

XVI. The Isis and Her Voyage: A Reply

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In an article entitled "The Isis and Her Voyage," published in this series in 1950 (*TAPA* 81.43–56), I reconstructed the route taken from Alexandria to Rome by the big ships of the Roman grain fleet. I concluded that, because of the prevailing northwest winds, they must have travelled first to the south coast of Asia Minor on a port tack and then to Rhodes and *south* of Crete on a starboard tack.¹

In a note that appeared in last year's volume (86 [1955] 319 f.), B. S. J. Isserlin suggested that this conclusion ought to be modified in the light of the fact that some ships carrying pilgrims in mediaeval and Renaissance times travelled north of Crete. He acknowledges that the vessels used on these runs were galleys but, adducing a number of references to indicate that they rarely used the oars, argues that the evidence of their voyages is relevant to the problem I dealt with.

I do not think so. There is all the difference in the world between the route a pure sailing vessel must follow and that open to a galley. In seeking evidence from the ancient as well as later ages, I deliberately limited myself to that offered by the former. It is, of course, perfectly true that oars were used only rarely on pilgrim voyages; the ancients avoided using them, too, as much as they possibly could.² The important point is that the oars were there, available for that 15 or 30 minutes of hard work on the benches which would get a galley past a headland or an island tip that might take a sailing vessel hours, perhaps days, to weather. A sailing ship is like the hitchhiker who hasn't a cent to his name, as against the one who has an emergency reserve for the return trip buried deep in a pocket; the former has only his thumb to get him home and he must wag it where traffic is heaviest even if that is a slow round-about way.

¹ This was the route used by the grain fleet and the favored one in general but not the only one. Cf. *PMich.* 490 and Wilcken's note in *APF* 9 (1930) 86: a recruit from Egypt assigned to Misenum travelled by way of Cyrene.

² Cf. S. L. Mohler, "Sails and Oars in the Aeneid," *TAPA* 79 (1948) 48–52.

Here is a typical example of the difficulties that faced the skipper of a sailing craft who attempted the channel between Crete and Greece. One of Nelson's commanders, de Saumarez, wrote on 1 September 1798: "After contending for three days against the adverse winds which are almost invariably encountered here, and getting sufficiently to the northward to have weathered the small islands that lie more immediately between the archipelago and Candia, the wind set in so strongly to the westward Thursday morning, that I was compelled to desist from that passage."³ This is the sort of thing that kept the Isis and St. Paul's ship and the other clumsy sailers of the Alexandria-Rome fleet from going north of Crete. But a pilgrim galley had no such worries. On occasions such as this, it had its oars to take over. And at all times its long slender hull and lateen rig enabled it to get a far better slant into a foul wind.

Isselin finds in the writings of Pietro Casola what he considers proof that the pilgrim galleys rarely used their oars. One of the passages he happens to quote from that author reveals the true nature of things. Casola on leaving Candia was met "by a wind so favorable . . . and so strong, that *without a single stroke of the oars* it drove us right opposite Modone." The oars were not gathering cobwebs under the thwarts as Isselin would have us believe; had the wind "set in so strongly to the westward" that sailing to Modone was impossible, Casola's skipper, instead of giving up as de Saumarez was forced to, would simply have ordered the oars run out. Galleys are one thing, sailing ships another; the voyages of the one, except in isolated cases, tell us nothing about those of the other.

³ Sir John Ross, *Memoirs and Correspondence of Admiral Lord de Saumarez* (London 1838) 1.253.