

Humanity and the Great Seas: Conversation with David Abulafia

Interview conducted by Hansong Li

David Abulafia is Professor of Mediterranean History and Paphomas Professorial Fellow of Gonville and Caius College at the University of Cambridge. He was educated at St. Paul's School and King's College, Cambridge. As a maritime historian, he is known for works on the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, culminating in *The Discovery of Mankind: Atlantic Encounters in the Age of Columbus* (2008) and *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean* (2011). Professor Abulafia's academic interests also include a wide range of social, economic and religious issues in ancient, medieval and early modern history. He is currently writing a history of the oceans, focusing on the long-distance trade and cultural interactions across the oceans from antiquity to modern times. On September 13th 2016, Professor Abulafia shared his historical insights with the *Chicago Journal of History* at the British Academy.

Chicago Journal of History (CJH): Let us begin with a question on your career as a historian. From *The Two Italies* (1977) and *Western Mediterranean 1200-1500* (1997) to *The Great Sea* (2011) and the *The Discovery of Mankind* (2008) you have expanded your inquiry on maritime history from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic.¹ Currently you are exploring oceanic history, having delivered a series of talks on ancient global trade at the Legatum Institute. It seems that the scope of your research has become increasingly larger in scale. What has been the engine and the guiding thread behind your research in the past thirty years? And what are some of the ongoing and upcoming projects that you have in mind?

David Abulafia (DA): I think when one starts as a historian, obviously one is guided to some extent by interests derived from one's teachers and so on, but in my case, without quite knowing what I was trying to do, I can now see, looking back to my very early work—my first book, *The Two Italies* was based on my Ph.D. thesis—how there are certain themes which almost

unconsciously prefigure what I was doing in *The Great Sea* and what I've also tried to do in some of my works on the relations between different religious groups. At the heart of this is an interest in the ways that connections across quite wide spaces—economic links but also cultural links—have been effected, and the interactions between these economic relationships and political developments. In doing this, I was very much influenced, as one can see in my first book, by the work of Braudel and the *Annales* School. But one can also see, if you look at my early work, that there is one very significant difference, and that is the amount of space I gave to political developments, to sometimes relatively small changes over time: the signing of treaties, the breaking of treaties, and the ways in which political decisions, political accidents, such as the death of a king, might actually determine quite significant outcomes. And it seems to me for a long time that the school of Braudel became so obsessed by structures, the *longue durée* and so on, but really failed to look at the role of individuals. It wasn't interested in the individual. That was almost a sort of theology underlying it, which pushed individual choice and free will into the corner and laid such heavy emphasis on the permanent features—by which I mean particularly the geographical features—of the Mediterranean.

So, the Mediterranean was my first area of concern. However, if you are working on the activities of merchants, you get used to a particular type of documentation—the trade contracts, the diaries, the narratives of voyages—and inevitably you get drawn to look at similar sorts of materials from different parts of the world. So, we have, for instance, the Cairo Genizah documents, most of which are actually at Cambridge.² I'm not a specialist in that material, but quite a significant element among the commercial papers that survive from eleventh- and twelfth-century Cairo from the Jewish community is concerned with the Indian Ocean, trade down the Red Sea, and trade to the west coast of India. You also get inevitably drawn to the Genoese, and others setting up trading centers in Bruges, and therefore the history of Flanders and northern Europe, the Italian bankers in England, and so on. So even if you were focused for many great years, in my case on the Mediterranean, you always have to be aware of those comparisons and connections. What I am now really interested in is the connections between the seas: leaving the Med-

1 Abulafia, David. *The Two Italies: Economic relations between the Norman Kingdom of Sicily and the northern communes*, 1977; Italian edn., 1991. *The Western Mediterranean Kingdoms, 1200-1500: The Struggle for Dominion*, 1997; Italian edn., 1999. *The Great Sea: a human history of the Mediterranean*, UK and US edns., 2011; Dutch edn., 2011; Greek edn., 2013; Turkish edn., 2012; Korean edn., 2013; Spanish edn., 2013; German edition, 2013; Italian edition, 2013; Romanian edn., 2014; Brazilian edn. (Portuguese), 2014; other editions under contract. Updated Penguin paperback (UK), 2014. *The Discovery of Mankind: Atlantic Encounters in the Age of Columbus*, 2008; Spanish edn., 2009; Italian edn., 2010.

2 The Cairo Genizah documents are a collection of Jewish manuscript fragments found in the genizah or storeroom of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Old Cairo, Egypt. The Taylor-Schechter Cairo Genizah Collection at Cambridge University Library is the world's largest and most important single collection of medieval Jewish manuscripts.

iterranean rather to one side, and placing quite a heavy stress on the three great oceans interacting with one another across a much longer period of time than we normally tend to think. We tend to date these interactions from 1492 (Columbus) and 1497 (Vasco da Gama), but it's going right back in time.

CJH: You are oftentimes described as a “maritime historian.” What do you think that term entails? What in your early years inspired your interest in the oceans?

DA: Well, “maritime historian” is a term that I probably would not have used myself some years ago. When I was beginning in academic life at my college in Cambridge, we often dined together in the evening. I wouldn't go every night, but sometimes, when I was quite junior, I would find myself sitting next to a guest, who would ask me, “What do you do?” Just to scare them off I would say I am an economic historian. I am not the sort of economic historian who is heavily engaged with economic theory, obviously. But interest in maritime trade has almost always figured in my works, perhaps with the exception of the book on Frederick II. It's a sense of maritime history as people moving across maritime space. What I am not particularly concerned with (and what I don't really have the expertise to deal with) are the technicalities of shipbuilding: the invention of navigational instruments, and so on, which tended to dominate maritime history, and indeed naval history in the strict sense of the contests for power on the surface of sea, which almost always comes into the history of maritime trade—just think of the Dutch, the Portuguese, and the English battling it out along the coast of India. But what has really dominated my understanding of maritime history are the ways in which pioneering merchants have spread out across seas and the ways in which it is not just goods they bring. Those goods, some of which still survive—you can go to museums and look at them—are part of the process of bringing cultural influences across great distances. Just to take a relatively modern example: the arrival of Chinese porcelain in Northern Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries, and the effect that it had on people's taste, and the whole life if you like, of the urban bourgeoisie. That's the sort of issue that engages me very much. So, it's not maritime history in the traditional sense. What has gratified me is the feeling that my type of maritime history is beginning to be practiced on a wider scale.

Where I tend to be more critical, in terms of the current historiographical trend, is with concepts such as Mediterranean history, Atlantic history, Indian Ocean history, and so on. It seems to me that sometimes these terms have been bandied about and used in a rather uncritical way that have not necessarily engaged with the maritime dimension. There are grounds for doing that. Sometimes, of course, when writing the history of the Mediterranean world, which encompasses the landmass and the sea, how far you go into the hinterland is a question. So, that's something that people are perfectly justified in doing. What I have actually tried to do is to see whether it is possible to write a human history of the sea as a space on which people cannot live in a normal way, but which they do inhabit in a process of

motion back and forth across it. I think that is a fascinating aspect of human existence, and something that has had enormous impact on the development of civilizations across the world.

CJH: *Frederick II: A Medieval Emperor* (1988), which you just mentioned, is not a work on Frederick's maritime influence on Sicily, Malta, and Cyprus, but an interpretive work on the vast empire: the land and sea, the enigmatic emperor, his court, and his legacy.³ What prompted you to write this work on Frederick II, which is not a history of the sea? Have you drawn any criticisms in book reviews for reassessing Frederick II's Christian piety and conventional wisdom, and challenging his status as the *Stupor Mundi* in a scholarly atmosphere that appreciates extraordinary kings? How well was your point accepted by other medieval scholars?

DA: I had originally intended in my Ph.D. years to research and carry on writing through the reign of Frederick II. I've always been interested in him. In fact, I was taught about Norman Sicily and Frederick II in school (it's very unusual, and kids don't always get that advantage). I simply had too much material, so I drew the Ph.D. to an end at around the time he was born. But I continued to do a bit of work on his grand admiral, a very interesting character who became the count of Malta. This drew me into the historiography of Frederick II, and particularly the work by Ernst Kantorowicz, who was one of the most celebrated—I wouldn't say most talented—historians of the twentieth century.⁴ His work on the life of Frederick II is very controversial. So quite early in my career, I wrote an article about what Kantorowicz had been trying to do, and particularly his links to rather extreme right-wing views in Weimar Germany.

And this came to the attention of J.H. Plumb, who was a very famous Cambridge historian.⁵ By then he had retired, but he had taken on the responsibility to commission lots of titles for Allen Lane and Penguin. So, he approached me and asked whether I would like to write a life of Frederick II. I wasn't quite sure whether I really planned to do it at that stage—I was in my late twenties, and I was probably just planning to plow on with my Mediterranean merchants, which might be very boring stuff. But he gave me that opportunity, and it was only as I began to write that I began to realize how radically different my own view of Frederick II was from not only that of Kantorowicz—everybody knew that Kantorowicz had greatly exaggerated this idea of Frederick being the *Stupor Mundi*, which was much influenced by the thoughts of Nietzsche and other philosophical positions. I began to see Frederick much more as a creature

3 Abulafia, David. *Frederick II: A Medieval Emperor*. London and New York, 1988; third English edn., 2001; Italian edn., 1990; German edn., 1991

4 Kantorowicz, Ernst Hartwig (1895-1963), German-American historian of medieval political and intellectual history and art, and the author of *Kaiser Friedrich der Zweite* (1927) and *The King's Two Bodies* (1957).

5 Sir John (Jack) Harold Plumb (1911-2001), British historian

of his own time, partly because I insisted on doing something that the existing scholarship had not done: I put him into context by going back to his Norman predecessors and also to his German ancestry, which was obviously much less of my area of specialty. So, I came out of this—as I got to the sections on culture, and also on his political relations with the Papacy that were bound up with his view of Christianity—with a very different view from Kantorowicz’s, and from that of an American historian called Thomas Van Cleve (who had published a book on Frederick II when I was a graduate student).⁶ And I realized that there were all sorts of presumptions, particularly about cultural life, which seemed to me to be based on the mythology of Frederick II.

Anyway, I wrote this book. My children were quite small, and I felt in some ways it was a rush job. Obviously, I wish I had provided a full apparatus of footnotes, and so on, but that was partly a space problem. So instead I had these commentaries on each chapter. The reactions of professional historians tended to be, “Well, of course, yes. Thanks for saying it. That’s what we wanted somebody to say,” which was encouraging. Putting Frederick in place as a thirteenth-century ruler—and indeed in some respects even as a twelfth-century ruler, as a conservative rather than a tremendously progressive and advanced figure—actually worked. Because it was published by Allen Lane, I also got reviews in the newspapers. Some of them, of course, didn’t particularly like the idea that Frederick was a much more conventional person than the mythology allowed for. But one would expect that the reviews in a Sunday paper would have their own views.

What really encouraged me, however, was not so much the reaction in England, but the reaction in Italy. The Italians have very much bought into this idea of him as a great cultural hero. They published a translation which is still in print. It continues to sell very well, actually, and we just signed a new contract renewing the publishing arrangement with my Italian publisher. There are many people out there, friends of mine, indeed, who will sometimes say, “Oh no, we think contrarily that the direction Kantorowicz was taking, allowing for all his exaggeration, was actually as a whole better.” I respect that, because one is at least engaged in serious academic argument. But mine has become quite an accepted view of Frederick, particularly in Italy, given that the emphasis was much more on Italy than on Germany. I think that’s right. In Germany, I can’t really remember how people responded to the book (there was a German translation, which was terrible, because they actually abridged it without my permission). But I think again the academic community thought it basically was the right way to think about Frederick, although there was still a school of thought that drew on Kantorowicz’s approach. The problem in Germany was, of course,

⁶ Thomas Curtis Van Cleve (1888-1976), American historian, professor at Bowdoin College and the author of *The Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen: Immutator Mundi* (1972)

that this sort of book, which aims at both an academic readership including both students and one’s colleagues as a sort of long essay reassessing Frederick, and also the general public, is something the Germans don’t tend to write. The academics in German universities, at least in my area, tend to be more interested in writing very focused examinations of the sources.

CJH: Especially given that half of your pages aren’t covered with footnotes.

DA: Yes, but on the other hand, when the German scholar Wolfgang Stürner published his two-volume life of Frederick II in a series on the medieval German emperors that came out not terribly long ago, it was unreadable and indigestible.⁷ What really disturbed me about it was the failure to engage with big questions about Frederick: his attitude toward the papacy, his cultural interests, and the whole myth about Frederick. It’s basically one thing after another. One German historian, a man called Houben, did publish a very short book on Frederick in German and in Italian, because he teaches at an Italian university.⁸ And at the very end of the book, he very interestingly says, well, we have to choose between Kantorowicz and Abulafia, and I would choose Abulafia.

CJH: In *The Discovery of Mankind*, you situate the discovery of the new world into a Renaissance culture in which Europeans reflected on their own culture and identity. You say, for example, that “the discovery of man in the Atlantic transformed the world...But it also jolted renaissance Europe” under the banner of the Abrahamic faith and the high level of civilization.⁹ What is the relationship between the

⁷ Wolfgang Stürner (1940--), German historian and the author of *Friedrich II (= Gestalten des Mittelalters und der Renaissance)*. 2 Bände. Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 1992–2000. 1. *Die Königsherrschaft in Sizilien und Deutschland 1194–1220*. 1992; 2. *Der Kaiser 1220–1250*. 2000

⁸ Hubert Houben (1953--), German medieval historian, author of *Federico II: Imperatore, uomo, mito*. 2010 (Italian); *Kaiser Friedrich II. (1194-1250): Herrscher, Mensch, Mythos*. 2008 (German)

⁹ Abulafia, David. *Discovery of Mankind*. New Haven: 2008. P. 313. “The age of the Renaissance did, then, see another ‘discovery of man’ than that which has been identified in the culture of the Italian Renaissance. In one sense, it was an incomplete discovery, for not all observers accepted that the newly discovered peoples were fully human. Often, they drew sharp lines between good people who could be redeemed by being shown the arts of civilization, and (importantly) by becoming Christian, and bad folk who were fundamentally evil, ignorant, bestial. And yet it was precisely the demotion of some or all of these peoples to a lower status than Europeans that moulded European relations with the wider world. The discovery of man in the Atlantic transformed the world, laying the basis for the great empires of Spain, Portugal and eventually England, France and Holland. It transformed the Americas, by mortality and conquest, and Africa, as demand for slaves to work mines and plantations in the Americas grew exponentially. But it also jolted Renaissance Europe: Christians, Jews and Muslims were only part of God’s Creation.”

Renaissance in the sense of the art, science and city-states of the Italian Renaissance, and the Renaissance as in the discovery of the new world? How did they happen together and affect each other?

DA: It is a tricky question because some of the literature—if you go back to the work of John Elliott, a very respected and great British historian¹⁰—tends to argue that we shouldn't overestimate the impact of these discoveries, particularly the discovery of the New World, on the way people thought or acted within Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. I approach this from, I think, an unusual perspective, because what I was first interested in, before I got to the New World, was the relationship between Jews, Christians and Muslims in, first of all, Sicily, and then Spain, which is where my ancestors actually came from. So, I had been writing a bit about that on and off. I did a particular study of the Catalan kingdom of Majorca as my first major foray into Spanish history. The last independent king of Majorca dreamed of conquering the Canary Islands. I felt I had to think about a very simple point, which is that in 1492, just as the Jews were being expelled from Spain, including my ancestors, and just as the Muslims were being conquered—they weren't expelled at that point but conquered in southern Spain—the Catholic monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, were becoming rulers over, first of all, the inhabitants of the Canary Islands (they only conquered Tenerife in 1496) and then also at the same time rulers over non-Christian peoples in the Caribbean, in Hispaniola (now the Dominican Republic and Haiti). There is a sort of interesting paradox there. On the one hand, they are purifying their own kingdom of Jews and Muslims, and on the other hand, they are becoming rulers over a substantial non-Christian population.

So, I got interested in the whole question of how the Canaries provided the model for what happened in the Caribbean, on which one or two people, such as Felipe Fernández-Armesto, a well-known English historian, have done a bit of work.¹¹ But it seemed to me that there was much more to be done, looking through, let's say, the eyes of Columbus. The first thing he said when he arrived in San Salvador, in the Caribbean, the first island he reached, was: these people looked to me like the inhabitants of the Canary Islands.¹² So the whole question of how they judged the religious practices, how they judged the degree of humanity that these people could possess, seemed to me something that really deserved much closer investigation.

10 Sir John Huxtable Elliott (1930--), British historian, Regius Professor Emeritus at Oxford University and Honorary Fellow of Oriel College, Oxford and Trinity College, Cambridge.

11 Felipe Fernández-Armesto (1950--), British historian, author of *The Canary Islands after the Conquest: The Making of a Colonial Society in the Early Sixteenth Century* (1982) and *Before Columbus: Exploration and Colonization from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic 1229-1492* (1987).

12 *The Journal of Christopher Columbus* (1492). "Thursday, 11 October", "Saturday, 13 October". London: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1893. P. 38-39.

Because even allowing for the work of Elliott, a historian of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, and of others like Anthony Pagden—a very fine historian and former colleague of mine now at UCLA,¹³ who had written an excellent book which touched on a lot of these issues to do with the attitudes toward these newly discovered peoples—one after another these historians did not engage with the late 14th and 15th centuries. They weren't familiar with the materials or the mental world out of which Columbus and his contemporaries emerged. So, for example, Pagden is excellent on las Casas, but his las Casas is a mid-sixteenth century figure,¹⁴ so of course we have to ask ourselves about the very early stages of engagement with the native peoples in the Caribbean.

That took me towards this topic. First of all, it was a course for my final year undergraduate students, which went well. And then I transformed it into a book. I have to say that this is one of my favorite books—that and *The Great Sea*, I think, are the two books that I'm proudest of. And it's something which also, of course, relates to what I'm doing now: the big history of the oceans. It has a very interesting relationship to that project, because I was looking at specific attitudes to unknown peoples. I'm still dealing with the whole issue of the opening up of the Atlantic, the opening up of the unknown shores of North and South America, Africa, and beyond. So, this has fed into my current interests and work.

CJH: The next question is rather abstract. As a region that connects Africa, Asia, and Europe, the Mediterranean Sea has witnessed trade, migration and wars. And when we study the history of the seas, it often seems that trade and war operate in the same space. If you have to generalize, what is the relationship between commerce and warfare? We have been talking about trade's mitigating effect on wars since the time of Montesquieu. What is your opinion on the historical role that trade has played in geopolitical conflicts, from a maritime and economic historian's perspective?

DA: It's a very interesting question, because this is actually what I'm writing about nowadays. What I'd really like to do is to contrast the Mediterranean with, let's say, the Baltic and the North

13 Anthony Robin Dermer Pagden (1945--), British historian, professor of History and Political Science at the University of California in Los Angeles, and author of such books as *European Encounters with the New World: From Renaissance to Romanticism* (1993), *The Fall of Natural Man: the American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Anthropology* (1983), *Spanish Imperialism and the Political Imagination* (1990) and *Peoples and Empires: A Short History of European Migration, Exploration, and Conquest, from Greece to the Present* (2001)

14 Pagden, Anthony. "Ius et Factum: Text and Experience in the Writings of Bartolomé de Las Casas" in *Representations*, No. 33, Special Issue: The New World (Winter, 1991), pp. 147-162; "introduction" to Bartolome de Las Casas, Nigel Griffin (trans.) *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1999)

Sea, what the historian Roberto Lopez¹⁵ called the “northern Mediterranean,” or the “Mediterranean of the north”: the complex of lands and seas all the way from England right up to Estonia, which formed a trading area that has many characteristics in common with the Mediterranean.¹⁶ There’s the whole question of the interplay between luxury goods and raw materials, and the rise of towns and all such issues. And then in the Mediterranean world, trade could actually be the source of violent conflicts. If we think of the Venetians and the Genoese, the Genoese and the Pisans, the Genoese and the Catalans, there is a history in those cases of outrageous attacks on one another, bloodthirsty episodes to read about. And yet on the other hand there is also the history of quietly carrying on business across political boundaries, both Christian and Muslim lands. One case I wrote about, the Almohads that ruled northwest Africa in the 12th and early 13th centuries, effectively suppressed Christianity and Judaism in most of—though not all—the areas they ruled. But they actually encouraged the Pisans and Genoese merchants to come and operate trade in their cities. So, the Christians penetrated into the lands of the Almohads, whom today we would call “Islamists.” They had space for the Christian merchants—of course they were foreigners, but the business was something they valued for, no doubt, fiscal reasons. The merchants were able to cross political frontiers, say, during the crusades, supplying the Egyptians even though they were enemies of the crusaders, whom the Genoese were supposed to be supporting. There are these long histories that sometimes led to scandal. But taking the history of the medieval and early modern Mediterranean, we do find, of course, a succession of very bitter conflicts between competing powers, and it’s not just Christians against Muslims by any means, but rather Christians against Christians, again and again.

The interesting contrast is, therefore, with the Baltic and the North Sea. Here with the Hanseatic League, although it went to war in the 15th century with the English and tried to suppress the expansion of Dutch trade (there were any number of episodes of naval conflicts), the fundamental principle was to bring together cities into not a union—some people in the European Union like to compare the EU to the Hanse and it was nothing like that—but rather a very loose and informal sort of arrangement. One of the effects of the creation of the Hanse was to help reduce, not to abolish, conflicts between members and to create an open sea in that area of Europe. So, I have always been struck by the ability of the northern Europeans to create a functioning network based on the principle of harmony,

15 Roberto Sabatino Lopez (1910-1986), Jewish-Italian-American historian, the former Sterling Professor of History at Yale University, and author of many books on medieval European economic history, such as *The Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages* (1971) and *The Shape of Medieval Monetary History* (1986).

16 Abulafia, David. “What is the Mediterranean?” in *The Mediterranean in History*, edit. Abulafia, David. P. 18. Los Angeles: 2003. Abulafia, David. “Mediterraneans”, in *Rethinking the Mediterranean*, edit. W.V. Harris. P. 64-93. Oxford: 2005

whereas what you had in the Mediterranean was a more competitive ethos. If you move into the wider world, in the modern period, looking at the Portuguese, Dutch, English, and even the Danish who turned up in India, this instinct to try to push out one’s rivals, and thinking of them as rivals rather than trying to create cooperative mechanisms for trade, is very characteristic of seventeenth-century European merchants trading with India and China.

CJH: Speaking of the peace and war dynamic in maritime history, many feel rather nostalgic about the concept of *La Convivencia*, especially given the dire situations in the past few decades. What is your assessment of the historical memory of ethnic diversity and harmonious coexistence of religious communities in the Mediterranean? And how do you compare multiculturalism in the past and in the present?

DA: I think sometimes in what I have written I have been a little bit too romantic, though not always. Actually, when writing about Sicily I think I tended to stress the way in which during the twelfth century, what harmony there was at the start of the century had very much broken down by its end. In the case of Spain—as I say for almost personal reasons, for it has to do with the history of my family—partly I like to engage with this idea of Christian rulers having Jewish ministers at court, and Jewish writers drawing on Muslim theologies, which had a major effect on the way Judaism developed in medieval Spain.

I think what one has always to do, and I’m aware of this starting in Sicily, is to draw some important distinctions between what happens at the very highest levels of the society and what happens lower down the social scale. At the court in Palermo, Toledo, Barcelona, where the king’s wish to employ Jewish astronomers, or Muslim astrologers, whoever it may be, is the decision he personally makes, the king helps undoubtedly to define certain aspects of cultural life. But when we reach the countryside, do we see the same harmony? Well, in some respects we might, as we see that it happened in so many medieval societies, like Sicily, where Greek peasants and Muslim peasants lived side by side. Gradually the Muslims were absorbed into Christian society, beginning to take Christian names. That slow process of osmosis took place. But it was a different sort of process than that which we see in the top levels of society. And in the middle, we often find in the towns, for instance, the outbreak of pogroms in Spain and the Norman Kingdom of Sicily. We always have to be alert to the fact that under the surface there are tensions and people who wind up the dominant Christian population against Muslims, Jews and other minorities in the period that I am interested in.

So, beware of the romantic notion of *Convivencia*. But I think there is a certain value in the concept all the same, especially when you compare what’s happening at certain points in the history of Spain with what is happening in some other parts of Europe—in Spain, for example, the tenth century under Muslim rule and the early thirteenth century in Christian To-

ledo—but one has to be very careful not to assume that this is the general state of things. There is an American historian who prefers to talk about *conveniencia* [convenience] instead of *Convivencia*, and I think there is some truth to that, for it was a very pragmatic idea of tolerance. If you happened to be king over all these religious groups, it was certainly a pragmatic approach to the existing minorities and the mixed populations. For one of your first concerns was to keep order, always.

CJH: Let us briefly move to modern times. In much of the twentieth century, the Mediterranean Sea was divided along the Cold War's ideological lines. But since the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc, what now accounts for the divisions and conflicts in the Mediterranean? Is it religion? Economy? Or the perceptions of the past?

DA: I think the Mediterranean nowadays is at a critical juncture. I wrote my book *The Great Sea* and talked in terms of five great periods of Mediterranean history, and my fifth period seems to be coming to an end after a very brief amount of time, beginning more or less with the building of the Suez Canal and the first steamships in the mid-nineteenth century. But we are now at a juncture where the Mediterranean has actually, in a certain sense, ceased to exist. Because since the middle of the twentieth century, the interconnection between the north and the south has been very much reduced. And there is an irony in this, because the development that lies at the start of this process is something which was a very welcome development: decolonization—the fact that the French left Algeria, the Italians left Libya, the English lost their hold over Egypt, and so on. But one of the results of decolonization at the time when the Soviet Union was trying to extend its influence in the Mediterranean was that an external power came in and helped to break the link between countries like Algeria and France (obviously, there was a long history of resentment toward the way the French treated the Algerians and other peoples). So, what one is actually looking at in the middle of the twentieth century is already a process of political fragmentation of the Mediterranean, which was accentuated a little further by the fact that the Soviet Union, having helped to set up Israel in the first place, then decided that it could use Israel by creating an anti-Israel alliance among the Arab nations.

So, you already have a divided Mediterranean. And then the creation of the Common Market, later known as the European Union, accentuated that, as it began to take in more and more of the Mediterranean countries on the northern shores. Those countries looked towards Brussels, Strasbourg, and indeed Frankfurt as the financial center of the German economy, and looked away from the Mediterranean, seeking to model themselves as far as possible on the vibrant German economy. In doing so, they sought a more European than Mediterranean identity. I don't think there is nearly as much initiative to develop commercial ties across the Mediterranean between the north and south. And one can understand why. One can understand, for example, that the Libyans might not have wanted the Ital-

ians to interfere in their affairs after they had disastrously ruined the country. And now, of course, we have further crises both within the Eurozone and with the “failure” of the Arab Spring. Or it should be said that the Arab Spring has not produced the dividends that many people perhaps expected when the revolutions broke out. The war in Syria and the migration crisis, the whole big question about the role of Turkey and whether we should try to restore its role as the focal point of a sort of neo-Ottomanism. All these issues I think make the Mediterranean a much more dangerous place.

CJH: We have discussed the shift from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic. Are you under the impression that our attention on politics, trade, and culture is currently shifting toward the Pacific? And what is the role of the Pacific in your present study of the oceans?

DA: I think we are, and one sees that through the policy that the American president has adopted—well, he comes from Hawaii. Realistically, one has to take into account the phenomenal developments taking place in China, but one also has to beware that the Chinese are in a much more fragile economic and political position than perhaps British businessmen and British universities trying to do business are aware. Perhaps we underestimate the ethnic tensions, which could really be quite explosive in the long term. It is already clear that economic growth has slowed, and it is clear, too, of course that there is an enormous gulf between the success stories of the big cities such as Shanghai and what is happening in some of the remote rural regions. But we have to take China very seriously into account, for we are looking at the sort of situation in which China itself is beginning to look outwards, which is important because there has been a long period of time in Chinese history where China hasn't tended to look out through the sea, periods in which officially maritime trade by Chinese merchants was forbidden—it is a bit exaggerated, for they carried on some activities nonetheless. But now we have China building merchant fleets, we have the attempt to rebuild the two silk roads—the maritime silk route, and the overland trade routes across Asia, which is having a very important role in the formation of Chinese foreign policy towards countries such as Iran. Bear in mind that Japan, even though its economy has weakened considerably, is still one of the major economies in the world. South Korea, of course, plays an enormous role now as a producer of exported goods, and potentially some of the countries around the South China Sea. But the question of the South China Sea is one of the potential flashpoints in the Pacific. So, I think there has been something of a shift to the western Pacific, to the particular part of the Pacific, such as the South China Sea, the Yellow Sea and the Japan sea, for that is a strategically important area which is sort of Mediterranean in its own right.

CJH: What is your opinion on the freedom of sea? There is a long tradition, from Thucydides to Grotius and Montequieu, of appreciating the freedom of navigation. Thucydides gave credit to Minos and others for eliminating pirates and

allowing free movement of merchants across the Mediterranean Sea. Grotius praised the Romans for similar reasons. As a maritime historian, what is your assessment of our notion of the free sea today, in light of international maritime laws such as the UNCLOS? Do you think it is a pragmatic goal or a romantic fantasy?

DA: The question of piracy has been a major issue in the coast of Africa for some years. Grotius, of course, asserted in the *Mare Liberum* (1609)—although it is not as if it is a tremendously elaborate argument—the freedom of the sea with the help of some classical sources. But when Grotius was asked, on the other hand, to defend the Dutch right to hold certain territories in the East Indies, somehow the concept of the free seas sort of evaporated and turned into the idea of European powers establishing themselves in a particular territory, forbidding others to invade their territory without permission. So, Grotius is not quite as consistent as one might like to think. On the other hand, this very short tract obviously set up an absolutely vital principle. It is very interesting to look at the ways in which countries in recent times have been trying to define the maritime limits of their control: Britain finding rocks somewhere way out in the Atlantic where we can drill for oil, which are almost as close to Scotland as is to Iceland; and notably, of course, the Chinese claims to these islands.

CJH: I have several questions on methodology. To understand the past, you use a vast number of literary sources. On the one hand, you study them as primary materials: poems, travel accounts, journals of Pigafetta, Magellan, Cabral and Columbus, and the *Arabian Nights*.¹⁷ You also evaluate literature to make historical arguments. For example, in *Frederick II* you point out that most of the court poetry was written to entertain the emperor's close group of familiars and “not intended to mark the creation of a great European literature, though Italian literary scholars can be excused for reading it in such a light”¹⁸. In general, what is the relationship between your historical scholarship and literature?

DA: As a historian, I have always regarded it as axiomatic that one should, if—for the sake of the argument—studying twelfth-century Sicily, take on board all source materials. I think one of

the problems with various German schools of historical writing is excessive dependence on charters and chronicles without taking on board the literary creations and artistic creations of the time. Nowadays, people tend to be very passionate about the need to take material objects into account: the “material turn” as my colleagues call it. I don't like the term “turn”, but I have always used material objects and have been fascinated by them. And in writing nowadays about the East Indian trade, nothing gives me greater pleasure than to go to the museums and to look at the pieces of porcelain taken from the shipwrecks—that's not about literature but about the ways in which historians need to latch on to the full range of sources. When you are using literary sources, of course, you have to be very careful that you don't mix fictions, which may be rooted in established literary traditions, with descriptions of reality. That could be a problem with some of these travel narratives, like Marco Polo. But so long as one is aware of those difficulties, it seems to be that these sources are of absolutely fundamental importance, because even if they don't tell you what happened, they tell you about how people visualized certain types of journey, for instance, whatever they might be.

CJH: In *The Great Sea, Part I: “The First Mediterranean, 22000 BC-1000BC”* and *Part II: “The Second Mediterranean, 1000 BC-AD 600”*, your historical narrative features a vast number of ancient sources, from Homer to Herodotus and Thucydides. For example, you pay special attention to events such as the fall of Troy in your historical inquiry.¹⁹ As a modern historian, what do you think of ancient Greek historical writers, and how do you use them in your own research?

DA: Thucydides, I must admit, I find rather boring. He is always regarded as somebody who has this amazing understanding of political relationships, himself being bound up with what was happening at the time. The one I have always been more open to is Herodotus, precisely because we have this interwoven account of events—how accurate they are, is not for me to say—and attention to traditions, myths, and so on. I am fascinated by his sort of “anthropology.” I always remember the passage in which he talks about the Persian soldiers who have been killed, and how their skulls are much thinner, and this is because they wore hats all the time.²⁰ We say to ourselves, this

17 Alonso de Ercilla's epic poem on the Spanish conquest of the Araucanian Indians of Chile; Theodore de Bry.

18 Abulafia, David. *Frederick II: A Medieval Emperor*. Oxford: 1992. Piero della Vigna: “the author of excruciatingly leaden verses”; Frederick, “delicate handling of a beautiful language” but “not at all original”; “poems thought to be the work of his sons Manfred and Enzo rise to greater heights”; Giacomo da Lentini and Rinaldo d'Aquino “seem to rise to the greatest heights...because they show a sensitivity and rhythmical handling of Italian.” P.273-77 “It is poetry written to entertain the court, or rather the emperor's closed group of familiars; it was not intended to mark the creation of a great European literature, though Italian literary scholars can be excused for reading it in such a light.” P. 273-4

19 Abulafia, David. *The Great Sea*. London, 2011. Chapters I-II; Interview: “Eine Brücke zwischen den Kulturen”: “Das große Thema in meinem Buch ist, wie sich im Mittelmeerraum zusammenhängende Regionen herausbilden und wieder untergehen. Der Untergang von Troja ist ein Ereignis in einer Serie von Krisen, die das Erste Mittelmeerzeitalter beendeten.”— <https://www.buechergilde.de/interview-mit-david-abulafia>

20 Herodotus, Book III 12. “τοῖσι δὲ Πέρσησι ὅτι ἀσθενέας φορέουσι τὰς κεφαλὰς αἰπιοντόδε: σκητροφέουσι ἐξ ἀρχῆς πῖλους τι ἄρας φορέοντες. ταῦτα μὲν νυντοιαῦτα: εἶδον δὲ καὶ ἄλλα ὅμοια τούτοις ἐν Παρθίῳ τῶν ἄμαλχαιμένει τῷ Δαρείου διαφθαρέντων ὑπὸ Ἰνάρῳ τοῦ Λίβου”

is scientific nonsense. But it actually reveals this extraordinary inquiring mind. So ἵστορία means inquiry, and it's something that he was definitely practicing. It may not be the history that I try to practice, but as a pioneer in investigations, who went beyond simply an account of political events and warfare. It is an extraordinary piece of work.

CJH: One of the challenges that face today's historians is to balance depth (the amount of details and degree of precision required by the discipline), and breadth (the macroscopic grasp and generalization of a historical period that would enable us answer questions about our past). As a historian of both rigorous methods and broad interests, how do you marshal intricate pieces of materials to construct large narratives? How do you identify yourself within the historical discipline? For example, you treat the Mediterranean as a whole, creating a theater in which different people come and go, and play their parts, rather than giving readers a list of Mediterranean countries and devoting a chapter to each country. In this regard, how do you see yourself in relation to the traditional historians of nations and countries? On the other hand, what do you think about the current practices of world history, comparative history and international history?

DA: What I was trying to do was actually to write the history of the sea, and really to battle with the practical difficulties that are involved in such an endeavor. It's a history of the sea and the shores around it, but in writing that, one has to engage with the territories inland. Let's say one is talking about the trading of grain, which is very important in the medieval and early modern Mediterranean, and ancient Mediterranean as well. Obviously, one has to know something about where it comes from, and sometimes it comes from some distance inland. But to actually try to write a history of, in the first place, the Mediterranean, which isn't simply an accumulation of regional or national histories, seems to me a very important objective—not because I ever use the word “transnational”, which I hate. I hate the word because of what it assumes, which is that one can talk about the nation-state well before it comes into existence or before the concept's been articulated. And if one is going right back to Neanderthals, as I do, then it's unworkable. I think it has become one of those fashionable words that is just thrown into every historical conversation, sometimes without really being applicable. Situating myself in the community of historians, I think one thing which I've never particularly been keen to do is simply attach myself to the latest trend. Rather, I'm always sort of depressed when I see very talented historians who want to be part of the material *turn* or the cultural *turn* or whatever *turn* it might be. It's part of a herd instinct, and they gather together and often indulge in a sort of impenetrable jargon, which is something I've always tried to avoid. I don't think it's necessary; I think sometimes it's actually a way of papering over weaknesses in one's understanding of what's going on. Now, inevitably, the work of an historian involves simplifying, reducing extremely complex series of events. With

what I've just been writing about, which is to do with the Danes establishing trading forts in West Africa and the West Indies and in India, it's actually a history of places that are occupied, conquered by rivals, reoccupied, reconquered, etc., and it goes on and on and on; and clearly one has to simplify that, one has to try to demonstrate what the overall characteristic of the relationship between, in this case, the Danish trading companies and these forts from which they operated was. So, that's part of the task of an historian. Part of the task of the historian is also to do this in an accessible way which raises the question of good writing, and I'm not saying this is true of all my books (perhaps my early books less than my more recent ones), but I do pay an enormous amount of attention to style. So, to write concisely, to write without lots of jargon, to write in a way which is saying something useful and perhaps even slightly original to fellow scholars but at the same time is going to engage and interest a wider public is the historian's task. I think it is so important that academic historians reach that wider public. We cannot, in the English-speaking world, allow what has happened in Germany to happen, which is this divide between the academic historians who write for one another and popular historians, the quality of whose research is often very poor. We really have to bridge that gap.

With regard to balancing breadth and depth, it is difficult. I mean, in writing *The Great Sea* or my current book, again and again, I would sometimes get drawn into a very rich literature on issues which actually, I began to realize, I was only able to devote about three lines to. When I was writing about the Peloponnesian War, and now in writing about these Danes and Swedes and their trading world, there is a very rich literature in other languages. Some of it, in this case, is in Danish and Swedish, which I can sort of make sense of, but it's very hard work. You have to say to yourself, “Well, you can achieve a certain depth, but you simply cannot pursue these things, at least within the context of this book. You might for other purposes, for a research article or whatever, but you always have to be aware of the limits, in this sort of book, of how deep you can go.”

CJH: And what is your opinion on comparative histories?

DA: What I'm much more interested in is talking about “going global.” In Cambridge nowadays, the great fashion is this sort of global turn, and I'm certainly a part of the global turn. But it's not something I've really made a conscious decision to latch on to, and I take the view particularly in the context of the attempt, which is now becoming quite widespread in Britain, to start talking about the global Middle Ages. So, you have a conference where experts on, say, Yuan China speak alongside experts on Valois France, and so on. To me, it can be quite interesting just from the perspective of thinking about different fiscal systems, for example. It gives you some ideas about how you might approach the one you're actually working on by looking at another one. But much more importantly it actually allows you to think about connections. What really matters is the history of connections, and that is where what I'm doing with maritime

connections—right across the globe and across the three major oceans, plus the Arctic Ocean when it comes into play in the sixteenth century—is really worth doing. It is about the way in which these civilizations interacted across global space, and from that perspective, about the role of trade, and also the role of empire building and things like that. But the role of trade is of fundamental importance.

CJH: The last question is on contemporary politics. We have mentioned Braudel in the context of historiography. The French historian was about to finish his *Identité de la France* by the time he passed away, a book in which he presents his insights on the basis for an enduring French consciousness. I would like to pose a number of questions on national identity and international politics to you. You have said, in the article, “The EU is in thrall to a historical myth of European unity,” that “our ancient institutions – our monarchy, system of law, our parliament – have survived more or less uninterrupted, while those of our European neighbors have had to be rebuilt time and again. This has given Britain a unique identity, distinct from a continent whose divided history has been characterised by revolutions and written constitutions.” You have noticed that since the 1970s, the European community has promoted rhetoric of a historical past of a common Europe, and those who speak against this understanding of history are brushed aside as being on the wrong side of history.²¹ You helped found the “Historians for Britain”, an organization that seeks to clarify the European myth and informs the public of the implications and consequences of Britain’s troubling relationship with the EU. What do you think is the English identity? Is there a character of the Mediterranean form of life? Is there a European identity? And now that the British public has voted to leave the EU, what is your vision for a new dynamic, a new status quo between the UK and the European continent?

DA: I’m not sure everybody really has understood what I was really campaigning for. If they actually read the article I wrote, it was there right at the beginning. But of course, they got wound up, and they took a very different view. I should say, the article was published just at the time when David Cameron won the general election a year ago. If you actually look at the signatories of the counter-article, in the same magazine *History Today*, you will see that they were all people, I would say at least 90% of them and perhaps 99% of them, who were clearly rather upset at the outcome of the general election. So, I don’t take that very seriously, and I don’t think that they actually understood, or wanted to understand, what was being said at that point. The position that “Historians for Britain” originally took was that we wanted Britain to play a role in a reformed EU, a radically reformed EU. And I think that that is a view which the wider

British public would have supported if it had been made available. The problem was that the Prime Minister came back with a package which hardly scratched the surface of the problems, and so we were in this very difficult situation where we all had to think very hard about whether we thought that the reforms were sufficient, because it does seem to me that the ideal position for Britain is to stand somewhat apart but also to be able to engage with the EU. Now, personally I don’t think I’d mind being part of the single market; I’m not as worried about the problem of immigration as many people—that’s not really what has motivated me. On the other hand, the question of restoring sovereignty to our parliament is something that has interested me very much. And what is, of course, the ultimate paradox is that this has happened as a result of popular vote. Now, we know that the majority of the members of Parliament is actually against leaving the EU. The Conservatives have agreed to be bound by the outcome of the vote, but it’s a rather messy situation. I’m the first to admit that. I think that with Brexit having won not by a landslide, but by a respectable but not overwhelming majority, it is absolutely vital that the government—and I think this government will do it—takes into account the views of the sensible people who opposed Brexit. Just as there were



Photo by Hansong Li

21 Abulafia, David. “The EU is in thrall to a historical myth of European unity”, in *The Telegraph*, Feb. 26th, 2015. See also “Britain: A Part From or A Part of Europe?” in *History Today*, May 11th, 2015.

sensible people who supported Brexit—I mean, there were also some weird racists—there were some people who didn't understand the issues. In fact, the quality of the debate was so lamentable on both sides. The public was not given the information it needed about what the European Commission is, what the Council of Ministers is, all these things. We were left in a state of ignorance about the fundamental issues.

CJH: Is that what Historians for Britain is trying to address?

DA: Well, when Cameron came back, the majority of the members of “Historians for Britain”, though not all of them, decided that they really supported Brexit. Some of them were a bit taken aback. One defensible position was that if the public voted for Brexit, we should continue to negotiate, which was what Boris Johnson had aired at one point—that a Brexit vote would be an opportunity to go back to Europe and say, “Come on, put more on the table.” So, as I say, it's a messy outcome, but I really have the gravest reservations about the way that the EU functions. I mean, the issue of the so-called democratic deficit, the way in which Mr. Junker and the commission are able to generate legislation which has not actually been produced through a democratic process, is something which concerns me very much. So, too, does the way in which our own parliament could be overwritten by European institutions. But I think there's always been in this country a degree of Euro-skepticism. It's unusual to meet people who are real Europhiles. I did actually meet somebody today, someone I know quite well, who was wearing a little badge which combined the Union Jack and the European flag. And I said, jokingly, “I admire your badge (well, I don't really).” A real passion for the European Union as it is, is something that not many people in Britain seem to me to feel. Even those who supported remaining in the European Union were very rarely enthusiastic about the way that the Union functions.

CJH: Just quickly to go back to the question on national identity: English, Mediterranean and European. Is there such a thing as European identity, and in what ways are you critical of it?

DA: I think what worried me about the concept of European identity was the amount of literature trying to promote the concept, trying to present European identity as something which may not exist but needs to be created. I mean, that is more or less a quotation, and I find that deeply disturbing. Many people may say that they feel European, and that there's an emotional attachment to Europe. There's a very strong sense, I think—particularly as a result of many years of membership in the European community, of a relationship with Europe—of Britain as a European country, and of the gap between ourselves and the United States. The political culture of the United States is actually more remote in many ways from that of this country than this country is from its European neighbors. But being European isn't the same as being part of a European Union, which is planning to integrate more and more closely. That seems to me to be a fundamental error among the Remainers; they talk

sometimes very emotionally of how European they felt, but that is not the issue. We all feel European. I have mainly worked on European history. I travel to Europe endlessly. But I do feel, even when I'm in France, that I am from another country. We come from another political tradition, and particularly, legal tradition, and the difference between our legal tradition, based on common law, and the Napoleonic legal systems of most EU countries, is something of considerable importance. This has meant that it's very difficult for us to fit into the process of integration. It could actually have a very damaging effect on the future development of our legal system.

CJH: Thank you, and let's end with your words to history students. Do you have any advice and comments for students who are interested in Mediterranean history, medieval and early modern history, and any other field that you have worked on? Do you have any suggestions on how they should approach the subject, and are there any things that you'd caution against?

DA: Well, I have a very simple piece of advice, which is—learn languages! Because what we're finding in Cambridge nowadays is that students are beginning graduate work with a very limited range of languages and the days are gone when you could actually expect undergraduate students to have wide linguistic knowledge. It's really rather sad that all of that is gone, that even French, which tends to be the first language of choice in schools, is now not taught to the sort of level where people can cope with, say, Braudel in the original.

CJH: And what in your opinion is the reason? It would seem that most people expect to see the opposite trend?

DA: It's extraordinary in this country that in the days before the Brexit vote, you might have expected people to want to increase our sense of being European by spreading knowledge of major European languages. Various governments came up with the idea that every school child should learn another language, but it doesn't seem to have resulted in very much. I think that the sort of very high-level French and Latin, which I studied in school, and which involved reading a play of Molière in the original when we were 15 years old, is something that has completely vanished. And the study of languages has become very utilitarian, very much directed to, perhaps, knowing how to order a quiche in a French restaurant.