

**Haywood, John. *Ocean: A History of the Atlantic before Columbus*
Pegasus Books, 2024**

560 pp., illustrations, maps, bibliography, notes

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Given the scope of both time and subject matter this book is still a remarkably concise volume. With 170,000 years and the exploration of the entire Atlantic Ocean within its 560 pages, it promises to be a comprehensive work and Haywood does not shrink from the magnitude of the task. Fortunately, the first 160,000 or so years are disposed of in the first of the 17 chapters and things proceed smartly from there. Most of us in North America look east toward the Atlantic and the standard coverage is of the exploits of Europeans from Columbus to the end of the age of discovery (whenever that might be). For Haywood, the action is on the eastern side of the ocean and the discovery is that of the ocean itself and not only the land on its western edge. As sea peoples crept gingerly beyond the Pillars of Hercules and left the Mediterranean, they faced a great unknown, not just the western sea, but north and south to lands unknown. The Atlantic's eastern shore was a mystery, but it was a knowable mystery, and, over the centuries, the expanding sea boundaries allowed the world to expand in the minds of those who lived on its shores. There is, therefore, much in the claim that the history of the Atlantic is the history of western civilization.

The volume is divided into three main areas. The first of these saw the expansion of sea-borne trade and ideas of those water-dependent civilizations such as the Greeks and Phoenicians (and to a lesser extent the Romans) beyond the metes and bounds of the Mediterranean to link with those living on the coasts of the Atlantic to the north. Exploration to the south initially had more challenges and less to offer. The second part of the volume deals with the northern peoples such as the Norse, who were very much a sea-based society. Haywood is an expert on the Norse period, and his previous work includes a number of books and atlases on the Vikings. The final third of the book really begins with the end of the relatively short-lived Norse encounter with America and shifts the focus to the south and south west as Spanish and Portuguese mariners gingerly moved toward the offshore Atlantic islands such as the Canaries and Faroes and along the African coast to the southern hemisphere and around the cape to escape the Atlantic into other oceans.

This to great measure is the story of both how and why the Europeans mastered their western sea. Haywood explores the changing technology on the sea through the design of vessels, their suitability for trade or conflict,

the increase made in the knowledge of navigation, and awareness of winds and currents. One observation particularly struck me: that the desire for exploration was often grounded in the belief that something existed beyond the horizon. This belief was cross-cultural and was part of many, if not most, of the European societies which had a coastal aspect. Haywood goes so far as to assert that one of the factors limiting the seafaring capability of the societies on the western edge of the Atlantic was the lack of offshore islands. Other than in the Caribbean, there is almost no land beyond the sight of land. In the eastern Atlantic, the British islands, the Northern Isles of Orkney and Shetland, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, and Greenland were stepping stones, carrying Europe more and more to the west. A similar pattern is found to the south and west with the Azores, Maderia, the Canaries, and Cape Verde Islands holding out the promise that there was something over the edge of the known world. Discoveries over hundreds and hundreds of years and the lure of islands and lands whose existence was often proven to be more than pure myth meant that it was possible that the sea had no edge. That belief, coupled with the promises of religions across the span of time, was a passive promotion of exploration.

This volume, like Lincoln Paine's *The Sea and Civilization*, is a synthesis of a great deal of research and publication and Haywood claims only to have produced a volume which provides a single, non-academic overview of the pre-Columbian Atlantic. His extensive bibliography and notes are a comprehensive guide to information about the Atlantic from the classical period to the most recent scholarship. The non-academic style provides pleasurable access to an incredible amount of information and the book is written with both skill and humour. It takes a knowledgeable writer to weave what seems initially like a succession of separate exploration stories into a tapestry of time with recurring themes. While the subject may seem at first to be overwhelming, Haywood's writing presents a clear narrative and piercing insights. The cliché "I couldn't put it down" is not often found in the review pages of academic and professional journals, but it does reflect my experience with *Ocean*. An insert section of colour images is more decorative than illustrative, but the maps are a useful adjunct to the text, as is the index.

This story has a richness which puts Columbus in a context and a continuity of expansion. Haywood's aim is to show that a history that begins in 1492 is far from complete and cannot be understood without knowing what came before. *Ocean* succeeds in meeting that aim and is highly recommended for both the generalist and specialist readers.

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