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# 1

## Maritime Quarantine: Linking Old World and New World Histories

Alison Bashford

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From the early modern period, a global archipelago of quarantine stations came to connect the world's oceans. Often located on islands adjacent to major ports, they multiplied across every large body of water. In the process, great new carceral architectures materialised, many surviving into the present as magnificent ruins – Malta's Manoel Island, for example. Other quarantine islands have been interpreted in the present by states seeking to sell and tell national stories of triumph over adversity; San Francisco's Angel Island, or South Africa's Robben Island, for instance.<sup>1</sup> And yet more have been 'adaptively reused' as convention centres, exhibition spaces or five-star hotels with a dark tourism edge, as has Sydney's 'Q Station'. Such divergent current uses cover a far more consistent past in which these local geographies served remarkably similar purposes, designed to secure both global health and global commerce.

Conceptually, geographically and historiographically, this archipelago of quarantine stations links old world and new world histories as surely as the shipping lines and trade routes connected them substantively. And yet scholarship on maritime quarantine tends to remain regionally sequestered. Historians analyse British systems vis-à-vis European systems,<sup>2</sup> or quarantine across the Ottoman Empire.<sup>3</sup> Historical scholarship on Atlantic and Pacific quarantine

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has unfolded quite separately again.<sup>4</sup> In other instances, it is specific ports, islands or stations that serve as entry points for historians of quarantine.<sup>5</sup> The study that best locates quarantine within a global frame and with economic globalisation in mind is Mark Harrison's *Contagion*, a sweep across centuries and geographies.<sup>6</sup> Yet there is a transoceanic history of quarantine still to be considered, building on the insights of recent maritime histories.

The so-called new thalassology announced in *American Historical Review* a decade ago treated the Mediterranean, the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans separately.<sup>7</sup> The Indian and the Southern Oceans, as well as the many other 'great seas', were omitted. The special issue marked a historiographical turning point, prompting as well as responding to a growing scholarly interest in maritime histories. Analysis of connections between multiple oceans and seas has since richly engaged historians, from *Seascapes* to *Oceans Connect: Reflections on Water Worlds Across Time and Space*.<sup>8</sup> Maritime quarantine rarely features in new oceanic histories, however, and yet it should do so not least given the frequency with which travellers and migrants, as well as merchant mariners, experienced quarantine as part of oceanic journeying. Attention to maritime quarantine helps us historicise the ocean,<sup>9</sup> and especially global coastlines in what has been called the maritime *durée*.<sup>10</sup> Quarantine islands also serve well methodologically as portals into the history of globalisation and, especially, the counter-forces to globalisation.

### Old World Quarantine

Quarantine was not always, or necessarily, a maritime practice: territorial borders, enclosed towns, isolation hospitals and inland lazarettos form part of the larger and longer spatial and administrative history.<sup>11</sup> Yet a major manifestation of quarantine has been maritime, beginning with early modern Dubrovnik and islands in the harbours of the Italian city-states. Quarantine islands came to be much in demand in the early modern Mediterranean as mercantilist states privileged trade, and especially as commerce with the Levant intensified.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, some islands were artificially constructed, commissioned entirely for quarantine purpose; the magnificent pentagonal lazaretto in Ancona, for example.<sup>13</sup> From the western to the eastern Mediterranean, on its northern and southern shores, the great sea came to be dotted with quarantine stations and lazarettos.<sup>14</sup>

The English prison reformer, John Howard, described this Mediterranean network in his *Account of the Principal Lazarettos in Europe*, the title of which signals the carceral archipelago that so engaged him, ‘with Further observations on some foreign prisons and hospitals’. And yet Howard immediately framed lazarettos commercially: they were specifically important for the major ‘trading nations’ that were exposed to plague. He discussed the lazarettos in Malta and Corfu, in Marseilles, Venice and Trieste, travelling through French and Italian cities as well as Smyrna and Constantinople.<sup>15</sup> He praised the lazaretto in Genoa, remarking on its ordered governance and architectural design, with a separate ‘court for infected goods’ and ‘court for suspicious goods’, elements that Jane Stevens Crawshaw elaborates in chapter 2 of this volume.<sup>16</sup> In addition to the famous system in Venice, it was the lazaretto in Malta that caught much of his attention, as indeed it has caught the attention of historians since.<sup>17</sup> He described ‘petty quarantine’ in which all ships with clean bills of health were nonetheless required to anchor in the harbour for 18 days; and ‘great quarantine’ for vessels with foul bills of health, in which people and merchandise were offloaded into and onto the lazaretto itself. There, merchandise was separated into different kinds of goods, placed under cover and treated: wool, silk, cotton, furs, hides and tobacco were all separated from one another ‘so that no confusion insues in distinguishing the respective properties’. All these goods and more – camel’s hair, vellum, ostrich feathers, beeswax and tallow candles – were ‘expurgated’ in slightly different and refined ways.<sup>18</sup> A precocious participant-observer, John Howard deliberately gained passage on a ship with a foul bill of health, intent on experiencing quarantine in Venice first-hand. And despite the self-imposed horrors, the whole purpose of his account was to discourse on the importance of building a major lazaretto at a point of entry to maritime England. Such an establishment might save the time and expense of compelling quarantine in Malta for English-bound ships.<sup>19</sup>

Howard published his famous *Account* in the pivotal year between epochs, 1789, and it was during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, as Alexander Chase-Levenson argues in chapter 3 of this volume, that the Mediterranean came to be comprehended as a barrier behind which terrestrial Europe might be – but was not – spared the ravages of plague and later cholera. Chase-Levenson also explains how national and imperial rivalries played out over and through quarantine measures, as authorities

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expediently suspended a ship's passage, destroyed its merchandise, and detained its passengers with diplomatic and military, as much as health agendas in mind. Declaring a foul bill of health, or re-routing a vessel interrupted commerce, undermined naval strategies and could easily and expediently turn passengers into prisoners of war. In peacetime, quarantine and international relations between different kinds of imperial, national and city-state polities were more productively linked, and as many scholars have shown, international diplomacy itself had a major origin in negotiations over disease, quarantine and commerce, between European and Ottoman empires and between imperial powers in the Pacific.<sup>20</sup>

Rigid Mediterranean protocols relaxed after the Napoleonic Wars, increasingly questioned in terms of efficacy and value measured against the loss of goods and trade. Notwithstanding Howard's insistence on the benefits of a domestic English lazaretto to rival those of Malta, Marseilles or Venice, the dominant nineteenth-century British story of quarantine was also one of progressive minimisation, and ultimately abandonment of quarantine in the 1890s. Over-active quarantine regulations and over-vigilant public health policy came to be cast as regressive, not progressive, especially by those with free-trade sensibilities.<sup>21</sup> Krista Maglen has described the emergence of the 'English system' of medical surveillance that aimed to facilitate commercial traffic, displacing an older quarantine system. Maritime quarantine measures, wherever, whenever and however they were implemented, hindered trade and commerce. And as a rule, national and international conversations and conventions on quarantine and sanitary measures have been driven at least as much by commercial imperatives to minimise procedures as by health imperatives to maximise them.

The Mediterranean connected to the Atlantic ports in the west, and an overland caravan route had long connected it to the East, and to the Indian Ocean via the Red Sea. It was in and around the Red Sea that the imperatives of disease prevention, commerce and increasing human mobility coalesced into a concentrated zone of sanitary inspection and experimental quarantine sites and procedures. Syria under Egyptian rule implemented a new system of quarantine, with a Beirut lazaretto functioning from 1835. This facilitated and reflected the region's integration into a European economy.<sup>22</sup> Valeska Huber has shown how overland journeys were altered by steam navigation and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Through this primary conduit, global mobility was both regulated and facilitated into and out of the Mediterranean.

Multiple new quarantine stations were established in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, managed both cooperatively and competitively by Ottoman, French and British authorities: on the islands of Perim and Kamaran, for example, both now in Yemen. A primary, but not sole, purpose of this new cluster of quarantine islands was to manage the movement of Hajj pilgrims, and in chapter 4, Saurabh Mishra examines the difficult and sometimes violent negotiations between pilgrims and quarantine authorities on Kamaran Island.<sup>23</sup> Quarantine islands also appeared in the late nineteenth-century Indian Ocean – a new lazaret on La Grande Chaloupe, Réunion and on Changuu Island, off Zanzibar, for example – a maritime space newly crowded with steamers as well as traditional craft. In the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, then, lazarettos and purpose-built maritime quarantine stations signalled an intensification of quarantine just when it relaxed in the Mediterranean and the Baltic.

### **New World Quarantine**

Quarantine practices differed to some extent between the Mediterranean old world and the Atlantic and Pacific new worlds. In eighteenth-century Mediterranean ports, despite the existence of elaborate lazarettos, infected ships would sometimes be turned away and forcibly moved on to another harbour, another polity. John Howard was quarantined in Venice, for example, with the crew of a ship that had been ‘driven from Ancona and Trieste’ precisely because it held the plague.<sup>24</sup> In the Atlantic and Pacific, by contrast, such a ship was the primary object of quarantine law and policy, to be quickly isolated either on a quarantine island or to be anchored without contact under the yellow flag. Authorities seemed rather more bound by a pressing reciprocal and cooperative responsibility to do so.

In the Atlantic and the Pacific, quarantine measures tightened considerably over time, and sites for quarantine inspection and detention proliferated, especially over the nineteenth century. What explains this broad difference? In the Mediterranean and the Baltic, quarantine centred on goods and merchandise. In the new world, quarantine became more tightly tied to human movement and its regulation in the great age of intercontinental migration. On the Atlantic coasts of North America, in many of the central and South American republics, and for new polities around the Pacific Ocean, migration factors came to trump,

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politically speaking, the imperatives of commerce. Merchandise certainly continued to be problematised as vectors for disease, as David Barnes has shown in the case of the Philadelphia lazaretto,<sup>25</sup> and yet humans, alongside animals, moved to the centre of quarantine activity. Indeed, powers to detain people for quarantine purposes served as the template for new immigration restriction laws in jurisdictions on the east coast of the United States, in Quebec, Newfoundland, the maritime provinces, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, and in British colonies in the southwest Pacific, including Victoria, New South Wales and New Zealand.<sup>26</sup> It is also the case that a different set of diseases was at stake in Atlantic and Pacific new world sites: not just plague and cholera, but also smallpox, yellow fever, typhus and, in the twentieth century, influenza. The history of quarantine certainly requires close attention to differential microbial patterns; a global medical geography informs a global biopolitical history.

Successive eras of intercontinental human movement, forced and free, have brought maritime quarantine and migration regulation together as state-based regulatory processes. Quarantine laws to detain and inspect vessels appeared in late seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century British and French colonies in North America and in the Caribbean.<sup>27</sup> Bedloe's Island in New York harbour served this purpose from the 1730s, ironically – or perhaps suitably – now hosting the Statue of Liberty. Although this history forms part of the long past of intercontinental migration and settlement, it also needs to be assessed within a new transnational history and historiography of global labour, beginning with the slave trade.<sup>28</sup> Initially directed at settlers, eighteenth-century quarantine in the British colonies in North America and the West Indies soon expanded to incorporate Atlantic slave-trading vessels and the inspection of slaves.<sup>29</sup> In Charleston, South Carolina, a pest house was built in the first decade of the eighteenth century, after an episode of yellow fever, and slave traders were soon required to pass all their vessels through a period of compulsory quarantine either on ship, on Sullivan's Island or later on James Island.<sup>30</sup> The slave trade was an enterprise with a disease history as well as a political and economic one, elements often indistinguishable from one another. And yet quarantine islands could quickly invert from being places of preventive detention to being places of accommodation and benevolent care, recalling the dual functions of protection and segregation that Jane Stevens Crawshaw describes in early modern Genoa. The lazaretto built in 1799 on the Delaware River



in Philadelphia, for example, was a response to a devastating yellow fever outbreak. Built for an abolitionist town, the Philadelphia lazaretto was never used to quarantine slave ships; it was used, however, to accommodate 135 Africans rescued from illegal slave traders off Cuba, by the USS *Ganges*. Such places of isolation can invert readily from forcible segregation with a preventive rationale to protective asylum, sometimes just as forcible, and to preventive detention readying entrants for deportation.<sup>31</sup> John Howard, for example, noted *La Quarantaine*, a house built outside of Marseilles for those fleeing the plague in 1720. When he visited at the end of the century, it was used ‘as a prison for vagabonds and beggars’.<sup>32</sup> This capacity to invert meanings and uses proved enduring, even characteristic, as Clarke, Hobbins and Frederick’s chapter in Part 2 of this volume shows. Sydney’s Quarantine Station, for example, was redeployed in the 1970s as a centre to accommodate illegal entrants awaiting deportation.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Atlantic crossings engendered a strong conflation of quarantine and immigration processes. Irish migrations to British North America and to the United States, especially during the famine of the mid 1840s, prompted a new suite of quarantine measures, and new sites were sequestered up and down the Atlantic coast: Partridge Island in New Brunswick; Grosse Île in Quebec; Lawlor Island, in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The author-witness of *The Ocean Plague* (1848) detailed the horror of shipboard illness and death that was only to be compounded by arrival at the quarantine station on Grosse Île.<sup>33</sup> Famously, the exodus of Irish and Eastern European migrants to the United States was later funnelled through New York City’s Ellis Island, an immigration screening site with medical inspections, surrounded by islands put to uses more strictly quarantine, including the artificial Swinburne and Hoffman Islands.<sup>34</sup>

On the other coast of the United States, Ellis Island was mirrored by Angel Island, San Francisco, ‘the Ellis Island of the West’ as California State Parks now pitch it to tourists. This extraordinary immigration and quarantine island is examined in this volume by Nayan Shah, historically, and by Gareth Hoskins, who reads its heritage and landscape geographically. Transpacific movements and new immigration laws fostered quarantine stations on the west coast of Canada as well, at key points of entry such as Vancouver Island. Indeed, around the Pacific, a history of trade, shipping, human movement, clashing empires and emergent territorial states

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proved fertile contexts for the quarantine imperative. The mutually constituting Chinese diaspora on the one hand and increasingly strident calls for ‘white men’s countries’ on the other, as well as the common perception in the Anglo-Pacific world of ‘Chinese diseases’ (both smallpox and leprosy), meant that a suite of Chinese exclusion acts dovetailed with quarantine laws.<sup>35</sup> This anxiety governed outgoing vessels, and emigration procedures as well, not least from Hong Kong, a particularly important node for Pacific maritime traffic and therefore quarantine, as Robert Peckham examines. Indian and Japanese indentured labour systems often instituted medical inspections on departure later in the nineteenth century. Combined with entry regulations, screening for infectious disease became a defining feature of transnational late modern Pacific history.<sup>36</sup> The Pacific ‘rim’ was precisely the kind of global coastline that called for, and hosted, the archipelago of quarantine stations, but the Pacific Islands became part of the transpacific network as well. Steamers took in ports across Oceania, westward from the Panama Canal, eastward from the Indian Ocean, as well as from the Pacific northeast to the southwest, shipping lines calling variously at Fiji, Samoa, Noumea and New Zealand.<sup>37</sup>

One element in the history of Pacific and Indian Ocean quarantine that has been under-examined is its link with the nineteenth-century rise and then regulation of indentured labour. After the abolition of slavery in the 1830s, contracted labourers and systems for their transportation proliferated, pressing forward a new and newly active set of shipping lines to plantations in the Caribbean and the East Indies, to East and South Africa, and around the Indian Ocean, especially to Mauritius. From the 1860s, planters in a number of Pacific Islands and Queensland in the north of Australia indentured Melanesian and Polynesian labourers, while Chinese labourers worked plantations in the Dutch East Indies and in the Straits Settlements. New procedures, places and policies for quarantine inspection and detention accompanied this escalated intercontinental transportation of workers. Indeed, conditions of indenture and transportation became regulated in part by quarantine laws, as well as disease clauses in immigration policies, treaties and statutes. This was all core business for states abutting the Pacific and Indian Oceans. And yet quarantining and inspecting indentured workers was not solely a government proposition, even if it was mainly so. In at least one case, as Hans Pols shows in his chapter on the Dutch East Indies, a quarantine island was

established, owned and managed by a private plantation company seeking to ensure the health of its contracted South Asian workers. If, as Michael Hanagan suggests, ‘processes, borders, and structured comparisons constitute the elements of an agenda for transnational labor history’, then there is a clear case for quarantine being an essential object of inquiry within the field.<sup>38</sup>

Disease and its control formed an elaborate system of ‘international hygiene’ and came to be a firm part of the nineteenth-century ‘global colour line’. And, as I have argued elsewhere, quarantine dovetailed with screening procedures for a eugenic and racialised national fitness that constituted such a strong element of nation-making in the Anglo-Pacific world. This saw many more Britons, than others, medically inspected.<sup>39</sup> Regulating human movement, often via quarantine laws or disease clauses in immigration laws, was usually seen as a desirable policy on the part of various new world nation-states, fiscally, racially, hygienically. Quarantine was a key mechanism through which the authority and territoriality of modern nation-states was asserted and became meaningful.

It is with good reason, then, that so many Atlantic and Pacific scholars have approached quarantine and medico-legal border control with a particular view to understanding late modern nation formation. Altogether, this makes for an entirely different history of quarantine to that of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Mediterranean, where quarantine was often critiqued as an illegitimate detention that had the unwelcome effect of hindering commerce. It was only where and when quarantine became an instrument of some other perceived public good (nation-building through immigration restriction) that the commercial effects were trumped, and quarantine, on the whole, was embraced.

It is thus the New World, not the Old, that holds the long history of conflated quarantine and immigration law, policy and practice. This history has since returned in muted form to the Mediterranean, refigured from the late twentieth century as the maritime gateway to the European Union. ‘Quarantine’ has re-entered both policy and popular representation on refugees crossing the sea from North Africa and the Middle East into southern Europe. To some extent the usage of *quarantine* as a word and a practice retains a disease-prevention significance, but it is also notable that *quarantine* is often used metaphorically, or simply metonymically: *quarantine* means ‘border detention’.<sup>40</sup>

### Portals of globalisation

Historian R. Bin Wong has recently suggested that sites for global history are rarely legitimately comparable, especially across periods – ‘spatial units are not easily matched to each other’. Indeed, he goes so far as to question whether ‘our expectation for precise spatial units is in fact reasonable’.<sup>41</sup> Quarantine stations and quarantine islands may prove an exception, however. Notwithstanding the differences of periodisation across the Old and New Worlds, quarantine sites sustained architectures, aspirations, rituals and practices that remained recognisable over centuries; curiously and remarkably so, given the great changes in technologies, perceptions of disease, scales and forms of international governance, and patterns of human movement and maritime commercial exchange over the long modern period, the fumigation of goods transferred over time to the fumigation of people in modern industrial architectures, for example. Venice’s fifteenth-century Lazzaretto Nuovo would be entirely recognisable to a medical officer on Nukulau Island, in the middle of the Pacific, in the early twentieth century. Quarantine sites thus serve as intriguing constants for global and *longue durée* comparison. Spatially contained, they are therefore also methodologically self-contained.

For a generation now, historians have argued over meta-propositions about how to write the history of globalisation. Middell and Naumann have sought ‘portals of globalisation’ through which large-scale pasts can be first conceptualised and then empirically researched.<sup>42</sup> Quarantine sites serve as intriguing portals, not just because they were so sustained and constant, but also because they contained the tensions that sat at the heart of globalisation, historically. For all the scholarly focus on flow of goods and humans across oceans, we must squarely interrogate the companion counterforce: the emergence of state powers to regulate this flow. In quarantine we see just that power being worked out over time: early modern city-states, nation-states, imperial states and postcolonial states experimenting with the authority to regulate movement, suspend trade and seize goods. Quarantine islands were key sites, then, where globalisation met its counterforce and where the tension between states and markets played out on the ground. Quarantine islands also concentrate a long modern history of the exercise of, and experiments with, state power over human freedoms. On a daily basis, and over centuries, authorities enforced confinement, compulsorily inspected, treated, fumigated

and segregated travellers, pilgrims, subjects, citizens and aliens. In this way, quarantine islands have long been key testing grounds for emerging state authority over individuals, commercial bodies and other states.

In the process, political subjectivities were formed: quarantine was always about freedom and its withdrawal. By the late eighteenth century in the Atlantic world, quarantine itself was designated a ‘medieval tyranny’ by those seeking to define and defend a new ‘liberty’. Principles of freedom of trade on the one hand, and freedom of movement on the other, conflicted. On quarantine islands in the Red Sea in the nineteenth century, Hajj pilgrims were caught between and protested against Ottoman, British and French imperial rule, seeking to assert Islamic law in institutions with an already difficult relation to the Prophetic injunction not to flee the plague.<sup>43</sup> Elsewhere, people in quarantine asserted newfound liberal political sensibilities by refusing ‘compulsory’ vaccinations or secondary penal segregation within quarantine islands. All kinds of fundamental political questions of the early modern and late modern eras were tested and worked out on quarantine islands. The stakes were high, and indeed they remain so. Quarantine was, after all, one long experiment in state powers of preventive or even pre-emptive detention.

Quarantine thus has a useful status in the history of economic globalisation in relation to state development. On the one hand, quarantine was itself a converging knowledge and practice, a network built over interconnections of trade and human movement, implemented often with novel kinds of international agreement across oceans and continents. As a system, it was increasingly uniform over time, with epidemiological intelligence shared, and even an internationally agreed language in place. Talking by flags was Esperanto for mariners. On the other hand, when quarantine was imposed, it suspended commerce, hobbling early ‘globalisation’. Thus, quarantine was at once part of the world forged through connections of capital, trade and empire, and one of the responses perceived to hinder those connections.

There are three spatial terms that historians of globalisation often bring together to conceptualise the project: *contagion* (meeting, influence, flow, connection), *convergence* (emerging similarities, standardisations and alignments) and *network* (linked systems and institutions with variously absent or present cores and peripheries).<sup>44</sup> It should come as no surprise, though it has never been stated directly, that maritime quarantine sat at the direct interface of these

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geographical concepts through which historians of globalisation have organised a large-scale and sometimes unwieldy scholarly enterprise. Perhaps uniquely, quarantine sites bring *contagion*, *convergence* and *network* together, both substantively and conceptually. If John Howard wrote his *Account of the Principal Lazarettos in Europe* in the pivotal year 1789, there is surely room for an account of the principal lazarettos of the world in an era of globalisation. This volume, *Quarantine: Local and Global Histories*, is a step towards that end.

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