Shipwrecks are a tragic but expected part of the human experience. Their numbers are staggering. A UNESCO estimate places three million shipwrecks in earth’s oceans.[[1]](#endnote-1) To this number must be added the ships lost on the world’s lakes and rivers. Even this massive number is surely an underestimate, since scholars have no data on boats and ships in earlier periods for large parts of the world, such as the sea-lanes around India and Southeast Asia, the coast of China, South America, or the Caribbean.

We can be sure, however, that boats and ships are far older than any direct evidence of remains or shipwrecks. The forty-thousand-year-old human migration to Australia required some sort of boat or raft to cross the Torres Strait off the southern coast of New Guinea. The archaeological evidence from the earliest settlements on the York Peninsula suggests that a relatively large group, more than a thousand people, came at the same time. Even earlier craft would have been necessary to colonize the islands of Indonesia and reach New Guinea. Other, less ancient migrations also required watercraft; these include Sri Lanka, the Philippines, the Caribbean islands, and Ireland.

Additional evidence for very early ships comes from trade. Archaeologists have identified materials that come from only one place but have been excavated at sites reachable only across open water. Examples include greenstone from Scandinavia, flint from Sardinia, carnelian from India, and copper from southern France.

Of the millions of wrecks and the thousands of located wrecks, I have selected sixteen based on the following criteria:

1. The wreck represents a type of ship that had a significant impact on human history. In addition, some of the shipwrecks directly affected changes in design, construction, laws, or regulation.

2. Shipwrecks would come from around the globe and through history to the present. I especially wanted wrecks beyond the much-studied Mediterranean.

3. The shipwreck needed good archaeological and textual documentation, which describes the worlds in which the ship operated, such as economics, migration, the movement of ideas, political rivalry, war, and environmental constraints.

The book does not, therefore, select only wrecks with a large number of casualties, those with especially rich cargo, or those that directly influenced maritime law or regulations. Rather, each chapter begins with the wrenching tragedy of the wreck and the excitement of the find, then moves to the design of the ship and wider questions. What was aboard the ship and why, where did it come from and where was it bound, who financed it, who sailed on it, and what we can infer about the surrounding society’s contacts and interchanges. Some of the sixteen shipwrecks are well known, and others quite obscure.

In treating shipwrecks as a window into maritime and larger worlds, I have widened the traditional definition of a shipwreck from the destruction of a ship by storm or collision. This book includes ancient ships consciously buried, ships that sank following fire or explosion, ships lost in warfare, and the loss of boats that operated on rivers and lakes.

Overall, the book explores how small ancient local maritime worlds slowly merged into regional worlds and finally into our single unified, globalized maritime world. The viewpoint of the book is that a maritime world was—to borrow from ecology—a habitat, in which owners and builders struggled for “fitness.” Shipbuilders judged local conditions (commodities, tides, surf, weather, seasons) and arrived at a variety of workable ship designs that used local materials and skills and seemed acceptably stable and safe, capable of carrying what was necessary, and cost-effective. Some ships were for open-ocean sailing, others for transport and fishing in estuaries and rivers, still others for specialized trade in a single commodity. If paddles or oars or a single sail proved adequate, given the terrors of water travel, a ship’s configuration and materials might remain stable for centuries.

As in the world of nature, change was likely when boundaries between earlier regional maritime worlds were breached. For example, the design of a North Sea ship known as the cog came to influence ship design in the Mediterranean. The process was, however, patchy and piecemeal. Larger maritime regions sometimes devolved into smaller ones if empires collapsed.

I am particularly interested in the mental side of the gradual integration of various maritime worlds. For example, what constituted the mental toolbox of possible designs accessed by a shipbuilder? Did ships arriving from other places influence design, or did shipbuilders ignore them? How did ideas of ship design and function interact with larger political or economic trends? When possible, the chapters also discuss the cognitive geography of those involved with the maritime world of the shipwreck. What constituted the safe, known world? Where was travel considered easy or possible, rather than difficult or impossible? What goods were worth the effort, and why? Was there a spirit of adventure, pushing beyond the known world?

Globalization came slowly as various regional maritime worlds merged and traded people, commodities, and ideas. By the eighteenth century the maritime world was largely but not completely globalized. Ships sailed around the world, and battles were fought on several oceans simultaneously. Nevertheless, communication remained slow, and scheduled maritime travel had yet to appear. Few people crossed oceans except when required by employment, family obligations, or immigration.

The merger of the regional maritime worlds into a single global maritime world is a product of the twentieth century, considered in the last three chapters. The oil tanker and the cruise ship epitomize the trend toward a standard worldwide product, design, and schedule.

Shipwrecks are a feature of our modern world. Every year more than a dozen commercial carriers are lost at sea, though most go unnoticed. Several dozen more are severely damaged, but rescue operations save the crew, and oceangoing tugs save the ship. Let us, then, turn to the exciting and tragic stories of sixteen shipwrecks and their larger story of the creation of a single globalized maritime world.

1. This estimate is contained in a UNESCO press release from a 2004 conference, “Protecting Underwater Heritage from Treasure Hunters.” See http://www.unesco.org/confgen/press\_rel/291001\_subaqua.shtml. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)