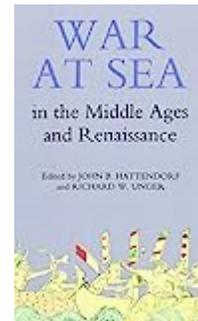




John B. Hattendorf, Richard W. Unger, eds. *War at Sea in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*. Woodbridge and Rochester: Boydell Press, 2003. xiv + 276 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-85115-903-4.



Reviewed by Marguerite Ragnow (Department of History, Center for Early Modern History, University of Minnesota)

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Toward a Theory of Medieval Naval Power

It may come as a surprise to some readers that the possibility of developing a theory of medieval naval power exists at all, much less that a collection of essays has been published to that end. Little attention has been paid by medieval historians in recent years to the development and use of aquatic craft, whether for commercial or military purposes, in comparison with the tremendous amount of ink spilt to further the project of medieval history generally, and this despite new technologies that have increased our knowledge exponentially through the recovery of artifacts. Military and maritime historians have begun to redress this lacuna, but as Hattendorf and Unger point out in the preface to *War at Sea in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, a general reappraisal of the use of armed force at sea is needed. This collection of sixteen essays, which developed from discussions at a 1997 American Historical Association meeting and, more directly, from a 2000 conference on maritime history sponsored by the Fundação Oriente in Portugal, makes a valuable contribution toward that end.

Advances in technological development, most par-

ticularly advances in military technology, are among the many factors considered by historians to have contributed to the rise of the West in the early modern era. The relationship between this technical advancement and social development is often thought to be reciprocal, even symbiotic. In the late-nineteenth century, German military historian Hans Delbrück was one of the first to address the interaction of military development and social change. He emphasized the relationship of strategy to policy, shifting historical focus from the fighting of war to the making of war.[1] In the same vein, the work of the nineteenth-century naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* (1890), became a classic study on the interaction of military technology and economic development. His work influenced many twentieth-century scholars, who have effectively linked developments in maritime technology with those in the production and use of firearms to explain Europe's expansion during the early modern era, and especially its commercial dominance of other regions throughout the world. As John Hattendorf's perceptive introduction adumbrates, historians of medieval naval and maritime

history have applied Mahan's theories to less effect.

Mahan based his theory, that naval power was necessary to advance commercial interests and that its most effective use was to reduce the enemy's capacity to make war at sea, almost entirely on eighteenth-century relationships between maritime trade, naval force, and government support of colonial empires. He was not interested in looking back to earlier periods in search of the historical roots of what he observed for the eighteenth century; Mahan was much more concerned with looking forward to develop new naval strategies. However, rather than dismiss Mahan out of hand, despite or perhaps because of his dominance of Anglo-American naval theory over the past century, the editors of *War at Sea* chose to juxtapose the essays in this volume against Mahan and current thinking about him and his theories. In particular, they consider how historians might usefully apply the questions Mahan raised to develop a better understanding of naval power during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Editors John Hattendorf and Richard Unger, themselves among the leading authorities on this topic, assembled fourteen experts in medieval or early modern maritime and naval history charged to re-evaluate for the Middle Ages and Renaissance "the topics of force, power and the sea, the roots, functions, and the concept of naval power," "taking the older literature as a starting point or foil" (p. xii). The resulting essays advance our understanding of medieval sea power in interesting and important ways.

Parts 1 and 2 examine northern and southern Europe respectively between the tenth and sixteenth centuries. This organization preserves the conventional view that northern Europe lagged behind the south in almost every respect. At the same time, it does make comparisons relatively easy, especially if one is interested in how both economic and geographic considerations affected technological development in each region. Within these essays, the eleventh century emerges as a significant transitional period in naval development, as it has similarly been identified for other aspects of medieval life. Of particular interest is John Pryor's examination of Byzantine fleets under the Macedonian emperors in the tenth and early eleventh centuries. His command of sources not readily available or not translated from the Greek underpins a technical study of the design and operation of *dromons* during this period, ranging from the water requirements of the crew to the disappearance of the waterline ram. He reaches the same conclusion for the Middle Ages that John Guilmartin reached for the sixteenth century: Mahan's strategic theories are inapplicable to

the pre-modern Mediterranean.[2]

Part 3, which examines the sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries, confirms that this period was one of significant change in naval organization and policy fueled by concurrent changes in state organization and advances in military and maritime technologies. As Nicholas Rodger states in his essay on the "new" Atlantic: "Important emphasis, however, is given to the strong relationship between domestic interests and overseas expansion and its implications for naval organization and warfare. In the sixteenth century, the Atlantic, the Mediterranean and northern Europe collided" (p. 241). The essays in this section examine the transition from the medieval to the early modern world, engaging accepted naval theory more directly than do those essays addressing the earlier medieval period. Jan Glete's examination of sixteenth-century naval power in the Baltic explains the importance of technological change to the development of strong naval administrations in Denmark-Norway and Sweden at a time when the naval strength of the Hanse towns was waning. Rodger offers an insightful examination of the different forms of naval organization existing prior to the seventeenth century and the advent of Mahan's modern navy. His insistence that it is a mistake to clothe pre-modern maritime history in "modern dress" is one that Richard Unger continues in his conclusion.

It is Unger's conclusion and Hattendorf's introduction that make this volume a must-read. Hattendorf's perceptive analysis of the state of the question is redrawn by Unger to incorporate the new work presented here. Rather than summarize the contributors' conclusions, Unger attempts to create a new framework for medieval naval power that links it to the unique political structures of the Middle Ages. Most useful are the connections he makes that cross the chronological and geographical boundaries reinforced by the volume's organization. Although this collection does not, in the end, accomplish its goal of constructing a theory of medieval naval power, it takes some giant leaps in that direction.

Practically, the volume suffers from its lack of a bibliography, although kudos go to the publisher for using footnotes rather than endnotes. There is a list of illustrations that includes several maps, but it does not, unfortunately, mention the useful tables also present. As in many essay collections, the topics not covered are regrettable: the development of French naval forces, the naval actions of the crusading orders and the Hanseatic League, and all developments of non-Christian sea power during

this period, among others. Nevertheless, this is a volume that will prove useful to scholars at every level, and which also could be used in the classroom. In the best of all possible worlds, it will lead scholars to re-imagining the Middle Ages and Renaissance as a period in which maritime activity, including naval power, played an important role.

Notes

[1]. Hans Delbrueck, *History of the Art of War within the Framework of Political History* 4 vols., trans. Walter J.

Renfroe Jr. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1975-85); originally published as *Geschichte der Kriegskunst im Rahmen der politischen Geschichte* (Berlin, 1900-36).

[2]. John F. Guilmartin, *Gunpowder and Galleys: Changing Technology and Mediterranean Warfare at Sea in the Sixteenth Century* (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975). Readers are directed to Pryor's forthcoming book, with Elizabeth Jeffreys: *The Byzantine Navy: Evolution of the Ships and their Capabilities*.

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