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From The Med to The World

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BOOK REVIEWS

FROM THE MED TO THE WORLD

Seagoing Ships and Seamanship in the Bronze Age Levant, by Shelley Wachsmann. College Station: Texas A&M Univ. Press, 2008. 448 pages. \$40.

Homeric Seafaring, by Samuel Mark. College Station: Texas A&M Univ. Press, 2009. 272 pages. \$60.

Byzantine Warship vs Arab Warship, 7th–11th Centuries, by Angus Konstam. Oxford, U.K.: Osprey, 2015. 80 pages. \$18.95.

These three books reviewed together are not an obvious historical match for each other as comparable scholarly studies; the only chronological thread linking them is their coverage of an era extending from the Bronze Age to the medieval period—a considerable portion of the maritime past. Yet all do focus, mostly, on the eastern Mediterranean.

The first book, *Seagoing Ships and Seamanship in the Bronze Age Levant*, is a monograph of the Institute of Nautical Archaeology at Texas A&M University. The institute, founded by George Bass in 1973, is the flagship for underwater and maritime archaeology programs in the United States; its publications reflect that fact, as does its extensive global outreach resulting from its finds of shipwrecks and other items relating to maritime history covering the past ten thousand years.

As a world pioneer in nautical archaeology, Bass also wrote the foreword to the book. Author Shelley Wachsmann

is the maritime archaeologist—now a professor for the institute at Texas A&M—whose research on the “Sea of Galilee boat” conducted for the Israel Department of Antiquities and Museums produced his earlier popular book of that name (New York: Perseus, 2000) on a single two-thousand-year-old landlocked freshwater find.

This comprehensive tome published under the auspices of the institute examines a wide swath of past Mediterranean cultures whose maritime activities led to their evolution as Bronze Age powers. This book explores economic development, by way of Mediterranean Sea trade; how seaworthy ships were built, down to the smallest details; and what technological advances made possible voyages longer than mere coast-hugging itineraries. It also addresses how ships and states dealt with piracy and—extrapolating from epigraphic evidence—what kind of agreements constituted Bronze Age maritime law.

Although such a broadly themed approach makes difficult any organizational scheme for demarcating possibly overlapping domains, this excellent book is divided into two main sections over seventeen chapters: (1) “The Ships: Review of the Evidence,” covering Egyptian to Cypriotic, Aegean, Minoan, Sea Peoples, and Homeric beaked ships, as well as extant shipwreck archaeology; and (2) “Aspects of Maritime Activity,” ranging from ship construction to types of anchors, methods of propulsion (e.g., sails, oars, or both), navigation, trade, and law. These are followed by conclusions, appendices, endnotes, glossaries, bibliography, and index. The ample illustrations (at least 450) in this book are rich: very few pages are bereft of images, up to the conclusions of chapter 17. They include archaeological fieldwork photos of sites and artifacts, illustrations, maps, drawings, site plans, and reconstructions. There are also tables containing texts and their translations. One of the best results of this monograph is the consideration of nearly every kind of possible historical evidence for Bronze Age seafaring. For example, nearly every known Minoan seal or ceramic shard with a ship image is examined closely for information. The same is true for the Medinet Habu Sea Peoples reliefs in Egypt and the exhaustive analyses of excavated ship anchors. Thus the book is a huge asset for anyone studying maritime history of the Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean.

The second book, titled *Homeric Seafaring*, also published by the Institute of Nautical Archaeology at Texas A&M, is much more specific to a defined time and place. The work is much indebted to a poetic yet historically rich body of epic literary references, especially that

of Homer in his famous “Catalogue of Ships” in *Iliad* 2. Yet if it were limited to that epic, the work would not add much to existing philological studies across centuries of painstaking analysis. Author Samuel Mark begins by pointing out (p. 11) that Homer can be a frustrating “siren song,” one to which archaeologists and historians, trained in data-mining purviews very different from those of philologists and literary scholars, will apply competing hermeneutics. But Mark reminds us (p. 15) that a skilled storyteller such as Homer (whoever the author behind that name might have been) “was careful to make his characters and events as lifelike as possible,” despite whatever chronologically diverse oral redactions changed the text along the way. This book also begins where the pioneer maritime historian Lionel Casson left off in attempting to reconcile the textual with the archaeological details, although not always weighting them equally.

Some of the perhaps surprising conclusions Mark contributes to the available literature include that seafaring was a very common activity even in agronomy-based societies, and that coast hugging can be more treacherous than open-sea sailing because of rocks, shoals, and currents. (Think Strabo’s warning in *Geography* 8.6.20 about rounding Cape Malea off the Peloponnese: “When you double Cape Malea, forget your home.”) Mark also concludes that sea battles were more common than prior opinion allowed; that Homeric ships were more for sailing than for rowing; and that the helmsman was a sailor’s best hope for a safe return.

The alphabetic Greek glossary is very useful, as is the textual index of all passages on seafaring from at least

thirty-five classical author sources in addition to Homer. This is even an enjoyable read for anyone ready for a different and fresh approach to traversing Homer's "wine-dark seas" and other Greek epics as well as encounters with Herodotus and encyclopedists such as Theophrastus and Pliny. It is well to remember that rarely in ancient Greece could you be more than fifty miles from the sea.

The third and last book is Angus Konstam's *Byzantine Warship vs Arab Warship, 7th–11th Centuries*. Osprey Publishing in Oxford is the prime book source of past military histories. Lavish color illustrations are a constant in Osprey books (of which this reviewer owns more than a dozen) and concise, clear texts are to be expected—and are found here. Angus Konstam is a prolific author, with scores of published books, mainly for Osprey, comparable to this one. He is a former naval officer who is also familiar with museum collections as a curator, so his publishing template and understanding of resources for historical naval warfare are well established.

This book is part of the Osprey Duel: Engage the Enemy series, in which two competing systems, generally enemy forces, are compared across multiple parameters. In the medieval Mediterranean chronology of the post-late antique world, in which Rome is no longer viable and Constantinople has replaced it, the two main fighting vessels under consideration are the Byzantine *dromon* and the Arab *shalandi*, which made up the bulk of the official navies of the opposing powers.

Shared or copied methods and tactics of naval engagement (according to contemporary treatises such as the

Greek *Taktika* and the *Naumachika* of Emperor Leo VI [r. AD 886–912] or the Arabic *Al-Adilla al-rasmiyya*) are covered here, from grappling with grapnels, to boarding, to hand-to-hand combat, as well as the maneuverability of both ships by sails, rudders, or oars. Very specific types of weaponry are annotated: bows, *cheirotobolistræ* or *tzangrae* (crossbows), catapults, ballista bolts, caltrops, pikes, *corseques* (trident stave weapons), and—the most feared of all—the unquenchable flaming oil known as "Greek fire." (Any of several Greek phrases [e.g., *pyr thalassion*, "sea fire," and *pyr kolletikon*, "sticky fire"] could convey the incendiary nature of this substance forcefully expelled from deck-mounted siphons.)

Ultimately, both opposing forces used nearly the same weaponry. Konstam consulted artifactual material, historical documents, and extant manuscripts revealing many technical specifications for outfitting both Greek and Arab ships, including design features, how the combatants fought, and specific battle outcomes for this fascinating single-subject book. We also should credit Arab navigators who used the measured night stars, hundreds of which still retain names derived from Arabic.

One quirky legacy of the Arabic side of naval warfare comes to us in our English word *admiral*, meaning sea commander, from the later Moorish Arabic term *amir al-rahl*, meaning something akin to "ruler of outfitted [ships]," since the word *amir* or *emir* already meant a type of leader or ruler functioning as war commander. Our word *admiral* thus derives from this seminal time when the Arabic naval command first came to be seen as distinct from a land general's command during the rapid

spread of Islamic hegemony across not just the land but also the sea.

In a world where information has not always been easy to come by, Konstam's small but highly esteemed book does justice to the world of competing Arab-Byzantine interests. It covers the specifics of the fierce at-sea dueling that went on within the larger competition that spread over a sea claimed by both Byzantine Greek and Arab powers, anticipating by half a millennium the Ottoman conflict that would include both the fall of Constantinople and the ensuing battle of Lepanto.

PATRICK HUNT



Mayday: The Decline of American Naval Supremacy, by Seth Cropsey. New York: Overlook, 2014. 348 pages. \$29.95 (paperback \$17.95).

Mayday is an extended argument for the expansion of the U.S. naval fleet to confront Chinese ambitions in the South China Sea, secure U.S. global interests, and ensure America's future as a great power. The author, Mr. Seth Cropsey, has considerable experience in defense and government, having served as a Deputy Under Secretary of the Navy in two administrations, in addition to other roles; he is associated with various think tanks. He demonstrates an in-depth and well-developed understanding of the strategic issues the Navy faces as he traces the development of U.S. sea power, assesses its current state, and examines a number of proposals before offering his own prescription for the Navy's future.

In many ways this book is a reapplication of pre-World War I naval theory espoused by the Naval War College's

own Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan. The author uses Mahanian thought extensively in his analysis of the historical development of American sea power into its current incarnation, explaining that, because of the U.S. Navy's current build rates and mismatched strategies, it is on a downward trajectory that will result in the loss of U.S. sea power. This, in turn, will result in a loss of U.S. influence and global stability worldwide. This channeling of Mahan is generally well executed, with one exception: at several points within the text, Mahan's equation of naval strength with the size of the national shipping fleet is referenced, without a solid explanation of how that relates to the current U.S. reliance on foreign carriers. The proposed repeal of the Jones Act (which mandates the use of U.S.-produced, -flagged, and -crewed carriers for cargo moved between U.S. ports) appears almost out of nowhere, and while a repeal definitely would improve competition and lower shipping costs, Mr. Cropsey fails to explain how this would be beneficial to the Navy or assist in correcting the strategic issues it faces.

The chapters on China's naval expansion and the ongoing gap between the U.S. Navy's force requirements and the number of hulls that its shipbuilding plan and budget can deliver are very informative and well reasoned. When observed through the Mahanian lens that Mr. Cropsey provides, it is not difficult to see how the People's Liberation Army Navy has embraced the idea that naval power is key to China's ability to influence the region and secure its interests from the African littorals to the deep waters of the Pacific.

The book runs a bit thin in the delivery of economic arguments regarding