



Historically Speaking

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Ships



Naming Ships

The ancient Greeks did, most often, name their ships and a feminine name was usually chosen. I chose to follow that tradition in my historical novels based in Greece around 600 BCE. The first ship in the first book of the series was named the Amphitrite, who was the wife of Poseidon, the Greek sea god (the Romans equated him to their Neptune). Another significant ship in the books is the Cyrene, who was a Thessalian princess, and later, the queen and ruler of the north African city of Cyrene. Anissi was familiar with the name because of that. According to the myth the city was founded and named after her by Apollo.

The ships of ancient Greece included the maritime trading ships and the ships of war. Most of us have heard of triremes (ships with three decks of rowers), but the first ships were monoremes and later biremes indicating one deck and two decks of rowers. The additional decks of rowers added speed and power to those ships and the triremes were, in their time, the most deadly ships of war.

My novels do not deal with biremes or triremes. The ships I describe are merchant ships. Most of them were small with a limited crew, and one ship wreck suggests that there were only four on the crew. They were built for capacity and not speed. They could be rowed, but most often took advantage of the wind when it would fill the sail. The sail was rectangular and was limited in articulation (the ability to angle it to catch the wind). These cargo ships used both sails and oars to get where they were going. They were not very good at sailing against the wind, and usually tried to sail when the wind would be behind them, so it could push them along. Even with the wind, they could only go about four or five knots. In my books, I choose to make the ships bigger than most merchant ships were, in order to provide for a larger crew to be involved in the story. Accommodations for passengers was largely non-existent, but I chose to make one ship have a cabin which was intended for the captain, but did accommodate a passenger in one part of the story. I also have the ships staying on the water more time than was the practice. That resulted in sleeping on the deck and in the hold. The common practice had the ships beached at night and the sailors slept on the beach near the ship.

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The following excerpt is from an article entitled The History of Greek Shipping written by Spyros M.

Polemis

"There were about 100 cities that were carrying on maritime commerce, first of which was Phaestos, and especially the capital of Crete, Knossos. Their power was so great that all the cities were without protective walls. Under the leadership of King Minos, the Cretans really became masters of the seas. The decline of Crete as a maritime power came about through violent happenings. There were very destructive fires and violence as a result of the invasion of the Achaids. This was around 1450 BC, at a time when the Cretan fleet had weakened or was far from the island.

Thus, we come to the second phase of the development of the pre-historic Greek fleet, after the domination of the Cretans, with the emergence of mariners from the ports of continental Greece.

It is difficult to know the facts of that period with any large degree of accuracy because mythology engulfed historical events. With the passage of time and centuries, the maritime history of a region was only retained as legend through mythological gods or heroes. Hercules was one of the great seamen of the time, as was Jason, and many of their compatriots who eventually established such a vibrant trade within the Black Sea, at a time when the Cretan fleet had weakened.

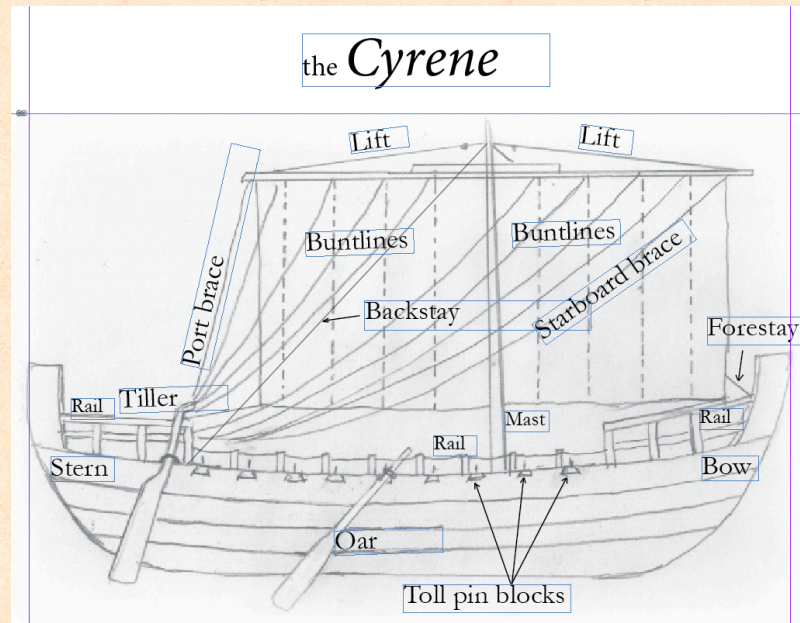
Pre-Hellenes were the inhabitants of Greece before the Dorians came, and before they were called Hellenes. The advance against Troy, which was indeed the biggest maritime operation of the pre-historic period, gives us an idea of the size of the fleets and consequently power and domination of the cities of that period. Mycenae was then the biggest maritime power and this is why Agamemnon was the leader of the expedition. Mycenae contributed 300 ships, in a total of 1,186 vessels that sailed against Troy. The islands contributed 174 ships from which 80 were from Crete. Homer and Hesiod poetically describe part of the maritime history of the period and the seamanship of the pre-historic Greeks. Hesiod talks about the most basic premise, the seamanship of people,

that people learn by necessity, for when their land is not fertile and does not produce, they take to the sea and learn the hard way.

Hesiod also gives some sound advice. Good advice for us all, I believe. For a prudent merchant and shipowner, Hesiod says, it is unforgivable to load on his ship all his fortune, because in the case of an accident, he may be totally destroyed. Not to be taken literally but metaphorically a very good parallel. He also suggests that larger vessels, not small ones, should be used for the carriage of cargoes.

This sounds very familiar indeed. During his time, the 8th century BC, the most suitable periods for sailing's were the spring and the summer. The mariners of the day, before the rains came, "and before the new wine was opened", would stop their voyages and would take their ships out of the water. The boats would stay on shore all during the autumn and the winter."

Below is the diagram I created of the *Cyrene* which becomes Mentu's ship.



The buntlines (lines) are used to furl and unfurl the sail.
The braces are used to skew the sail.
The toll pins are where the oars fasten for leverage.
The tiller(s) steer the ship.
The stays support the mast.