feels as if the sound is travelling through your body, as if you can feel it inside you. Soon, you are no longer sure of your orientation. Are you still floating in roughly the same place, or have you drifted away? Have you been carried further out to sea, or towards the coast? Maybe you've turned around, and now your head is facing the other way. You are curious to find out, and after lying there for a while, you also grow a little tense. You hope that you have not been swept away to a dangerous place. For a moment you are aware of your own vulnerability. You have no idea what is going on around you. Even directly beneath you, the cloudy water makes everything invisible. Your head is suddenly filled with visions of sharks and other predators... What nonsense. You need to suppress your curiosity and your fears. If you open your eyes, lift your head and look around, the experience of immersion will disappear. But that feeling of utmost relaxation, being surrounded by something greater that carries you and makes you forget yourself – that, you want to keep hold of.

Suddenly you feel the ripples increase on the surface of the water: a big wave reaches your legs. You hope you will manage to stay above the water, but you are swamped by the wave. Water streams over your face and finds its way into your nose and mouth. The taste is salty and unpleasant; you resurface, spit a couple of times to get the taste out of your mouth, open

your eyes and orient yourself in space. You are once more fully conscious and present in your surroundings. You just need to swim a little to the right to get back to your spot on the beach. You start to move towards that place; it is time to feel solid ground under your feet again.

Two visions of the water

Everyone will be able to identify with the experience described above. Still, in all its simplicity it can tell us something about our relationship with water. What *is* that great expanse of water? We have so much in common with water. It is a basic necessity of life: life itself began in the water, and our bodies are mostly made of water. Water can be seen as an element, in both the traditional and the modern sense. As one of the traditional elements in both Eastern and Western natural philosophy – alongside air, earth, fire and, in the East, metal – it is a fundamental component of reality. Through its chemical formula, H₂O, we can view water as a combination of two elements, hydrogen and oxygen. This book is not a study in traditional worldviews, and it is definitely not a book about modern chemistry. What it *is* about is our relationship with water. In that sense, there is a third way to define the word ‘element’. When we are in the water, are we in our element? Is water our element? We are land animals; our bodies are very different from those of sea creatures such as fish, whose gills and fins are perfectly adapted to this all-encompassing, constantly shifting medium. Do we, in fact, belong on the water? This chapter is an exploration of our relationship with water, a study in hydrophilosophy. It examines the complex, ambiguous relationship with water that we have evolved throughout our history. As we shall see, we have embraced water as our element, but to this day we also still approach it with a great deal of suspicion. The multifocal lens created by these two different attitudes towards water can expose various dynamics in human societies. With a philosophy of water, we will be able to understand the world in hydropolitical terms.

Throughout history, a long succession of societies have seen the water as their element, and in some cases all but merged with it. We will encounter those societies in the various chapters of this book. In Plato’s dialogue *Phaedo*, Socrates describes the residents of the Mediterranean coast as ‘frogs around a pond’. For thousands of years, the coastal regions of the Arabian Peninsula have been home to seafaring peoples who travelled to East Africa, India, South East Asia and even China. The most famous depiction of this maritime Arab world is the mythical figure of Sinbad the Sailor, a character from the famous *Thousand and One Nights*. South East Asia, a region with many thousands of islands, peninsulas and long coastlines, also has a long maritime history. It is still home to the *orang laut*, the ‘sea people’ who spend much of their lives on the water. It is still possible to visit Brunei’s old Kampong Ayer, the ‘water village’ of wooden houses built on stilts above the water. This is an Asian counterpart to the European city on the water, Venice. In our own part of the world, too, cultures have seen water as their element for centuries. Ancient Romans arriving in what is now the Netherlands encountered swamps that made them question whether they were on land or water, and they met communities whose members travelled exclusively by boat.

Maritime communities in different parts of the world have many things in common. Every year since the Middle Ages, Venice has celebrated the *Sposalizio del mare*: the 'Marriage of the Sea', when the leader of the city throws a ring into the sea and recites a Latin motto expressing the city's strong bond with the sea. This is another cultural feature with a South East Asian equivalent: the king of Srivijaya is said to have thrown gold pieces into the sea, saying: 'See, that is where my treasure lies.' Modern-day Indonesia has wooden houses shaped like ships that are surprisingly reminiscent of old houses you can see in Norway. To many, the most famous of the ancient worlds that had a strong connection to the water is that of the ancient Greeks. With its many coastal cities and islands, it was inevitable that Greek society would gain a nautical orientation. The Greeks explained the creation of the islands through stories that told of bored Giants throwing huge blocks of stone into the water. Water voyages also play an important role in Greek mythology, as in the well-known myth of the Argonauts that tells the story of Jason and his search for the golden fleece. Their voyage to the Caucasus brings the Argonauts into contact with all kinds of different peoples in different places, from the Black Sea to Minoan Crete. That island was home to another mythical figure associated with the water: Daedalus, the ancient world's greatest inventor, who together with his son Icarus was imprisoned by King Minos. Unfazed, the inventor set about building wings to allow him and his son to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Everyone knows how the story ends: intoxicated with the freedom granted by the wings, Icarus flew too high, until the sun melted the wax holding his wings together and he fell to a watery death. In this myth the open water represents freedom, but also man's hubris (from the Greek word *hybris*) and downfall.

Even the greatest epic of Greek culture depicts a voyage by water. The *Odyssey* recounts the long journey Odysseus makes by sea after the Trojan War to return to Ithaca, his homeland. Odysseus is not your typical Greek hero: what sets him apart from other heroes is not his courage and fighting ability, but rather his cleverness and cunning. He is innovative, curious and adventurous. He has the wherewithal to seize the opportune moment, a skill for which the Greeks had a name: *mētis*. Later, we will see how that skill is intertwined with the essence of the maritime world. The ancient Greeks were very conscious of the water, which in their minds was mainly the Mediterranean Sea, the 'pond' around which these 'frogs' lived. The narrow channel that connects the Mediterranean Sea to the Atlantic Ocean, which we call the Strait of Gibraltar, was known to the Greeks as the Pillars of Hercules. According to legend, those pillars were inscribed with the words *Non plus ultra*: 'nothing further beyond.' This was the edge of the world. Plato believed that the lost city of Atlantis must be located somewhere beyond that point. To the ancient Greeks, the Atlantic Ocean beyond the Mediterranean was a mysterious place, the realm of myths and sagas.

A positive relationship with the water, the idea that water is our element, can be found in a very different setting, and in a more metaphorical sense. In many religious traditions, water represents a higher power, the divine.

In Chinese culture, the *tao*, often translated as the 'way', is frequently likened to water. Lao Tse said, 'Water is fluid, soft and yielding. But it will wear away rock, which is rigid and cannot yield. As a rule, that which is fluid, soft and yielding will overcome that which is hard and rigid. This is a paradox: what is soft is strong.'¹ Building on that idea – and expressed in equally paradoxical terms – Taoists assert that water resembles the highest virtue, because it naturally finds the lowest-lying places. Because it goes where nothing and nobody wants to go, it is everywhere. Because it never stops flowing, it is unmoving. Another Chinese philosopher, Mencius, said, 'The highest good is like water. The goodness of water is that it benefits many living things. And yet it never seeks conflict, and it is content in places that all men disdain. (...) Because it does not seek conflict, it is free from unhappiness.'² A good person, a happy person, is like water.

Water also plays an important role in Greek thought. Greek philosophy originated with Thales of Miletus, who described water as the fundamental element from which the cosmos was formed. Although the later philosopher Heraclitus saw fire as the most important element, he too recognized the importance of water, making the famous observation *panta rei*, 'everything flows'. Reality is constantly in flux, as is a river, and according to Heraclitus it is impossible to step into the same river twice. Christianity also associates water with the divine. When someone is initiated into the faith, the baptismal waters wash away sin and bring the believer to Christ.

The psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud was fascinated by religion, despite having no religious sentiments himself. He studied the phenomenon in his book *Die Zukunft einer Illusion* (*The Future of an Illusion*) and described the religious experience of being submerged in the 'All' as 'the oceanic feeling' – a feeling of which, not being religious, he had no experience. By spending a while floating in the sea, which is how we began this chapter, even non-believers can gain a tiny foretaste of that oceanic feeling. In his fascinating study, *Water*, the Dutch philosopher Rene ten Bos writes about the relationship between mysticism and water. The mystic does not believe that anything good can be expected of the solid ground under his feet; he prefers to dive into a kind of holy anonymity. By that measure, all mystical schools are also diving schools.³ In making that observation, Ten Bos is following the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, whose trilogy *Spheres* links floating in water to a deep human experience. In the first months of life, we float in the womb. That experience is buried deep in our soul, and it is what is evoked by the feeling of coming home or a sense of mystical unity.⁴ We can discern a pattern running throughout our history, of humanity embracing water as its element, but that is only one side of the story. On the other side is a different mentality, one that is suspicious of the water. There are also cultures, philosophers and religious traditions

that have treated water as a threat, something unclean, that threatens to undermine the community's morality.

As well as having a strong maritime tradition, for example, Indian culture also follows the doctrine of *kala pani* ('black water'), which forbids people to cross the ocean. The notion of purity, which has held an important place in India's Brahman tradition, treats such a crossing as a defilement. Contact with strangers and absence from one's own sacred soil were taboo. Anyone who did cross the ocean would lose their social position, and even their descendants would be defiled by that decision. This may have similarities with the experience of floating in the water at the start of this chapter, when you are suddenly gripped by a fear of everything that may be hiding in the murky water, a fear that makes you long for *terra firma*. The Chinese were well aware of the dangers and strange elements associated with the water. The renowned sea voyages of the eunuch Zheng He inaugurated a blossoming of Chinese marine navigation, but that era came to a sudden end when the Ming Emperor Hongxi outlawed sea travel. Ships with more than two masts were forbidden. Historians believe that the origins of this extraordinary policy lie in a growing emphasis on the land, due to the threat from nomadic tribes and the corrupting effects of trade, which brought piracy in its wake. Trade by sea also brought great prosperity to the court eunuchs, which drew protests from moralistic bureaucrats.

In Christianity, water represents not only baptism into the divine, but also death and destruction: the waters of the Biblical flood inundated the whole world, the ultimate punishment for humanity's misdeeds. Like the waters of baptism, the flood waters wash away sin, but instead of bringing hope they bring ruination. The water in that story represents eternal nothingness, the oppressive form of the mystical experience of oblivion. In philosophy, too, we can trace a long tradition of suspicion towards water that dates back to the very first great philosopher of ancient Greece. Although the Greek world was heavily dependent on the sea, the Greeks were not blind to what they perceived to be the negative influence of water. Plato's great work on politics, *The Republic*, begins with a reference to water. In the opening sentence, Socrates talks about going to the port city of Piraeus, to pray to the gods and to see a festival that was being celebrated there for the first time. Rene ten Bos points out that, although Socrates' comment *katebēn* is commonly translated as 'I went', the true meaning of the verb *katabainō* is to 'descend' or 'go down', an expression used in Homeric texts to refer to the descent into the underworld.⁵

Athens was an inland city, and in the fifth century BC it was joined with Piraeus, which had previously been an island off the coast of the mainland. The great democratic leader Pericles created a permanent link between the port of Piraeus and the city of Athens. As we will see, this port still plays an important role in modern hydropolitics to this day: it is now China's maritime gateway to Europe. For Plato, however, the port was a low place that was comparable to the underworld. He believed that the port and its connection with water had a detrimental influence on people's moral character.

Plato expands on this theme in his book *Laws*. In his discussion of the ideal society, he states that such a society should not be located by the sea, but rather inland. Only divine lawgivers could prevent bad moral practices invading from the sea. Habits of backstabbing and duplicitousness arise close to water; cities built on the coast quickly become untrustworthy and uncaring. Plato contrasts this picture with the noble customs of farmers and aristocrats. Even fishing is bad for one's moral character: whereas hunting on land demands bravery and strength, the only trait cultivated by fishing is idleness.⁶

We have already discussed Plato's characterization of Mediterranean coastal dwellers in *Phaedo* as 'frogs around a pond'. That passage, too, expresses a negative attitude towards the water: 'nothing worth mentioning' grows in the sea, and the sea can show us nothing of the *Logos*, the divine Reason that governs the cosmos. The frogs live close to the ground and lack a clear vision of reality. We can only see the truth if we turn away from the water.⁷

The idea that water blurs our view of reality can be seen in an experience with which many readers will be able to identify: seasickness. The absence of solid ground under our feet and the continuous motion of a boat on the water can make us nauseous. At the start of the chapter we discussed the experience of panic, the feeling of being utterly lost, when you are floating on the water. The very word *nausea* comes from the Greek *naus*, meaning 'ship'. We also use *nausea* more broadly to refer to an experience of revulsion, disorientation and disgust.

Plato's disgust for water, and for the people who live near it, was typical of land-bound aristocrats. The tension between those two worlds can be seen all over the world. Before we go on to examine that tension in more detail, it is worth taking a moment to consider the mentality of people who live at the water's edge. What kinds of societies arise by water, and what virtues and worldviews are associated with a maritime orientation?

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Chapter 2

The Mediterranean Sea

Introduction

The Mediterranean Sea forms the border between three continents: Europe to the north, Asia to the east and Africa to the south. It is a location often associated with problems, with people fleeing conflict and poverty in North Africa and the Levant and making the hazardous crossing over the Mediterranean to reach stable, prosperous Europe. Former Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi has described this crossing as a 'new slave trade', and according to the Maltese prime minister Joseph Muscat the waters between Europe and Africa have become a graveyard.

The growing number of refugees since 2015 has shaken the European Union to its core. The deals the Union has made with countries in the region have reduced the number of refugees and represent an attempt to strengthen the borders between the continents.

At the same time, the Mediterranean region is dealing with a host of other problems.

The refugee crisis was caused in large part by the aftermath of the Arab Spring, a wave of protest that began when Mohammed Bouazizi, a Tunisian market trader, set himself on fire in late 2010. Although Tunisia itself has emerged relatively unscathed from this upheaval in the Arab world, a military leader was once again able to take power in Egypt and both Libya and Syria descended into civil war. On the Asian coast of the Mediterranean, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been raging for decades. The European coast is home to the countries that suffered most during the eurozone crisis. Greece was particularly hard hit, although the Italian economy is also facing stagnation and a mountain of debt. Discontent among the Italian populace brought a populist alliance to power in 2018. In Spain and Portugal, the eurozone crisis resulted in soaring youth unemployment.

Until the 1970s, Greece, Spain and Portugal were dictatorships. The political systems in many countries in the region still function relatively poorly, and those countries face a range of internal tensions. The relationship between Italy's rich, industrial north and poorer south has been tense for years, while calls for independence in the wealthy Spanish province of Catalonia on the Mediterranean coast are growing ever more insistent.

All these negative phenomena would seem to point to a region in chaos, but if we take a broader perspective, we will see that there is more to the situation. The dynamic regions around the Mediterranean Sea are evolving, and new connections are being made.

Technology and energy hubs are emerging, together with new intersections of people and goods. The chaos and the dynamism are two sides of the same process: the rise of a new order in the Mediterranean region, which is putting pressure on existing borders, and which has its roots in a very old, established pattern in the region.

If we wish to understand that pattern, we must first look deeper into its geography.

Mediterranean geography

The geography of the Mediterranean Sea is unusual. In the first place, it is a fairly large body of water, and its coast is home to a great many different peoples. In that sense, the Mediterranean differs from the much smaller Caspian Sea, Black Sea and Red Sea. Being inland seas, those waters can be fairly easily dominated by a single great power. Only the Romans, however, have ever managed to govern the entire coastline of the Mediterranean world. They rightly called it *Mare Nostrum*, 'our sea'. Since Roman times, no single power has been able to dominate the whole coast.

Still, the Mediterranean Sea can be described as an inland sea. Just three tiny openings connect it with the other waters of the world. To the west, the Strait of Gibraltar connects the

sea with the Atlantic Ocean. At the narrowest point of this channel, Europe and Africa are separated by just 14 km of water. To the north-west, the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea are joined through the Bosphorus, which separates Europe and Asia but which at one point is less than a kilometre wide.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the Suez Canal has provided a slender connection between the south-west Mediterranean and the Red Sea, and hence also with the Indian Ocean.

In the past, these three maritime bottlenecks have been of great strategic importance. The Strait of Gibraltar played a key part in European conflicts in the eighteenth century and again during World War II. The United Kingdom still owns Gibraltar, to the north of the strait. To the south, bordering on Morocco, there is the Spanish exclave of Ceuta. Control over the Bosphorus made first Constantinople and later Ottoman Istanbul a regional behemoth, with the power to govern trade flows. That location was a source of tension between the Ottoman and Russian Empires: the latter cherished hopes of conquering Istanbul, which would have given its territories on the Black Sea free access to the Mediterranean. The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 was also wound up with the issue of maritime access, as it gave Russia control of the port of Sevastopol, and hence a way to reach the Mediterranean Sea.

Since the Suez Canal was first dug, it has been fought over by major external powers such as the UK and France. Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser's nationalization of the Canal in 1956 caused an international crisis.

In spite of the great surface area of the Mediterranean Sea, these small channels give it the appearance of an almost enclosed inland sea. Rather than offering direct links with the outside world, as is the case for the North Sea or the Caribbean, it connects diverse societies that live around the edge of a large 'lake'. Although the pattern of our current borders suggest that the water forms a partition between the nation states of three continents, geography teaches us that it is more appropriate to talk about a shared world with porous borders.

The French poet and thinker Paul Valéry spoke of a 'Mediterranean civilization' uniting Southern Europe, the Levant (the land to the east of the water) and North Africa. Historian Fernand Braudel also treated the region as a single unit, and we saw in Chapter 1 that Plato referred to the inhabitants of the region as 'frogs around a pond'.

The societies of this region have several characteristics in common. The Mediterranean has its own specific climate, with dry summers and rainy winters, that nourishes specific vegetation and makes it possible to grow olive trees, vines and figs. This climate has also caused a certain economic structure to arise in the area, with relatively important agriculture and tourism sectors.

There are even some shared political aspects. Many Mediterranean regimes are comparatively centralized. Leaders at the capital wield a lot of power, and in several countries they are at the head of a repressive state machinery. At the same time, the region

is characterized by fierce resistance movements that take the form of labour unions, civil society movements and distinct regional identities. These clashes frequently lead to revolution and even greater repression. Although the government is quite powerful, the region's economies are often organized along liberal lines, with relatively free markets in comparison with corporatist Northern Europe. Finally, the relative weakness of institutions around the Mediterranean often goes hand in hand with strong personal networks and corruption.

There is also a geographical reason to view the Mediterranean Sea not as open water, but as a contained world surrounded by land masses. Millions of years ago, this area was still low-lying dry land. Then, at a certain point on the Atlantic coast, the water broke through, the land was inundated, and the Mediterranean Sea was born. Without that continuous flow from the ocean, the water would once more slowly leach away, as the sea evaporates faster than its rivers can replenish it. In that sense, too, the Mediterranean Sea has a lot in common with a lake.

The Mediterranean Sea has been crucially important to the diverse communities who have settled around it. The ancient Greeks referred to it simply as 'the sea' (*Thalassa*), while to the Jews it was the 'Great Sea' (*Yam Gadol*), and its Turkish name was 'the White Sea' (*Akdeniz*). Two islands in the sea, Cyprus in the east and Malta in the middle, are independent nations, while the largest island in this body of water is Sicily, to the north of Malta. These islands have served as ideal meeting places for the diverse peoples of the Mediterranean. They reveal the various different influences layered one on top of the other, for instance in their architecture and in the Maltese language, which is related to Arabic.

These islands symbolize the shared Mediterranean civilization, which is now rising once more in a new form. Let's take a closer look at how the peoples of this region have been interconnected throughout history.

The Mediterranean civilization

The oldest sources of civilization in the Mediterranean Sea can be found in Malta.¹ At Tarxien, on the island of Malta, you can visit mysterious temples that are even older than the pyramids. We know relatively little about this civilization, although we do know that they venerated a mother goddess. It seems to have been a peaceful world, and it is possible that Malta and the neighbouring island of Gozo were considered sacred ground. This mysterious civilization was brought down by outside invaders, although, as with the nature of the civilization itself, we know relatively little about what exactly happened.

Another important mythical place in the ancient world was Troy, which was situated on the coast of what is now Turkey. The city was a key intersection between the waters of the Black Sea and the Aegean. Troy plays a central role in Homer's great epics about the ancient Greeks, but the Romans also traced their lineage back to Aeneas, who fled the destruction of the city by the Greeks.

The ancient Egyptian civilization was less directly connected with the Mediterranean world – the water source the Egyptians cared about most was the Nile river. The Mediterranean Sea was at the edge of their world, and they left the sailing of it to other peoples who traded in goods.

Egypt's world revolved around the Nile. It was a land-based power whose attention was very much directed towards the African continent. It is often seen as the forerunner of Europe or of the Middle East, demonstrating how the modern West's self-image clouds our perspective on history. One painful example of this self-centredness is the bizarre 2016 Hollywood film *Gods of Egypt*, which depicts the entire Egyptian world as white. We have barely scratched the surface in our understanding of how deeply embedded ancient Egypt was in Africa.²

The first true maritime empire on the Mediterranean Sea was the Minoan civilization on the island of Crete, which flourished in the third and second millennia BC and which is named after the mythical king Minos, who also gave his name to the monstrous Minotaur. The myth of the Minotaur offers a glimpse into this culture's maritime orientation, telling of boats full of young people sent to Crete from other societies to be sacrificed to the monster. There was a cult within Minoan civilization that was dedicated to a god who was similar to Poseidon, the god of the sea who would later be venerated by the Greeks. The ancient Greek historian Thucydides claimed that Minos had founded a 'thalassocracy': a maritime empire.

It is clear that societies had already established relations across the water by the second millennium BC. However, around the year 1200 BC that world suddenly imploded. Its downfall was mainly caused by sudden, vast flows of people, many of them pirates and mercenaries, who left a trail of destruction in their wake. They are known collectively as the 'Sea Peoples', and they went by names such as the Denyen, Tjeker and Shekelesh. Eric Cline's book *1177 B.C.*, which came out a few years ago, pins down this apocalyptic implosion of civilization around the Mediterranean Sea to a specific year.³ We still know very little about the origins and motivations of these Sea Peoples.

The restoration of civilization and the cross-water networks was a slow process that involved a central role for the Phoenicians, who hailed from modern-day Lebanon. The Phoenicians began a tradition that continues to this day: they established city states, beginning on the nearby island of Cyprus where they founded Qart Hadasht, which translates literally as 'New City'.

Later, they used the same name for a city they established in modern Tunisia: Carthage, which would go on to become Rome's arch-rival. (Yet another 'new city', 'Cartagena', was founded in Spain; the Spanish would later export the name to the New World, for the city of Cartagena in Colombia.) By the ninth century BC, the Phoenicians had created a Mediterranean trading network that extended as far as the Atlantic coast.⁴ That tradition continues today. The Lebanese are still a seafaring people, and their traders are to be found throughout the Middle East and in both North and West Africa. Carlos Slim, the Mexican telecommunications magnate and one of the richest people in the world, has Lebanese roots,

as do the former Brazilian president Michel Temer and the controversial businessman Carlos Ghosn.

Another culture that saw a steady rise after the great collapse of civilization precipitated by the Sea Peoples was that of the ancient Greeks. Through their sea voyages, they spread out across the entire eastern part of the Mediterranean. There are many stories about historic migrations in Greek mythology.

Homer's epics are filled with voyages by sea, to Troy in the *Iliad* and back to Ithaca in the *Odyssey*. The Greeks fought many a sea battle and built their own trading networks. We can discern an ambiguous attitude to trade in Homer's epics. On the one hand, they denounce the small-mindedness of Phoenician traders, for example, as being inferior to the way Greek aristocrats lived. On the other hand, the epics also depict the Greek gods disguising themselves as merchants, and the Cyclopes, who represent the less civilized societies the Greeks encountered by sea (primitive, living in caves, lawless, lacking agriculture or social conventions), are portrayed as primitive because they do not trade at all.

Greek civilization expanded westwards, and in 733 BC the Greeks settled in Syracuse on the Italian island of Sicily. Greek cities such as Corinth and Athens turned their attention to the Tyrrhenian Sea between the Italian islands and mainland Italy. This was a new, experimental world that invites an analogy with a different time and place: the Greek colonization of Italy, and the influence of Greek culture on Roman culture in the region, is comparable to how, millennia later, the old European world settled America. A new world was opened up, where people could experiment with new ideas. The Greek philosopher Plato visited Syracuse to persuade the king, Dionysius, to put his utopian political philosophy into practice; centuries later, the ideas of John Locke migrated to the New World, where they inspired the Founding Fathers of the United States of America.

In both cases, migration lent impetus to a younger, more dynamic world which, although in cultural terms still largely based on its predecessor, was more practical and materialistic. Europeans envy America's vitality and are simultaneously disgusted with what they see as a superficial version of European culture. As America is to Europe, so was Rome to Greece.

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