

1996

When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405-33

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Recommended Citation

Mahncke, Frank C. (1996) "When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405-33," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 49 : No. 1 , Article 31.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol49/iss1/31>

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views and his evaluation of Corbett's historical work in one particular instance.

JOHN B. HATTENDORF
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Levathes, Louise. *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405-33*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994. 252pp. \$23

Between 1405 and 1433 Admiral Zheng He of China led seven trading and flag-showing voyages for the Ming emperor Zhu Di through the East Indies to India, the Persian Gulf, and the East Coast of Africa. Zheng He's fleets were truly remarkable, with as many as three hundred vessels, nearly thirty thousand men, and a four-hundred-foot-long, seven-masted flagship—nearly five times the waterline of Columbus's *Santa Maria*. (By any measure of distance and size, these voyages surpassed those of Columbus.) Yet in 1434 the entire enterprise collapsed abruptly, leaving little trace or impact. Sixty years before Columbus, China withdrew from world commerce, leaving it to the Europeans.

Louise Levathes, a former visiting scholar at Nanjing University in China, has done a timely and scholarly service in recounting Zheng He's voyages, basing her work on original manuscripts in China. The subject of which she writes so well is little known to the ordinary student of maritime affairs, grounded (as is this reviewer) in Western maritime history. As China begins again to assert itself in world

trade and maritime affairs, Levathes's work is especially timely, reminding us that China is not a newcomer to the world stage.

There are two parallel themes in her book, both equally interesting. The first covers details of the seven voyages and of court life in the Ming dynasty. There existed a richness that is scarcely imaginable today. Silk, pearls, tea, wine, hardwoods, iron, spices, and herbs were carried and traded from China to Africa. Court life was elaborate, ritualized, and more brutal than the Medici at their height. Levathes describes all these with an eye for detail that would be the envy of the keenest society reporter.

The second theme, and the most important and interesting to the readers of this journal, is the economic and political significance of the voyages. Although the expeditions were a heavy draw on China's resources, the emperor supported them to demonstrate to China's neighbors near and far the power and majesty of Zhu Di's reign. Elaborate presents were exchanged with local rulers along the way, by which they acknowledged their position as vassals of the emperor in far China. Commemorative tablets were placed, many of which survive today, to testify to the reach of the emperor. Not infrequently Zheng He entered into local civil wars, placing on their thrones rulers who were thus beholden to the emperor. This was showing the flag, and presence, on a grand scale.

The most important part of Levathes's work is her analysis of why the later emperors and palace cliques so abruptly terminated these voyages and

why the voyages never led to exploration and colonization.

Deftly avoiding the swamps of socio-philosophy, Levathes paints a picture of a society so sure that it was the best that could possibly be that it felt no need of anything physical or intellectual from anyone else. The rulers of China believed that China's self-evident superiority would be manifest to all, and all would (and should) come to them with proper fealty.

To trade with the world in goods and ideas and to explore that world became an abomination to China's rulers. One hundred years after Zheng He's last voyage, the building of an oceangoing vessel in China was a beheading offense. Had it not been so, this review might have been written in Mandarin.

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Haywood, John. *Dark Age Naval Power: A Reassessment of Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Seafaring Activity*. London: Routledge, 1991. 232pp. \$45

John Haywood has produced a detailed study, originally written as a dissertation for the University of Lancaster, of early seafaring, and one of considerable importance. Students of naval history, and those who teach it, usually skim over this period for lack of solid information. Haywood provides not only details of early medieval naval history in northwestern Europe but offers a thesis as well.

The book opens with a brief introduction setting forth the purposes of the book—to write a history of Germanic

seafaring from the earliest recorded incident, a failed attack on the Romans on the Ems River in 12 B.C., through the age of Charlemagne in the ninth century. The author relies primarily on literary evidence, but where possible incorporates archaeological evidence. This approach differs from work on the succeeding Viking age, where scholarly concentration is primarily focused on ship finds. The results of this approach are revealed in chapters on early Germanic piracy and the raids of the Franks and Germans. Haywood argues correctly that the seakeeping ability of early medieval vessels was so limited that ship-to-ship battles were rare. Readers will be surprised, however, to discover the extent of naval activity during this period.

For those who hope to find answers to questions concerning the migrations of the Angles, Saxons, and other tribes to Britain, the volume both intrigues and challenges. Haywood argues that the Frisians (whose significance is deflated at the expense of the Franks) and other Germanic tribes employed sails on their ships. Although the Nydam and Utrecht ships as well as other early finds are discussed, none provide evidence to confirm use of the sail. The author does not provide a reconstruction of King Alfred's navy, but he does provide useful supplementary information to suggest that it proved successful against the Danes. The emperor Charlemagne (d. 814) and Louis the Pious receive praise for grasping the importance of naval power. They used it to great advantage in campaigns, especially on rivers, where ships were involved in