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. 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 Atratic to the sea now called the Adriatic.”

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 Samochor”, and the “Sibbichaean”. 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?

REFERENCES

2 Pliny the Elder. Historia Naturalis, III 120[1].

Yo Ho Ho and a bottle of rum
P McCrory