



Océanides: Universal History Seen From The Oceans

260 researchers from 40 countries took up the challenge of studying maritime history from antiquity to the present. Their contributions, grouped in four volumes published by Boydell & Brewer, give a new vision of the oceans and reassess their importance in the history of our civilisations as well as for our future. Christian Buchet, scientific director of the project, highlights the key ideas.

BM : How was the Oceanides project born?

Christian Buchet : From an intuition. Quoting Walter Raleigh: "*For whosoever commands the sea commands the trade; whosoever commands the trade of the world commands the riches of the world, and consequently the world itself*". It seemed to me to propose a scheme operating at all times and all places... However, it remained to be demonstrated. It is now done, but this collective work, worthy of the Encyclopedia of the eighteenth century, goes far beyond this by modifying our view on history and geopolitical context.

BM : Let's start with History: What lessons did you learn?

Christian Buchet : Mainly a new vision of the Universal History that can be divided into three stages. First of all, the "Mediterranean" age. Some civilisations were born around the Mare Nostrum, others around the China Sea. In a way, there were two centers, two Mediterranean ones that existed simultaneously, roughly up to Antiquity and perhaps even to the Middle Ages.

Then, from the Renaissance to the 21st century, we were in the Atlantic time. With the Geographical Big Bang of the great discoveries, all the world trade passed through the Atlantic route: the European shipowner captured the essential, ending a millennial system based on a network of 1,000 to 1,200 intermediaries.

Finally, a new break since only some fifteen years ago with the advent of the time of the global ocean, or "oceanotemporaneous" time.

BM : You also evoked a new vision of geopolitics: would the sea return to the center of the game?

Christian Buchet : She has always been and still is! Take the example of the First World War: Germany lost it because it did not control global logistics flows. This weakness forced it to maintain a certain number of people in agriculture when the French and the English could rely on grain and meat from farmers in Canada, the United States, Australia and Argentina. Clearly, independent of the fact that the Americans arrived by sea, it was the control of flows that enabled the Allies to mobilise superior forces than Germany and ultimately to win.

BM : This geopolitical vision of oceans however is struggling to get accepted ...

Christian Buchet : Yes, probably because of a predominance of a terrestrial vision. MacKinder, one of the fathers of geopolitics, considered that the one who rules Eurasia, the *Heartland*, commands the world. Except that this is not true: the one who commands the world is the one who holds the sea, or at least the straits, that is, the flows. In fact, it is not he who rules the *Heartland* who has mastery over the world, but he who controls the "*Heartsea*". And this *Heartsea* could well be the Indian Ocean, epicenter of the world. Hence the considerable stakes today between India, China, etc.

More than ever, it is the sea that must be held. Hence the will of Russia to setting sail once more, and of China to equip itself with an oceanic fleet. They no longer fight for *Heartland*: China does not fight for Siberia, but for the Paracels, the Senkaku. It even manages to create artificial islands. In this time of the global ocean, we will no longer fight for land but for islands. Not for what they are but because they give access to the maritime domain in which there is everything.

BM : France, given its history, should be well positioned in this new era?

Christian Buchet : Yes, if we take into account our maritime space, our skills and our many assets. No, if we do not change our vision of ourselves. In France, we have an astonishing relationship to the sea. When, at the beginning of the year, I ask my students to quote me a naval battle, it is always Trafalgar and Aboukir, always a defeat. This doom and gloom is quite astonishing. We have a very beautiful maritime history, but it is as if we were not aware of it: I hope that Oceanides will help change this state of mind and help France to turn its future towards the sea.



The frigate Hermione on her departure to the United States. © Marine nationale/S. Marc.