

***Ne Plus Ultra: Greeks and Romans
on the Atlantic***

by L.A. Curchin

The ancients believed that Ocean (which included the Atlantic) was a circular stream surrounding the inhabited world. It was established by the gods as a boundary beyond which mortals might not travel. This idea is neatly summed up in the motto *Ne plus ultra* ('Don't go further beyond') which, according to medieval tradition, was carved on the Pillars of Hercules, the rocky headlands overlooking the Strait of Gibraltar. Hercules had passed through here on his way to steal the cattle of the three-headed king Geryon. The sun god Helios lent Hercules the golden cup in which the sun floated back to the east every night on the stream of Ocean.

The waters of the Atlantic, colder and rougher than those of the Mediterranean, and with no land visible beyond, were a deterrent to sailors. The only civilized people who had ever flourished in the Atlantic were the inhabitants of the fabulous island of Atlantis, which, according to Plato, was sunk by the gods as a punishment for insolence. Although geographers such as Ptolemy knew that the earth was round, popular thought viewed it as a flat disk surrounded by water, with nothing beyond. No wonder the Greeks and Romans were reluctant to sail the uncharted waters west of Gibraltar.

Explorers did venture beyond the Pillars, but did not stray far from the coastline. An anonymous Greek writer from Massalia (Marseilles) in the sixth century BC wrote a sketchy account of a voyage to Albion (Britain) and Hieme (Ireland). This survives in a Latin version, the *Ora Maritima* by Avienus (fourth century AD). Massalian merchants had probably learned about these islands from the Gauls, and rightly calculated that they could be reached by sailing around Spain. Another Massalian, named Pytheas, wrote a book about Ocean around 310 BC; this work does not survive, but is frequently cited by ancient geographers. Proceeding up the coast from Cadiz, Pytheas circumnavigated Britain and reported the existence of a further island, Thule, six days' sail to the north. Thule may be Iceland or the Faeroe Islands, or it may just be imaginary. Ancient writers also mention the Cassiterides or 'tin islands', which are possibly the Scilly Isles near Cornwall, and the 'Isles of the Blessed' beyond Morocco, which are probably the Canaries. The geographer Strabo records that Publius Crassus, father of the triumvir, visited the Cassiterides and observed the tin and lead

mines there. Returning home, Crassus circulated this knowledge among Roman traders.

Other explorers travelled south. Hanno of Carthage sailed along the Atlantic coast of Morocco, and possibly as far as Senegal, around 480 BC. He reported seeing hairy, anthropoid creatures which he called gorillas, but which were probably baboons. In 146 BC, the Roman commander Scipio Africanus sent the historian Polybius to investigate the African coast. Sailing beyond the Atlas Mountains, Polybius discovered a 'forest' (jungle) teeming with exotic animals. Eudoxus of Cyzicus (around 140 BC), finding a derelict Spanish ship on the east coast of Africa, conceived the idea that the dark continent could be circumnavigated by following the stream of Ocean. To test his theory, he headed south from Cadiz, but his ship ran aground on the Moroccan coast. Returning by land, he outfitted a second expedition, which sailed down the west coast of Africa and was never heard from again.

Despite these explorations, the average Roman remained wary of the western ocean, both as a sacred boundary and as the place where Homer located an entrance to the underworld. In 137 BC, a Roman army under Decimus Brutus reached a river in northern Portugal whose name sounded like Lethe, the river of forgetfulness in Hades. The superstitious Romans dreaded this river, believing they would die if they crossed it. Brutus led his soldiers across the Lethe, perhaps (as local legend maintains) by crossing first and then calling each man by name to show he had not lost his memory. He then continued westward, where he saw – 'not without a certain fear of impiety and a sense of awe', as the historian Florus puts it – the sun sinking into Ocean. Caesar records no trouble among his troops when they took to the sea to defeat the navy of the Veneti off the west coast of Gaul, nor even in his raids on Britain in 55 and 54 BC. However, when the emperor Claudius launched his invasion of Britain in AD 43, the superstitious soldiers assembled at Boulogne refused to cross the English Channel, believing it a sacrilege to venture beyond Ocean, the boundary of the known world. Claudius had to send his secretary, Narcissus, to quell the mutiny.

In the time of the Roman Empire, maritime commerce between the Mediterranean and the Roman provinces on the Atlantic seaboard became commonplace. Lighthouses, like the surviving examples at Dover in Britain and La Coruña in Spain, warned ships of dangerous rocks and shoals. The evidence of amphoras and other trade goods allows us to trace the shipment of Mediterranean products to Britain, the Rhine valley, and even Scandinavia. The Romans never crossed the Atlantic, but they incorporated much of Atlantic Europe into their domain.