

A History of the World in Sixteen Shipwrecks

BY STEWART GORDON

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Reviewed by James Holmes



Learning about history isn't always fun. But it should be. And it can be. Think about Wayne Curtis's *And a Bottle of Rum: A History of the New World in Ten Cocktails* (Broadway Books, 2007), which tells the history of the New World amusingly and fascinatingly. Paul Revere paused for a snootful in Medford, Massachusetts, where I attended graduate school, during his midnight ride to Lexington? Who knew?

Anyone who writes for the popular press knows it's crucial to find an intriguing "hook" like Curtis's to ensnare everyman's curiosity. Stewart Gordon succeeds

by that standard, deploying a creative and enlightening take on maritime history. High school and college students will be entranced.

A senior research scholar at the University of Michigan's South Asia Center, Gordon uses the tales of sixteen shipwrecks since remote antiquity as a prism through which to survey world history. He reprises the approach he used in *When Asia Was the World* (Da Capo, 2009), a sampler of Asian history from 700 to 1500 CE through personal accounts left by famous and everyday protagonists.

By recounting each find, delving into ship design, and investigating the larger setting of which the wreckage was part, the author shows how seafaring spread out gradually from isolated coastal and riverine enclaves to encompass all seven seas, plus navigable inland waterways like the Yangtze or Mississippi.

How did Gordon select among thousands upon thousands of shipwrecks to assemble a compact book? Not by such obvious measures as casualty counts or a disaster's cultural cachet. The foundering of the *Titanic*, for instance, is nowhere to be found. (A German U-boat's torpedoing of the *Lusitania* is.) No, he distributes his cases in time and space, picking those that inform readers about a particular coastal region, body of water, and historical epoch.

In keeping with this approach, Gordon proffers a roster of episodes that spans from the dim recesses of time through the cruise ship *Costa Concordia* disaster in 2012. And as a South Asia scholar, the author fittingly reviews incidents from around the globe rather than concentrating on familiar expanses like the Mediterranean Sea. Ancient Southeast Asia puts in more than one appearance. *Sixteen Shipwrecks* tarries in the classical Aegean Sea, Viking-era North Atlantic, and medieval Indian Ocean, among other seas and ages.

Gordon bases a chapter on each shipwreck, applying three criteria to sift among wrecks. Each candidate must involve a ship type that influenced human history to a significant degree, including through interactions with other peoples or societies; the sample of cases as a whole must represent all of history, as well as seas across the globe; and solid architectural or documentary evidence must be available to illuminate the circumstances surrounding each wreck.

The result is a series of vignettes, each complete in itself. Teachers thus could take a plug-and-play approach to using the book in the classroom. They could assign one or a few chapters, along with Gordon's brief introduction and epilogue, without leaving students scratching their heads. Or the work is a speedy read from cover to cover. They could read the whole thing.

Now, it is true that, by and large, the Asia-related chapters of *Sixteen Shipwrecks* are less gripping than the others. That's not because Gordon writes about Asia less vividly than with other topics in the book. It's because he departs from his pattern in his determination to furnish readers a broad-based account of sea history.


Gordon's formula works best when a chapter starts with the discovery of a shipwreck linked closely to the historical era under study. Recounting how divers and archaeologists find the ship's remnants, recover artifacts and cargo, and preserve, reconstruct, and—perhaps—display the vessel for posterity constitutes the attention-grabber for the chapter.

The researchers' quest excites interest while humanizing larger historical trends. Describing a shipwreck and putting it in historical context helps readers imagine what it was like to voyage—and come to grief—in a Viking longship, a nineteenth-century clipper like the *Flying Cloud*, or some other vessel from yesteryear.

For instance, the author launches into the story of the Khufu Barge (chapter 2) by relating how, in the 1950s, workers clearing rubbish around

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the Great Pyramid of Giza unearthed the barge in an underground chamber—a chamber that had been sealed for 4,000 years. Conservators then raced against time to preserve the ship's remains before the wood desiccated and fell apart in the dry desert air. They ultimately rebuilt the vessel for display in a museum.

That's bracing stuff. So are Gordon's accounts of archaeological expeditions to the Aegean Sea (chapter 3) and the British Isles (chapter 4), both of which start off with investigators who unravel mysteries.

Now turn to Asia. The author has to go to Nigeria, to the Dufuna Dugout site (chapter 1), to find an authentic example of a dugout. He then examines methods and materials for constructing dugouts before using the Dufuna project to illustrate the ship type whereby islanders fanned out across the South Pacific during migrations spanning millennia. That's an absorbing story that is largely lost to history. Physical evidence is minimal, forcing us to infer from what little we have.

Gordon carries the story to the twelfth-century Indian Ocean, using documentary rather than physical evidence to describe the loss of David Maimonides on a trading voyage to the subcontinent (chapter 6). There's no nautical archaeology to capture readers' fancy.

The same goes for the author's story of the ruins of the Chinese fleets that invaded thirteenth-century Japan (chapter 7). Assorted debris litters the seafloor at Hakata Bay, the Yuan Dynasty fleet's objective. With no single shipwreck to investigate at Hakata Bay, however, the author reverts to a more standard historical account of Kublai Khan's cross-Yellow Sea adventures and the *kamikaze*, or "divine wind," that helped repel them. The storytelling remains good, but it's less riveting without that focal point.

In short, Gordon's approach loses some of its allure without an artifact—a Pacific dugout, Indian Ocean dhow, or Chinese transport—to rivet readers' attention on the historical episode he wants to explore.

Gordon is determined to show how seafaring technology and practices developed outside the Mediterranean world, a nautical region amply documented since classical antiquity. Widening readers' gaze in time and geographic space represents a worthy motive. I applaud the author for making the effort. His formula—discovery, recovery, history—just works better for some oceans, seas, and historical epochs than others.

It's worth pointing out, moreover, that one Asia-centric chapter, on the Intan shipwreck (chapter 5), ranks among *Sixteen Shipwrecks*' best. That tale features Indonesian authorities who combat looters in the 1990s in the course of locating an eleventh-century merchantman loaded with tin ingots. Studying the craft opens a window into commercial and social interactions between China and Southeast Asia, the nature of South China Sea societies a millennium ago, and on and on. That's drama.

Sixteen Shipwrecks probably cannot stand alone as a textbook on world history or civilization. But it makes a worthy supplement, giving such courses some saltwater flavor. It might also entice students to dive into heftier works on maritime history, such as Fernand Braudel's *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (University of California, 1966), David Abulafia's *The Great Sea* (Oxford, 2013), or Lincoln Paine's *The Sea and Civilization* (Atlantic, 2014).

We will be in Gordon's debt if *Sixteen Shipwrecks* fires enthusiasm—if readers come away realizing that Asian and maritime history are fun. ■

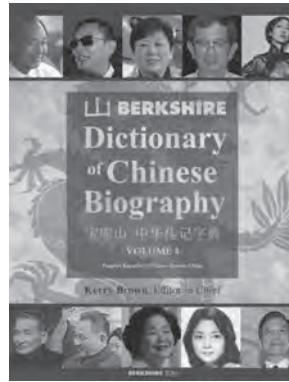
JAMES HOLMES is Professor of Strategy at the Naval War College and coauthor of the book *Red Star over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenge to US Maritime Strategy* (Naval Institute Press, 2010). The views voiced here are his alone.

Berkshire Dictionary of Chinese Biography, Volume 4

EDITED BY KERRY BROWN, PATRICK G. BOEHLER, SYLVIA HUI, AND WAI TSUI

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Reviewed by David Kenley



With the publication of volume 4, Berkshire is nearing completion of the *Dictionary of Chinese Biography*. While the editors and writers will continue to add to and amend the online supplement, this is the final volume of the dictionary's printed version. Volume 4 includes figures who have influenced Chinese history since 1979. As with the previous three volumes, this one exemplifies high standards of research, writing, and editing. It is a welcome addition to an already-impressive reference work.

Intended to be sold separately from volumes 1–3, volume 4 is arranged in a slightly different format. Whereas the first three volumes included thirty to forty entries each, volume 4 has exactly 100 entries. Most are shorter than those in the earlier volumes but still include a short bio and a summary of the entry, followed by an informative essay and a list of texts for further reading. Volume 4 also has many of the appendices included in the original three-volume set, including a pronunciation guide, biographical directory, geographical directory, *pinyin* glossary, general bibliography, and a timeline.

In many ways, the *Dictionary of Chinese Biography* self-consciously bucks many academic trends. As recently as February 2016, Charles W. Hayford wrote in the *Journal of Asian Studies* that "academic historians have long found biography a little dodgy. Nowadays the prudent grad student avoids straight biography, and academic journals do not generally review popular biographies." Instead, Hayford argues, "Writing accessible biographies for the public was left to journalists, retired diplomats, independent scholars, and Jonathan Spence." Hayford points out that "heroic biographies" are especially suspect, useful only as Christmas presents.¹

Despite these widely held assumptions, there are many advantages in using biography to study history. Individual lives often encapsulate and typify larger societal trends, enabling the reader to analyze these trends at a more personal level. For these reasons, dozens of highly respected academics from Harvard, New York University, Tsinghua University, Taiwan National University, and other such institutions have eagerly contributed to volume 4 of the *Dictionary of Chinese Biography*. They bring a level of credibility to this reference work, written for the nonspecialist and English-speaking audience. Not surprisingly, the top Chinese historians have praised the dictionary. William Theodore de Bary of Columbia University writes, "All students of China, and indeed of East Asia and world history, will be greatly aided in their studies by this comprehensive reference work, a true milestone in collaborative historical research." Rana Mitter of the University of Oxford has added, "This magnificent work will surely be a must-have for serious libraries around the world."²

In many ways, volume 4 is the best in the series. It includes a more diverse set of subjects than any of the previous three books. In volume 3, nearly 80 percent of the subjects are military or political figures, all but