

SEA-POWER AND OTHER STUDIES

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SEA-POWER¹

SEA-POWER is a term used to indicate two distinct, though cognate things. The affinity of these two and the indiscriminate manner in which the term has been applied to each have tended to obscure its real significance. The obscurity has been deepened by the frequency with which the term has been confounded with the old phrase, 'Sovereignty of the sea,' and the still current expression, 'Command of the sea.' A discussion—etymological, or even archæological in character—of the term must be undertaken as an introduction to the explanation of its now generally accepted meaning. It is one of those compound words in which a Teutonic and a Latin (or Romance) element are combined, and which are easily formed and become widely current when the sea is concerned. Of such are 'sea-coast,' 'sea-forces' (the 'land- and sea-forces' used to be a

¹ Written in 1899. (*Encyclopædia Britannica.*)

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common designation of what we now call the 'Army and Navy'), 'sea-service,' 'sea-serpent,' and 'sea-officer' (now superseded by 'naval officer'). The term in one form is as old as the fifteenth century. Edward III, in commemoration of the naval victory of Sluys, coined gold 'nobles' which bore on one side his effigy 'crowned, standing in a large ship, holding in one hand a sword and in the other a shield.' An anonymous poet, who wrote in the reign of Henry VI, says of this coin :

For four things our noble showeth to me,
 King, ship, and sword, and *power of the sea*.

Even in its present form the term is not of very recent date. Grote¹ speaks of 'the conversion of Athens from a land-power into a sea-power.' In a lecture published in 1883, but probably delivered earlier, the late Sir J. R. Seeley says that 'commerce was swept out of the Mediterranean by the besom of the Turkish sea-power.'² The term also occurs in vol. xviii. of the 'Encyclopædia Britannica,' published in 1885. At p. 574 of that volume (art. Persia) we are told that Themistocles was 'the founder of the Attic sea-power.' The sense in which the term is used differs in these extracts. In the first it means what we generally call a 'naval power'—that is to say, a state having a considerable navy in contradistinction to a 'military power,' a state with a considerable army but only a relatively small navy. In

¹ *Hist. of Greece*, v. p. 67, published in 1849, but with preface dated 1848.

² *Expansion of England*, p. 89.

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the last two extracts it means all the elements of the naval strength of the state referred to; and this is the meaning that is now generally, and is likely to be exclusively, attached to the term owing to the brilliant way in which it has been elucidated by Captain A. T. Mahan of the United States Navy in a series of remarkable works.¹ The double use of the term is common in German, though in that language both parts of the compound now in use are Teutonic. One instance out of many may be cited from the historian Adolf Holm.² He says³ that Athens, being in possession of a good naval port, could become ‘*eine bedeutende Seemacht*,’ i.e. an important naval power. He also says⁴ that Gelon of Syracuse, besides a large army (*Heer*), had ‘*eine bedeutende Seemacht*,’ meaning a considerable navy. The term, in the first of the two senses, is old in German, as appears from the following, extracted from Zedler’s ‘Grosses Universal Lexicon,’ vol. xxxvi: ⁵ ‘Seemachten, Seepotenzen, Latin. *summae potestates mari potentes*.’ ‘Seepotenzen’ is probably quite obsolete now. It is interesting as showing that German no more abhors Teuto-Latin or Teuto-Romance compounds than English. We may note, as a proof of the indeterminate meaning of the expression until his own epoch-making works had appeared, that Mahan

¹ *Influence of Sea-power on History*, published 1890; *Influence of Sea-power on the French Revolution and Empire*, 2 vols. 1892; *Nelson: the Embodiment of the Sea-power of Great Britain*, 2 vols. 1897.

² *Griechische Geschichte*. Berlin, 1889.

³ *Ibid.* ii. p. 37.

⁴ *Ibid.* ii. p. 91.

⁵ Leipzig und Halle, 1743.

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himself in his earliest book used it in both senses. He says,¹ 'The Spanish Netherlands ceased to be a sea-power.' He alludes² to the development of a nation as a 'sea-power,' and³ to the inferiority of the Confederate States 'as a sea-power.' Also,⁴ he remarks of the war of the Spanish Succession that 'before it England was one of the sea-powers, after it she was *the* sea-power without any second.' In all these passages, as appears from the use of the indefinite article, what is meant is a naval power, or a state in possession of a strong navy. The other meaning of the term forms the general subject of his writings above enumerated. In his earlier works Mahan writes 'sea power' as two words; but in a published letter of the 19th February 1897, he joins them with a hyphen, and defends this formation of the term and the sense in which he uses it. We may regard him as the virtual inventor of the term in its more diffused meaning, for—even if it had been employed by earlier writers in that sense—it is he beyond all question who has given it general currency. He has made it impossible for any one to treat of sea-power without frequent reference to his writings and conclusions.

There is something more than mere literary interest in the fact that the term in another language was used more than two thousand years ago. Before Mahan no historian—not even one of those who specially devoted themselves to the narration of

¹ *Influence of Sea-power on History*, p. 35.

² *Ibid.* p. 42.

³ *Ibid.* p. 43.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 225.

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naval occurrences—had evinced a more correct appreciation of the general principles of naval warfare than Thucydides. He alludes several times to the importance of getting command of the sea. This country would have been saved some disasters and been less often in peril had British writers—taken as guides by the public—possessed the same grasp of the true principles of defence as Thucydides exhibited. One passage in his history is worth quoting. Brief as it is, it shows that on the subject of sea-power he was a predecessor of Mahan. In a speech in favour of prosecuting the war, which he puts into the mouth of Pericles, these words occur:—*οἱ μὲν γὰρ οὐχ ἔξουσιν ἄλλην ἀντιλαβεῖν ἀμαχεί, ἡμῖν δὲ ἔστι γῆ πολλή καὶ ἐν νήσοις καὶ κατ' ἠπειρον μέγα γὰρ τὸ τῆς θαλάσσης κράτος.* The last part of this extract, though often translated 'command of the sea,' or 'dominion of the sea,' really has the wider meaning of sea-power, the 'power of the sea' of the old English poet above quoted. This wider meaning should be attached to certain passages in Herodotus,¹ which have been generally interpreted 'commanding the sea,' or by the mere titular and honorific 'having the dominion of the sea.' One editor of Herodotus, Ch. F. Baehr, did, however, see exactly what was meant, for, with reference to the allusion to Polycrates, he says, *classe maximum valuit.* This is perhaps as exact a definition of sea-power as could be given in a sentence.

¹ *Herodotus*, iii. 122 in two places ; v. 83.

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It is, however, impossible to give a definition which would be at the same time succinct and satisfactory. To say that 'sea-power' means the sum-total of the various elements that go to make up the naval strength of a state would be in reality to beg the question. Mahan lays down the 'principal conditions affecting the sea-power of nations,' but he does not attempt to give a concise definition of it. Yet no one who has studied his works will find it difficult to understand what it indicates.

Our present task is to put readers in possession of the means of doing this. The best, indeed—as Mahan has made us see—the only effective way of attaining this object is to treat the matter historically. Whatever date we may agree to assign to the formation of the term itself, the idea—as we have seen—is as old as history. It is not intended to give a condensed history of sea-power, but rather an analysis of the idea and what it contains, illustrating this analysis with examples from history ancient and modern. It is important to know that it is not something which originated in the middle of the seventeenth century, and having seriously affected history in the eighteenth, ceased to have weight till Captain Mahan appeared to comment on it in the last decade of the nineteenth. With a few masterly touches Mahan, in his brief allusion to the second Punic war, has illustrated its importance in the struggle between Rome and Carthage. What has to be

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shown is that the principles which he has laid down in that case, and in cases much more modern, are true and have been true always and everywhere. Until this is perceived there is much history which cannot be understood, and yet it is essential to our welfare as a maritime people that we should understand it thoroughly. Our failure to understand it has more than once brought us, if not to the verge of destruction, at any rate within a short distance of serious disaster.

SEA-POWER IN ANCIENT TIMES

The high antiquity of decisive naval campaigns is amongst the most interesting features of international conflicts. Notwithstanding the much greater frequency of land wars, the course of history has been profoundly changed more often by contests on the water. That this has not received the notice it deserved is true, and Mahan tells us why. 'Historians generally,' he says, 'have been unfamiliar with the conditions of the sea, having as to it neither special interest nor special knowledge; and the profound determining influence of maritime strength on great issues has consequently been overlooked.' Moralising on that which might have been is admittedly a sterile process; but it is sometimes necessary to point, if only by way of illustration, to a possible alternative. As in modern times the fate of India and the fate of North America were determined by sea-power, so also at a very remote

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epoch sea-power decided whether or not Hellenic colonisation was to take root in, and Hellenic culture to dominate, Central and Northern Italy as it dominated Southern Italy, where traces of it are extant to this day. A moment's consideration will enable us to see how different the history of the world would have been had a Hellenised city grown and prospered on the Seven Hills. Before the Tarquins were driven out of Rome a Phocœan fleet was encountered (537 B.C.) off Corsica by a combined force of Etruscans and Phœnicians, and was so handled that the Phocœans abandoned the island and settled on the coast of Lucania.¹ The enterprise of their navigators had built up for the Phœnician cities and their great off-shoot Carthage, a sea-power which enabled them to gain the practical sovereignty of the sea to the west of Sardinia and Sicily. The control of these waters was the object of prolonged and memorable struggles, for on it—as the result showed—depended the empire of the world. From very remote times the consolidation and expansion, from within outwards, of great continental states have had serious consequences for mankind when they were accompanied by the acquisition of a coast-line and the absorption of a maritime population. We shall find that the process loses none of its importance in recent years. 'The ancient empires,' says the historian of Greece, Ernst Curtius, 'as long as no foreign elements had intruded into them, had an invincible horror of the

¹ Mommsen, *Hist. Rome*, English trans., i. p. 153.

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water.' When the condition, which Curtius notices in parenthesis, arose, the 'horror' disappeared. There is something highly significant in the uniformity of the efforts of Assyria, Egypt, Babylon, and Persia to get possession of the maritime resources of Phœnicia. Our own immediate posterity will, perhaps, have to reckon with the results of similar efforts in our own day. It is this which gives a living interest to even the very ancient history of sea-power, and makes the study of it of great practical importance to us now. We shall see, as we go on, how the phenomena connected with it reappear with striking regularity in successive periods. Looked at in this light, the great conflicts of former ages are full of useful, indeed necessary, instruction.

In the first and greatest of the contests waged by the nations of the East against Europe—the Persian wars—sea-power was the governing factor. Until Persia had expanded to the shores of the Levant the European Greeks had little to fear from the ambition of the great king. The conquest of Egypt by Cambyses had shown how formidable that ambition could be when supported by an efficient navy. With the aid of the naval forces of the Phœnician cities the Persian invasion of Greece was rendered comparatively easy. It was the naval contingents from Phœnicia which crushed the Ionian revolt. The expedition of Mardonius, and still more that of Datis and Artaphernes, had indicated the danger threatening Greece when the master of a great army was likewise the master of a

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great navy. Their defeat at Marathon was not likely to, and as a matter of fact did not, discourage the Persians from further attempts at aggression. As the advance of Cambyses into Egypt had been flanked by a fleet, so also was that of Xerxes into Greece. By the good fortune sometimes vouchsafed to a people which, owing to its obstinate opposition to, or neglect of, a wise policy, scarcely deserves it, there appeared at Athens an influential citizen who understood all that was meant by the term sea-power. Themistocles saw more clearly than any of his contemporaries that, to enable Athens to play a leading part in the Hellenic world, she needed above all things a strong navy. 'He had already in his eye the battle-field of the future.' He felt sure that the Persians would come back, and come with such forces that resistance in the open field would be out of the question. One scene of action remained—the sea. Persuaded by him the Athenians increased their navy, so that of the 271 vessels comprising the Greek fleet at Artemisium, 147 had been provided by Athens, which also sent a large reinforcement after the first action. Though no one has ever surpassed Themistocles in the faculty of correctly estimating the importance of sea-power, it was understood by Xerxes as clearly as by him that the issue of the war depended upon naval operations. The arrangements made under the Persian monarch's direction, and his very personal movements, show that this was his view. He felt, and probably expressed the feeling, exactly