

## CHAPTER I

THE MEDITERRANEAN AS THE  
NURSERY FOR NAVIGATION

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Man did not by nature take to the sea. He had to be tempted on to that alien element. And of all the seas the Mediterranean has been the arch-temptress. While the boisterous, tide-swept oceans scared away all but the superman of primitive races, the inland sea sang her siren song with kindly intent and promised him mastery over another world.

We will pass over the remote age when that sea was separated from the Ocean and was divided, near Sicily, into two great lakes; and we will seek to understand its characteristics when it occupied the present basin. It is so shut off from the Ocean that little or no tidal impulse enters. The Mediterranean tide rarely rises more than a foot,<sup>1</sup> except at the head of narrowing gulfs, where, as at Venice, the rise may amount to 2 ft. or more. Therefore the inland sea is almost free from the tidal currents which baffled and terrified the oarsmen of primitive times if they ventured outside its western portals.<sup>2</sup> In that vast lake, enclosed by the shores of the then known world, they found few strong currents, the skies were nearly always clear, and during the

<sup>1</sup> Strabo, i, 3, par. 82.

<sup>2</sup> Vegetius, F. (*De Re militari*, ch. 12), notes that oars cannot surmount the tides.

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months of summer light winds or calms prevailed. Nowhere else were waters so safe and climatic conditions so favourable for the vessel propelled by oars; and this was especially the case in the eastern half, with which we are at first more specially concerned; for it has the characteristics of a landlocked sea, while those of the Atlantic often intrude into the weather of the West Mediterranean.

Moreover the northern shores of this inland sea are serrated by three great peninsulas, in two of which are many sheltering gulfs. The north coast of Africa, it is true, presents an almost unbroken front, which, except at two points, has discouraged navigation and hindered the progress of its peoples; but on the European side sea and land intermingle to an extent nowhere else to be found. From the coast of Cilicia to that of Spain there occurs a long succession of capes and bays, islands and islets, which invite, nay almost compel, intercourse by sea.

At the outset I wish to emphasize these dominating facts. For the contrast between the almost harbourless land-mass of Africa and the myriad interlacings of sea and land on the opposite coast goes far to explain the static life of Africa and the progressive civilization of Europe. Progress depends very largely on the free interchange of the inventions and products of diverse peoples and climes; and such interchange can best be effected by sea—a statement which is fundamental to the whole of our present

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inquiry. I will go further and assert that the history of nations has been far too much written from the standpoint of the land; whereas maritime environment counts for as much as the character of the land.

Spread out a good physical map and consider the great advantages of Southern Europe in this respect. Its peninsulas and islands, diversifying the Mediterranean, have from the earliest age challenged men to voyage from one to the other; and during nearly half the year the challenge was friendly. For that broken coastline presents few dangers, the land being generally mountainous or undulating and sloping down into deep water. Also the headlands have not there been subjected to the tidal scour of ages, which has strewn beneath our ever-wasting capes the reefs so fatal to coastwise traffickers. And under the lee of Mediterranean headlands there is deposited little *detritus*, so that their bays are seldom masked by shoals which form another peril of our home waters. Apart from the silt poured forth by its semi-torrential rivers, the coasts of that sea present very few dangers. Well may that lover of the Mediterranean, Joseph Conrad, write of it as “that tideless basin, freed from hidden shoals and treacherous currents”, which has “led mankind gently from headland to headland, from bay to bay, from island to island, out into the promise of world-wide oceans”.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Conrad, J., *The Mirror of the Sea*, p. 187.

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#### 4 THE MEDITERRANEAN AS THE

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Even so, primitive man probably did not put out to sea if the land furnished all his needs.<sup>1</sup> As to the motives which led him on to maritime quests we may learn much from primitive tribes surviving in recent times. Some of them were, or are still, in the Stone Age; and, if they have lived in isolation, they live the life of man, say, 10,000 years ago. Generally they are hunters, pursuing their prey with what seem to us poor weapons. And, naturally, if they do succeed, it tends to thin down. What happens then? They take to fishing. Now, there are signs which show that fishing comes later than hunting, at least for several peoples. Thus, there was no word for fish among the original Indo-European peoples. Also the Achæans, who invaded Greece from the North, are represented by Homer as eating fish only in the extremity of hunger.<sup>2</sup> Vast supplies of flesh constituted the ideal Homeric banquet.

Probably the pressure of hunger drove primitive peoples to fish in marshes and rivers; and in course of time they learnt to make canoes of reeds from which they speared fish or drove them into shallows and then netted them. Coast-dwelling tribes found that fish were plentiful in the shallows of the sea;

<sup>1</sup> I question the dictum of Köster, A., in *Das antike Seewesen*, p. 1, that navigation is as old as man himself; for the evidence as to the ways of primitive man seems to show that he was first of all a hunter by land.

<sup>2</sup> *Odyssey*, xii, 331; Rose, H. J., *Primitive Culture in Greece*, p. 141.

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they constructed larger canoes, sometimes of bundles of bark, lashed together with long grass or withies. Thus, the French expedition of 1800 to Australia found the very primitive native Tasmanians fishing in canoes of eucalyptus bark, one of which was 15 ft. by 5 ft. and ventured well out to sea, propelled by six men with poles. A raft of bark and reeds, twice as long, would go over rough water to an island three miles out.<sup>1</sup> Examples of similar devices are widespread, and reed rafts or canoes are still in use in marshes, rivers and even off shore in many parts of the world.

As reeds and suitable tree-bark are not common on the coasts of the Mediterranean, reed-rafts and bark-boats were little used in that sea—a fortunate circumstance, seeing that little progress can be made with those materials. But on its shores there is, or rather was, until goat and Turk played havoc with it, fair store of good timber, also of stone capable of taking a good edge and therefore of cutting and working up wood. Consequently, even before the age of metals, Mediterranean man learnt to make wooden canoes, probably first by hollowing out the trunks of trees. These “dug-outs” were far more seaworthy than canoes made of rushes, skins or bark;

<sup>1</sup> See *Atlas of Péron's, Voyage...aux Iles Australes*, 1800–4, also *Mariner's Mirror*, xvii, No. 1, for this and other specimens of primitive canoes. Note also that very early Egyptian ships are shown as being bound together with rushes. Reed-rafts and thence canoes were certainly the earliest Nile craft.

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and as late as 400 B.C. “dug-outs” (μονόξυλα πλοῖα) were found by Xenophon in use by a tribe on the south-east of the Euxine, which brought 300 such craft to help the Greeks. Seeing that Xenophon describes the tribe as possessing good stores of salted dolphin and dolphin blubber, they clearly used these “dug-outs” for fishing in the Euxine.<sup>1</sup>

Later, we shall see how the Greeks of the Homeric Age fashioned their craft. But during many centuries before the time of Homer, neolithic man made his way about the Mediterranean; for wherever fine flint, obsidian or greenstone can be worked, there primitive man was able to make sharp-edged tools suitable for constructing large canoes and boats, as the great war canoes of the Maori convincingly prove. Flint and obsidian are found on Mediterranean coasts, and by tools made from them early man probably soon built seaworthy craft. Ethnologists even consider that the Mediterranean peoples form a distinct family.<sup>2</sup> It may have spread originally from North Africa to Crete, the Ægean lands and thence westwards; and some archaeologists maintain that neolithic man ventured out on the Ocean to Britain and Ireland; but, in the present uncertain

<sup>1</sup> Xenophon, *Anabasis*, v, 4. On the growth of the dug-out canoe see Fawcett, C. B., “The Evolution of Navigation”, in *Manch. Geograph. Soc. Journal*, 1921.

<sup>2</sup> *Camb. Ancient Hist.* 1, 110; Breasted, J. H., *Ancient Times*, pp. 226–8.

state of our knowledge, I pass over this topic. My present aim is, not ethnological, but maritime, especially to suggest the motives which led Mediterranean man to take to the sea.

The primary impulse for all this effort and adventure was, in all probability, search after food. For, if the people of the Eastern Mediterranean ran short of flesh or corn, they were compelled to resort to the sea; and that often happened, owing to the rocky or sandy nature of many of the coasts, which yield scanty harvests, or in years of drought no harvest at all. Further, the forests of the coastal areas were not so extensive as to support very large supplies of game. Therefore the early tribes which were driven by their enemies to the shores of the Mediterranean must have had a constant struggle for food. Naturally, the conquered tribes had recourse to the sea for food; and it is significant that conquering peoples long retained their contempt for seafarers. In Homer the fisherman had no social status such as the farmer had;<sup>1</sup> and, even among the island Phæacians, the champion wrestler, Euryalus, taunts the castaway Odysseus with being a mere sea-trader, intent only on greedy gains, and no sportsman.<sup>2</sup>

Slowly did the conquering Achæans and Dorians who came from the North learn the difficult art of seafaring from the conquered Ægean folk, who,

<sup>1</sup> Radcliffe, W., *Fishing from the Earliest Times*, pp. 64–8.

<sup>2</sup> *Odyssey*, VIII, 163.

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along with the Minoans, must have practised it for ages. We know next to nothing about those primitives, who made the first incredibly difficult attempts at rowing and sailing. Minoan signet rings show quaint little boats with high prows and sterns, propelled by oarsmen. It seems likely that the first of these efforts were directed towards fishing; for on the warm coasts of the Mediterranean one of the largest and fattest of fish abounds. The tunny (a huge fish not unlike a giant mackerel) has there been speared and netted during thousands of years. Yet it is still plentiful; and even now the yachtsman is warned to beware of tunny nets spread out from the shore at scores of places in Syria, the Tripolitan, the Ægean, and as far west as Sicily.<sup>1</sup> Spawned mostly in the Sea of Azov or the North Euxine, the fish swim south through the Marmara to the Mediterranean, where they attain a huge size, often turning 400 lb. or more.<sup>2</sup>

Now, consider the food value of a single fat tunny in lands where goat was none too common a dish, and where the ox was generally a skinny little beast. Picture to yourselves the stimulus to the building of larger boats, stronger nets or lines, and bigger hooks or harpoons of which that fish was the reluctant

<sup>1</sup> *Mediterranean Pilot*, i, 27, 321; v, 55.

<sup>2</sup> One of the signs of Poseidon was the tunny (Cook, A. B., *Zeus*, p. 786). In August 1932 Col. E. T. Peel caught off Scarborough a tunny 9½ ft. long, weighing 798 lbs.

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cause. The harpooning of the tunny or the chasing of a shoal of tunny into creeks or shallows became a favourite sport of the Greeks; for Aristophanes (*Wasps*, l. 1087) uses the word *θυλλάζειν* as equivalent to harpooning; and Æschylus in the *Persae* (l. 427) drove home to the Athenian audience the slaughter of the beaten Persians at Salamis by comparing them to tunnies driven inshore and speared by fishermen.

But this is not all. The tunny, as we have seen, swam down the Bosphorus, Propontis and Hellespont in shoals towards the warm waters of the Ægean and South Mediterranean; and I imagine that no small share of man's early seafaring energies went to the pursuit of those shoals. At the risk of unduly stressing this tunny *motif*, I will suggest another service which this fish has rendered to mankind. Its shoals, as we have seen, come regularly from the Sea of Azov and Euxine down the Bosphorus and Hellespont to the Ægean. Is it not certain that fishermen would try to find out where they came from and where they went to? Surely, then, the first seafarers up and down those straits would be tunny fishermen. The first explorers of the Euxine were, I suggest, not Jason and the Argonauts (the men of the golden fleece), but the pioneer tunny-chasers—the men of the bronze harpoon.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See, however, Miss J. R. Bacon's careful monograph, *The Voyage of the Argonauts*.

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Perhaps, even earlier, the tunny, which still abounds off the north coast of Africa and now provides one of the chief industries for that barren land,<sup>1</sup> may have tempted on to the sea its primitive inhabitants. As we have seen, these may have spread thence northwards to Asia Minor or Europe. If this view be correct, may not the poverty of North Africa (except in the Nile Delta and Tunis) and the riches of the sea have driven and lured those peoples northwards? Here it is well to remember that, though the Etesian breezes of summer, blowing from the north-north-west, retard the northerly voyage, yet they scarcely affect the Syrian coast, where also a northerly current of from one to two knots favours the coastal run towards Asia Minor, and so enables the trader from the Ægean to make a round trip to Egypt, Syria and thence home again.<sup>2</sup> So soon as man had observed the set of the winds and currents, he had these forces as his allies in the Eastern Mediterranean, probably first for fishing, and later for trading.

That this was the order in which seafaring developed may be inferred from these facts: (1) hunger is the primal cause of man's activities: the search for clothing, ornaments and weapons comes later; (2) though Homer mentions fish as a diet (and in the Ægean area that implies sea fish) yet he does not often mention sea-traders other than Phoenicians

<sup>1</sup> *Mediterranean Pilot*, v, 55.<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* v, 135, 156.