

EAST AFRICANS & ANCIENT NAVIGATIONS

Why It Could Not Be

In a series of papers, this writer has proposed that our ancestors were very much more in touch than usually accepted by most maritime historians. Doubts about this lead us into something seen in many other of those other papers, namely opening with the negatives and this is echoed in this article with “Why it Could Not Be” are expressed. To be borne in mind is that dates are to be expressed here as Before Common Era (= BCE/BC) and later ones as Common Era (= CE/AD), as are the international comparisons.

Things Chinese begin these international comparisons and are taken from the book called “1421” by Gavin Maxwell (2003). He especially means the expeditions in the “treasure-ships” led by Zheng-He (15th c. Chinese) westwards across the Indian Ocean. Online sources give the flag-ship of Zheng-He (= Cheng-Ho) as measuring ca. 400 ft. in length and 160 ft. in width; Noah’s Ark as circa (= ca.) 450 ft. long and ca. 75 ft. wide and the Santa Maria of Christopher Columbus (15th c.) as ca. 85 ft. long and ca. 25/30 ft. wide. Did such ships exist? Also bear in mind Confucianist/Neo-Confucianist disdain for the sea and sailors.

More massive ships are described in the Sanskrit myths of ancient India but are dismissed by Robert Dick-Read (The Phantom Voyagers 2005; Africa & Indonesia: questioning the origins of Africa’s most famous icons online, etc.) There is little evidence for the giant wooden ships of either India or China. Also Sean McGrail (Boats of the World 2004) cites very serious doubts about “the oldest dock in the world” at Lothal (India). James Hornell (Water Transport 1946) is one of those writing that the codification of Hinduism shown by such as Manu Smriti (= Laws of Manu) stopped Brahmins going to sea.

Nor were the early Arabs greatly enamoured of going to sea, as their primary traditions were those of land-bound dwellers of the desert in the Arabian Peninsula. Hornell (ib.) plus others quote Mohammed saying “he who goes twice on the sea is truly an infidel”. Of the various successors to Mohammed, the third was Omar ibn Khattab. George Hourani (Arab Seafaring 1951 & 1995) quoted Omar/Umar refusing the Faithful permission to go sea because “it is unnatural”. Hornell (ib.) has him writing of the sea “Trust it little, fear it much...Man at sea is an insect on a splinter now engulfed, now scared to death”.

Not as religio/spiritual but nearly so, was the antipathy towards the sea and sailors in Egypt according to Strabo (1st c. BCE Greek). Connie Lambros- Phillipson (Seafaring on the Mediterranean online) described Egypt to Crete as “The Improbable Journey”. Alessandra Nibbi (Revue d’Anthropologie 1993) went further on this kind of thinking shows this kind of thinking shows the ancient Egyptians had no interest in the sea. In support of this would be Plutarch (ca. 1st c. CE Greek) saying “Egyptian priests held aloof from the sea”. Also Porphyry (ca. c. CE Greek) wrote “Egyptian priests held it was unholy to sail on the sea”.

Egypt direct to Crete may have been “The Improbable Journey” but Crete to Egypt was not. We also know of Cretan craftsmen of the Middle Minoan or Proto-Palatial (ca. 4000/3700 BCE) were also acting as craftsmen in Egypt. From early on, Asiatics were also acting as craftsmen in Egypt. They were shipbuilders too for Egypt. When a weakened Egypt could no longer compete with the other Mediterranean powers, Pharaoh Necho (700/600 BCE) sent Phoenicians to explore

the east coast of east Africa. This seems to have started as an extension of the former Egypt to Punt voyages but turned into a round-Africa one.

Egyptian plus other ships on the Red Sea had to cope with what the unknown author of the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (= PME= Voyage on the Erythraean Sea) called dangerous coral reefs. The 1911 *Britannica* refers to complex waters making Red Sea navigation difficult and dangerous. Despite frequent voyages, east Africans could ask Egyptians where they had come from. Nor did this frequency prevent Egyptian ships going down, as made plain by the story "The Shipwrecked Sailor".

East Africa facing the Red Sea is above the Horn of Africa, whereas east Africa facing the Erythraean Sea is south of the Horn. Strabo (1st c. BCE Greek) and Idrissi (14th c. Magrebi) wrote respectively of Above-Horn and Below-Horn east Africa as evidently not possessing ships. When what such as Nibbi (ib.) wrote about Egypt is recalled, it seems east Africa had no ships at all.

There is a route via the Red Sea, the straits called Deire in Greek and Mandeb in Arabic, the Gulf of Aden and on to the open Erythraean Sea (= western Indian Ocean). It is unlikely such geographical niceties were recognised in antiquity. If so it is likely that the terms of Deire plus Bab el-Mandeb refer to the connection of the Red and Erythraean Sea.

Deire would appear to be the Greek word of narrow referring to the narrow but Bab el-Mandeb translates as Gate of Tears. One suggestion is that this refers to east Africans en route to the trans-Islamic form of slave-trading to perhaps parallel the Sankofa of west Africa (esp. Ghana). The Sankofa is the bird that always looks back in regret on the part of west Africans never to see their homelands again because they were now part of the trans-Atlantic slave-trade.

Less romantic would be that the Gate of Tears refers to going from the relatively sheltered Red Sea to the open Indian Ocean. A reason for the tears is nicely illustrated Cosmas Indicopleustes (= C. the Voyager on the Indian Ocean). The ship carrying Cosmas nearly came to grief close to the Horn of Africa.

There are also plenty of wrecks that would have occasions for tears. Some are famous. One has been shown as the