

Zitierhinweis

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FRANZISKA HILFIKER, *Sea Spots: Perception und Repräsentation maritimer Räume im Kontext englischer und niederländischer Explorationen um 1600* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2019), 245 pp. ISBN 978 3 412 15171 3. €39.00

Based on doctoral research conducted at the University of Basel, this interesting study looks at Dutch and English maritime voyages between 1570 and 1620, an era which saw the first circumnavigations of the globe. Following recent trends in historiography, it seeks to direct closer attention at the oceans as an arena of sense-making and a culturally constructed space in their own right, rather than a space solely to be traversed in order to reach the shores beyond it. The study is inspired by theoretical work ranging from the oceanic turn and the spatial turn to New Historicism and New Criticism and quotes literature from various disciplines, including history, geography, and literary criticism. It relies mainly on printed (and a few manuscript) sources such as travel accounts, compilations, log-books, engravings, sea charts, and navigational treatises. Some of these, like the de Bry family's famous and richly illustrated collections of voyage accounts, published in twenty-five parts during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, are already well researched. Others, like Thomas Ellis's haunting descriptions and striking images of icebergs (1578) or Richard Hakluyt's pamphlet on the Strait of Magellan (1580), are less familiar. To this rich and diverse corpus, Hilfiker applies the method of close reading.

Central to the study is the concept of 'sea spots', which the author characterizes as 'maritime places . . . that, in the context of European expansion and colonial competition during the period under investigation, attained particular significance in being intensely sought after, navigated, experienced, and registered in various media, and thus became spaces of special meaning' (p. 36, translation by Sünne Juterczenka) The sea as a whole is conceptualized as a mosaic of individual 'sea spots', interconnected like a web, but each with distinct qualities that mark them out as desirable destinations and points of interest to European explorers.

The voyages at the centre of the study were led by navigators such as Martin Frobisher, John Davis, Willem Schouten, and Willem

Barents. New to the exploring scene and in competition with each other, the Dutch and the English bypassed routes controlled by the Iberian powers, challenging Spanish and Portuguese dominance and monopolies to the south and west by trying to establish alternative spheres of influence, especially in the Pacific and in the Arctic north. Pathfinding and reconnaissance in the Arctic Ocean, although marred by the harsh climate and difficult navigation amongst icebergs and drift ice, thus seemed to promise riches and kudos at a time when the Dutch and British strove to match and even surpass Iberian maritime prowess.

After a rather elaborate first part summarizing the state of research, contextualizing the voyages, and explaining her methodology, Franziska Hilfiker offers many fascinating insights in chapters four to six, which together form the most substantial part of the book. These chapters directly address maritime history's recently highlighted connections with research fields such as the history of cultural contacts and colonization. Hilfiker carries out a dense analysis of various encounters between explorers, maritime places, and coast and island-dwelling peoples. Closely following the sources, she identifies island coasts, maritime straits, and frozen Arctic seas as 'sea spots' especially pertinent to the experiences, observations, representations, and interpretations she seeks to reconstruct.

Representations of the sea, as Hilfiker shows in a chapter about the explorers' landfalls, were crucial means of articulating and interpreting cultural difference. In coastal areas and shallow waters, indigenous islanders often moved much more nimbly than European explorers who, by contrast, sought to avoid direct contact with water and considered entering it dangerous and inconvenient. Many island cultures, like those in the South Pacific, were intimately connected with the sea, and islanders comfortably inhabited coastal spaces. This astonished European observers, who discussed these agile swimmers at length and cast them as strange, amphibious creatures. Europeans also read the islanders' elaborate boat designs as indicating various degrees of 'savageness'; in other words, they constructed cultural hierarchies in their observations of coastal life.

In another chapter, the book makes a compelling argument that—just like islands, which have been widely acknowledged as

trans-oceanic stepping stones of the early modern period – straits and maritime passageways were relational spaces that became pivotal to the increasingly global thinking of European maritime powers. After all, such waterways were crucial to linking far-flung parts of the world (not least the oceans themselves) and to setting up commercial routes. Representations of the Strait of Magellan and of the much sought-after North-West Passage, according to Hilfiker, are especially revealing of this extending geopolitical horizon and of rivalries between the two newly risen and ambitious maritime powers, the Netherlands and England. They illustrate, moreover, that straits and passageways were rarely discussed in isolation, but were regarded as constituting a global system of interconnecting and intersecting paths.

The study furthermore offers a refreshing perspective on early modern interest in the Arctic regions, which the English dubbed ‘*Meta Incognita*’. This interest has not typically been the focus of research on European expansion and colonization prior to the nineteenth century. While there is ample research on subsequent explorers such as Franklin, Scott, and Amundsen and their spectacular races to the North and South Poles, early modern attempts to enter the Arctic regions may have been underestimated as antecedents to those media events of the modern era. Hilfiker, meanwhile, is able to show how even the unsuccessful and unprofitable endeavour to establish a sphere of influence in the north that could rival the Iberian overseas possessions helped shape European imaginations. Devastating failure and prolonged suffering, as experienced during the exploration of the Arctic seas and indelibly ‘inscribed’ on the bodies, ships, and minds of the explorers, were regarded as essential aspects of pathfinding. They were even interpreted positively as signs of superiority over other exploring nations. The failure to master the hostile Arctic environment was far from inconsequential. On the contrary, Hilfiker demonstrates that it left strong impressions on those who strove for more global influence, and that failure changed the ways in which the northern seas were perceived in Europe.

Hilfiker’s observation that failure had an important role to play in the quest for global dominance raises the question of how acknowledgements of failure would later inform new initiatives to

enter the Arctic regions or find a route linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. So, for example, the eighteenth-century voyages of James Cook disproved the existence of both a navigable North-West Passage and the alleged vast southern continent of *Terra Australis Incognita*, whose existence had been posited by the ancient geographer Claudius Ptolemy and which was thought to border the Indian Ocean and counterbalance the continents of the northern hemisphere. Although Cook did explore and chart the coastline of the smaller southern continent of Australia, which had been previously discovered by the Dutch and was subsequently colonized by the British, his discoveries by and large disappointed hopes of compensating for the British loss of global influence after the American Revolution. Yet Cook's voyages were and still are considered the apex of exploratory achievement. It seems that shrewdly casting failure as success, as Dutch and English explorers did during the early phase of European exploration, may have contributed to a more general epistemological shift. After all, an appreciation for the negative results of exploration and the non-existence of much anticipated and hoped-for discoveries would later become crucial to key Enlightenment concepts like that of progress. These and other questions are outside the purview of Hilfiker's study, but they point to promising routes for further investigation.

The study's most impressive achievement, however, lies in showing how traces of early modern perceptions and interpretations of the sea can be detected in materials that have long been characterized as far removed from the 'actual' encounters and experiences of explorers and navigators and ridden with all sorts of distortions and inaccuracies. Hilfiker succeeds in showing how such perceptions and interpretations were processed and, through their circulation in texts and images, made accessible to a wider audience—not just in the Netherlands and in England, but also in the German territories through the de Bry family's publishing venture (for example). Engaging and enjoyable to read, *Sea Spots* certainly deserves interest from scholars outside history departments, and even from a wider public audience. Hilfiker does at times try the patience of readers not used to the soaring theoretical heights and abstract vocabulary of post-structuralism and constructivism. On the whole, however, this does not diminish the value of an original and well-written contribution to maritime

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history: a thriving, rapidly evolving, and—in an age of climate crisis and intensified rivalries over newly accessible natural resources and trade routes—highly topical field of research.

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