

Exploration in the Ancient World:

Part Two: Early Sailors and Explorers

by: S.B.P. Haag

Darius the First was king of Persia from 521 to 485 B.C. According to Herodotus, born in about the year Darius died, the king sent out on a voyage a man named Scylax, who came from Caryanda, an island near Halicarnassus in Asia Minor, the town where Herodotus himself was born. Scylax's instructions were to sail from what is now Afghanistan, down the Indus River and westward until he reached the Red Sea. This voyage Scylax completed in thirty months, landing eventually at the same site on the west bank of the Red Sea from which a hundred years earlier Necho, the Egyptian king, had despatched a similar expedition of Phoenicians. Necho's expedition, however, had been sent southwards with orders to sail right around Libya, that is, Africa. Herodotus' account of this voyage has been the subject of a great deal of discussion. Here is what he says.

Necho sent some Phoenicians in ships to sail southwards and to return past the Pillars of Hercules into the Mediterranean and so home to Egypt. So the Phoenicians sailed southwards from the Red Sea. Whenever summer ended they would land, sow a crop, wait until the harvest and then sail on. After two years passed they returned to Egypt. They reported (some people believe them, but I do not) that in sailing round Libya the sun was on their right. Persian Wars, Book 4, 42.

It is of course the last detail Herodotus mentions which is so provocative. Could Herodotus really have heard about what would in fact be perfectly appropriate for a voyage along the coastline around the southern tip of Africa, where in sailing westward the sun would indeed appear in the northern sky, not the southern, and therefore on the sailors' right hand side? Scholarly opinion seems still to be divided on the possibility, though there is general agreement that such a voyage was theoretically possible, and might indeed take thirty months or so.

There were recorded two early attempts to sail out from the Pillars of Hercules and southwest around Africa. They are reported in a rather similar way to the voyage of Scylax, or the Phoenician circumnavigation, and one of them appears in Herodotus once again. Sataspes, a Persian, was Darius the King's nephew. He was condemned to death by Darius' successor Xerxes (who reigned in the first half of the 5th century B.C.). His sentence was to be commuted if he succeeded in circumnavigating Libya by the western route, and returning to the Arabian Gulf. (We may suspect that Xerxes in fact considered this merely an imaginative variant on the death penalty.) Sataspes was gone for many months, but unluckily for him returned by the same way he had left, with some travellers' tales which Xerxes did not choose to believe, so he executed him anyway, by impaling him on a stake.

At more or less the same time, another expedition, this one despatched from the Phoenician colony of Carthage in North Africa, took the same course under a captain named Hanno. This was a colonising expedition, though, for Hanno apparently took a whole fleet of ships. Hanno himself returned to Carthage, back through the Pillars, and on his return set up an inscription describing his journey, part of which at least was translated into Greek and has come down

to us as Hanno's Coastal Voyage. It appears that Hanno sailed as far south as the Gulf of Guinea before turning back, for as much as twenty-five hundred miles or so. He claimed to have founded seven colonies and then made two further voyages to the south to explore. Like Sataspes, Hanno said he found small hairy wild men (whether pygmy humans or apes has of course been much debated), three of whom he caught, killed and skinned to bring some tangible evidence home to Carthage. None of the geographic features mentioned by Hanno are easy to identify precisely, so that it is hard to be sure where he went to, but the evidence for a southern voyage of exploration well past the Tropic of Cancer, even if not as far as the Equator, seems certain enough.

Another Carthaginian, Himilco, is reputed to have voyaged out to the west and north, at about the same time as Hanno turned southwards, to explore the western coast of Europe. Himilco may have reached Brittany and seemed at least to know of England and Ireland. Certainly Phoenician traders acted as middlemen in the Cornish tin trade (which they may have set up in partnership with another group of middlemen, the Bretons) but they seem to have been very reluctant to talk about the whereabouts of the tin mines, presumably to prevent any adventurous competition from the Greeks.

Not until Aristotle's time or somewhat after did a Greek explorer and sailor report any voyage out into the Atlantic. Pytheas, from Massilia (Marseilles in southern France), coasted northwards from Spain to Brittany and then around the British Isles at the very end of the 4th century B.C. Some of Pytheas' details are intriguingly suggestive as they are passed on to us by later writers, most of whom regarded him with suspicion. These details seem to refer to a far northern voyage, perhaps even to the limits of the Arctic pack-ice, and modern Arctic explorers are far more inclined to believe him than the ancient world was.

Land travels were naturally harder - and later too - than sea voyages. Here we should think first of Xenophon's account of the ten thousand Greek mercenaries who marched northwards from Mesopotamia to the Black Sea at the turn of the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. Though the detailed geography of the Anabasis, the March Up-country, is not always easily identifiable, the general line of the route is clear, and it was certainly a formidable undertaking. Still, with the Persians behind you, you probably have little to lose!

Alexander's great campaigns must of course be regarded as the most extensive wanderings achieved in classical Greek times, and much practical knowledge of the eastern lands was gained from them. Alexander took with him two men whose job it was to measure distances and prepare geographical reports, but their work has not survived. However, scientists at the time made use of these surveys and studies to further their own geographical accounts, so that some of Alexander's geographers' knowledge has actually come down to us embedded in later works.

In a later issue of Labyrinth, I'll look at the geographies and maps of later antiquity, produced by men such as Strabo and Arrian under the Roman emperors.