

### XXIII. The Isis and Her Voyage : Some Additional Remarks

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In his instructive and highly stimulating paper (*TAPA* 81 [1950] 43–56) on the voyage of the grain ship “Isis” as reported by Lucian, Lionel Casson interprets the course taken by that vessel in the light of certain basic atmospheric conditions governing at all times journeys under sail in the eastern Mediterranean. He points to the prevailing regime of northwesterly winds and deduces, in particular, that a sailing ship cannot travel from Rhodes past the northern coast of Crete, and so westwards, as it “cannot travel west in northwest winds, and these are the ones that prevail in these waters” (48). He illustrates the validity of this law from examples so widely separated in time as the “Isis” and Nelson’s squadron (*ibid.*).

It seems to the present writer that, in this particular instance, Casson’s conclusions may need modification. We are in possession of a literature of pilgrim texts from the Middle Ages, some of which describe in fair detail the journey to and from Palestine, atmospheric conditions, courses steered, etc. Now by the fifteenth century the pilgrim galleys had become too unwieldy for progressing by oars, except for occasional short stretches, as on leaving harbour and getting into the wind. This fact can be illustrated particularly well from the writings of Pietro Casola<sup>1</sup> and Felix Fabri,<sup>2</sup> both of whom travelled and wrote in the late fifteenth century. Oars, says Casola, are of little use (164, 189; cf. Fabri 1.53 and *passim*); attempts to keep a galley under way in the teeth of the wind are laborious, ineffective, and have to be given up (296); when a galley is becalmed the galeotti have time to listen to a sermon as there is nothing for them to do (189). Shipping is, in these instances, practically entirely dependent on sailing power.

<sup>1</sup> *Canon Pietro Casola's Pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the Year 1494*, trans. M. Margaret Newett (Manchester 1907).

<sup>2</sup> *Fratri Felici Fabri Evagatorium in Terrae Sanctae, Arabiae et Egypti peregrinationem*, ed. C. D. Hassler, 3 vol. (Stuttgart 1843); partly translated by A. Stewart in “The Library of the Palestine Pilgrims’ Text Society” 7–10 (London 1893–96).

That being so, it seems of interest to follow the courses taken by the two above mentioned pilgrims on their return journey from Palestine. Casola is, first of all, brought by varying winds from Rhodes to Candia (308-14)—a fact which one could, *grosso modo*, square with what Casson says about what would happen to a ship making west from Rhodes along the north coast of Crete. However Casola further reports (319) that on leaving Candia he is met “by a wind so favourable . . . and so strong, that without a single stroke of the oars it drove us . . . right opposite Modone.” As for Fabri, he is indeed, like the “Isis” many years before him, driven well into the Aegean, and a first attempt to round Malea ends in failure (3.314 ff.) ; however, a little later conditions are different and the seemingly impossible is done (3.329).

It is only fair to say that fifteenth-century craft with their lateen rig could probably keep much closer to the wind than the “Isis”, and that the journeys mentioned above are both in the later part of the year, when winds are apt to veer. However this latter point seems to be the important one: medieval mariners knew that, with patience, weather conditions might vary considerably and permit the, at first sight, impossible. We may have to allow their ancient confrères a wider latitude of choice than seemed originally likely.