The Edge of the World
A Cultural History of the North Sea and the Transformation of Europe
Walther, Olivier

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The Edge of the World tells the story of Europe before states were strong enough to control the movement of people and goods and impose exclusive national identities. It is truly, as Michael Pye writes in his introduction, “a story of connections”. Written in beautiful prose, the book rehabilitates the North’s contribution to the culture of Europe by exploring how the sea carried books, fashion, science and money from the end of the Roman Empire to the Renaissance, a period that no one, after reading The Edge of the World, would describe as Dark Ages.

The story begins with the Frisians, a people of seafarers and herders living on the salt marshes of today’s Netherlands and Germany, where the frontier between land and sea was constantly blurred by wind and storms. Living between the Franks in the west and the Saxons in the east, the Frisians developed long-distance trade routes, spreading the use of money across the North Sea. Living on the edge of continental powers, they raised cattle because cereals couldn’t be grown in the marshes, and developed a society were men and women were more free than elsewhere in Europe.

After the Frisians came the Vikings, whose appetite for conquest, slavery and pillage “helped break up all the frontiers, genetic and cultural and political, of the North” (p. 78). The Vikings did not limit their incursions to the coasts of the North Sea. They ravaged England, Ireland, and much of the rest of Europe that was accessible to their warships, venturing to such distant places as Iceland, Constantinople, Greenland, and the New World, which they called Vineland. Pushing the limits of the known world, the Vikings brought disruptions and greater circulation to Europe. After the dust of the pillages had settled came a time of settlements and trade. Many cities in Ireland and Britain bear the marks of their Norse conquerors.

In the mid-13th century, the North Sea was, again, the epicentre of a major cultural transformation with the development of the Hansa, a loose economic community that included such diverse towns as Lübeck, Hamburg, London, Riga, Danzig, Bergen, Novgorod and Bremen. As the cities in Northern Italy, the Hansa cities became powers without flags, seals or kings. At the edge of a world where territorial powers had remained fragmented, they lived from the sea and established a sophisticated network of trade posts from which merchants competed, using violence and threats in order to keep trade routes open.

Nowhere in the book does the author succumb to the temptation of environmental determinism. If there is one thing that hasn’t changed in the North Sea from 650 to 1550 CE, it is the ability of the people to be the architects of their own lives. The Frisians of the 7-10th century, for example, built artificial dwelling mounds called Terpen to protect themselves from the fury of the sea and developed markets where herders and farmers could use coins to trade their products. Later on, flood mitigation and land-drainage became even more substantial and contributed to the propagation of capitalism in the Low Countries. As Michael Pye argues, “Man made the land vulnerable in the first place, and then invented limited companies, people borrowing money to
The book also shows that the Vikings were not simply forced out of their homeland by poverty or demographic pressure, but were driven by profit, the search for unknown territories, and the hope of being more independent from their kings.

The book makes the compelling argument that money, rather than the environment, was the common denominator of the great circulations of the North Sea. Focussing on the many ways that money could be minted, exchanged, borrowed and used to the profit of merchants, The Edge of the World challenges the evolutionary principle according to which cities grow from agricultural surpluses. It shows that many of the wealthiest cities of the Middle Ages developed due to the multiplication and diversification of economic activities that followed the establishment of long-distance trade routes. Such cities had little to do with their hinterland.

At no time in European history was this more obvious than between 1250 and 1550 CE, when Hansa cities developed across Northern Europe. The cities of the Hansa, writes Pye, were “all about trading, hardly connected with the land powers around them. No feudal lord had the ships to interfere with business at sea” (p. 224). For Hansa merchants, territory was seen as a burden that distracted resources and men from the sea. Nothing counted more than the profit that could be made from moving goods, often by playing kings against each other and by building monopolies. The author is careful enough to avoid idealizing the Hansa or making its cities a glorious ancestor of today’s German economy. What made the Hansa modern, he argues, was the idea that money could be pursued for itself, whatever the political boundaries erected by territorial powers.

In the late Middle Ages, the great circulations that had characterized the North Sea for centuries became increasingly challenged by states. After the Black Death killed a third of the European population in the 14th century and created a shortage of labour, new laws were passed across the continent to control movement of people and goods. Such laws had a tremendous impact on the mobility of Northern European societies, where tailors, goldsmiths, blacksmiths and shoemakers were used to crossing political boundaries as they will. Drawing a parallel with our post 9/11 era, the author argues that “something had to be done, but there was nothing to be done, so it was necessary to control everything, just in case” (p. 269). “Plague”, he argues, “justified the rules that kept a person in her place” (p. 288).

The consolidation of state powers was slow and until the 17th century, the North Sea was still full of smugglers, merchants and adventurers willing to take advantage of porous borders. “Lives were still so fluid”, argues Pye, “that nationality could not keep a bureaucrat, a pirate, a sailor in his place; cross the sea, and you could change your loyalty, your paymaster or your role” (p. 285). Some of the most beautiful pages of the book describe how people easily changed sides as new opportunities arose. “Before there were solid, all-powerful states, choosing and changing sides was always an option” writes the author. “You went where you were known, where you could do the thing you wanted to do and where someone would protect you from being jailed” (p. 283). People like Weland of Stiklaw, a priest, successively worked for or against the kings of Scotland, Norway and England before turning up as a baron. Such social fluidity is reminiscent of some of today’s conflicts, where commanders can be soldiers one day, rebels the next day, and eventually join a terrorist group the third day. Soon enough, however, “there was an
enthusiasm for papers” (p. 285) all across Europe and people’s identity became primarily defined by where one’s parents were born, not where one happened to be.

At a time when border controls and physical barriers to movement are being reintroduced in Europe, *The Edge of the World* is a highly needed reminder that circulation is fundamental to our identity. Beyond Europe and the Western world, scholars working on societies where states remain weak will also find *The Edge of the World* an exciting source of inspiration. The diversity of people and products found in Bruges, Lübeck or Bergen in the 13th century is reminiscent of some of the border markets animated by long-distance traders in today’s Asia and Africa; places whose primary purpose is to provide cosmopolitan merchants with a temporary place to do business and exchange information. As their counterparts from the North Sea’s Middle Ages, these markets experience rapid growth and sudden declines, depending on whether trade routes connecting them to the rest of the world remain open to business.