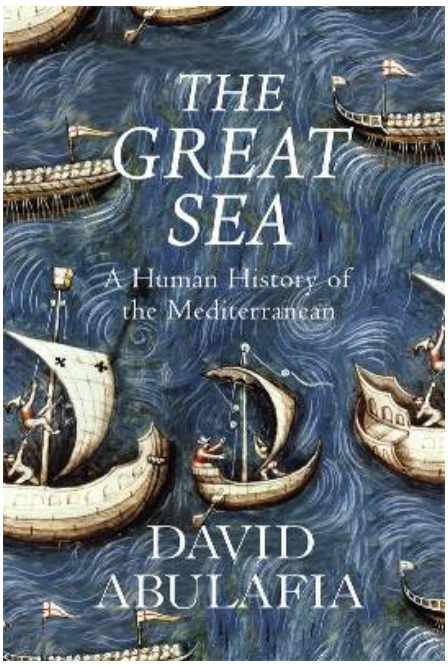

The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean

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For over three thousand years, the Mediterranean Sea has been one of the great centres of civilization. David Abulafia's The Great Sea is the first complete history of the Mediterranean, from the erection of temples on Malta around 3500 BC to modern tourism. Ranging across time and the whole extraordinary space of the Mediterranean from Gibraltar to Jaffa, Genoa to Tunis, and bringing to life pilgrims, pirates, sultans and naval commanders, this is the story of the sea that has shaped much of world history.

The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean Details

Date	:	Published May 17th 2011 by Allen Lane
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Author	:	David Abulafia
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Genre	:	History, Nonfiction, European History

From Reader Review The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean for online ebook

Dimitri says

A gorgeous mosaic that pleads for the diversity and cultural exchange to which the shores of an inner sea lend themselves so well. As one of the prominent anti-Brexit historians, Abulafia knows how to argue against the mythology of the nation-state.

The only danger of 5000 years of Braudel with the wars & kings restored into the economy ? Getting lost amidst the marbles. For example, some of the more Byzantine interests of the Italian merchant republics in the Ottoman era aren't clear within the space of a few pages, and the cultures of the Jews* from Spain to the Levant could easily fill all of it by themselves just as easy as WWII** or the Minoan civilisation.

* Cultures of the Jews: A New History by David Biale
** The Path to Victory: The Mediterranean Theater in World War II by Douglas Porch

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Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books (hide spoiler)]

Patricia says

Superb, superb, superb. A keeper for the rest of my life, a book I will dip in and out of, I am certain, many many times (have now read cover-to-cover twice) before I lay aside. I am an Asia historian but one can not escape the importance of Mediterranean Europe upon Asian history and culture, hence the value of this work that systematically goes into each of the great ages of the Mediterranean, its peoples, its cultures, its wars, its injustices, its epidemics, its destinies.

This is not to say there are not issues: I was deeply unhappy with the maps. There were too few, with too few labels, and I had to have a historical atlas constantly at my side. In addition, the photographs in my edition were in black & white (the European edition apparently had colour photos so watch which edition you purchase). And the names and place names are so endless that although my Kindle-reading friends complained about certain aspects of the book on a Kindle, they said the links to the footnotes, etc. which were obviously electronic, were extremely helpful, which made me mad with jealousy as I juggled bookmarks on the map and footnote pages.

I can't conceive of writing a book of this magnitude and depth of knowledge. What a legacy Professor Abulafia has left the world. I stand in total awe.

John says

I found "The Great Sea" to be an extremely enjoyable and informative book. The goal of the author, a professor at the University of Cambridge, is to trace the history of the Mediterranean Sea in terms of its periodic rises, declines, and re-organizations as "a single commercial, cultural and even (under the Romans) political zone." Specifically, David Abulafia divides the history of the Mediterranean into five periods: prehistoric, classical, medieval, great powers, and modern. The author's interest is not in the sea as a natural habitat, bur rather, as a zone across which diverse peoples interacted, particularly through trade and commerce. This interaction of people drawn from vastly different societies is what the author believes made the Mediterranean such an important contributor to human civilization, even if its relative importance has declined in the modern era.

While the book is fairly long, it is very well written and is structured in short, highly accessible sections that pull you from one topic to the next. The book never felt long, and virtually every page is evidence of the author's deep knowledge about, and deep love for, the sea.

Only a few things prevent me from giving the book five stars. One is that I felt the discussion of the prehistoric Mediterranean to be a bit drawn out, though that probably has more to do with my interests than the author's skills. Once the book reaches the classical world, however, it really comes alive, at least for my tastes. Second, (and this criticism is specific to the e-book edition), the book uses many maps that do not render well and are difficult to enlarge.

Overall, I very much enjoyed reading this book, and I came away from the process feeling educated and enthused.

Brian says

My three-star rating isn't strictly fair to the content of *The Great Sea*, which is very good, but rather with the difficulty I had in reading it. It took me two weeks because I would repeatedly lose focus and have my mind wander only to realize that I'd been reading and rereading the same section multiple times without ever really taking it in, and I'd either switch what I was reading or give up. Maybe it's because of the book's format. It's simultaneously dense and choppy--full of citations and quotes and statistics about the various areas and periods it covers, but nothing is covered for more than a few pages at a time before a chapter break and a slight shift in focus. Despite the quality of the information I had a hard time sticking with it for an extended period of time.

The book is divided into five sections covering five different periods of Mediterranean history, delineated like so:

> I have identified five distinct periods: a First Mediterranean that descended into chaos after 1200 BC, that is, around the time Troy is said to have fallen; a Second Mediterranean that survived until about AD 500; a Third Mediterranean that emerged slowly and then experienced a great crisis at the time of the Black Death (1347); a Fourth Mediterranean that had to cope with increasing competition from the Atlantic, and domination by Atlantic powers, ending around the time of the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869; finally, a Fifth Mediterranean that became a passage-way to the Indian Ocean, and found a surprising new identity in the second half of the twentieth century.

Of these, my favorite was the First Mediterranean, both because the popular image of history before the Roman Empire is of a very atomized society without much long-range connection, which *The Great Sea*

does a great job of countering; and the fact that the Bronze Age Collapse is one of the most interesting periods in history.

I mean, trade networks throughout the eastern Mediterranean, and then they started falling silent one by one. The Mycenaean civilization was destroyed so thoroughly that the Greeks *forgot how to write*, the king of Ugarit wrote a frantic letter for aid on a clay tablet but the city was crushed into dust before it could be fired and delivered, the Hittite Empire collapsed and its capital was burned to the ground and never reoccupied, Troy was burned twice, and in Egypt the Pharaoh wrote about previously unknown "Sea Peoples" which had attacked Egypt and were defeated in battle...until they attacked again and the Egyptian Empire collapsed in on itself to the territory around the Nile.

I really want to read a book just about that, and the first part of this book was the part that held my attention the best.

Other than that, I liked the point Abulafia made about the Mediterranean port being a distinct category of city for much of the Mediterranean's history. Medieval ports were often a wildly varied melting pot of peoples from all across Europe, the Middle East, and Northern Africa, with Turks, Arabs, Jews, Italians, Greeks, and others all rubbing shoulders together and keeping the lines of trade flowing across the waters. In the great population displacements after World War II, this almost entirely vanished. The Jewish trade networks maintained with their co-religionists across multiple cultures failed as Jews were expelled from Arab countries and fled Europe in favor of Israel, the European decolonization process led to people from the colonizing country leaving for their newly-free home and colonizers returning to the mother country, and rising nationalism led to movements to expell the "other" from the shores of the glorious $COUNTRY. It's only with the modern rise of tourism and the reinvention of much of the Mediterranean coast as a tourism and retirement destination that the old melting pot has returned, though now at great environmental and quality-of-life cost. Venice itself is dying under the flood of tourists, a sad fate for what was one of the most powerful cities in the Mediterranean only a few centuries ago.

The book also does a good job of showing how the Mediterranean remained connected even during periods of change, though the volume of trade may have been reduced. The collapse of the Roman Empire and the end of *Mare Nostrum* did reduce the shipping in the western half, but the Eastern Roman Empire survived. The Black Death allows for Atlantic merchant powers like the Dutch and the British to find a foothold in Mediterranean trade. Traders would buy shares in shipping ventures down to 1/64 of a ship so that any individual ship foundering wouldn't necessarily ruin the backers. The pre-modern world was more modern than we often think.

Based entirely on the information I'd have given this four stars, and I really liked reading the book when I could pay attention to it. It's a good historical survey that makes me want to track down other more specific books to learn more.

Riku Sayuj says

It is strange to read such an expansive history book and realise there is no real theme to the book. Why would an articulate historian write such a well-researched book that summarises 1000s of years of history, without having an overarching theme to be supported by all that effort? Most of the popular expansive history books (think Sapiens, think GGS, etc.) are actually organised around powerful central themes that allow the reader to engage with the history being told - to have solid reasons to stay engaged with it. Unless a

reader is only looking to be informed in a general way about what he is reading, it is the argumentative flow that keeps him/her engaged. That is the strength of narrative histories that are also thematic.

Abulafia has instead focused on exactly what his title says "A history of the Mediterranean region" which is further circumscribed by limiting it to the human aspect of it, ie., to the communities that lived on its shores, the trade that crossed its surface, the privacy that disrupted it often, the rivalries for its control and the political alliances and stories that flourished around the great central sea of European history. Now if you think about how such a history would be written, it would be immediately clear that it would end up being a very European history, that peeks into the Asian events once or twice, especially through the peephole that is the Suez Canal. Unless there is a thesis that there is some central character about the region which shaped the flow of histories that touched its shores, what does such a history really add to a reader who is already well versed with the general flow of European history? If all you are getting is a summary of history that is more limited due to some artificial constraints that disallows the author to talk about certain aspects, what is the value in spending the time required to read all of 700+ pages? Not much really.

In my opinion, a truer history of the Mediterranean would first get the reader familiar with the geography of the Mediterranean, because the moment you define the book based on a geographic entity, geography has to take centre stage in some way. Once the Mediterranean region was established well, the author might then proceed to the flow of history but keep drawing our attention to the ways in which the unique features of the Mediterranean (which is in fact pretty unique) impacts things. This is the kind of book that I expected this to be, and that was my motivation to start it. The impacts might be large or small, or even marginal, but that would be a more useful or thought-provoking book than a constrained history of Europe, especially since the constraints do not really work in a continent like Europe where the interactions between various countries were too central to the flow of history. So, for instance, we cant have Russia's role limited to its pining for the Mediterranean and its attempts to strike up a better relationship status. That only leaves the reader with a limited perspective, which is fine in a thematic work on history, but not in a general history, I guess.

These are some of the reasons why I believe I could never really connect fully with the book and even found myself skipping through some all-too-familiar areas. I could do that safe in the knowledge that I am not missing any arguments by doing so. The same cannot be done in a thematic work because one might lose the flow of arguments if one skips over a topic or period just because one is familiar with it, since we cant be sure exactly how the author is going to use that to substantiate his argument/theme. But in any general history book, we can easily skip over things either because we already know it or because that specific era or topic is not of particular interest at the moment.

But all that said, Abulafia is still a very good historian and this is still a very readable account. It is held together beautifully even though it is a tough job to give structure and coherence to a limited history like this and still keep it true to the original promise to the reader that it is going to be a history of a specific region. Abulafia exhibits the command and discipline required to reign in his history, event though even after the reigning in, it is still a sprawling beast of a book. It is enjoyable, and it is knowledgeable, but I am not sure if it serves a purpose, ie., if there is any reason for someone to actually pick up the book and make the effort of reading through the 700+ pages of it.

Fiona says

I'll never actually finish this book. I must have had it for a couple of years now. It's another that I'll always have on my bookshelf to dip into when I want to look something up or read about a particular place or

period. It's a bit too dense for my taste but an excellent resource.

Josh Hamacher says

This massive tome details the history of the Mediterranean sea, starting with the first known inhabitants and going right up to 2010. Given the length of the book and the scope of the subject it's remarkably readable. Abulafia has an impressive ability to turn what could be a dry account of facts into a page-turner (at least by the standards of history books).

The focus is on larger societal trends and changes, the interactions between the peoples, cities, and nations surrounding the Mediterranean and how these entities and interactions evolved over time. Prominent figures are mentioned, of course, but are not allowed to hijack the larger narrative. As the book approaches modern times and written records become more plentiful and trustworthy, Abulafia occasionally details the life of a specific individual as a way of illustrating larger trends. I found this approach quite effective.

I learned a lot from this book but there's definitely too much to take in from a single reading. I'm already looking forward to rereading it in a few years.

Jared says

Very impressive in its breadth, and surprisingly engaging for such a long book. He, like anyone else studying a topic as broad and deep as the Mediterranean, acknowledges his deep debt to Braudel. Nonetheless, Abulafia seeks to dismantle Braudel's longue durée view of the Mediterranean as relatively stable with a view of the societies surrounding the sea as constantly changing, divided broadly into five different "Mediterraneans" over time. I think he is largely successful in his task; at the very least, his change provides a good counterbalance to the previous emphasis on continuity.

Tamara says

Good grief finally done. This really, really long. I was desperately checking how many pages I had left already by page 600 or so.

It's not entirely terrible - theres lots of interesting episodes, anecdotes and details that are fun. Ocassionally, theres even a whole few pages of coherent information about something that I actually understand - technology, language, trade, physical conditions of slaves, etc. This is actual stuff about actual stuff, and I find it interesting.

The problem is that it's interspersed amongst hundreds and hundreds of pages of "so in this period the ascendant Valencians moved against Syracuse, which contributed to the decline of Alexandria and blah blah blah." WHAT DOES THIS EVEN MEAN? Is there some sort of history-writing code which I have missed the memo on? Did they steal their boats? Burn their city? Send them stiff letters? What? I just have no interest whatsoever in this kind of geopolitics recap of a thousand years ago - not as any kind of normative statement, it just bores me. It doesn't *mean* anything to me, as a modern reader, whether Genoa or Carthage is ascendant at a given moment in the 1100's or what.

So theres lots of that, and it never really added up for me into a coherent history or sweeping sense of history for the region - it's too big and too dense. Which is ok, I don't think it had to, but the book is kind of stuck in limbo of being both too big and not big enough.

Then theres the sort-of-political sort-of-nostalgia stuff, which i'm probably exagerrating, but hey, it's my review and I can see political bugbears if I want to. Everything is political after all. Yes, yes, we get it, the place was just lovely in all those simply lovely port cities which were so diverse and cosmopolitan and where all those Greeks and Turks and Jews and Arabs and Albanians and Everyone got along so well (and were especially lovely to their neighbours during the race riots, in one memorable paragraph that Abulafia appears to have genuinely missed the irony of completely) and how awful that it all stopped with all that sad ugly nationalism business. It seems to me that this so much classist tripe that is a manufactured nostalgia of second generation post-exiles of westernized, wealthy elites, but what do I know?

Anyway, not really recommended. Too big and disjointed to be all that interesting.

James Kane says

Professor David Abulafia, one of the most respected and established historians of the Mediterranean world in the Middle Ages, concludes this hefty volume with the claim that "[the Mediterranean Sea] has played a role in the history of human civilization that has far surpassed any other expanse of sea". Although historians of other "expanses of sea" would no doubt vociferously defend the claims of their own subject in this respect (historians have a tendency to be territorial about such things), Abulafia certainly supports his statement with a picture of great complexity that encapsulates just how busy and influential an expanse the Mediterranean has been for thousands of years. True to its title, *The Great Sea* really is a "human" history of the Mediterranean, full of fascinating details and entertaining anecdotes about the cultural, religious, commercial, intellectual, political and military activities of countless people over the centuries. Warriors, traders, slaves, merchants, philosophers, crusaders, preachers, sailors and ambassadors all play a part in this sweeping story. Abulafia's almost panoptic account of the Mediterranean from 22,000 BC down to the present day is bewildering in the breadth of its content, and at times it suffers from the inherent difficulty presented by any diachronic narrative so vast in its geographical remit. While the range of detail impresses and informs, it inevitably dilutes the focus of the history and frustrates the author's attempts to evoke discernible main themes. This might not be such a bad thing, though. Life, we all know too well, is messy, and the developments of history rarely (if ever) play out along the clean lines that so many books would have us believe are the norm. Whatever the future of the Mediterranean Sea - and as this book makes clear, its influence is undoubtedly in decline in many ways - Abulafia has produced a detailed and readable overview of the region's colourful past, covering its joys and its tragedies, its achievements and its failures, its happy periods of tolerance and its nadirs of violence and persecution. Some scholars may lament the generic nature of the work, but non-specialists with an interest in Mediterranean history will find this a valuable addition to their shelves.

Rindis says

After reading Norwich's A History of Venice, I looked at his other books, and saw one on the Mediterranean that looked interesting. However, most of the reviews for it said it was okay, but Abulafia's *The Great Sea*

was much better, so I put that on my wishlist instead, and got it for Christmas.

It's a large, expansive, book, covering from prehistory to the current day (2010). Abulafia purposefully tries to limit the scope of his book by sticking to subjects that impinge directly on the Mediterranean as a whole; the communities on its shores, the trade that crosses its surface, the rivalries and the piracy. It is a general history, and doesn't really have any defining thesis, other than perhaps the one his book is organized around. The book is split into five parts (titled 'The First Mediterranean', 'The Second Mediterranean', and so on), with each part being about a single economic complex in the Mediterranean.

Many parts are familiar to those familiar with history, but along the way there are plenty of new things to see. I had not known of the ancient ruins on Malta, nor the entire nature of Allied frustrations dealing with French North Africa. The third and second-to-last chapters are depressing, as they cover the destruction of several multicultural communities in the lead up to WWI through the aftermath of WWII. The final chapter takes a quick look at how mid-20th century emigration spread southern Italian cuisine to the rest of the world, and then talks of the impact of tourism on the Mediterranean.

In all, it is a broad book that manages a surprising amount of depth, and an enjoyable read.

Marks54 says

This is a "human" history of the Mediterranean Sea, from over 10,000 years ago to 2010. I saw that this had received a favorable review in the Economist so I got a copy, but was hesitant to plunge in - it is a rather long volume. I started it last Friday and could not put it down! It tells a coherent and entertaining story of five different seas that seems on target, provides a believable overall narrative, and yet includes all sorts of tidbits about people, places, and odd facts that makes books like this so rewarding.

My biggest concern was that this would be a huge survey that did not hold together well - a sort of mega cliffs notes. It is a survey, but the whole is much more than the parts. For example, I learned much more about the rise of Spain to eventual European dominance in conflict with France, the Italian commercial republics, and the Ottoman Empire. For another example, the author did a good job in showing how the maritime life of the Mediterranean was important in how countries developed -- such as why Northern Italy prospered and moved into manufacturing and high value added enterprises while Southern Italy did not. The role of merchants, pirates, and intellectual wanderers are well developed to show how they made the Mediterranean into an integrated area rather than just an array of kingdoms and states.

While the author is very learned, he is also very wise and strikes a good balance between detail and general themes. Nearly every section of the book has links to an entire scholarly community with its own issues and debates. The book tends to offer the main line story in each area while at the same time indicating to readers where disagreements exist. On the areas where I was better informed, it was very clear how Abulafia was crafting this story and he does a fine job.

Don't try to speed read it and have some maps (and google) handy to check up on the wealth of details that you will encounter here. I thought it was very rewarding and the greatest proof of this was that the book held my attention once I started. I did not have to worry about getting sufficiently far in the book so that I would finish. That took care of itself.TT

Jennifer (JC-S) says

‘For over three thousand years, the Mediterranean Sea has been one of the great centres of world civilisation.’

This book, the cover tells me, ‘is the first complete history of the Mediterranean from the erection of the mysterious temples on Malta around 3500 BC to the recent invention of the Mediterranean’s shores as a tourist destination’. I was immediately fascinated: how does a history of a sea read? People interact with the sea in a number of ways, but they don’t live on it. What facts become important, which aspects of human civilisation will feature, and why?

David Abulafia is professor of Mediterranean history at Cambridge and in this book he sets out the presence of the people who have lived around the Mediterranean from around 22000 BC to 2010 AD. This is a history of the people who ‘dipped their toes in the sea, and, best of all, took journeys across it.’ The book is divided into five chronological sections:

The First Mediterranean 22000 BC – 1000 BC
The Second Mediterranean 1000 BC - 600 AD
The Third Mediterranean 600 AD – 1350 AD
The Fourth Mediterranean 1350 AD – 1830 AD
The Fifth Mediterranean 1830 AD – 2010 AD

Each section of the book opens and closes a period of the sea’s history during which trade, cultural exchanges and empires act as unifiers before the process stops or reverses. Some of those significant events include the collapse of the Roman Empire, the impact of the Black Death and more recently the building of the Suez Canal.

‘The history of the Mediterranean has been presented in this book as a series of phases in which the sea was, to a greater or lesser extent, integrated into a single economic and even political area. With the coming of the Fifth Mediterranean the whole character of this process changed. The Mediterranean became the great artery through which goods, warships, migrants and other travellers reached the Indian Ocean from the Atlantic.’

There’s a wealth of information here: about the great port cities (including Alexandria, Salonika and Trieste); about the space of the Mediterranean from Jaffa in the east to Gibraltar in the west, from Venice in the north to Alexandria in the south. As part of the narrative, Professor Abulafia includes information about people whose lives illuminate the developments he is describing: a diversity of ethnic, linguistic, political and religious influences. We meet the Venetian merchant Romano Mairano, and the Arab traveller Ibn Jubayr. We read, too, of Shabbetai Zevi, described as a deluded Messiah in 17th century Smyrna.

Of most interest to me was the role of the Mediterranean in trade. The merchant is a critical figure. The Phoenicians spread the alphabet across the Mediterranean: how else can merchants create the records they need? The merchants carry essentials such as grain and salt, but they also carry ideas, plagues and religions across the sea. Not all interactions are peaceful, and different people (including members of minorities) make different contributions across culture and creed.

I would have to read the book at least once more to fully appreciate Professor Abulafia’s coverage: while the book is easy to read there is a huge amount of information to read and absorb. There is a map included in each chapter, which I found very helpful in placing the narrative.

This is an amazing book and well worth reading by anyone with an interest in the history of the Mediterranean Sea.

‘Rather than searching for unity we should note diversity.’

Jennifer Cameron-Smith

Anthony Panegyres says

David Abulafia's history is epic in both design and scope. It's an incredible achievement, exploring the Mediterranean from as far back as 22000BC right through to the present day. I don't think Abulafia has the narrative touch nor the understanding of some aspects of the Levant that Phillip Mansel does. Abulafia does, however, have a phenomenal knowledge of Jewish history - and the many successes and tragedies that history entails.

I also had the feeling at times that Abulafia believes in race and bloodlines to an uncomfortable extent.

Unlike Mansel, who is hard to turn away from, this history took me a while to read, yet it's certainly worth the time and patience.
