

WARM UP

Yo Ho Ho and a bottle of rum

P McCrory

To paraphrase Billy Connolly, there is something that definitely sounds windswept and interesting about the dream of sailing the seven seas. Certainly Mrs Connolly seems to have thoroughly embraced the idea, if her recent biography is anything to go by. But have you ever thought of just what are the seven seas? I was reminded of this recently when my 9 year old daughter asked me this question after watching the *Pirates of the Caribbean* and having named the oceans (that I knew) she quickly pointed out that it didn't tally up to seven. This glaring lack of knowledge was right up there with my theory that the Chinese built the Great Wall to keep rabbits out of their backyards. Clearly my antipodean schooling has been lacking in several key areas of classical knowledge. Perhaps I was away that day.

My research has now revealed the following facts:

Medieval Arabic and European literature often spoke of the "Seven Seas"; however, which particular seas

depended upon the context and local geography. Apparently the first reference to this magical number of seas was in a song or hymn written about 2300 BC in Sumer.¹ In ancient Greek literature, the "seven" seas were arbitrary and were usually seven out of the following list of nine bodies of water—Adriatic Sea, Aegean Sea, Arabian Sea, Black Sea, Caspian Sea, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean Sea, Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf.

Just to confuse the issue, the Romans used the term in an entirely different context. The navigable network of channels in the mouth of the Po river, which discharge into the saltmarshes on the Adriatic shore, were also called the "Seven Seas". Pliny the Elder, a Roman author and fleet commander, wrote about these lagoons, separated from the open sea by sandbanks:

"All those rivers and trenches were first made by the Etruscans, thus discharging the flow of the river across the marshes of the Atriani called the Seven Seas, with the famous harbor of

the Etruscan town of Atria which formerly gave the name of Atriotic to the sea now called the Adriatic."²

As if Roman confusion wasn't enough, the 17th Century churchman and scholar John Lightfoot mentions a very different set of seas in his *Commentary on the New Testament*. A chapter titled *The Seven Seas according to the Talmudists, and the four Rivers compassing the Land* includes the "Great Sea" (now called the Mediterranean Sea), the "Sea of Tiberias" (Sea of Galilee), the "Sea of Sodom" (Dead Sea), the "Lake of Samocho", and the "Sibbichaeon". Obviously he couldn't count either.

In the late 19th Century, Rudyard Kipling published a volume of poems *The Seven Seas* (1896) and dedicated it to the City of Bombay. Unfortunately he did not specify which particular classification he preferred!

Finally, some modern geographical classification schemes count seven oceans in the world—North Pacific Ocean, South Pacific Ocean, North Atlantic Ocean, South Atlantic Ocean, Indian Ocean, Southern Ocean, and the Arctic Ocean.

Any questions?

Br J Sports Med 2006;**40**:815

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- 1 Meador BD, (Translator and editor), Inanna, Lady of Largest Heart: Poems of the Sumerian High. University of Texas, 2001. ISBN 0292752423.
- 2 Pliny the Elder. *Historia Naturalis*, III 120[1].

Expression of concern about content of which Dr Paul McCrory is a single author

This paper is authored by Dr Paul McCrory. During 2021 and 2022 there was an investigation by BJSM and BMJ which found that some of his work was the product of publication misconduct. Such misconduct includes plagiarism, duplicate publication, misquotation and misrepresentation in publications in respect of which he was listed as the sole author.¹ We are placing a notice to readers on all content in relation to which he is identified as the sole author to alert them to the conclusions of our investigation.

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Br J Sports Med 2022;**0**:1. doi:10.1136/bjsports-2022-106408eoc



REFERENCE

- 1 Macdonald H, Ragavooloo S, Abbasi K. Update into the investigation of former BJSM editor-in-chief Paul McCrory. *Br J Sports Med* 2022.