

5

Saltwater horizons: seas, oceans and civilisations

In this chapter, I aim to interrogate the relationship between oceans, seas and civilisations. A beginning can be made with the peculiarity of ocean environments – the vital forces of seas and currents. According to geographer Phillip Sternberg, oceans are spaces of ‘fluid mobility and ... tactile materiality ... continually being reconstituted by a variety of elements: the non-human and the human, the biological and the geophysical, the historic and the contemporary’ (Sternberg, 2013: 157). When it comes to theorising oceanic spaces, the object should be ‘the actual work of construction (labor, exertions of social power, reproduction of institutions etc.) that transpires to make a space what it is’ (2013: 158). The ‘actual work’ includes connections across oceans, and within them also. A maritime-centred perspective on the past can help reach my aim by revealing how problems of accessing and travelling on navigable waterways, seas, coasts and oceans have ingrained themselves into the patterns of civilisation-making and interaction (Paine, 2013). At the same time, a maritime history of the world can add to an elucidation of the dynamic inter-relation of civilisations with the assemblage of oceanic forces.

There are four aspects to this inter-relation discussed in this chapter and then in Chapter 6. The four aspects criss-cross the four dimensions of inter-civilisational engagement. First is the orientation of civilisations to seas and oceans. Many societies exhibit a cultural and perhaps *civilisational* reluctance to embrace sea-going, while others are less hesitant. Creative orientations to seafaring can be seen in the acquisition of navigational and cartographical knowledge and techniques, constant processes of learning about aquatic travel, the formation of maritime communities and religious axioms about sailing. Second, oceans – like societies that are land-bound – are zones of conquest. As we shall see, oceanic civilisations and states over the last five hundred years have an impetus to connect and conquer other societies. How oceans are incorporated into the cosmologies of civilisations is a third aspect. For islander civilisations dependent on

the sea, aquatic worlds often circumscribe myth, spirituality and art. Finally, the extensive mobility available to societies disposed to seafaring widens their range of exposure to different temporalities. Seafaring societies meet both the temporalities of islander societies inhabiting seas and oceans and those of other constellations of marine and naval forces. In world history, seas, coasts and oceans are ecologies of engagement as surely as terrestrial environments are.

Civilisations take to the water, as it were, travelling with merchants, fishers, migrants, sailors and administrators. How they do so in the Atlantic, the Indian and the Pacific Oceans is well researched in studies of those zones. Heightened interest in studying oceans as human domains has grown in the humanities and social sciences (see Bentley *et al.*, 2007; Gillis, 2004, 2013). In contrast, histories of inter-oceanic connections are rare (Paine, 2013). There has been no sustained attempt to integrate oceanic studies into civilisational analysis, nor any attempt to revise either in dialogue with the other. A few points emerge here as responses to the lack of contact between these respective fields of scholarship. To begin with, I propose that connections across seas span a range of remarkable diversity, just as links across lands do. A typology of those connections can discern features of oceanic, portal or thalassic, and islander-based civilisations in their orientation (Mazlish, 2004: 21–41; Murphy, 2001; Paine, 2013) – an orientation that is as decidedly civilisational in character as any of the land-based empires. Yet, the orientations of oceanic, portal and islander civilisations have not received the attention that they should in civilisational analysis. Moreover, the disciplines of world history and sociology have favoured contained national societies and land-based civilisations qua civilisation. But even when oceanic, portal and islander-based civilisations are treated, it is less for their imaginaries and proclivity for engagement and more for their part in the histories of other larger and ‘greater’ states, empires and civilisations. In response, I contend that maritime civilisations reach out to saltwater horizons and are animated by oceanic imaginaries. They develop marine, naval and imperial institutions with potential for long-range travel voyages and large-scale conquests. Maritime civilisations purchase on a liquid surface and navigate fluid currents and complex underwater fluxes. Above the undercurrents, open skies are ever-present and ever-retreating horizons. They relinquish the coasts with enough confidence to cross seas and oceans relying on marine knowledge, maps and journals, and the aptitude and technology for taking readings of sun and sky. Physical mobility helps foster the figurative imagination of mobility.

When coupled with the nascent institutions of imperial power, oceanic imaginaries produced maritime empires with goals for conquest via water rather than over land. Europe’s Atlantic seaboard states constructed imperial states of this kind. Collectively, they subjected oceanic space to a higher order of naval and

juridical power, with far-reaching consequences. Oceans and seas have been defined as zones of colonialism, especially over the course of the last five centuries (Bentley *et al.*, 2007; Klein and MacKenthun, 2004). A goal of Europe's empire-building has been control and politicisation of the seas – an end in itself sought by early colonisers as new intruders into old worlds (Mancke, 1999). As an end, control obliged imperial states to create legal and diplomatic instruments for the negotiation of warfare and conflict in extraterritorial space. States extended their authority in oceanic zones as implicit power through instruments of law and diplomacy and via norms of conflict management. Many seas had been contested for centuries: the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Aden, the South China Sea and the Bay of Bengal. But subjection of maritime endeavour to a normative, juridical and diplomatic framework was a new feature of emerging patterns of conquest and imperialist expansion.

Cartographical representation of oceanic space, along with naming seas, was the companion of this transformation. Modern cartography plotted the steady extension of the frontier of the imagined globe. Coextensive with the delineation of continents, European cartography instilled an abstract divisibility to the oceans, seas and islands. Abstraction in cartography needs common standards. Imperial institutions thereby adopted standard semiotics of space in cartographic representations. For Spain, the *Casa de Contratacion*; for France, the *Academie Royal des Sciences*; and for Portugal, *Padron Real* – all harmonised European conceptions of the world in common semiotics of proportionate spaces, including oceans and seas. Cartography has been inseparable from modern power, even while it extended human imagination. In all of the above ways, oceanic imaginaries have been sources of creation.

Oceanic civilisations and empires

There were conspicuous ocean-going states and civilisations prior to the fifteenth-century breakout of Europeans from their continental worlds. Fernández-Armesto cites the Phoenicians, the Vikings and the empires of Asia as examples of such civilisations (Fernández-Armesto, 2001: 320–2). Nevertheless, at the demi-millennium a consolidation of oceanic links began. The empires and imaginaries of transatlantic colonialism conjoined the two zones of the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, slowly at first and then more definitely. To properly appreciate this, the scholarship of modernity must forgo the landlocked self-understanding of the Western tradition and take to the water, so to speak. Europe's empires of the seas created global visions by signifying claims over oceanic space in order to extend their imperium. Having re-signified the world's ocean spaces and incarnating

their signification in the art of cartography, the agents of imperial states were able to imagine continents as continents, islands as islands and oceans as oceans, and give names to all of them. Manifold connections between two world zones grew with the intensification of imperial and civilisational rivalries. Colonisation of the Pacific Ocean followed, slowly, beginning in the late eighteenth century.

Perspectives and problematics brought up in Chapters 2 and 3 are relevant to the modernity of colonialism, as it might be considered within civilisational analysis. A focus on inter-oceanic links could lead to a scaled-up version of connected histories reconceptualised as connected oceanic regions. Early modernities can be reframed as processes of inter-civilisational engagement spanning Eurasia and the connections of the greater transatlantic and Pacific. In highlighting those possible reframings and the growing density of connections, I am reiterating three key arguments put forward in earlier work around the thesis that the distinctive trajectory of Europe relates to early 'Atlantic modernity' and extending that argument to the world's multi-civilisational regions (Smith, 2006). What distinguishes my elucidation of Atlantic modernity from the regular story of the rise of the West is a focus on the following dynamics:

1. The outgrowth of Europe's Atlantic empires that integrated Africa, the Western hemisphere and the rest of the world.
2. The imagination of civilisation that coalesced in the imaginary signs of colonialism.
3. Early forms of capitalism instituted through new regimes of accumulation, slavery, development of practices of capitalist rationality and the expansion of trans-continental markets.

The tri-continental Atlantic zone was joined with other global networks discernible in the build-up of early modernities. Atlantic societies were joined with historic Eurasia – part of which was incorporated into the Indian Ocean zone – through extensive imperial connections between multiple centres. The wind patterns of the Atlantic favoured a conjunction of the two oceans. Ships drawn to the Roaring Forties and across the South Atlantic would eventually pass the southern tip of Africa and find a route to the Indian Ocean. The conjunction linked the Eurasian land mass to a hemisphere not occupied by the Western Atlantic powers. Through inter-civilisational engagement across the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans, a number of the early modernities discussed in contemporary civilisational analysis manifested themselves coextensively in greater world contexts.

Each oceanic zone has distinctive histories. Much of the recent scholarship of Atlantic history has established how the Atlantic seaboard states had no

competitors in oceanic space in the Western hemisphere. The situation diverged completely from the seas ringing the Indian Ocean and the states that patrolled them. In their land invasion of the Americas, by contrast, they confronted Amerindian peoples and civilisations. In time, they competed with each other in the Atlantic Ocean and around the Caribbean. Legal philosophies armed imperial states with novel world visions of oceanic sovereignty, such as Hugo Grotius's *Mare Liberum* and the principles of suzerainty underpinning the Treaty of Tordesillas. With respect to Africa, Asia and the Middle East, European colonialism remained mainly commercial until the nineteenth century. Importantly, Europe's empires asserted the right to sovereignty in the Indian Ocean, principally against their European rivals. The claims could not be effective immediately but they were a measure of imperial ambition and imperialising logic. Britain, France, Portugal, the Netherlands and Spain expanded and then internationalised different versions of imperial power and their corpus of laws for the high seas. Born in the north-western periphery of Eurasia, the oceanic empires extended inter-European rivalry into the Indian Ocean, where they were marginal to a congested zone of trade criss-crossed by regional circuits of transport of goods, people and information (Fernández-Armesto, 2000). Moreover, throughout the Indian basin a complex patchwork of sovereignties presented the interloping powers with a more strategically challenging scenario than in the Atlantic. Prior to the nineteenth century, the transformative effects of the linkage between the Indian and Atlantic Oceans were mostly felt in the Atlantic.

Before the entry of the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and English forces, the Indian Ocean was a crowded and heterogeneous world of its own (Chaudhuri, 1985). Attracted to the spice trade and the potential for strategic advantages over each other, Portugal, the Netherlands, Britain and Spain were drawn deeper into the Indian Ocean. Initially, they were unimportant outsiders arriving in zones of complex and dense rivalries (Matsuda, 2012: 74–87). Portugal was only able to navigate its entry into the Indian Ocean because it could exploit the inter-civilisational transfer of navigational technologies from Asian and Arab sources. The option of quickly establishing colonial monopoly, in the manner of the Euro-American empires, was simply not available to them in the Western Indian Ocean. Instead, the Portuguese had to adapt to existing patterns of trade (Hodgson, 1974: 19–22; Matsuda, 2012: 49–63; Russell-Wood, 1998). The distinctly Catholic traders met Muslims, Jains, Hindus and Jews in settlements that acted as contact zones between merchant forces. In extending their imperial sphere from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean, Portuguese sailors, traders, officials and soldiers were engaging in a globalising encounter. While en route around Africa they engaged in the habitual rituals of possession on the West African coastline, using methods learnt from Islamic forces in the long *Reconquista* of the Iberian

Peninsula (Smith, 2006: 91–2). The rituals stopped after crossings of the Cape of Good Hope. As they entered the Indian Ocean as a ‘Western’ force, they had to do so on Eastern terms. In following an entrepôt pattern of empire-building, they used a combination of naval and military coercion and negotiation to acquire ports at Mombasa, Mozambique, Goa, Melaka, Macao and Nagasaki. Through their company, the *Estado da India Oriental*, they established a vehicle of colonial power that could maintain routes of communication, transfer and long-distance movement. Portugal was peripheral to the emporia trade for a very long time and could not have things its own way in many places. Conversely, Portugal’s Asian trade was far from peripheral to Atlantic Europe. They collaborated for a time with the Spanish, who held Manila, and expanded their conjoint institutional and economic development (Subrahmanyam, 2007). Yet, it is hard to see how Portugal could have gained hegemony in the Indian Ocean even during the union with Spain, if that was ever their objective. Nevertheless, their commercial involvement conspicuously introduced naval power and large-scale trading companies into Asian and African trade patterns. These factors were indicative of a different kind of imperial state formation from that of the Americas that were more suited to the crowded world region of the Indian Ocean.

For years to come, this would remain colonial intrusion rather than conquest. The Dutch and then the English soon followed. Both were equipped differently from the Portuguese seaborne empire. The modern Dutch state was collectively formed with a delta prospect through which northern Europe’s largest rivers spilled out to the sea. It met its challenges by building a worldwide oceanic empire. With experience in piracy and warfare, the progenitors of the United Provinces’ imperial vocation were corporatist governors at home and expansionists abroad. At home they instituted a self-balancing confederal polity of estates and riverside cities. They complemented state institutions with a family enterprise-based variety of capitalist economy. As an oceanic empire, it was similar to the Portuguese in that its agents sought forts, naval bases and factories at first and established colonies later. Yet, the protestant Dutch built a distinct Asian empire by, first, seeking to supplant rivals in Asia and, second, by creating corporatist-commercial power and harnessing that power on a qualitatively larger scale. In the form of the Dutch East Indies Company (VOC), the Dutch state created a vehicle for economic monopoly and political and military bureaucracy. While the VOC was in the ascendancy, Dutch imperialism progressed and its naval and marine power expanded. For a century-and-a-half, the spice monopoly fetched high profits. When the VOC declared bankruptcy in 1799, formal colonial rule of Dutch Asian possessions became a matter of government administration. Expansion halted. England, initially a minor naval power, also produced an oceanic state from the most extreme margin of the Eurasian land

mass. When the British government separated the functions of the British navy from commercial interests, it removed fiscal and organisational responsibility from commercial operations, enhancing the profitability of the latter and the viability of the former. Even with modifications to the state, however, Britain's imperial strategies still had to adjust to regional circumstances in Asia and the ongoing competition in the Indian Ocean basin.

What was true for the British applied to their European competitors also: they had to adjust to economies in which they were marginal and they had to negotiate with local authorities. Cooperation with other foreign merchants and urban and regional officials was obligatory in Indonesia, where Chinese suppliers and middle-merchants outnumbered the Dutch for a very long time. Connecting Asian port trade to a longer chain of transport, warehousing and final sale was an enterprise across different cultural zones all requiring cross-cultural negotiations. Furthermore, all this occurred in an era when the Asian-borne trade was still greater than that of the Europeans and when Asian production was still far greater. The Acehnese Sultanate, China and the Ottomans all tried to check the Portuguese advances, but then abandoned the strategy (Mancke, 1999: 229). The Dutch were more of a powerhouse. They outmuscled and outmanoeuvred the strained Portuguese Empire. Strategically and commercially, Portuguese interests were not as significant as the colonial companies of the English and the Dutch would become.

With all the European rivals in the field – including the Spanish in the Philippines – intrusion turned to conquest (Arnason, 1997b: 114). The Dutch (VOC) and English East India Companies advanced centralised bureaucracies as a new vehicle for colonial intrusion. The Dutch VOC succeeded as a well-backed government monopoly with colonial, mercantile and naval responsibilities. With the demise of the VOC, colonial rule devolved to public administration. But Dutch interests generally were on the defensive by the early nineteenth century. The effects of the Anglo-Dutch Wars over the course of the eighteenth century had tempered the will of both sides to war with each other. By this time, exclusion of British commerce from the sea lanes of Asia and from the Pacific had already come to an end, finished off when the British terminated the Spanish monopoly over the Pacific as a direct consequence of the Seven Years War.

At the dawn of the era of Grotius's doctrine of open passage on the high seas, the English were well placed to exploit long-distance trade as a specialism. In the early decades, officials of the English East India Company adopted the strategy of negotiating commercial privileges rather than using force as the first resort in the manner of the Portuguese. In many ways they carried the authority of the empire in their person. As 'agents of empire' they personified an implicit *imperium*. Thomas Raffles exemplified the embodiment

of personal and imperial authority in his deal-making strategy in Singapore (Matsuda, 2012: 197–9). The embodiment of authority was generalised in the English East India Company, but British offices were also part-rationalised. In a strategy intended to minimise venality, the restructuring of the Company's staffing produced the model of the Civil Service. As British interests extended their territorial hold, the English East India Company increasingly assumed state functions by resourcing troop regiments with its own soldiers and by developing a system of revenue extraction. With a larger apparatus British imperial authorities were more imposing. By 1830 the transformation to a colonial administration was complete. As they acquired colonial territories in Asia, the British were able to strengthen the web of networks made in the process of linking three oceanic spheres, thereby projecting British imperial power further. In the early eighteenth century the British looked the strongest of the European empires in Asia, though the position was not assured. The shift in strategic weight in Asia from Indonesia to India probably helped them achieve a precarious but discernible advantage at that time (Braudel, 1985: 530–3).

The Dutch and the British stimulated naval development through the VOC and the English East India Company. This was no linear development; along with the French, both lost ground to Asian traders in the early eighteenth century, even with British consolidation in India. The international balance shifted decisively in the nineteenth century. Dutch power advanced in Java (though it was checked in South-East Asia overall), French colonialism spread to and in Indochina and Egypt, and British influence expanded further in India, China and Singapore to a point of effective imperial hegemony (Pomeranz and Topik, 1999: 66–76). The porosity of ports and cities throughout the Indian Ocean and its bordering seas, coasts and archipelagos now assisted. So also did the maturing naval power of the oceanic empires.

In one generation, the impact of Western colonialism was felt in the territories of Asian and Islamic states. The British turned ascendancy in India into the Raj; French incursion shocked Egypt, as French conquests did in Indochina; and the Dutch reorganised Indonesia (Hodgson, 1993: 206). Over the course of the conversion of footholds into colonial territories, Europe's oceanic empires had forged new constellations of power from the connections of the Western hemisphere with the central world economies, state systems and multi-civilisational zones of Asia, Africa and the Indian Ocean. They were fully fledged world empires in the sense that they projected ambitions for pre-eminence in the imperial worlds that they organised. They are categorically distinct from the portal and thalassic civilisations and states that we turn to next.

Porosity of ports: civilisations of the seas

Oceanic civilisations and the states and empires that they instituted had a large-scale reach. Portal civilisations were more modest and had a thalassic imaginary, a seaward horizon if you will. Though their 'headquarters' was a port city, portal civilisations were more than states with working harbours and open sea-fronts. Their imaginaries oriented to the ebbs and flows of the sea and surrounding islands. Port cities fostered in the mind movements of ebb and flow between the human artifice of the port structures and the natural flow of tides (Murphy, 2001). Places where nature and construction contrast – and also conjoin along fluid boundaries – are ecologies that nurture a marine imagination. Ports help imagine a habitus of flows:

A further part of this pleasure is due to the artifice of port life that is built on the back and forth motion of the waters' edge. At the point of seaborne arrival and departure, nature and artifice blend into a seamless whole. The solidity of the wharf and the fluidity of the channel meet in suspended equilibrium. The pylon of the wharf, upon which the sea washes itself, beating and rocking with the motion of eternal return, is pure human contrivance, driven into bedrock, forming a tectonic joint with nature. The ebb and flow of the marine domain sets the tone for the artifices of the port (its ship-craft, wharves, buildings, urban plan, architecture, social structure and politics) and this nature-become-artifice ultimately replays itself in the higher artifice of abstract human thought. (Murphy, 2001: 11)

Where continuous trade, counter-balancing structures of power and artful politics are signified in the imaginaries of portal states, we can characterise such states as thalassic civilisations. They produce receptive impulses. The make-up of society and material culture in such places structures hospitable environments for strangers and communities of foreigners. Like oceanic states, they embrace mobility and support the mobility of arriving mariners, newcomers, goods, ideas, techniques, philosophies and styles. The materiality, architecture and logics of port cities nurture particular kinds of imagination, and consequently portal societies are welcoming of science and philosophy as well as trade. As conjunctures, they provide the preconditions of creativity. They propagate works of knowledge. They are publishing centres throughout a sphere of influence.

But portal civilisations also relate to other civilisations in particularly open ways. Their orientation is more to negotiated coexistence elsewhere, rather than to total conquest. They 'put out' communities of foreigners to other cities and societies on the terms that others negotiate with them. When their agents 'make landfall' elsewhere they act to negotiate with established social orders.

Ancient Greek cities and the sea-based Phoenicians exemplified this pattern (see Fernández-Armesto, 2001: 349–65). Port cities established by both colonising powers are trading ports again today, for example Tyre, Piraeus and Cadiz. There are other examples of thalassic civilisations: Renaissance Venice, the Hanseatic League cities, early modern Königsberg, Muscat and Makran under the modern Omani Empire and the Ryukyu Kingdom. Venice and the Omani Empire illustrate the varying contexts in which portal civilisations can acquire trans-civilisational reach.

Venice

The Venetian archipelago as a settled habitat is a ‘rational impossibility’ (Fernández-Armesto, 2001: 294). Swampy marshland makes for a bad location. Yet, over a thousand years, it remained astonishingly independent. As an artefact resisting constant ecological assault, Venice contrasts ornamental grandeur with the city’s marshy foundation. Ecology was not destiny. With forts, bridges, squares, wells and ultimately with canals, the lagoon’s inhabitants made a city and then gambled on building a seaborne power, a wager that worked. This is a robust example of a thalassic civilisation and empire. In the process of state formation, the political bloc could subordinate, or *pattern*, economics in decisive phases. Following Weber’s uncharacteristic sociology of the city, Rundell argues that an urban imaginary produced an oligarchic city republic (Rundell, 2014: 241–8). The guild patriciate obtained a monopoly position by the end of the twelfth century, leaving the office of the Doge ineffectual. Its thalassic empire added an imperial domain to its sphere of explicit power and an imperial dimension to its fiercely competitive political centre. Though ruthless and corruptible, the guild oligarchy was the crux of a tyrannical concentration of power in the polity. Externally, the oligarchic state attained imperial extension of a very particular and modest kind. With little domestic territory, portal Venice became a consummate seaborne power that, at its height, commanded a network-like empire with an extremely effective and mobile navy (Paine, 2013: 317–21, 429–30). The mercenaries, agents, contacts and intermediaries of the Venetian Republic extended throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Venice was an eastward-oriented conduit of civilisations, so much so that traces of Byzantine and Islamic traditions endure in its art, architecture and urban design. Venetian rulers, merchants, officials and artisans could deal with Islamic, Jewish and Byzantine counterparts without the strictures of orthodox Catholic scruples (and without the support of Rome where necessary). Crucially, the character of the middle imperial power lay in extension more than domination. Toynbee’s image of Venice may

be a misleading and over-simplistic one of ephemerality and decadence, but his assertion that Venice 'succeeded ... because she avoided the strain which imperialism tends to impose upon communities that indulge in it' is credible (1972: 174). Through trading posts, Venice dominated lucrative trade routes from North Africa to Crete and Cyprus, to the Levant and the Black Sea, and then way back to the Mediterranean's west. Venice had grown on the back of its internal struggles and it eased and curbed access to citizenship according to an internal balance of forces and imperatives for expansion. In the east, its commercial partners were frequently its political rivals. Byzantium – for some time its main challenger – fell when Constantinople was captured at the start of the thirteenth century by the Venetian-funded forces of the Fourth Crusade following a particularly unstable period. The Fourth Crusade was a watershed in the rising republic's history. Strategically, Venice gained the eastern Mediterranean as a sphere of influence, while financially the victory delivered a vast windfall in plunder. At that time, the Republic was a pre-eminent power in the region.

At its peak, what gave Venice an edge over its rivals was its position as the clearing house of Eastern trade with the West. Like other city-states of sixteenth-century Europe, it was given to creative adaptation of instruments and strategies of commerce encountered in the distant travels of its merchants. The empire's long-distance trade in commodities, art, produce and materials embroiled it in substantial economic transactions with Arab and Byzantine merchants and later with the Ottomans, all of which acted to aggrandise the financial knowhow of Venice's bankers, the technological and organisational resources of the merchant marine and the base of wealth held by the Venetian patriciate itself. Braudel puts the success of Venetian civilisation down to financial power and its augmentation of the state and its agencies (Braudel, 1985: 116–36). In this combination, Venice found a kind of capitalism that its navy, boosted by its mercantile and cultural power, could defend until the Spanish unlocked the Atlantic world for Europeans. Venice's seaborne trade still increased in absolute volume after that event. But in comparison to other states, its fortunes had taken a turn for the worse. In the second half of the fifteenth century, the Ottoman Empire had emerged as a new regional rival. Under Mehmid I and Bayezid II, the Ottomans had successfully converted their state into a seaborne power. The Venetian navy that had provided an effective convoy system of protection for seaborne commerce was in ruins and unable to resist the new competitor. By the time the Ottoman Empire had routed the Venetian navy in the 1499–1503 war, the balance in the eastern Mediterranean had shifted entirely (Fernández-Armesto, 2000: 297). The city republic turned in the sixteenth century to territorial state-building and agricultural production to compensate. Fitting agriculture into a political economy of

commercial porosity and cultural creation helped Venice survive until the era of powerful national states. Defeat at the hands of Napoleon in 1797 brought the Republic to an end.

Many historians consider the end of independent Venice as a tragedy. Toynbee does not join the chorus of tragic meta-narrative, but the end is decisive as far as he is concerned. He writes that 'on the whole and in the end, Venice failed to make any fresh creative contribution to the life of the society in which she managed to survive; and this Venetian failure can be explained by the fact that Venice, too, did succumb, in her own way, to the nemesis of creativity' (1972: 176). On the contrary, Venice as a portal city continued to welcome and promote cultural creativity. The physical inheritance was not the only legacy of thalassic success. City-making had been based on high investment in the objects of civic pride. The resulting landmarks of public magnificence affected confidence and world-making. Venice had an urban, artistic and imperial imaginary that incubated creativity. In city design, architecture and art, the city incarnated mercantile power. Those entering and leaving always had the republic's power impressed upon them in the surviving heritage of the empire's wealth. The watery entrance impressed with utilitarian and symbolic qualities. Its architecture and urban design combined different genres. The combinations are creative. The Grand Canal is Venetian Gothic; the Rialto Bridge classical. Rival classicisms vied for patrician favour and ebbed and flowed with the city's fluctuating politics. An infusion of Baroque forms and motifs in the late imperial period completed the mix. The result is creative arrangements on public buildings and private residences of facades, reliefs, stylistic columns, crenellations, porticoes, ornate decorations and statues. The construction of piazzas, arcades, palazzi and churches continued the theme of combination.

The traditions are living ones. Venice remains a site for architectural and artistic innovation that accentuates portal features and affects (Murphy, 2001: 27–32). In the nineteenth century, British Romanticism discovered Venice for the rest of Europe. The splendour of the city on the lagoon became the subject of art, writing and poetry as well as a haunt of artists, writers and poets. Byron, Turner, Dickens and John Ruskin popularised Venice, but left out the living city of the day. What they did, however, drew people to the living city. When the railway came, the significance of the watery entrance diminished. Its introduction was an instalment in a long story of struggle between so-called modernisers and preservationists over the portal character of the city. Industry and flooding became threats to the city, but they are not the only ones. Long after the empire has passed, the experience of Renaissance magnificence remains a drawcard for tourists, though the watery entrance is very limited for twenty-first-century jet-setters. The number of visitors has grown to levels seen by many as unsustainable.

Yet, the local population is in steep decline. If the trends continue, will the place remain meaningfully connected? Will its portal character survive? But these are questions that will have to be left unanswered here.

Oman

Oman's thalassic civilisation mobilised traditions of engagement during a highly interactive phase in the nineteenth century (Nicolini, 2004). The Omani Empire built an orientation to cross-flows and influences on the foundation of a long history of confrontation with other civilisational forms (Rundell, 2015). At the same time, Omani input into inter-civilisational trade built up commercial traffic under its own auspices between the Middle East, Asia and East Africa. Even though the imperial state depended on terrestrial forces and its lands, Oman was a seaward civilisation oriented to oceanic horizons (Fernández-Armesto, 2001: 328–30). Omani shipping heading down East Africa's coast and to India was favoured by the cyclical winds of the monsoon. Oman attached well-networked coastal communities to robust trades of the interior, including the slave trade. Within this network, Kilwa and Zanzibar acted as nodes of exchange between Africa's interior trades and outside destinations in Oman and Gujarat. Omani agents injected a range of raw resources into international trade such as copra, rare timbers, animal hides, horns and shells. The Omani Empire even helped in the creation of Swahili civilisation through their subjection of the Swahili to the powers of the Indian Ocean trade (Nicolini, 2004: 57–66). The engagement of other civilisational forces in East Africa was part of this civilisational process also. Older traditions of intra-African trade and trade between the interior and thalassocracies on East Africa's coasts all the way down to Madagascar are underestimated in the historiography (Paine, 2013: 268–72). Undoubtedly, as Nicolini has argued, they contextualised Swahili integration into Omani commerce. Conjoined circuits of Saharan trade, created by the empires of the Niger Delta and Ethiopia in earlier centuries, formed the backdrop of zones of contact, communication and exchange with Islamic and Christian civilisations. The importance of historical trades for commerce and state formation in the West Indian Ocean has also been underestimated. As elsewhere, cross-cultural knowledge and capabilities were needed to navigate and organise economic relations. In the era of Omani domination of the cities of East Africa, Afro-Arab and Swahili brokers were all involved in allying markets in the interior with wider maritime movements within the greater Omani sphere of influence.

The modern Omani Empire was thus able to exploit the seasons of the monsoon to link Makran, Muscat and Zanzibar with Asia in an extensive civilisational nexus. In doing so, Oman triangulated three very different mercantile

worlds: Persia and Arabia, thalassocratic East Africa and the interior and Gwadir (later in Pakistan) and Asian ports. Moreover, Oman's own interior lands were a different economic world, more remote from the trading impulses of the coastal nodes. The tribal interior, nonetheless, was not unaffected by the seaward orientation. On the contrary, land-based Omani society had a tradition of negotiating distant relationships with the outside Arab world. Externally, royal authorities had to engage increasingly intrusive European powers. The ascendant Omani state had seen off Portuguese occupation in the 1650s (Paine, 2013: 454). In subsequent decades, competition with Turkish, Persian and Western interests grew. But Oman was up to it and indeed thrived in the new regional environment. The rise of the House of Al Bu Sa'id in the mid eighteenth century began a two-and-a-half-century period of uninterrupted dynastic rule. In the late eighteenth century, the Sa'id separated secular and theocratic powers, thereby putting the state on a stronger commercial, naval and diplomatic footing. Playing France off against Britain, Oman was able to settle an unthreatening treaty with the British. Steering a fine strategic line between French and British interests in East Africa, the Omani prince-merchant Sa'id bin Sultan Al Bu Sa'idi (1807–56) was able to sustain an increasingly independent sphere of Omani power and influence in the Indian Ocean. Oman could establish trade relations with the United States, France and Portugal while remaining faithful to the treaty with Britain. Sa'id bin Sultan moved his capital to Zanzibar and from there opened up the extensive and lucrative clove trade. Exposure to European imperial rivalries afforded Omani elites the opportunity to regard Portuguese, then British and French models of imperial statecraft and diplomacy. Through a long learning process they created a *sui generis* statehood, carefully and strategically crafting an imperial polity that incorporated such disparate elements as the mercantile and slaving elites in Zanzibar and a praetorian military force in Muscat. The empire in Arabia and East Africa had a confederal rather than centralist form. As a result, the Omani Empire was well equipped to challenge the European powers in the West Indian Ocean (Mancke, 1999: 230; Paine, 2013: 454).

The Omani relationship with the British bears this point out. British agents were increasingly prominent in the Arabian Gulf and were able to funnel intelligence on Oman back to London. Knowing the empire well, the British were on a solid footing to negotiate with the Omani sovereign. Britain's growing support for the abolition of slavery in international trade put it at odds with the slaving Omani Empire. While high officials of the British Empire walked a difficult diplomatic tightrope in negotiations with other powers about abolishing slaving, they were seeking an alliance with Oman that resulted in the compromise of the Moresby Treaty. The Omanis for their part artfully used their own position and the dilemmas of the British to their best advantage by using British

collusion to outmanoeuvre French influence (Rundell, 2015). Oman emerged with decisive control over East African commerce, at the expense of its local rivals. For a time in the nineteenth century, the Omani Empire held a strong position, where others had already succumbed to the force of British colonialism. Economic decline, internal division and a stronger maritime and naval presence of Western forces undermined that position and precipitated a long period of retraction from international prominence. But no more can be said about that here.

Islander civilisations

Oman's zenith passed with the break-up of the empire into Muscat-centred and Zanzibar-centred states. Island bases in the Arabian-Persian Gulf and East Africa had a dual place in the thalassic Omani Empire as, first, intermediary ports and, second, as part of the segmented nexus of polities under Omani auspices. Islands were the distribution points of many portal civilisations. While islands were crucial in the creation of oceanic and portal civilisations, it is also worth thinking about them as separate entities.

Some can be regarded as islander civilisations. This requires awareness of their historical, collective and indigenous memories. The struggle for memory strikes up against the social problems of the present for many contemporary states. In the twenty-first century, few islands achieve the heights of Hong Kong and Singapore. Many find themselves trapped in dependence and inequality. Yet, this has not always been the fate of such islands (Fernández-Armesto, 2000: 275–6). Many have a past in which they played a more pronounced part in inter-civilisational networks, even though conditions of human habitation were often precarious. Poverty and inequality within, compounded by inequality in the world economy, makes it hard to visualise a proud past before dependence that some islands had. Places such as Kilwa, the Comoros, Sicily, Madagascar, the Caribbean and Melanesia were nodes of trade, spiritual exchange and intercultural communication. Military occupation and colonisation were not outside their experiences either. Interlopers left layers in the historical accretion of island societies, if they governed long enough. As an example, the Maldives make up an unusual historical assemblage. They appear thrown like a net across the oldest courses of commerce. Stretching from the south of India to reach out towards the middle of the ocean, the islands catch the passing traffic, including a share of the spice trade. Religious artefacts attest to the influx of Buddhism and later Islam to join the indigenous religion in monument-building on the islands. Whatever remains they have left behind have had to defy sporadic bursts

of iconoclasm. Its strategic value was such that the whole string of islands was captured in the early eleventh century by the Cholas in a move that sealed their advantage in South-East Asia. It is hard to draw generalisations when faced with the variety of societies, such as in the above list. Where are islands in the histories and sociologies of civilisations?

Braudel, Paine and Fernández-Armesto stand out as generalist historians of civilisations and island societies. What shines through Braudel's comprehension of the Mediterranean for the reader is the *feel* of the islands and littorals and the coasts, currents and breezes (Braudel, 2001). The integrated world that his history recreates presents islands as nodes of interaction between many civilisations that inhabit the Mediterranean basin. Braudel's later reflections (2001) suggest a more nuanced picture with only a formative unity – an image not reflected in his earlier history or by those following his thalassology (Arnason, 2003: 321–2). His geography-heavy thalassology is not beyond critical debate. None of the reception seems to hone in on his privileging of islands in the Mediterranean. Many similar points are also made by comparativists and historians of the Indian, Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Braudel's focused treatment of the Mediterranean's archaic and ancient islands emphasises networks of communication, trade, exchange and migration (2001). Stepping outside the Mediterranean, there is less history of islands to stir the interest (see, for example, Braudel, 1993). Braudel left a substantial legacy, however, in the study of connectivity across seas, one that spread throughout the historiography of other oceans (Bayly, 2012: 5). Paine goes further than Braudel to argue for a global maritime history that rethinks the space of human agency and asks us to imagine the high seas as the arena in which it occurs. For instance, he paints a picture of Oceania as a world of islands connected in 'the oldest, most sustained, and perhaps most enigmatic effort of maritime exploration and migration in the history of the world' (Paine, 2013: 13). Transmigration across large bodies of water between islands was a pre-archaic world breakthrough that occurred first in the western Pacific. Paine advocates a completely different maritime view of evolutionary complexes of the environment, technology and society. In his view, islands are points of human connection that punctuate inter-linked oceans. A regional case in point is the archipelago formation of Indonesia and the Malaysian Peninsula. The islands and the Peninsula land mass separate the South China Sea (itself split from the Pacific by the Philippines) and the Indian Ocean. The region is porous, shaped by a pockmarking island topography, which enables connection but inhibits unity (Paine, 2013: 169–70; see also Arnason, 1997b). The entire zone has been a vibrant nautical crossroads of trade, politics and spirituality; islands catching the passing traffic in culture, goods and models of organisation (Paine, 2013: 278–83). Paine's thalassology sits well alongside Fernández-Armesto's environmental

world history. Fernández-Armesto exercises vigilance around the circumferences of islands as well as the joins of land and sea. Shores and oceans are magnified in the worlds of island inhabitants. Islands are only 'small' when their civilisation fosters an insular relationship to the surrounding sea (Fernández-Armesto, 2000: 277). He sees the project of civilisation as thin in many island environments and yet its agents often prove remarkably resourceful. Venice is the magnificent exemplar in his classification of small islands civilisations. I have defined its significance differently. Moreover, where Fernández-Armesto regards Pacific island civilisation as an 'exception' (2000: 289), I regard it as the exception to elevate, as I argue below and in the next chapter. Nonetheless, I still find it easy to admire Fernández-Armesto's sensuous grasp of diverse island environments.

Overall, there are no equivalents amongst founding perspectives to the astute appreciation of islands we find in Braudel, Paine and Fernández-Armesto. Mauss deserves more than an honourable mention as one exception. His inclusion of the civilisational complexes of multi-island Melanesia and Polynesia sets their gifting practices in comparative perspective with pre-Brahmanic India and north-west America (Mauss, 1969). Often Mauss's analysis of islands presents an intra-societal picture. However, larger-scale interaction also appears in his short comparative anthropology. As a key instance of this, inter-island rituals model potentially larger encounters on a civilisational scale. Mauss's limited comments on the trade of islands give clues to how his style of comparison of material and moral life could be reorganised to illustrate patterns of exchange across greater distances and involving encounters of more clearly differentiated cultures.

The historical question of islander civilisations continues unresolved and, with one exception, I do not have the room, or the scholarly expertise, to pursue it in the manner it deserves. If we think of civilisations and regions as closely aligned, however, some candidates for further investigation are thrown into relief. The Maldives, the Torres Strait, the Caribbean and the Comoros-Madagascar could register in a research programme of this sort. Undoubtedly, there would be more. The paucity of analysis of islands as civilisations may well relate to their general fate in the global age. When the imperial expansion of European states was at its height and the conflicts it engendered were the greatest, islands were incredibly important strategically, economically and culturally. Their decline since has been precipitous. The nature of the demise of most islands is not only economic, strategic and political. As Gillis writes, it is also a product of lost memory: 'We have lost sight of this [the pre-eminence of islands] because in the Western historiographical canon laid down in the nineteenth century, history is presented as if it begins and ends at the edges of continents, and dwells almost exclusively on their interiors' (Gillis, 2004: 85). In the nineteenth century, large-state nationalism also

devalued island societies (Gillis, 2004: 114–16). Anthropology called attention to island societies, but the anthropological imagination was dependent – in complex ways – on colonialism and its devolution, and the early division of the twentieth-century social sciences. In the course of the twentieth century, actually existing island societies were marginalised by globalising logics. Perhaps it is no surprise that a paradigm of comparative analysis such as civilisational analysis, in which large multi-societal complexes are the object of inquiry, should neglect islands. However, if inter-civilisational engagement is the analytic put to work in comparative analysis, then the dense regions of connections of island societies can be brought into the picture.

There is another reason to elevate the significance of islands and islander civilisations. Islands as environments compel reflections on civilisational pasts. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, island environments themselves looked gravely threatened by acute climate change. Vanuatu, the islands of the Republic of Kiribati, Tuvalu (at less than five metres above sea level) and Fiji are critically exposed in the Anthropocene. If islands are needed for a future agenda of civilisational analysis, it is partly because they reanimate the question of a common fate for humanity. Human connections with and across seas, coasts and oceans anthropologically have defined humanity and shaped civilisations (Gillis, 2013). If we accept this, then it follows that one way of thinking about the ecological commons is to picture the ‘Earth island’ (Gillis, 2004: 167–8); that is, to invoke an island horizon in contemplating possible futures and acting on them. Given that, climate change appears, rightly, as the issue of our times. An islander perspective has more to offer for contemporary civilisational analysis in this area. A view from an island puts ecology into perspective and land and sea-mass into proportion. Oceanographer Sylvia Earle writes in *Time* magazine, ‘Rain forests and other terrestrial systems are important too, of course, but without the living ocean there would be no life on land. Most of Earth’s living space, the biosphere, is ocean – about 97%. And not so coincidentally 97% of Earth’s water is Ocean’ (cited in Hau’ofa, 2008: 52). Rising sea levels are not the only issue. Acidification of the ocean, precipitous decline in key species in the food chain and erosion of essential reef environments also present major threats to wider bionetworks. As issues, they should not be limited to thalassology, the earth sciences, marine biology and oceanography. They are questions of life itself for many islanders. Oceans should be included in civilisational analysis more methodically. They can be part of a research programme as byways of engagement and as environments of the institution of civilisations. This would bring ecology onto the agenda more substantially and include it with particular islander standpoints.

Conclusion

A promising research agenda on oceans and imaginaries cannot be pursued here except in regard to one notable civilisation: the Pacific Ocean civilisation of Polynesian, Micronesian and Melanesian societies. In the next chapter, I present an extended case for inclusion of the Pacific. In Chapters 4 and 5, I have concentrated on presenting inter-civilisational engagement with a *breadth* of scope. The coming chapters of Part II concentrate on providing *depth* by examining modern examples in greater detail and with more focus: the Pacific, Latin America and Japan. By exploring the lineage of ideas around culture, politics, economy and civilisation in these three distinct contexts, I track inter-civilisational engagement in greater depth in specific environments and contexts.