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 T. R. Glover
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THE GREEK ON THE SEA¹

It is not of small importance, whether man's views of the world that he inhabits were such as to cramp his energies and terrorize his mind, or the reverse. SIR RAYMOND BEAZLEY, *Dawn of Modern Geography*, vol. I, p. 391.

But ever, night and day,
 Rings in my ears the windy sea's deep note.

THE phrase, from one of the last of Classical poets, suggests one enduring characteristic of the Greek mind, of Greek life and art and literature. Hero, in this poem of Musaeus, says what they all felt from the first. Euripides, we are told, wrote his tragedies in a cavern, grim and gloomy, on the isle of Salamis; "I have seen it", adds Gellius; and that is why, says the writer of his life, "he draws the greater part of his similes from the sea".²

αἰεὶ δ' ἀνὰ νυκτὰ καὶ ἡῶ
 ἐξ ἄλδος ἠνεμόεντος ἐπιβρέμει οὔασιν ἤχη.

The Greek does not sentimentalize about the sea; he has so little in fact to say of enjoyment of the sea that some moderns assure us that the Greek never liked the sea at all. Hesiod tells his brother how their father was wont to sail in ships, for that he lacked a livelihood sufficient, and came at last to Boeotia from Aeolian Cyme in his black ship, over a great stretch of sea, flying not from wealth nor riches and substance, but from poverty; and he settled near Helicon in that miserable hamlet Ascra, bad in winter, hard in summer, never good.³ He implies only one reason for sea-faring. Hesiod made one voyage himself, one only voyage, a sea-passage to be measured by yards, across the Euripus to Chalcis; the Boeotians eventually bridged it. "Full is the land of evils and full the sea", he says; so perhaps his gloomy view

¹ A paper read to the Hellenic Travellers on the *Théophile Gautier*, 14 September, 1929, off Naples.

² Cf. Gellius, *Noct. Attic.* xv, 20, 5; and *Vit. Eurip.* 59 ff.

³ Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 633 ff.; cf. p. 82. The Euripus is 120 feet across, Tozer says.

of the sea need not prejudice our conclusion, when the land is no better. We shall have to return to him for instructions—a landsman's advice.¹

Meanwhile some readers of Homer hold that the Achaean heroes too were very dubious about the sea; which, if they really were the kin of the Celts and came from mid-Europe or mid-Russia, need not much surprise us. Hephaistos wrought many pictures of common life on the shield he made for Achilles, but no scene was taken from the sea or ships. The heroes, when Troy fell, “pondered over the long voyage” homeward, whether they should cross the open Aegaeon to the south end of Euboea, some 110 miles, with the island of Psyria “for their encouragement about midway”, or should skirt the Asian coast southward and thence by Crete make their way to the Peloponnese.² None of them sailed for pleasure; indeed we hardly find a hint of such a thing in Greek literature, but do we in Icelandic saga? Yet it is plain that, whether they said so or not, the old Norse did enjoy the sea; and it is arguable that, if not the Achaeans, nor Homer himself (whether from Scio's rocky isle or not), there were Greeks who could as little keep off the sea as the Norse, even if they too abstained from talking about their feelings. After all, that form of relief is a late development of literature—perhaps decadent, too.

On the other hand Homer is evidence that Greeks enjoyed stories of the sea, of long wanderings, and strange lands and adventures. To-day, at all events, that is the part of the *Odyssey* that most captures us. Perhaps the return and the slaying of the suitors was as pleasing to the first hearers and to the poet; perhaps; but he also gives us a hint that there was another saga of the travels of Menelaus. Both his epics have allusions to the tale of Jason; and Odysseus tells how Jason before him ran his ship, the *Argo*, by the blessing of Hera, safely through between the Wandering Rocks. *Argo*,

¹ *Works and Days*, 101.

² See T. D. Seymour, *Life in the Homeric Age*, chapter XI, “Sea Life and Ships”; and *Odyssey*, III, 169. H. F. Tozer, *Geography of Greece*, p. 19, picks out this passage as “almost the only really reliable piece of Geography” in the *Odyssey*.

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the sea-faring ship, *πάσι μέλουσα*—she indeed interests all men from the tellers of tales before Homer to the curious late poet who wrote the Orphic *Argonautica*—the last of the three epics on the hero and the Northward voyage that survive from antiquity.

Perhaps even when we are dealing with myth and legend, there is something to be said for a chronological order, if there is one, and Odysseus concedes priority to Jason. In a very interesting volume¹ Miss Janet Bacon has traced the growth of the *Argo* story, with a strong implication that the *Argo* interests men more than the Argonauts. In Apollonius Rhodius she finds Jason only “passively agreeable”, and “except for his youth and beauty he is as unheroic as Aeneas”.² An old gentleman may take a kinder view of Aeneas, I hope, in the belief that middle age, queer as youth may think it, can also have its heroism. Pindar gives us our oldest surviving tale of Jason³, and a splendid one it is, splendid in Pindar’s way with the great figure gloriously imagined and the great moment, the great outcome in fame and achievement; and you (he seems to say), who may hereafter have the Alexandrian or Cambridge mind, can fill in date and detail for yourselves.

“Tell me, what was it that first befel them in their sea-faring? What was the peril that bound them with strong bolts of adamant? To Pelias came a prophecy, cold on his cunning heart, spoken at the central stone of tree-clad mother-earth—by every means to hold guard against the man of one sandal, whensoever, from the homesteads in the mountains, he shall come to the sunny land of glorious Iolcos, whether stranger or man of the city. So in the fulness of time he came, wielding two spears, a wondrous man. Raiment of two kinds was upon him, the garb of his Magnesian home close fitting to his splendid limbs; but above it the skin of a panther kept from him the lashing rain. Nor had the bright locks of his hair been shorn from him, but over his back ran rippling down. Swiftly he came and straight on, and took his stand, making trial of his dauntless soul, in the market-

¹ J. R. Bacon, *The Voyage of the Argonauts*. ² *Ib.* p. 91. ³ *Pythian*, 4.

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place when the crowd was thronging it. Now they knew him not; howbeit, as they looked on him with awe, one spake to another and said: 'Surely this is not Apollo, nor verily Aphrodite's lord, of the brazen chariot. . . .' Thus spake they; and thereon, in headlong haste of mules and polished car, came Pelias; and he was astonished as he gazed at the sandal, the one sandal, plain to see on his right foot."

So the quest is laid upon him—the sailing of the ship, the gathering of the heroes; and to the Euxine they fared, to Aietes and Medea his daughter, the fire-breathing bulls, and the stealing of the king's daughter, the passionate child, queen of Colchians. But, from old admiration of the hero with the one sandal, I have broken the course of Pindar's tale, or he broke it himself, starting it in the middle, as poets do, 'Ὀμηρικῶς. For he begins with a speech of Medea, far from Colchis or Greece, telling how "we had left the Ocean, and by my counsel had carried our seafaring ship twelve days over desolate ridges of land" to the waters of Lake Tritonis in Libya. At the end of his story—"Long were it for me to go by the beaten track, for the time is nigh out, and I know a certain short path and many others look to me for skill. The glaring speckled dragon he slew by subtlety, and by her own aid he stole away Medea. And they went down into the deep of Ocean, and into the Red Sea, and to the Lemnian race of wives that slay their men".

North Africa and the Indian Ocean (for that in those days, as we see in Herodotus, was the Red Sea) seem far enough from the eastern end of the Black Sea, and hardly the natural route back to Pelias and Greece; nor do days and distances seem to tally with modern Geography. But why should they? Legend brought Jason and his heroes home four different ways.¹ The obvious way was the one they took outward bound. But Apollonius sent them up the Danube, from which they portaged or somehow else got to the Adriatic, whence by the Eridanos (which, if not a poetic invention as Herodotus maintained², might in Jason's day have been the Po) to the

¹ Cf. Scholiast to Apoll. Rhod. iv, 259; J. R. Bacon, *Voyage of Argonauts*, p. 114; Strabo, c. 46.

² Herodotus, iii, 115.

Rhone, and down the Etruscan coast, round to Corcyra, and off to Lake Tritonis. They also sailed, another tells us, through Russia up the Don to the Baltic and homeward by Gibraltar. And we have seen Pindar's route. Miss Bacon rebuts Rawlinson's conclusion that these inconsistent and wild stories prove "the unreal and poetic character of the whole". The routes, she urges, are not incredible; Pindar's is the oldest and is refuted most eagerly by the ancients; and a vessel of fifty oars would seem hard to carry so far over such ground. But some of the routes—the Rhone, the Danube, central Russia—were the trade routes by which amber came from the Baltic to the Mediterranean.¹ Possible routes for trade—or for wandering; but for one ship one route must suffice for one voyage. The Argonauts, says an ancient critic, sailed not with one ship, but with a considerable fleet. In other words, there gathered round the *Argo* the stories of many and many a pioneer voyage. That is the way of the folk-tale; the variants gravitate to the hero, and once he has begun to accumulate legend, there is no end to it, and the other great motives and stories are gradually woven in—the strange princess, the fiery bulls, the Rocks, the dragon—every strand of romance; and the saga grows and grows in wonder and interest, till at last it is too much for geographer and historian. "I think", says Pindar himself, "that the tale of Odysseus is more than ever he suffered, and all because of sweet-voiced Homer."²

There was great discussion in antiquity as to the historical and geographical value of what Homer wrote. Eratosthenes said:³ "You will find the scene of the wanderings of Odysseus, when you find the cobbler who stitched up the bag of the winds". Polybius laid down a sounder canon: "To invent everything carries no persuasion, and it is not Homeric".⁴ How much did he invent, then? how much did he know? Were the wonderful places, that Odysseus saw, out in the

¹ J. R. Bacon, *op. cit.* chapter ix; H. F. Tozer, *History of Ancient Geography*, pp. 31 ff.

² Pindar, *Nem.* 7, 20.

³ Strabo, c. 24.

⁴ Quoted by Strabo, c. 25, who has a very long discussion of Homer's geography and tries to accept as much of it as possible.

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Ocean, or mostly in the Mediterranean—Sicily, Corcyra, the Straits of Messina? There was a divergence between Charybdis as described by Circe and as observed in nature. “So Circe lied”¹—more than once, unless you call it hyperbole; and now we touch upon Circe, perhaps it was an invention of Homer’s to make her sister of King Aietes of Colchis, and aunt of Medea—an invention which indeed illustrates his knowledge of Colchis and of Jason’s expedition but raises questions as to how it was brother and sister lived so far apart.² And the Cyclops tribe suggests some free use of knowledge of Scythian Arimaspoi, about whom Aristeas wrote an epic,³ and of whom Herodotus tells us that they were said to be one-eyed and stole gold from griffins.

The travels of Menelaus raised further questions. “The man who told Homer about Pharos, or rather the common report”, put it much too far from the shore—a day’s run; and nowadays it has no water on it.⁴ Menelaus says he visited among other peoples Ethiopians and Erembians; but “no Ethiopians live on our sea, and it was impossible to take ships up the cataracts of the Nile”. Could it be, some asked, that Menelaus made a coasting voyage by Gades (and Gibraltar) as far as India, that he was the precursor of Vasco da Gama in fact? This might explain his seven years of wandering. Or, asked others, did he sail *over* the isthmus of Suez? Eratosthenes, at least, fancied that, before the channel at the Pillars of Hercules had been burst open, the Mediterranean might have had a higher level, in which case there might have been no isthmus at Suez at all. This might allow you with Zeno to explain the Erembians as Arabs. Strabo urges that Homer did not know of India, for, if he had, he would have mentioned it. But here Strabo perhaps forgot what he said a few pages earlier⁵ (as writers do⁶) to the

¹ Strabo, c. 44.

² Strabo, c. 21.

³ Strabo, c. 21; Herodotus, iv, 14.

⁴ Strabo, c. 37–42.

⁵ Strabo, c. 36.

⁶ If the reader thinks that the writer of this book is unaware that the same passage is sometimes quoted in more essays than one, the writer himself has noticed it. He would also plead Strabo’s excuse for Homer’s omissions, which Servius too made for Virgil. See p. 195.

effect that, in general, silence is no sign of ignorance; for Homer does not allude to the ebb and flow of the Euripus, nor to Thermopylae and other well-known things in Greece, which you must suppose he knew quite well. He did not even mention his own native place, which would have saved endless dispute. But whether the camel-drivers and spice-mongers of Arabia, now known as Bles¹, were rich enough in Homer's day to make fine presents to Menelaus, and whether Erembians are etymologically derived from *eran embainein*, a name which later peoples for the sake of greater clearness changed to Troglodytes, we may perhaps postpone to another inquiry. We may conclude with Strabo that no one should quarrel with Hesiod for speaking of men who are half-dogs (he does not in his surviving works) nor with Homer for his pygmies;² we can allow with him that a poet may write of the wanderings of Odysseus and Jason, and insert for practical people sound lessons from the hardships these heroes underwent, while at the same time he concedes them (in moderation) no mean entertainment in the element of myth—the places being famous and the legends charming; but we shall agree that the geographer has a sterner task—and he must give us what is useful and reliable rather than what is famous and charming.

Modern students of Homer are often less worried about the Erembians. They are content to let them go, and with them the Oceanos with which the poet surrounded the world; but they note that Homer's knowledge even of the lands we call Greece has surprising limits.³ That he does not mention Europe, and only thinks of Asia as one plain of Asia Minor, matters little. Why does he call Ithaca low-lying? they ask, and where was it? A great German would have us look for it in Leucas. Even the Argolid seems confused.

Before we leave Homer and Jason, a word or two from more modern stories of exploration may lend some light to

¹ See p. 240.

² Strabo, c. 43.

³ H. F. Tozer, *History of Ancient Geography*, pp. 20–25; T. D. Seymour, *Life in the Homeric Age*, chapter II, pp. 53, 66; cf. note on p. 2. The traveller Leake identified the Styx from Homer's description.

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form our judgment. Where were the Indies, for instance? What lands did Columbus think he discovered? Distinguishing East and West Indies by and by, you would perhaps exclude Virginia from the West Indies; yet Mr P. A. Bruce says English prisoners destined for the West Indies often went to Virginia, and not by mistake. Where was Quivira, the city of gold? Where the Strait of Anian that connected Atlantic and Pacific? Where the Armenian's islands of gold and of silver east of Japan and therefore toward America? Was one of them California, rich in gold? It obviously was not; for California is not an island and it was not known to have any gold till Sutter set Marshall to dig him a mill-sluice in 1848. Yet Lower California is shown in good maps of the eighteenth century as an island; and Anian long haunted the minds of geographers. How, too, we may ask, did the name California get out of the romance of chivalry and attach itself to that land which the China galleon skirted and even missionaries could hardly colonize? And, a parallel question, how came Brazil upon the map, and what had it ever to do with South America before Vespucci? The amazing portages of the Argonauts are not altogether ludicrous, when you read of the regular routes by river and portage up the Ottawa, and from Lake Erie to the Mississippi, and many more. Birch-bark canoes and the fifty-oared *Argo*—they are very different. But portages cannot have been quite unfamiliar,¹ and one returns to the views of Polybius and Miss Bacon; there is a basis of fact for the wildest of the geography. There is an Indian Ocean, there is a Rhone, Russia has its rivers, and trade has its unmapped routes, revealed to-day in buried treasures, stray lost coins and men's graves. The poet is not a geographer; but, in days before Geography became so strictly scientific and "profitable", there was a charm in it, as Aeschylus bears witness, a poet always ready to digress to it, as Strabo notes.² Perhaps too *The Golden Journey to Samarcand* may remind us that even isotherms have not

¹ Of course there was in historical times a shiproad at Corinth for rolling ships from one sea to the other; but that is not quite the same thing.

² Strabo, c. 33.

driven all the charm from the face of the earth. Quebec is still romance, and must be as long as its rivers surround it and the Île d'Orléans faces it, and Wolfe and Frontenac are remembered. But let us get back to the Greek on the sea.

What took him to sea—to Colchis, of all places? Strabo suggests that the wealth of the regions round Colchis, derived from mines of gold, silver, iron and copper, may have been the motive of the Argonauts as of Phrixus before them.¹ At a later point Strabo returns to this gold of the Colchis region—alluvial gold carried down by mountain torrents and caught by the barbarians by means of perforated troughs and fleeces; and there he thinks you may have the origin of the tale of the Golden Fleece.² Nor again can Herodotus and Polybius have been the only Greeks who went over sea and land because some craving within drove them—the impulse to see and to inquire.

Long before Homer, the men of the Greek lands, whether one dare so early call them Greeks or not, were busy with the sea. Cnossos in Crete implies a sea trade of importance. Works of men's hands from Egypt, both in Crete and on the Greek mainland, awaited the excavator, with the ostrich egg, the amber beads, and the jade. Amber is found in a natural state in Sicily and Italy, but the great source of it has always been the Baltic, and there is a chemical difference between the two ambers. I do not know what succinic acid is, but it is not found in the Mediterranean amber; the Baltic amber has it variously from 3 to 7 per cent.; and the amber found in the Mycenaean graves has 6 per cent.³ So the legends of Eridanus and Phaethon's sad sisters are confirmed by chemistry, and one far-ranging trade is proved for an age long before Homer. Carved ivories are also found. It was remarked by the ancients that Homer constantly mentions ivory, but not the elephant.⁴ The ivory must be African. Jade of various colours is found in various places, but it is urged that New Zealand and South America may be safely ruled out. White jade is Chinese: so that a celt of white jade,

¹ Strabo, c. 46.

² Strabo, c. 499.

³ Schuchhardt, *Schliemann's Excavations*, p. 196; cf. p. 153, n. 2.

⁴ See p. 143.

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two inches long by one across, found at Troy, may have travelled from China.¹ Stray things and stray people turn up in the unlikeliest places, and no one will wish to plead for a China town in Troy, or a regular trade connection with Peking. Yet the presence of the thing is a witness to man's restlessness and intercourse.

But, moving downstream again, we turn once more to Homer. Whatever his Achaeans felt about the sea, they lived in a world of shipping and seafaring, of Taphian sea rovers and Phoenician traders and kidnappers—and of ship-builders in Greek waters, or nobody would have listened to a poet who could count up 1200 ships at Troy. An exaggeration, a poetic exaggeration, no doubt, but evidence of much acquaintance with the sea; and stray details in the *Odyssey* confirm it. Here we catch a glimpse of colour on the black ship—red-cheeked, it may be, or purple-cheeked, or blue-prowed. Oak, white poplar and pine are used to build ships, and they may take twenty men, or even fifty to row them; but every man can row. Oars, decks, the mast and the sails and ropes, the rudder, the landing plank, the boarding pike, all are mentioned; the beaching of the ship, that the sailors may sleep ashore; the mariner's knowledge of the stars—one thing with another gives us a fair picture of the shipping; and, if it is not fanciful so to translate *ἄνοσος*, we are even told of voyages without sea-sickness.²

After Homer comes a dark age, as all historians know. But when we find an immense colonial development at the end of those dim centuries, and 1200 ships alleged to have borne warriors to Troy before them; when we find the whole vocabulary of sea-faring is genuinely Greek, while our own is full of borrowed words, Dutch and others; when we find a wide and very accurate geographical knowledge of the Mediterranean implied in all that activity and colonization; our dark age may lack recorded episode, but we should be

¹ Schuchhardt, *Schliemann's Excavations*, p. 38; see also H. R. Hall, *Oldest Civilization of Greece*, pp. 108–9.

² For all this and much more, see T. D. Seymour, *Life in the Homeric Age*, chapter xi, "Sea Life and Ships".