

Sea Names Categories and Their Implications*

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I. Introduction

It is my intention to distinguish a number of categories of sea names, based on the type of referent they were named for. I will do so in order to get some insight in the naming mechanisms and in order to work out their implications for the present. I am not a names specialist but a geocartographer who uses maps as a place names source.

Most sea names can be categorised into one of the following categories:

- 1) Seas named for cardinal directions
- 2) Seas named for nations
- 3) Seas named for persons
- 4) Seas named for places
- 5) Seas named for attributes
- 6) Seas named for rivers flowing into them
- 7) Seas named for adjacent areas
- 8) Seas named for countries

These categories are not only applied to sea names — there is no minimum size for a named water body to qualify as a sea, neither is there for gulfs or bays, although generally the hierarchy is understood to be ocean - sea - gulf - bay in descending order. But actually many seas are smaller in size than gulfs like the Gulf of Mexico or bays like the Bay of Bengal. Therefore, most names of sizeable gulfs and bays have been incorporated in this research as well. Some 200 names have been studied. In cases where the derivation of the names was not clear, I have consulted Egli's *Nomina Geographica* (1872, 1893), which is still the best source.

Amongst the *Cardinal Directions* the four main directions North, East, South and West can be discerned as well as the direction towards the centre, in-between directions like those used in the Northeast or Northwest Passages are rarely encountered. The *Seas named for Nations* consists of a category that refers to ancient tribes or nations mostly: The ancient Celts, Ionians or Caspians are examples in Europe, the Caribs in the Americas and the Chuktchi and Arafurs in Asia. *Seas named for Persons* are mostly those named for European discoverers, though a mythical person like King Aegeus of Athens who gave his name to the Aegean Sea also qualifies. *Seas named for Places* are those named after the towns or cities on their rims, like Okhotsk, Adan, Adria or Azov. *Seas named for attributes* refer to the water colour, influenced by silt (red, yellow, green or white), to the existence of whirlpools, to their stormy character (Black Sea, Golfe du Lion) or to the plants, animals or islands contained in them (coral or algae). Some seas have been named for the *Rivers* flowing into them by explorers that came to these seas from the interior of continents, like in the case of the seas north of Siberia. The last group is the one *named for adjacent areas* including islands and countries. These *seas named for countries* can also be regarded as a separate group; they can refer to present-day states or to former ones, and it is their present or former administrative organisation that sets them apart from the seas named after nations or tribes, although the distinction remains a bit subjective. I have opposed the present-day Chuktchi and the seafaring Arafurs together with the ancient Caspians and

Ionians to more state-like constructions like the former Benin, Bengal and Biafra empires, and present-day Mexico, Iran, Thailand, Papua, Philippines, China, Japan, Norway and Ireland.

The seas that do not fit into this classification are only a few: the Scotia Sea in the Antarctic was named after the ship *Scotia*; the same applies for the former Geelvink Bay and the still existing Geelvink Channel, both named after an explorer's ship, which was in turn named after a bird. It is sometimes a bit ambiguous to decide on the decisive aspect: the Sea of Marmara is named after the Marmara Islands that were named after the marble quarried on them, used for building the palaces and churches of Constantinople. This makes it either a sea named after the *adjacent area* or a sea named after an *attribute* — containing marble. The Solomon Sea has been named after the Solomon Islands, that were named in turn after the biblical King Solomon in the expectation of the lost gold mines he was associated with. So there was some wishful thinking involved in the naming process. So here again the name could be placed in the categories named for persons or named for adjacent islands. In similar cases I have opted for the most direct link, that is for the category *Adjacent areas*.

II. Space and Time

A first provisional subdivision of seas and gulfs on the basis of this categorisation can be seen in figure 1. When we look at the geographical distribution of the members of the various categories separately, then we see that:

1. Seas named for cardinal directions lie in the navigational heartlands of Europe and Asia. The Pacific also qualifies, as it was used to be named South Sea because it was first approached by Europeans from the North.
2. Seas named for nations do not show a specific pattern, be it that these are rather out of the way seas.
3. Seas named for persons show a clear pattern: they are found in the Arctic and Antarctic regions.
4. Seas named for places do not show a clear pattern either
5. Seas named for attributes are mostly located in the heart lands of sea navigation as well
6. Seas named for rivers only qualify in northern climes
7. + 8. Almost all other names are for adjacent areas, islands or countries and, as I said, the country subcategory is treated apart here.

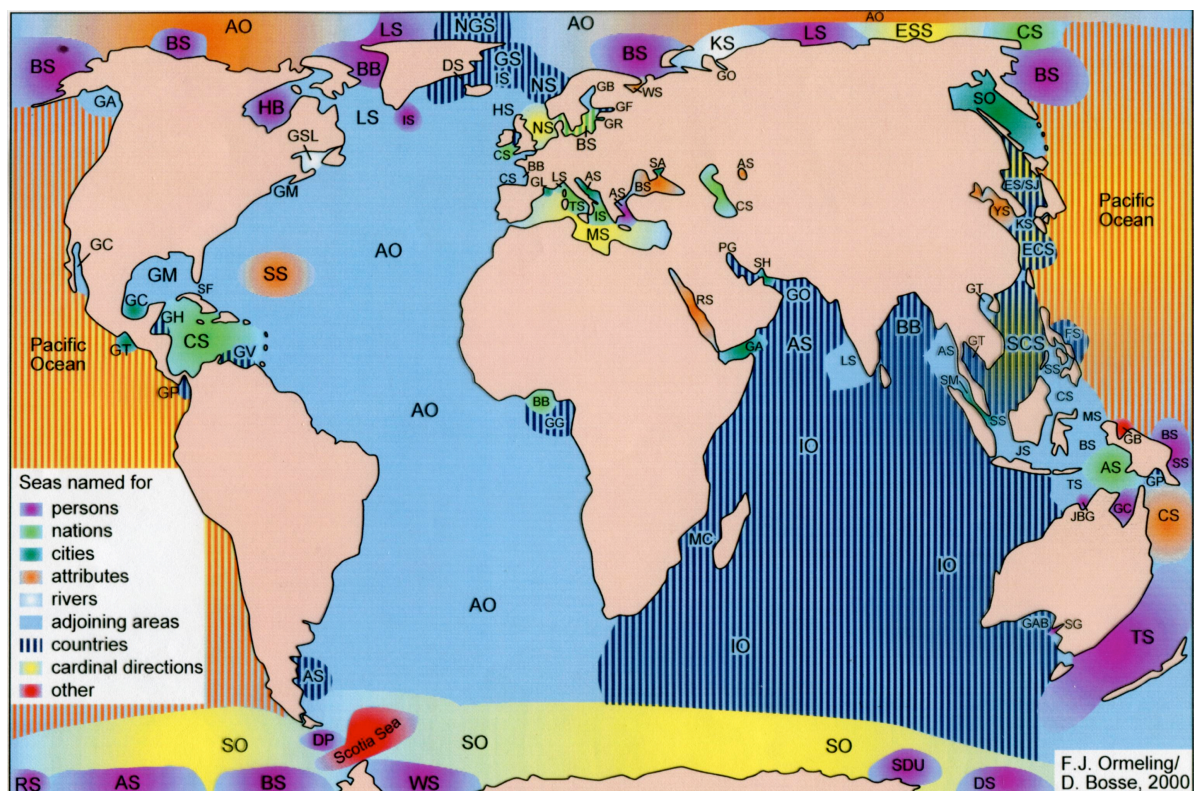


Fig. 1. Distribution of Sea Names Categories

I have not only looked at the English versions of the names of seas, straits and gulfs. In the nomenclature there can be both differences in generics and specifics. Water bodies that qualify as seas are regarded as gulfs or straits in other language communities. The Sicilian Channel, Strasse von Sizilien/Canal de Sicilia vs Mare di Sicilia and Mer de Sicile is an example of differences in generics. Examples of different specifics are Bight of Heligoland vs Deutsche Bucht, Denmark Strait vs Groenlandssund, La Manche vs English Channel, Pacific/South Sea or Great Ocean, Caribbean vs Mer des Antilles. In other cases single names for seas can be attributed to different name categories: the name East Siberian Sea can be in both the *cardinal direction* and the *adjoining region* categories. The East China Sea is even more complex. On ancient Dutch maps it is rendered as Chinese East Sea, so it is not the sea adjacent to East China, but the sea to the east of China, and this can be categorised both as direction or as country names. On the map of all sea names categories (Figure 1) both categories have been rendered simultaneously.

Apart from the geographical distribution the temporal dimension can be analysed as well. Murphy (1999) rightly claimed that the timing of the naming decision is not of crucial importance for the fact whether seas named for countries are experienced as being contentious now or not — it is the present-day interpretation, not the original grounds for selecting a specific name which is decisive here. But the temporal dimension will shed some light on the naming mechanisms.

I will do so through an attempt to make educated guesses regarding the time these sea names were coined and codified on maps, and again I base myself partly on Egli (1872, 1893). Even so I will only be able to look from a European perspective as I am not familiar with the names given by Asian and Arabian explorers. And another caveat is that in the case of seas named for adjoining areas, there is a time gap between the two: A century seems to pass between the naming by Europeans of Yucatan or Mexico or Florida, and the naming of the seas, bays or straits adjoining to them.

People probably started naming oceans and seas after directions, properties and after the people or nations living on their coasts. Next

comes a phase of trading contacts and trading cities get an important place: seas are named for the trading cities or trading countries (like Arabia) and adjoining regions or islands. In a later, continental exploration phase in the 17th -19th century, seas were named for adjacent cities or rivers. It is only afterwards, in modern times, that individual explorers are commemorated in sea names. The most recently coined sea names like Irminger Sea, Davis Sea, Ross Sea, Antarctic Ocean or Southern Ocean mostly fall in this category. On figure 2 the period in which the various names were coined and codified mostly reflects European exploration endeavours.

About 10% of the names of the 200 largest seas, gulfs and straits stem from Antiquity, an equal percentage was given in the Middle Ages, and from the 15th century onwards there is a steady increase in sea names, with the apogee in the 19th century (20%). The distribution of the names given in the various periods discerned is partly a reflection of ancient and medieval trade routes between Europe and India and China. Medieval trade in the Baltic is reflected, and the following centuries reflect European exploration, with a time-difference, however. Names like Mexico, Florida or Moluccas have been codified at least a century earlier than the names of the gulfs, straits or seas named after them. Names in the Arctic and Antarctic clearly show that exploration there came last, and so came the relatively late naming of Australian and Pacific waters. What strikes are the new names in sea areas well-known for long, such as the Cantabrian Sea, Alboran Sea, Sea of the Hebrides, Norwegian Sea, Argentine Sea and Laccadive or Lakshadweep Sea. The names Gulf of Oman and Straits of Singapore reflects the relatively recent emergence of the Omani sea-borne empire.

III. Differences between oceans and seas, straits, gulfs and bays

When we compare names of oceans and seas with those of gulfs and bays, there will be a scale phenomenon: in theory at least the latter two categories refer to smaller water bodies, and therefore would be more localised. When referring to territorial objects it would be logical that these would be smaller territorial objects as when compared to names of seas.

Seas and Gulfs have a similar percentage of being named for people (13-15%). This percentage is much larger for straits: 30%. Country names are reflected in sea, gulf and strait names as follows: 12%, 15% and 13%, so there are no large differences here. There are hardly any seas called for cities (3%: Ochotsk, Adria and Azov being the exceptions), whereas over 30% of both gulfs and straits are called after cities. Regarding adjacent areas, 35% of seas *is* called after them, and these percentages are 9 and 20 respectively for gulfs and straits. Regarding attributes and cardinal directions, there is only one gulf (Golfe de Lion) so called for its stormy weather, and no straits, whereas 12% of the seas are called after attributes. There is the same case for cardinal directions: 12% of the seas has such a reference in their names, and only 2% of the gulfs (in Spanish Golfo de Corea Oriental and Golfo de Corea Occidental), while no straits have any directional reference, apart from the Northeast and Northwest Passages, that are no longer discerned as such.

When we look at smaller bays and gulfs (in my selection of 200 names of seas, gulfs, bays and straits I have only selected the major ones from a dimensional point of view), these are mostly (about 2/3 of those found by me) called after cities. So the smaller the named bodies, the higher the percentage of city derivations in their names (seas 3%, larger gulfs and bays 31%, smaller gulfs and bays almost 70'/?).

IV. Implications of the naming process

The implications of these names seem to be the following:

In the case of *seas named for individual persons*, this can only mean a homage to the discoverers, and this can never infer that any rights can be derived from those names. Commemorating the names of these explorers, most frequently in areas so remote or inaccessible that no one ever ventures there, recognises the hardships they experienced.

In the case of *seas named for nations*, clearly no rights are implicated here: the Caspians for which the Caspian Sea was named have completely disappeared, and so did the Etruscans for which the Tyrrhenian Sea was named, the Caribs (Caribbean) are almost extinguished. The Chukchi (Chukchi Sea) are still there, but few in numbers, and the Celtic Sea is a memory of the Celts that once held sway over most of Central Europe, but were subsequently pushed to its western fringes.

Seas named for cardinal directions refer to the people from which this direction emanates. The name North Sea was established in a time when Dutch and English maritime traffic was pre-eminent, the name even came to supplant the name West Sea, in use in Denmark. So some economic domination has been involved at the time the name was codified. But at least for the Dutch this economic domination has disappeared long since. The same is valid within Northern Europe for the name East Sea (German, Dutch, Danish, Swedish and Finnish name for the Baltic). So the only thing expressed in this name category is the fact that when named, the area the direction emanates from was the most important. This has been codified in the name.

A similar phenomenon lies behind the case of *seas named for places*, that is towns or cities: at the time the names were coined and codified these towns and cities were the most important on the coast, and since then this role might have long been lost. A good example is the town of Adria in Northern Italy, for which the Adriatic Sea has been named. Malacca used to be the most important town on the strait named after it in the 15th and 16th century, and its role has been taken over by Singapore in the 20th century, which has been reflected in the emergence of the name Strait Singapore.

Seas named for attributes do not contain any connotations of power, and neither do *seas named for Rivers*.

Then the final category is formed by the names of *seas named after adjacent areas*. In Germanic languages like English there seem to be three subcategories according to the following models:

1-*Generic + of + Area name*: Bay of Bengal 2-*Area name adjective + Generic*: Andaman Sea, Arabian Sea 3-*Area name + Generic*: Timor Sea (instead of Timorese Sea or Sea of Timor)

In Roman languages the country adjective follows the generic part in stead of preceding it, and the last case (country +sea) does not exist:

1-*Generic + de/di + Area name*: Mer de Banda, Golfe du Mexique, Golfo di California
2-*Generic + Area name adjective*: Mar Argentine, Mer Adriatique

At least in some Germanic languages, these three forms seem to be interchangeable. As well in Romanic languages I have come across forms like Mar de China Oriental and Mar Cinese Oriental.

Of the three models the third has no possessive implications. We should look into the territorial implications of the other two. The name Irish Sea might be a good example, It is the sea Englishmen would have to cross when travelling to Ireland. At the time the name was coined and codified, England dominated Ireland, and this name can therefore never have territorial connotations. It was the sea one needed to cross to get to Ireland, so there would be only **instrumental connotations**. Gulf of Mexico, Gulf of Finland, Gulf of Venezuela, Formosa Strait or Taiwan Strait would be similar instrumental cases. Another connotation would occur when a sea surrounds the island it is named after: the sea names becomes a **locational connotation**: Fiji Sea is the sea around the Fiji Islands and the Lakshadweep Sea seems to be the sea around the Laccadive islands. Similar cases are the Sawu Sea, Sea of the Hebrides, Sea of Marmora.

A similar locational reference is **adjacency**. All three models can bear the connotation of adjacency, so the names that are placed in this category are those names referring to countries that are neither instrumental nor locational. We could refer to these names also as the 'beyond' or 'off type'. The Philippine Sea e.g. is the sea *beyond* the Philippines, or *off* the Philippines as experienced from the major shipping routes. The only exception to the fact that seas gulfs or straits named for countries are adjacent to them is the name Denmark Strait for the sea strait between Iceland and Greenland. People in Iceland refer to this strait as Greenland Strait (Groenlandssund) . The name Denmark Strait was given in colonial times, when both Iceland and Greenland were Danish colonies. People in Iceland did not agree with the strait being called after Denmark, because it was not adjacent. It never occurred to them that the name might refer to territorial aspirations, at least this was not the issue.

In most cases where **country names** were part of sea names or gulf names, their use implied instrumentality: the sea or gulf one needs to navigate in order to get to that country: Bay of Bengal, Deutsche Bucht, Gulf of Finland, Gulf of Honduras, Venezuela, Mexico, Panama, Thailand, Irish Sea, Korea Bay, Korea Strait, Mocambique Channel, Persian Gulf. Arabian Sea refers more to a navigational hazard than to access to Arabia.

Names that do not fit here belong to the beyond or off type discerned above. Examples are Greenland Sea (not the sea one usually takes to get to Greenland), Iceland Sea, Norwegian Sea, Philippine Sea, Mar Argentine and Sea of Japan. The Mar Argentine is not the way to get to Argentina (that would be the River Plate) and the main shipping route to Japan does not follow the Sea of Japan. The names East China Sea and South China Sea do not fit here either, their original Chinese names East Sea and South Sea are sinocentric, and they refer to seas beyond the country named as well. Apart from the last two names all the names of seas that belong here are rather recent names, not stemming from the marine community but rather created behind offices desks.

V. Summary

Taking account of the fact that usually water

bodies would be named later than the land areas around them or within them, instrumental or locational connotations and the conditions for the navigators would be the main naming concerns: attributes of the sea, directions, or ports or countries (or the peoples living on their shores) aimed for. The only exception to this general trend would be the seas, gulfs and straits named for navigators. This is not to be wondered at, since it was a marine community that was instrumental in giving these names.

The names that do not fit in this general model look artificial in this marine environment, and give the impression of office names, generally created long after their discovery. Alboran Sea, Bismarck Sea, Cantabrian Sea, Celtic Sea, Iceland Sea, Irminger Sea, Mar Argentina, Norwegian Sea, Peter the Great Bay and Philippine Sea are examples.

Literature

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