

## REVIEW

Beresford, J., *The Ancient Sailing Season* (series: Mnemosyne Supplements. History and Archaeology of Classical Antiquity, vol. 351), Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2013. Pp. xv, 364. ISBN 9789004223523; E-ISBN: 9789004241947. Price € 131.00/\$182.00

In the *Works and Days*, Hesiod, a confessed landlubber (though both his father and brother were seafarers), warns his brother Perses to sail, at the end of October:

εἰ δέ σε ναυτίλης δυσπεμφέλου ἴμερος αἰρεῖ·  
 εὖτ' ἂν Πληιάδες σθένος ὄβριμον Ὠρίωνος  
 φεύγουσαι πίπτωσιν ἐς ἠεροειδέα πόντον,  
 δὴ τότε παντοίων ἀνέμων θυίουσιν ἀῆται·  
 καὶ τότε μηκέτι νῆας ἔχειν ἐνὶ οἴνοπι πόντῳ,  
 γῆν δ' ἐργάζεσθαι μεμνημένος ὧς σε κελεύω.  
 νῆα δ' ἐπ' ἠπείρου ἐρύσαι πυκάσαι τε λίθοισιν  
 πάντοθεν, ὄφρ' ἴσχωσ' ἀνέμων μένος ὕγρον ἀέντων,  
 χεῖμαρον ἐξερύσας, ἵνα μὴ πύθη Διὸς ὄμβρος.  
 ὄπλα δ' ἐπάρμενα πάντα τεῶ ἔγκάτθεο οἴκῳ,  
 εὐκόσμως στολίσας νηὸς πτερὰ ποντοπόροιο·

(“Haul up your ship upon the land and pack it closely with stones all round to keep off the power of the winds which blow damply, and draw out the bilge-plug so that the rain of heaven may not rot it. Put away all the tackle (χεῖμαρος) and fittings in your house, and stow the sails of the seagoing ship neatly, and hang up the well-shaped rudder over the smoke”: Hes. *Op.* 618-628). Somewhat further, in line 660, Hesiod confesses, telling he crossed from Boeotia to Euboeia:

τόσσόν τοι νηῶν γε πεπείρημαι πολυγόμφων·

“Such is all my experience of many-pegged ships (νηῶν...πολυγόμφων)”. In between these fragments Hesiod warns Perses against the dangers of maritime trade generally and going out at sea in person specifically. He gives advice for the right time to go out at sea (around fifty days after the solstice, sc. from the end of June to about the end of August: Hes. *Op.* 663), because then the winds are steady and the wind is harmless (Hes. *Op.* 670). There are people who go out in spring, he says (Hes. *Op.* 681-683), but:

ἀρπακτός· χαλεπῶς κε φύγοις κακόν· ...

“such a sailing is snatched, and you will hardly avoid mischief” (Hes. *Op.* 684).

Many have believed (and some still do, I fear) that such were, largely, the guidelines most ancient mariners acted upon, sometimes widening the time frame from April through November. Until only a few decades ago, many scholars were convinced there really was a “good season” to sail as well as, necessarily, a “bad season” or even a “closed season”: of this Beresford presents (p. 3) a fine example from Rougé, J. 1981: *Ships and Fleets of the Ancient Mediterranean*, Middletown, CT, 15-16. Even McCormick, M. 2001: *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce, A.D. 300-900*, Cambridge, 461, still argued that early mediaeval mariners were more likely to put onto winter seas than their Greek and Roman predecessors. Yet, about the same time this traditional picture was seriously attacked. First Morton, J. 2001: *The Role of the Physical Environment in Ancient Greek Seafaring*, Leiden/Boston and next Arnaud, P. 2005: *Les routes de la navigation antique: itinéraires en Méditerranée*, Paris, convincingly argued that, in fact, navigation also took place in winter, largely thanks to (enhanced) capabilities of many ships (not all ships! and by no means at all costs). In the book under scrutiny Beresford (p. 6) largely comes to the same conclusion: “[W]intertime seafaring on the Graeco-Roman Mediterranean was not only possible but was commonplace and large numbers of vessels and mariners routinely made voyages onto what has, for too long, been regarded as a ‘closed sea’”.

Beresford explores his subject in six chapters, excluding the introduction (“The State of Modern Scholarship”: 1-7) and the conclusion. In chapter one (“The Textual Evidence”: 9-52), Beresford considers the ancient texts relating to seafaring, starting with, indeed, Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, notably Vegetius’ *Epitome rei militaris* (an important text for the believers in a closed season, written at the turn of the fourth and fifth centuries AD), and an edict issued by Emperor Gratian in AD 380 and preserved in the *Codex Theodosianus*. The latter text is directed at shipping state-owned supplies from Africa. Beresford argues that, reading these texts superficially, one might be justified to support the traditional view. Perhaps, however, this view might be understandable for the Archaic and even the early Classical periods in the Mediterranean, but, amongst others, the evolution of ships and regional variations are neglected in it. “[T]hat the sailing season remained virtually unchanged across the broad span of antiquity ... appears unrealistic given such important technological, economic, political and military developments, ...” (Beresford, 13). An apt and important observation, moreover one supported by relatively vast documentary evidence.

Chapter two (53-105) discusses “The Mediterranean Climatic Regime”. As weather and seas are essential to understand (Graeco-Roman) seafaring, Beresford pays much attention to phenomena like winds, currents, visibility, and the many various other meteorological variations (one might say the various Mediterranean microclimates), notably those occurring in winter. To do this, he relies to a large extent on the five volumes that comprise the currently most

recent *Mediterranean Pilot* (1978-2000, Taunton, various editions), issued by the British Admiralty, and the many specialist charts these contain. It is a fundamentally sound choice, as are the other Admiralty sources he uses.

Next Beresford turns, in chapter three (107-172), to “Ships and Sails”. In fact, this is an essential chapter, in which Beresford adduces much evidence, both from experimental archaeological experiments (the Kyrenia II ship and the reconstruction of the Athenian trireme, the “Olympias”) and from literature. Especially as regards the later element I was somewhat disappointed, because on this point this volume shows some significant lacunae (even more because Beresford almost exclusively uses works written in English). Even so, references to papers from an essential book as Hocker, F.A./C.A. Ward (eds.) 2004: *The Philosophy of Shipbuilding – Conceptual Approaches to the Study of Wooden Ships*, College Station, TX [series: Ed Rachal Foundation Nautical Archaeology Series] are lacking, just like recent works on (Archaic Greek) sewn plank ships (e.g. the fundamental Kahanov, Y./P. Pomey 2004: The Greek Sewn Shipbuilding Tradition and Ma’agan Mikhael ship: A Comparison with Mediterranean Parallels from the Sixth to the Fourth Centuries BC, *The Mariner’s Mirror* 90, 6-28). Also the absence of Basch, L. 1987: *Le musée imaginaire de la marine antique*, Athènes, though in several respects perhaps outdated but still important, is to be regretted, just like that of works in German or French (e.g. from the journal *Archaeonautica* a still important paper like Pomey, P./A. Tchernia 1978: Le tonnage maximum des navires de commerce romains, *Archaeonautica* 2, 233-251, [http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/nauti\\_0154-1854\\_1978\\_num\\_2\\_1\\_875](http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/nauti_0154-1854_1978_num_2_1_875)). It might, perhaps, be argued that Beresford’s book is about the sailing season and not about ships, but exactly because the evolution of ships is at the heart of his working thesis such omissions are vital: he weakens his argument needlessly.

After these first three chapters, the following (chapter four, 173-212, “Navigation”) is, in fact plain sailing. Beresford amply demonstrates that the ancient mariners had access to sufficient means to navigate accurately in almost all weather conditions, certainly if they more or less kept to the coastlines and/or chose the right period to sail a particular route. Chapter five (213-235), “The Sailing Season of the Indian Ocean” and chapter six (237-264) “Ancient Pirates and Fishermen” (to some extent perhaps ‘bien étonnés de se trouver ensemble’) are, more or less, a (tasty) dessert. Very good reading, but not essential for our understanding of the ancient Greek and Roman sailing seasons – especially the long time suggested period of the *mare clausum*.

In the “Conclusion” (265-275), Beresford resumes his theory. Though the Mediterranean may, potentially, be a perilous environment for the mariner, it did not keep the ancient mariners from sailing on it. Looking uncritically at ancient seasonal seafaring calendars, we might be tempted to believe in a, more or less official, period of ‘closed season’ for seafaring. However: “For most of the lit-

erate elites of antiquity, as indeed for the majority of the land-based population of the Graeco-Roman world, the sea was an element both alien and dangerous” (Beresford, 266), those who navigated it were “viewed with suspicion and regarded as socially and morally suspect” (*ibidem*). Nevertheless, societies relied – more or less – on these same men to provide for necessities of life, though in fact basically ignorant of how they managed to do so. The mariners themselves relied both on their navigational skills and the strength and seaworthiness of their ships. Notably during the Hellenistic and early Roman imperial periods a huge evolution in shipbuilding took place, largely overlooked by the literate elites that continued to adhere to, by then, already completely obsolete views.

As indicated above, notably regarding chapter three, I am not completely happy with Beresford’s work. That is not because I do not believe in his theory: on the contrary! I think that Beresford weakens an altogether feasible theory by applying insufficient ribs (though they are available) to make his ship as sturdy and seaworthy as possible (to try a marine-oriented metaphor). The evolution of shipbuilding is, indeed, an attractive (and, I think, realistic) concept, as is the evolution of seafaring in total. Like it is not today, seafaring was also no static occupation before the invention of the compass and, e.g., the journeys of exploration in the 15th and 16th centuries AD: those men stood, indeed, on the shoulders of giants. Beresford describes their efforts lucidly and entertainingly. As usual in Brill’s editions, the book is well taken care of, with good maps and pictures, a large though (as already indicated) regrettably incomplete bibliography, and a sufficient index. Equally usual in a Brill’s edition is that its price might, regrettably, well be forbidding for the interested reader. I find that a pity: this work deserves the widest possible audience.

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