IN THE BEGINNING WAS WATER.

This dictum evokes a famous verse in the Quran, which affirms that “every living thing is made of water” (wa jā’alnā min al-māʾ i kullā shay’ in ḥayyin, 21:30); it is implicit in Genesis 1, where the earth and the heavens are created by a division of the waters; it forms a basic truth claim in modern astronomical science, so that the mere presence of water on a planet may be a sign of life; it is found in many creation myths and much common sense. Thales, who launched the great adventure of Greek philosophy, also affirmed as much. There is something vital about water, then, clearly, but which waters exactly? The key lies in the sea, both as the largest expanse of water and, by way of evaporation and rain, as a source replenishing the sweet water reserves of the land.

WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE

From its ancient mythological origins, one may affirm with scant irony that the concept of the sea has itself been “at sea.” Thalassa, daughter of Hemera (terrestrial light) and Aether (celestial light), is a primordial Greek goddess, associated with the sea in general and the Mediterranean in particular. She may also personify a riverbed. In the Quran, the world’s waters are divided in two, often appearing in the dual form (baḥrayn, the two seas) to mark the difference between the bitter brine and the thirst-quenching sweet. The separation between the two types of water was in itself deemed evidence of the miracle of divine power (25:53; 27:61). The entry for “Mer” in the Encyclopédie of Diderot and D’Alembert opens by presenting two contradictory...
meanings: the sea is both “that great mass of water which surrounds the entire earth, & is more properly called Ocean,” and “a particular division or portion of the Ocean, which takes the name from the countries that it borders, or other circumstances.” Faithful to its roots, “the sea” remains a slippery concept.

Like water and sea, the signifier Ottoman has a similarly floating quality, connoting multiple meanings. The name of a dynasty ruling continuously from the turn of the fourteenth to the twentieth century, it may also invoke a space, a language, a culture, a political-economic system, a mode of governance, and much else. One thing is certain: a simple glance at the map shows that the sea thoroughly pervades Ottoman geography (map 1). The empire included, at one point or another, all the Black Sea coast, the longest stretch on the Mediterranean, the Red Sea in its entirety, significant parts of the Persian Gulf, even a portion of the Caspian (not to mention the multiple excursions across the Indian Ocean and down the Swahili coast). Its capital city, Constantinople/Istanbul, was eminently maritime, dominating the crucial waterway connecting the empire’s many seas. So was the imperial court itself, for the Topkapı palace, as if positioned by a master planner’s mise en abyme, is set on top of the promontory formed where the Golden Horn flows into the Bosphorus, with a clear view northwards along the straits and south to the Sea of Marmara. The empire also cohered around many of the great rivers of the Afro-Eurasian landmass, which were like main arteries of a massive body. Two of the four rivers of Bernini’s Fontana dei quattro fiumi in Rome traversed mainly Ottoman lands (the Danube and the Nile); they could have been three, had the baroque sculptor chosen the Euphrates or the Tigris to represent Asia instead of the Ganges.

Some Ottomans at least were quite conscious of such a predominance of the aquatic element. For example, the famed seventeenth-century polymath Kâtip Çelebî had this to say about the Ottoman space: “It is no secret that maritime conditions constitute the greatest pillar in this exalted state, to which affairs the utmost attention and care must be given, inasmuch as the splendor and title of an ever-increasing state is to be with dominion over the two lands and the two seas. Apart from this, there is absolutely no doubt that most of the well-protected domains are composed of islands and seacoasts, and particularly that the benefaction of the seat of the exalted sultanate, that is, the city of Constantinople, lies in the two seas.”

And yet, as far as the modern historical imagination is concerned, “Ottoman” does not tend to rhyme much with “water.” There has long been
a terrestrial bias in the conception of the Ottoman past, which has always evoked more of a land-bound Behemoth than a water-soaked Leviathan. Despite a few scholars’ repeated efforts to contest the land-oriented historiographical bias, much of the literature concerned with the Ottoman state (and its relationship with its subjects and neighbors) relies on the assumption that commercial and naval matters were tangential to an administration focused on agricultural and military affairs. Tracing the long-standing genealogy of this discourse well into the heart of the European modern, this book explains why.

The short answer, which the following chapters explore in depth, is simply that the idea of maritimity itself is embedded in the narrative birth of modernity, so that the concepts of Europe and the sea are mutually constitutive,
both evoking freedom and progress. Ottomanity, by contrast, is projected in its very idea as a theocratic Islamic space dominated by an imperial elite seeking to draw profit primarily from agricultural revenue. Thus layers of historiography have created the appearance of tension from the start between the maritime/the European and its Others, notably the Ottoman, but also the Muslim, the Arab, the African—all germane to the history of the Red Sea.

This is a story of seas and empires, water and writing, texts and archives, history and historiography. It is about concepts and their discursive function, about disciplines and their generic production.

It is a book that may be viewed as a historian’s echo to Johannes Fabian’s classic account of “how anthropology makes its object”: in conversation with his Time and the Other, it presents a reflection on space and the Other.4 By evoking the very conditions of possibility of modern historical discourse (“how history makes its object”), it dwells most notably on the enduring weight of modern Eurocentric notions of both space and time. Furthermore, it seeks to display what writing outside this Eurocentric analytic might look like.

Space and time are not unitary and neutral categories, nor can they be naturalized points of departure. Rather, they should enter the field of interrogation, for they are not, to extend Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s words concerning space, “the setting (real or imagined) in which things are arranged, but the means whereby the positing of things becomes possible.”5 Even further, as Michel Foucault has shown, the assumption by space and time of objective, universal features was a fundamental mechanism by which a new sort of power both established and concealed itself. More efficient because better hidden, the disciplinary power of modernity exercised its authority by focusing on the biopolitical realm. This was realized by codifying time and space into regular units, and by asserting that this order was external to, indeed preceded, the institutionalized practices of control.6

On the question of space and time and their plural constitution, Edward Said makes the point succinctly, drawing on Gaston Bachelard’s notion of the poetics of space (in his book by that title): “The objective space of a house—its corners, corridors, cellar, rooms—is far less important than what poetically it is endowed with, which is usually a quality with an imaginative or figurative value we can name and feel: thus a house may be haunted, or
homelike, or prisonlike, or magical. So space acquires emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process, whereby the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us here. The same process occurs when we deal with time.”

The project of this book emerged from a startling realization: there had been no historical account of the Red Sea even remotely comparable to Fernand Braudel’s Mediterranean. Many maritime basins had inspired attempts at Braudellian projects of all kinds: the Atlantic Ocean had its historians, steered by the pioneering efforts of Bernard Bailyn, and so did the Indian Ocean, with the great K. N. Chaudhuri, an avowed disciple of the French master, in the vanguard. Even the massive Pacific, the elusive Baltic, and the dark Black Sea were elected to the noble academy of historical subjects. But nobody had raised properly the idea of the history of the Red Sea. Even the efforts pointing in that direction were not convincing in the way that accounts of the Red Sea’s White counterpart (as the Mediterranean is also known) had been, well before Braudel’s summation.

Yet the Red Sea offered itself as the ideal unitary space, in terms of geographical, climatic, religious, linguistic, social, commercial, human, even political and juridical integration of a sort Mediterraneanists could only dream about. Not only were the natural and cultural commonalities of the various shores evident, but it had been, essentially, an Ottoman lake for about four centuries. This ought to justify its treatment as a historical actor à la Braudel, especially considering the current mood of the discipline at large in its oceanic turn.

This book thus reveals a dynamic Ottoman Red Sea world even as it traces the genealogy of its scholarly marginalization as a historical subject. But it does much more, as it reflects on the organizing category itself. What is shown is that the sea does not have a natural and eternal purchase on an objective reality. It is rather a heavily laden concept.

To take the example that forms the discovery at the core of this book: lengthy research in the extensive Ottoman records of the Prime Minister’s Archives in Istanbul revealed an absence of the category “Red Sea” prior to the nineteenth century. There are, of course, innumerable sources that a modern historian can project backwards onto her idea of the Red Sea (accounts that mention a certain port of the region, a specific commodity that belonged to it, ships that sailed it, fluxes and exchanges that traversed it). But nowhere was there any evidence of the historical presence of the Red Sea, that internal Ottoman lake, as a unified subject. In none of the documents

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examined in search of remnants that could be used as evidence in the recon-
stitution of its past existence, did the category “Red Sea” make an appear-
ance. None, that is, until the age of European hegemony.

The most common designation to appear in Ottoman documents for (portions of) the maritime domains that are now identified as the Red Sea was Bahr-i Süveys, named after the port city Suez, through which Ottoman power in the region was projected. Starting at a certain point in the mid-nineteenth century, the term Bahr-i Süveys suddenly disappears from the Ottoman record in favor of the now familiar Bahr-i Ahmer (the red sea).

Such a simple observation may not at first glance seem to be of great importance. The following argument demonstrates that it is, and that the semantic shift incites a reassessment of basic assumptions regarding philoso-
phy, political economy, cartography, geography, and of course history. By homing in on the presence/absence of the Red Sea from the scholarly arena, the argument poses a set of fundamental questions concerning historical practice in general: What discursive procedures enable an object to become a viable subject for history? How do particular subjects qualify as historical? How did the sea, its past and its present, become a subject of historical analysis in and of itself? And most importantly, for whom and by whom does the becoming-historical of the sea materialize? Should there be, can there be, a universal history of the sea? Or are there rather a series of deep-rooted though well-hidden predispositions in the modern discipline of history that explain the absence of an integrated history of the Red Sea and that reveal how Europe produced the hegemonic history and geography of the universal present?

The Red Sea had to be produced as a scientific object, and this process took place under particular historical circumstances: the extension of European colonial hegemony over the region (and the globe). There simply was no Ottoman production of the idea of a sovereign sea before the mid-nineteenth century, and the Ottomans did not give the entirety of the Red Sea a singular name before that time either. Having explained why the Red Sea has not previously become a proper subject of history, the book also explores the potentiality of a history written without the weight of Eurocentric geohis-
toricism, opening the path onto a more evocative genealogical history, one composed of fissures and breaks, in which time is not chronometric but het-
ersynchronous, and space not homogeneous but fractal.

Instead of a limited move that would seek inclusion of the Red Sea in the realm of the discipline, the challenge is to push the critique of Eurocentrism
further, arguing that the organizing categories of modern geography (the sea, the ocean, the region, etc.) are neither objective nor neutral. Instead, they belong to a specific discursive formation that takes shape with the birth of the human sciences in early nineteenth-century Europe, in which history and geography emerged as autonomous disciplines. Historicism was always a geohistoricism, and the sea featured prominently in it from the very start. In a striking reenactment of the myth of Narcissus, it was in the waters of the sea that Europe came to recognize and admire itself in its past and present.15

This book thus engages the practice of history writing through a sustained interrogation of the concept of the sea. What is shown, in sum, is that the question of the maritime is far more than a subfield of historical writing. It is, indeed, a central and vital category of philosophy of history.

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Historical studies focused on bodies of water have proliferated in recent years, usually under the broad label of “the new thalassology,” an appealing combination of classical, Hellenic authority and radical novelty.

An etymological explanation is required. The now common neologism thalassology is usually traced back to the recent review essay by Edward Peters, which hailed Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell’s The Corrupting Sea (2000) as one of the two books constituting “the hypertext of the new thalassology.”16 It should be noted that Claudio Magris uses the term thalassologist to describe the intellectual project of Pedrag Matvejević in the introduction to his book on the Mediterranean.17 In fact, it also has a much older incarnation.

In the late nineteenth century, the term thalassology referred to the holistic study of oceans and seas combining elements from a multitude of disciplines (most notably biology, meteorology, and geography), akin to today’s oceanography. Although the use of the term seems to have been rather uncommon, it was recurrently advocated in prominent arenas by the Italian scientist Ludovico Marini.18 There is no indication that this meaning bears any relation to contemporary usage.

Neither Peters’s review nor any work subsequently iterating the term explains how its approach is a “new” articulation of an older form of discourse. The approach is simply declared to be “genuinely new” in being a “micoregional history of the Mediterranean with the enigmatic sea (or several seas) as its flexible center.”19 Nor indeed is it made clear what constitutes
the old thalassology, although the short discussion of Fernand Braudel (who, we are told, “if he did not invent thalassology in 1949 . . . certainly put it spectacularly on the historian’s map) perhaps places Braudel at the opening as the embodiment of the old.²⁰ In any case, the resuscitation of the old-new term has snowballed and has become the standard appellation for the recent crop of studies focusing on water basins (although how recent is obviously a contentious issue: Marcus Vink speaks of a “new thalassology” of the Indian Ocean that emerged in the 1980s).²¹

After the end of the Cold War came a proliferation of innovative studies of seas and oceans, as well as special chairs at prestigious universities, series in major publishing houses, and well-endowed, multiannual academic programs and conferences. History departments everywhere indulged the fashion. Here, finally, was a providential way out of the historians’ existential dilemma after the generalized and devastating critiques of modernization theory and its attendant spatial paradigms, the nation-state and area studies. These were increasingly seen as nefarious residues of Cold War or, even worse, colonial politics—and therefore inimical to proper historical inquiry. This oceanic turn in the disciplines appeared to lead its practitioners to the promised land of scholarly renewal, liberated from the constraints of the past. There was, however, something uncanny about it all. The celebrations of the sea as a zone of historical inquiry free from political and discursive weight were trumpeted too loudly and quickly. Notably absent was an explanation of genealogies and implications. The sea was a self-evident category, and thalassology—the assumption by the sea of a subject-position in historical accounts—was a recent critical project. If it had antecedents, the precursor was Fernand Braudel.

In the summer of 2006, the subfield was consecrated by one of the profession’s established institutional organs when the American Historical Review devoted its featured forum to the theme “Oceans of History.” In her introduction to the collection the historian Kären Wigen celebrated the importance of the new trend: “Chances are, readers of the AHR have found the ocean catching their eye of late. Maritime scholarship seems to have burst its bounds; across the discipline, the sea is swinging into view. . . . No longer outside time, the sea is being given a history, even as the history of the world is being retold from the perspective of the sea.”²²

This recent sea-centered literature begins with a dual proposition: it is original and it is uncommon. Thus Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, leading latter-day proponents of Mediterranean history, introduce their
review of the field with that very postulate: "Sea and ocean history is more novel than it sounds. It admirably exemplifies a new historiography of large areas... Both its scope and its methods are so distinctive as to make it an exciting—and quite unpredictable—area of reflection and research."23

The crucial justification for a focus on bodies of water is, then, that such spatial units "tend to be politically neutral."24 The history of the sea, it is argued in near unanimity, subverts the constraints of both national and imperial discourse. As an example of how, thanks to a focus on seas and oceans, conventional politics are set aside, Horden and Purcell mention "the 'new' Atlantic historiography, [in which] a 'white,' a 'black,' a 'green' (Irish), and even a 'red' (Marxist) Atlantic may coexist in equilibrium."25

In some sense, this is obviously true. The focus on nonterritorial spatialities runs against a well-established historiographical tradition that has reinforced forms of nationalist politics by assuming and therefore naturalizing conventional geographies. This does not make maritime history politically neutral. Can historical discourse ever be? As Hayden White has argued: "The politicalization of historical thinking was a virtual precondition of its own professionalization, the basis of its promotion to the status of a discipline worthy of being taught in the universities, and a prerequisite of whatever 'constructive' social function historical knowledge was thought to serve."26

It also remains unclear why polychromatic perspectives are specific to nonconventional geographies: Why there could not be, say, a blue, white, and red France, or even a brown, black, or rainbow France? The spatial units that frame historical narratives are all always already full of meaning; they derive from particular historical conditions, they come with their own discursive baggage, they have distinct conceptual implications, and they are all essentially and equally political.

Moreover, histories that take as their subject nonconventional geographic units still assume the very conceptual and cognitive framework that structures the mode of historical writing inherited from the nineteenth century with the professionalization of the discipline. This discursive arrangement rests on specific parameters: time and space are reduced to universal, homogeneous, and neutral—in a word, objective—categories, combining in what Heidegger describes as "the conquest of the world as picture,"27 where time is unitary, linear, and teleological, and space is made up of coherent, bounded units with inherent characteristics that can be defined according to a set of scientific criteria—geographical, cartographic, ecological, but also ethnological, philological, and cultural. Thus was the subject of disciplined history
produced: a cogent and representational, indeed anthropomorphic, central actor (appearing in the title, usually in the format “History of X”) whose regular progress along a stable chronology was rendered in the form of a narrative.28

In this perspective, histories of nonconventional geographical units in fact partake of precisely the same politics as their more conventional counterparts—a politics of realism and the status quo that Hayden White has extensively critiqued.29 Thalassology is thus saddled with an ambiguous paradox: subversive of the dominant state-centric approach to history, it tends nonetheless to reproduce the pillars upon which this discourse is founded. For this very reason, thalassology is a particularly fruitful site of interrogation about the nature of history, if it is executed according to a critical and genealogical method. What better locus to think about history, about the problematic of space, time, and the historical object, than the sea, a place that can host neither archive nor seminar, the two foundational features of the professionalized historical discipline?30

The making of the modern discipline of history is often narrated as a dramatized struggle between two opposite poles, neatly represented by two prominent individuals: G. W. F. Hegel and Leopold von Ranke. Both figures loom particularly large over Western historical discourse, and both played a crucial part in the formulation of the professionalized discipline. While the former dominates philosophical reflection about the nature, orientations, and meanings of history and is an unavoidable reference for any theoretical discussion of the discipline, the latter almost single-handedly created its methods and scope, forging the historian’s self-identity and practice through his legendary seminars and archival heroics.

They were, of course, very much writing against one another, and these two approaches to history have maintained a rather tense relationship to this day, where, grossly, a theorizing impulse clashes with an empiricist one. History à la Ranke, Hegel surmised, was incapable of assigning any meaning or larger structure to the legacy of the past, and those who practice it gather their materials “from every conceivable source (Ranke). A motley assortment of details, petty interests, actions of soldiers, private affairs, which have no influence on political interests,—they are incapable [of recognizing] a whole, a general design.”31 Ranke, for his part, could not accept the intimation that the histo-
rian would superimpose preordained ideas onto the past; on the contrary, he ought to let reality speak for itself directly, by way of the historical record (wie es eigentlich gewesen—“what actually happened,” or “the way it actually was”). Ranke makes clear his yearning for an autonomous discipline of history, separated especially from philosophy. The philosopher, Ranke complained, “view[s] history from his vantage point, seeks infinity merely in progression, development, and totality.” Proper history, by contrast, “recognizes something infinite in every existence: in every condition, in every being, something eternal, coming from God; and this is its vital principle.”

Their important differences notwithstanding, the two writers had much in common in terms of the spatial and temporal configurations that for them framed history. Three of these shared characteristics are particularly relevant to the arguments of this book.

First, they both explicitly repudiated the model of exemplar history of previous epochs. Second, history, for both Hegel and Ranke, needed a primary actor, and in both cases the nation-state took center stage, as the incarnation of homogeneous space-time. Ranke disagreed with Hegel as to whether history ought to be interpreted as the unfolding of a universal story along hierarchical stages that could be defined by a singular idea (or rather, Idea); but he, like his opponent, saw the world (and Europe in particular) as divided into a certain number of nation-states that had to be allotted a particular moral character, the ideal fulfillment of which formed the essence of history. Moreover, both assumed and affirmed the uniqueness of the European continent and its civilization, encapsulated precisely by the special place of history within it. There was something distinctly European about universal history, and something distinctly historical about Europe. And that distinction was connected to the progressive constitution of the nation-state. In other words, history, from its very beginning as a professionalized discipline, was thoroughly territorial, with both its practical-empiricist and its philosophizing bent bound by the unit of the nation-state. Transcending the state, moreover, both Ranke and Hegel also saw a European self that combined the various trajectories of individual nations into a higher whole, the culmination of world civilization.

Finally, both Hegel and Ranke conceived of the Mediterranean as having a sovereign coherence, and as playing a central role in the movement of world history. Indeed, Ranke had published a text entitled *The Ottoman and Spanish Empires in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, as the opening volume of the four-volume series *Sovereigns and Peoples of Southern Europe.*
At the very outset, Ranke describes the sequence of grandeur and decline of the states of southern Europe, strikingly putting within the same frame of historical analysis the Spaniards, the Italians, and the Ottomans. He goes on to chastise existing narratives for being “engrossed . . . with the event of political and religious strife” and therefore incapable of delivering the “internal developments” that explain the shift of the center of gravity of world history from southern to northern Europe. These, he then suggests, had something to do with the locale, and here the Mediterranean makes an appearance as the defining feature that gives coherence to the analytical frame; “Whilst these three nations made themselves formidable or conspicuous among the rest, they encountered each other directly in the Mediterranean; they filled all its coasts and waters with life and motion, and formed there a peculiar circle of their own.”

Always more vigorous in his theorizations, Hegel turns the Mediterranean into an abstract, coherent system. Having postulated the idea of the “Geographical Basis of History,” he goes on to delineate its various incarnations; and this is where the sea comes to the fore: “The Old World . . . has its continuity interrupted by a deep inlet—the Mediterranean Sea. The three Continents that compose it have an essential relation to each other, and constitute a totality. Their peculiar feature is that they lie round this Sea, and therefore have an easy means of communication; for rivers and seas are not to be regarded as disjoining, but as uniting . . . For the three quarters of the globe the Mediterranean Sea is similarly the uniting element, and the centre of World-History.”

Hegel proposes as a “fundamental principle that nothing unites so much as water” against the customary tendency to view it as the “separating element.” Recent times, he complains, have seen a particular insistence on finding natural borders to states, and thus has the sea often been wrongly viewed as forming a barrier. Much to the contrary, it is, he recurrently opines, a coherent and dynamic unit that generates interaction and connectivity. And as such, it is the fundamental feature, indeed the motor, of historical progress. Water acts as a connector, and this is evidenced, for Hegel, by the fact that Europeans maintained regular contact with America but not with the interiors of Africa and Asia and by the tendency of coastal regions to separate from the interior. The sea, therefore, and the Mediterranean Sea in particular, lies at the very heart of Hegel’s geohistorical and philosophical complex: “The sea gives us the idea of the indefinite, the unlimited, and infinite; and in feeling his own infinite in that Infinite, man is stimulated and emboldened

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to stretch beyond the limited: the sea invites man to conquest, and to piratical plunder, but also to honest gain and to commerce. The land . . . attaches him to the soil; it involves him in an infinite multitude of dependencies, but the sea carries him out beyond the limited circles of thought and action.”

This is quite a momentous argument, especially in light of the text’s insistence on the place of the territorial state in the constitution of history, and Hegel can be considered to have been among the first advocates of Mediterranean unity, as well as the prophet of thalassology.

These two positions are related, as the new thalassologists repeatedly assert by hailing the Mediterranean as the “ur-sea” or the “great original of seas.” This relation does not emerge, however, from some particular Mediterranean primeval unity or propensity for connectivity. Nor does it derive, as Braudel has it, from the “fact” that the Mediterranean is “the oldest stretch of sea ever dominated [saisi] by Man,” unlike the Atlantic, which has “nothing but a borrowed and hastily constructed past.” Indeed, as will be discussed below, in the case of Bory de Saint-Vincent, who theorized the unity of water basins, the Atlantic Ocean featured just as prominently as the Mediterranean in relation to the idea of coherent bodies of water. Besides, the Red Sea probably has a much better claim to being “the oldest stretch of sea ever dominated by Man.” The connection, rather, is due to the simple fact that the invention of the Mediterranean and of thalassology are coeval, to each other and to the constitution of a particular self-identity of imperial Europe, rendering one the yardstick for the other.

A concept, says Louis Althusser, writing about capitalist time, “is never immediately ‘given,’ never legible in visible reality: like every concept this concept must be produced, constructed.” This book is devoted to the production of the sea as concept. It explores the trajectories that have opened the discursive space for making the sea an object of historical analysis. It follows various twists and turns that have led to the constitution of the sea as a viable subject of history by evoking a number of steps of its historiographical becoming.

In recent years, the posited European monopoly on maritimity has been subjected to critique, often with the aim of demonstrating instead that the sea was important to non-European states and peoples too, and in some cases well before the rise of Europe. These studies are important and have helped
to reshape historical practice and method as a whole. Particularly inspiring for the arguments of this book are a series of interventions that have fundamentally transformed the way the Pacific and its islands are conceived and written about. The opening salvo in this adventure was Epeli Hau’ofa’s evocative essay “Our Sea of Islands,” in which the Tongan scholar sought to counter the dominant production of knowledge that defined the Pacific islands as “too small, too poor, and too isolated to develop any meaningful degree of autonomy.” Hau’ofa contrasts this external and expert-induced belittlement to alternative, indigenous notions of space: “But if we look at the myths, legends, and oral traditions, indeed the cosmologies of the peoples of Oceania, it becomes evident that they did not conceive of their world in such microscopic proportions. Their universe comprised not only land surfaces but the surrounding ocean as far as they could traverse and exploit it, the underworld with its fire-controlling and earth-shaking denizens, and the heavens above with their hierarchies of powerful gods and named stars and constellations that people could count on to guide their ways across the seas. Their world was anything but tiny.”

This long-standing sense of place and identity of the Oceanian Islanders enables a radical reconfiguration of geographical typology, from “islands in a far sea” to “a sea of islands.” Here too, a simple semantic shift leads to a dramatic conceptual rearticulation. The first expression, Hau’ofa explains, “emphasises dry surfaces in a vast ocean far from the centres of power,” whereas the second “is a more holistic perspective in which things are seen in the totality of their relationship.” Thus the very basis of the modern conception of what “land” and “sea” mean, and how they relate to each other, is transformed—an epistemological break that has inspired a whole series of contributions on Oceania’s many lands and seas that go well beyond the colonial categories of and in the Pacific. It has bred a different style of scholarship, but also art and activism—indeed, a whole way of life and thought.

The danger, therefore, as Hau’ofa and others suggest, is the tendency to reproduce uncritically the geographical categories of the European modern. What remains rather underexplored in the case of many maritime histories, even in many works that propose alternative historical narratives, is the set of deeper theoretical underpinnings of history writing and history making outside Europe, as well as the divergent manner in which the Ottomans themselves, or any others, conceived space, time, and identity before European hegemony and their potential implications for today.
In addition to sketching a history of the Red Sea akin to Braudel’s Mediterranean, this book uncovers the genealogy of maritimity as a central element in the cosmos of modernity and the birth of the idea of the sovereign sea along with the human sciences in Europe in the early nineteenth century. Any historical study that takes the sovereign sea as a neutral historical concept and an innocent geographical space will inevitably reproduce components of Eurocentric thought. In avoiding this pitfall, one chapter seeks to conjure alternative notions of spatiality, inspired by the Ottoman archival record concerning the Red Sea. The objective is to reflect upon the historian’s craft in general and to produce a historical account of the Ottoman Red Sea but also to evoke the possibilities for imagining today a different relationship to landscape and ecology (whether maritime or terrestrial) as an inhabited and meaningful place, based on a relational rather than a managerial understanding of space. What is suggested, quite simply, is that Ottoman history may contain perspectives, even within a seemingly trivial archival document, that allow for an alternative way of thinking and being in this world.

BOOK OUTLINE

The five chapters that follow are intended to illustrate and provide depth to the ideas sketched above. Each one engages particular clusters of questions related to the general theme and builds on existing scholarship, both theoretical and empirical, while tracing original research perspectives. These are elaborated in the Conclusion, which presents the horizons that are opened by the book’s various arguments considered as a whole.

Chapter 1, “The Place in the Middle: A Geohistory of the Red Sea,” provides the basic setting of the Red Sea in the long term, as it has come to be imagined today. Consciously written in the Braudellian mode, it puts forward the foundational long-term features of the spacetime signified by the name “the Red Sea.” Beginning with the geological and the climatic domains (Braudel’s longue durée), it then broaches the central features of the social and economic dimensions of the sea (conjonctures) before presenting a narrative emplotment of the place (événements). An additional segment follows, complementing the three-tiered schema with a perspective of world history from the angle of a nonhuman actor that was particularly tied to the Ottoman Red Sea world: coffee.
Chapter 2, “Thalassology alla Turca: Six Theses on the Philosophy of History,” seeks to produce a philosophy of history from the outside (of Europe). It follows on previous scholarship dealing with the Ottoman past in theoretical terms. Over the past few decades, Ottomanist historians have been coming out of their parochial niche and posing questions of global import. There is no longer any reason to assume that Ottoman history should not provide for a rich reflection of universal value on the practice of history itself, on potential alternative worldviews, or on transregional processes, for example. In six basic theses, ranging from the world-historical to the micro-historical, the chapter reveals what the philosophy of history looks like from the Bosporus and why the history of the Ottoman Red Sea does not, perhaps could not, or even should not exist.

Chapter 3, “Self-Portrait of the Ottoman Red Sea, June 21, 1777,” narrates the history of the region through the prism of the sources themselves, rather than the objectivist analytic of Braudelian-inspired thalassology. With the aim of exploring how some Ottomans themselves saw the Red Sea and its world in the late eighteenth century, a close exegesis of an official document is undertaken, though which is revealed the special nature of that world as lived and imagined by its administrators and practitioners. An investigation of the various spatialities and temporalities embedded in the content and form of that document unveils a complex universe, involving local and global politics, the movement of tides and winds, the difficulties of shipbuilding and seafaring, the relationships within and between Ottoman state and society, various cycles of exchange and mobility, and other factors.

Chapter 4, “The Scientific Invention of the Red Sea,” focuses the analysis directly on the creation of the Red Sea as an object of knowledge and power. The story here follows the dramatic expansion of European (and mainly British) military power over the region, and the actual production of the Red Sea as a scientific object, culminating in its thorough charting in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Only then does it become a sovereign, organic space, about which particular truth claims can be made. And this becoming-scientific of the Red Sea went hand in hand with British imperial expansion in the region (and the world). The chapter then evokes the eventual rise to hegemony of these spatial and temporal notions, and their internalization by the Ottomans and Egyptians themselves, who adopt the category “Red Sea” in the 1850s and beyond.

Chapter 5, “Thalassomania: Modernity and the Sea,” examines the emergence of the sea as an operative concept at the center of the discursive
formation of modernity and reveals the surprisingly important place of the sea in the writings of major figures of modern thought. The assumption of the sea as an analytical unit was not the outcome of a natural teleological process. Seas and oceans, just like the stories told about them, are not discovered as such in nature. The chapter shows that the idea of the sea forming a unitary and coherent space can be traced back to the early nineteenth century and the foundations of the modern disciplines (of history, geography, botany, and oceanography most importantly).

The analysis here exposes the common parameters, anchored in organic realism, of the modern disciplines, through its concentration on the genealogy of a single object (the sea). The chapter also explores the ontological implications that accompanied the new epistemic setting. What is shown in this regard is that most significant in the differentiation between the have-nots of History in modern philosophy of history is a certain idea of the sea.

One important caveat must be kept in mind before embarking on this journey. What is envisioned today as “the Red Sea” was, from time immemorial and certainly in the Ottoman period, an eminently cosmopolitan space, replete with mobility and exchange of all kinds. This book does not concern itself primarily with these important historical flows, nor does it seek to reveal an authentic experience of the sea by people, locals and others, who encountered it. Obviously, the scholars, pilgrims, traders, administrators, coastal communities, and the rest, who lived “the Red Sea,” conceived of the maritime spaces in multiple ways that do not necessarily conform to imperial norms, whether European or Ottoman (though they were certainly affected by them). These various experiences of the sea are fascinating in their own right, and they can never be subjected fully to the objectifying ambitions of elites—but they do not fit, for reasons both practical and methodological, into the subject of this book.