

Ancient Mariners

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The Ancient Mariners of the Mediterranean and Ming Dynasty China:
A Comparison of Seafaring in the Ancient World

"Audaces fortuna iuvat!" This Roman motto which literally means "fortune favors the bold" has been cited as a common adage used by business men during the apogee of Roman Imperial domination. Most historians who have studied the Roman world of the first and second centuries AD would most likely agree that the seafarers under the protection of the Roman Empire would have held this motto dear to their own hearts. The Mediterranean Sea of this time has been referred to as a "Roman Lake" by many historians. But this was most definitely not always the case. In fact most of the knowledge of seafaring that the Romans acquired was first discovered by other great sailors such as the Greeks, Phoenicians, and Egyptians before them. The Chinese of the Ming Dynasty could equally claim that the Indian and Pacific Ocean later in the 15th Century AD were "Chinese Lakes." These Chinese voyages of Zheng He and his "treasure ships" left a lasting imprint upon the history of seafaring. These voyages were filled with great scribes, doctors, and scientists with great knowledge of seafaring and a desire to acquire tribute for their emperor, Zhu Di, the Son of Heaven.

But how did these great ancient seafarers of the Mediterranean and those of the Ming Dynasty China emerge to become the great lords of the sea? This essay shall explore this question as well as these equally important ones: Who were these seafarers? Where did they sail? What did they do? How did they sail? How were their ventures organized? And why did they go to sea? But in order to fully understand how these questions apply to these two sea peoples, we must look at the cultures themselves to determine how each was called to the sea.

It has been said that the study of world maritime history is really a study of different cultures. These various cultures determine not only why a particular civilization goes to sea, but also when, where, how, and who does so. Unlike Ming China, the Mediterranean is and does consist of many different cultures. Over the centuries, because of these varying cultures and the struggles that erupted over desired resources, the Mediterranean has also come under the domination of many different masters. This ever changing succession of various ruling states led to innumerable maritime developments as one power sought to outdo the other not only on land, but most importantly, on the Mediterranean Sea.

"Bringing of forty ships filled with cedar logs." So wrote an ancient scribe in listing the accomplishments of Pharaoh Snefru, ruler of Egypt about 2600 BC. The Egyptians were, according to most academic records, among the very first civilizations along the Mediterranean to go to sea. The Egyptian desire to go to sea probably first began in view of the need to lower the cost of trade goods. Nearly all of these initial voyages to sea began in frail boats using mostly human propulsion. First with hands and later with oars, these voyages mostly stayed within sight of land. The use of these vessels to transport goods came in response to an economic desire to reduce the bottom line: lower costs and increase profits. Before the utilization of the sailing ship, these valuable goods were carried overland thousands of miles and thus the price of a good would increase with each mile and each middleman.

This utilization of trade by sail ship eventually led to perhaps the first state sponsored sailing venture. Under the rule of Pharaoh Mentuhotep III the need for

myrrh and frankincense for ceremonies increased. However, these products were derived from trees that grew in only two places; Ethiopia and Somalia. This and later pharaohs derived these trading enterprises by developing ports along the Red Sea to assist traders in moving these and other goods down into Somalia or Ethiopia and back again. They discovered that a sea route would offer an alternative to overland transport. This venture made it possible for the Egyptian sailors to bring in these goods more cheaply, quickly and efficiently.

Though Egypt would be the first major trading nation, they were not the first true maritime power in the Mediterranean. This honor went to the Minoans who hailed from the island nation of Crete. The Minoans were the first to protect their trade with a powerful fleet. This utilization of a navy to protect commerce would signal the shape of things to come. Their trade goods were coveted by both Egyptian and Phoenician royalty and for several years Crete prospered. But by 1500 BC Minoan civilization had collapsed, possibly due to a volcanic eruption nearby and was replaced by a new maritime power: the Phoenicians.

The Phoenicians had great ships and great sailors as well as the ports that were needed to support them. The Phoenicians possessed the timber needed to build sturdy ships and they would eventually make it as far as the West Coast of Africa on their many trading explorations. Their two largest contributions to the later world would be the founding of Carthage and the use of writing. The installation of writing and its use by the Greeks in the future would create an atmosphere that encouraged a high level of efficient trading in the years to come.

The next great power in the Mediterranean were the Greeks. The Greeks would make many innovations that revolved specifically around trade. Greeks developed large clay jars, called amphoras, to not only carry goods but also to measure them once they arrived in a trading port. The Greek ships were also much stronger than previous ships. They used edge to edge construction technique which made them extremely seaworthy. They also placed lead sheathing over the entire hull in order to protect it even further. Once Alexander the Great came to power, the many Greek harbors were also expanded to adequately facilitate their prosperity as maritime trade reached an all time high. Like the Phoenicians, the Greeks set up many colonies throughout the Mediterranean that aided in supporting the mother city. The first challenge to the Greeks came from the Persians, but their fleet was soundly defeated by the Greeks. The next antagonist would succeed beyond most anyone's expectations and would become the new dominant power in the Mediterranean for a thousand years; they were known as the Romans.

How could a group of landlubbers from the north such as the Romans come to dominate the Mediterranean and become a great sea power in their own right in such a relatively short period of time? Though they were land people, the reason that Rome became so great, was because of their geographic location on the River Tiber. Here both land and sea trading routes converged to yield the Romans a glimpse unto what lied outside their city walls. One of Rome's main competitors in trade was Carthage. Over the years they would develop a bitter rivalry that would eventually end in three Punic Wars, complete destruction of Carthage, and the rise of Rome as the great sea power of the Mediterranean. This was done by adapting land based combat methods on the sea. After the destruction of Carthage, the Mediterranean would become a "Roman lake" for many centuries to come and the life blood that would keep the republic and then the empire strong for nearly a thousand years would be trade.

Now that we have done a short overview of the important maritime civilizations of the Ancient Mediterranean, lets move onto the Ming Dynasty China. Even though China was involved in the international aspects of trade, the biggest difference between them and other parts of the world is that China did not actively seek out trade partners. China did not send out trading vessels to different nations to trade goods, other nations came to China. The bulk of Chinese maritime trade during the Ming Dynasty was inter-coastal. This consisted of Chinese junks sailing the waters between different provinces and villages trading for food and luxury goods. Out of all the nations of the world, the goods that China possessed were some of the most coveted and most sought after. It was with the goods of China in

mind that nations of the Mediterranean searched for a maritime route that would bring these much sought after goods to them more cheaply, quickly and efficiently. It could be successfully argued that China always was a maritime nation of great skill but it was not until the voyages of Zheng He that the true brilliance of their knowledge began to shine. In many ways, these voyages were the first true scientific voyages in history. Many Chinese scientists journeyed with the treasure fleets collecting data as they went forth. Many of the innovations that the Chinese had developed over the last few hundred years were also put to use on this voyage. One of the most important was the Chinese understanding of magnetism that came to their comprehension from their belief in chi which is an energy that runs through everything. This understanding of magnetism helped the Chinese develop a magnetic compass that significantly improved the distance that Chinese mariners could travel. All of this development and innovation was not inexpensive and the Chinese government knew that the best way to bring in more income was to establish more trade. This was only one of several goals that Zheng He possessed when he set out with the first great "treasure fleet" in 1405.

Being that we have now looked briefly at both the civilizations of the Mediterranean and that of the Ming Dynasty China, we can address the specific question at hand. Who were the seafarers? The answer is totally different depending on which area of the world you are referring. In the Mediterranean the seafarers were usually simple traders with only a limited knowledge of navigation and the sailing of the sea. This would change somewhat as the Mediterranean became a battleground and more and more seafarers had to have not only a basic understanding of the sea but also knowledge of how it affected military tactics. There never was a centralized control of trade in the Mediterranean therefore the people who were involved in trade were seldom representative of a certain political ideology or nation. Basically the seafarers of the Mediterranean were simple traders who were born, raised and trained upon the sea.

In comparison, Chinese seafarers that comprised the treasure fleets were made up of people from all over China. They made up a diverse group of not only sailors but scientists, shipwrights, physicians, and other professions that formed a group of not only devoted men eager to gain trading prospects but also men in search of tribute for the emperor and scientific discovery. This is not to say that this was the case for all of the seafarers in China. As stated before, China had a thriving coastal trade for thousands of years, long before the departure of the treasure fleets. These coastal traders were quite similar to their counterparts in the Mediterranean. They were also simple traders with limited knowledge of navigation in open water. The Chinese traders also were independent and did not trade for the glory of the government but for their own sufficiency. This all began to change during the years of the treasure fleets as the seafarers of China turned into the diplomats and representatives of the emperor.

Where did they sail? In the case of the Mediterranean the sailing geography was usually limited to that particular body of water. Of course there were some exceptions to this rule. The importance of the Red Sea to the development of Egyptian trade cannot be overstated. The Persian Gulf is where all of the goods coming from India and China were transferred to overland routes and eventually other overseas routes and this made the Persian Gulf very important in the link that kept the Mediterranean in the international trade theater. Also many of the seafarers of the Mediterranean would sail as far west as the coast of Africa and possibly the shores of England, while also journeying into the Western Indian Ocean and all through the many rivers and seas that constitute that territory.

In China the situation was much more diverse. Though the "junk" traders seldom left sight of the Chinese coast (excluding Taiwan), the situation regarding the treasure fleet could not be more different. Under the guidance of Zheng He, the seven different treasure fleets that went forth between 1405 and 1433 sailed from as far east as Australia and Batavia to as far west as Africa. They also sailed to India and Arabia and numerous place in between. Because this was a journey to gather patronage for the new emperor, Zhu Di, the treasure fleets made as much landfall as possible and did so in the most peaceful of manners to avoid potential

conflict. Without a doubt, it would have been completely possible for these Chinese treasure ships to sail around Africa and into Europe if so desired. What did they do? In the Mediterranean they were mostly traders. Of course, warfare was always a possibility when the time arose, but the main occupation of the maritime civilizations of the Mediterranean was trade and commerce. When there were no harbors to pull into they would trade on the beaches. In the case of the Phoenicians they seldom saw their trading partners, they left the goods on the beach and came back later to collect the payment. In the case of the treasure fleets of China, things were much different. Their voyages were not about trade as much as they were about receiving tribute for the emperor. When the fleet made landfall, Zheng He and other representatives would go ashore to inform the country that they were now a protectorate of China and that they must pay tribute. They would also set up trade to be carried out under the watchful eye of the Chinese government. In some cases, the treasure fleet would even intervene in local wars to maintain harmony throughout the empire of Zhu Di, the Sun of Heaven. How did they sail? The evolution of ship design was ever changing in the Mediterranean. From the keeless ships of the early Egyptians to the strong ships of the Greeks, ships in the Mediterranean were in a constant state of flux. Much of this had to do with the demands put on vessels as trade increased but a lot of this innovation that occurred also had to do with the constant threat of warfare in the Mediterranean and the need for stronger and better ships to meet this threat. The most popular method of ship construction in the Mediterranean was beginning with a lying the keel and ribs down first and then attaching the shell later using different methods such as the mortises and tenons style which was one of the most secure. Most of the navigation was done by using coastal landmarks but many of the seafarers were familiar with celestial navigation and used this during the nighttime hours when not obstructed by cloud cover.

The technological innovations that were used in the building of the treasure fleets are were remarkable. The Chinese had dry-docks in which to build their ships. These ships also had watertight compartments which made them remarkably seaworthy. Even better than the development of these true ocean going vessels was the creation of the floating magnetic compass and a vast array of gunpowder weapons that made the fleet of Zheng He the most formidable on Earth for centuries to come.

How were their sailing ventures organized? Why did they go to sea? These last two questions seem to be interwoven and can be addressed as more or less one question. As aforementioned, the civilizations of the Mediterranean went to sea for one of two purposes, trade or war. In the event of war, the sailing ventures were organized but in the case of trade they were not. This is a direct reflection of the geographic makeup of the Mediterranean. Because there are so many different cultures throughout the Mediterranean it seems logical that their sailing ventures would not be well organized and for the most part independent of other ventures. The people of the Mediterranean went to sea for trade in independent trading vessels that directly reflected their diverse civilizations and cultures.

On the other hand, China would be a story quite of a different nature. The treasure fleets of Zheng He were extremely well organized and they went to sea not so much for the trade as for the greater glory of the Chinese emperor. This organization and dedication to country are a true reflection on the people of Southern China. Even though there were many different provinces the people were united by a common race and cultural heritage. This is the exact opposite of the situation in the Mediterranean. The treasure fleets were organized in a most managerial way and the ships themselves were filled with scientists and scholars whose sole reason for begin was to gain knowledge and promote their emperor. This is a direct reflection of the enlightened attitude that was prevalent at this particular time in Ming China.

Comparing the ancient mariners of the Mediterranean and those of the Ming Dynasty has been a study of contrasts. The Ming Dynasty, even though separated by more than a thousand years from the ancient mariners of the Mediterranean, were far more technologically advanced than any other peoples at that time and had made more leaps in their overall seafaring than any other peoples up to that point. Despite

this, not long after the last treasure fleet had made its last voyage and returned to China, it halted fast and turned its back on the sea. This decision would cost the Chinese very dearly in the years following the last voyage of the treasure fleet and the near complete destruction and conquest of their empire by western sea-power is a testament to the value of maintaining a seafaring culture. The civilizations of the Mediterranean on the other hand would never turn their back on the sea and would continue to advance and become a solid, well trained seafarers. To this very day they admire, persevere, and advance their nautical tradition.

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