

**James Beresford, *The Ancient Sailing Season*. *Mnemosyne Supplements, History and Archaeology of Classical Antiquity*, No. 352. Leiden: Brill, 2013. Pp. xv + 364, 67 figures. ISBN 978-90-04-22352-3. £110.**

The role of the sea and maritime communication within the ancient Mediterranean world has long been recognised by scholars from a broad range of disciplines. The importance of this maritime connectivity has been re-emphasised in recent years through major works such as that by Horden and Purcell (*The Corrupting Sea*, 2000) which set maritime communication very much at the heart of the ancient world. Despite the focus on the maritime elements of antiquity, our understanding of the day-to-day minutiae of operating the ships and boats of the ancient Mediterranean has perhaps lagged behind other related fields. Coupled with this has been a contentment amongst the majority of scholars to rely on two or three ancient sources as a means to define the ancient sailing season as running from the spring to the autumn, with a complete winter closure of the seas – *mare clausum*. There have only been sporadic attempts to look further into the nuances of this seasonality. Similarly, the Mediterranean maritime environment is often characterised with overly broad brushstrokes, with an acceptance that conditions in the Roman Empire were broadly similar to those of today and the application of a generalised wind regime that sees prevailing north-westerly winds across the Mediterranean for much of the year.

James Beresford sets out to challenge the long-held and oft repeated traditional views on the ancient sailing season from the outset of his book. Primarily, he seeks to prove that sailing during the Mediterranean winter months was both possible, practical and indeed normal. He begins by addressing the three ancient literary sources responsible for what might be termed the ‘traditional view’ of non-winter sailing — Hesiod, Vegetius, and Gratian. It is striking that in dismantling our reliance upon those sources, they actually become far more nuanced and in some ways more reliable sources, once the context in which those authors were writing is reapplied. Thus we come to understand that while Hesiod does say that a good time of year for sailing is fifty days after the solstice, he also describes sailing at other times of year. The quote by which he is primarily cited for maritime purposes has been taken largely out of context and it is modern scholarship that has badly misinterpreted the text as being against sailing at any other time of the year, rather than what the text actually says. By the end of Chapter One it is abundantly clear that basing an interpretative sailing season, for every type of vessel across the entire Mediterranean world, on three textual sources is very misleading, yet that has been the traditionally accepted model. The three standard sources are countered throughout by analysis of a host of lesser known literary sources that build up a clear picture of regularised winter sailing, in a range of vessel types for a variety of reasons.

This momentum is continued in what is probably the most striking chapter of the book, dealing with the maritime environment itself. Taking clear inspiration from Horden and Purcell’s concept of micro-scale environmental variation, Beresford presents a compelling argument that this can be extended to the environmental conditions in which ships and boats were sailing the ‘wine dark sea’ during antiquity. He strongly emphasises the regional variability in prevailing weather patterns across the Mediterranean and while acknowledging that such patterns cannot be directly

applied to antiquity, suggests that a similar level of regional variation must have been present, given the similar over-riding geographical similarity with today. By seeking to understand the regional and inter-regional through analysis of the local, Beresford makes it very clear that certain areas of the Mediterranean must have been perfectly suitable to navigation during the middle of winter (for example the Levantine shores), while other were markedly less suited. He makes it equally clear that for some voyages, for example from the eastern Mediterranean to the west, the variation in wind conditions dictates that the optimum time of departure is in the autumn and that such a voyage must have continued into the winter months in order to reach its western terminus.

Having addressed the central concerns of the literary sources and the key element of the environmental conditions, attention is then turned to supporting factors such as ship construction, rigging and navigation. These provide some useful context to the previous discussion but they are not without some problems and represent the weakest area of the book. Ironically, given the revisionist approach to the overall sailing season itself, the description of the archaeologically documented transition from shell-based to frame-based building is extremely traditional in its viewpoint; based around a gradual transition 'inexorably towards the skeleton-first process' (page 124). This fails to properly acknowledge either the early frame-based ships that have been found at Dor/Tantura on the Israeli coast or the 10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century mixed construction vessels among the huge corpus of material at Yenikapi in Istanbul. Both of these sites have been published long enough ago that they could be expected to be included in a book with a 2013 publication date. In this regard, the volume has an air of being slightly out of date and this is continued in the description of Mediterranean sailing rigs, which although broadly correct, does perpetuate some academic myths regarding the use of the lateen sail and the general potential performance of ancient rigs. As with the section on construction, material published between 2007 and 2011 concerning various aspects of ancient sailing rigs could reasonably be expected to have been included. Finally, it is also a little simplistic and perhaps disingenuous to compare Nordic clinker and Mediterranean mortise-and-tenon shipbuilding traditions in the way set out in Chapter Three. They might be better recognised for what they are; different building traditions produced in different places at a different time by different people. These points aside, the inclusion of chapters concerning the building, sailing and navigation of ancient vessels is certainly welcome and Beresford dwells for some time on the sailing rigs of the ancient Mediterranean in a manner that overall is more helpful to the wider, non-specialist readership than most comparable volumes.

Chapter Four continues with a useful description of the main facets and principles of ancient Mediterranean navigation. This chapter, like the one on the Maritime environment should become a standard reference work on this subject because of the broad, yet holistic approach that it takes and the interesting perspective that underpins it. The conclusion is again easily reached, that navigation, using the methods that seem to have been utilised in antiquity could certainly have taken place during the winter months. Finally, the volume is rounded off with a chapter addressing the seasonal activities of fishermen and pirates, elements of

Mediterranean maritime society that are often over-looked by an academy focused on oared naval vessels and large, long-distance merchant ships. While piratical activity has been the source of some existing work, the analysis of the extremely small-scale maritime activity represented by fishing fleets is extremely welcome. In particular, the heavily seasonal nature of the pursuit of certain species of fish and the relationship of that seasonality to other pursuits, such as agriculture, forms an intriguing part of Beresford's overall view.

In summary, Beresford presents an extremely detailed and at times compelling argument for an extension to our interpretation of what comprised the sailing season of the ancient Mediterranean. He effectively meshes together the literary, environmental and archaeological evidence to present a picture in which ancient mariners were perfectly able to take to the seas during the depths of winter, if they had reason to do so. Beresford's argument is sophisticated enough to acknowledge that not everyone wanted or needed to go to sea all of the time and that certain institutions were risk-averse in setting out periods when they would rather the vessels under their commission avoided the shipping-lanes. The great strength of this volume is its ability to see between the generalised views of traditional academia and to present the reader with the sheer variability in sailing conditions that existed across the Mediterranean. In assessing this variability, the clear conclusion is that we should change our view of the ancient sailing season to reflect the range of vessels, motives and weather conditions that were in existence in antiquity.

Overall, this is an attractive, well-produced and extremely valuable, if disproportionately costly, volume that presents a lot of very useful material relating to ancient maritime activity and some of this material will come as an interesting and enlightening surprise to many readers. Although some elements of Chapter Three seem a little outdated, the purpose of the book is not to discuss Mediterranean shipbuilding or sailing rigs, but to force a reassessment about how we view and think about the ancient sailing season. In that regard, Beresford succeeds admirably in his primary objective and *The Ancient Sailing Season* should become the standard work on the subject in due course, for casual readers, students and specialists alike.

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