

In 2021 I wrote a series of articles on the ancient ships which was published at SWZ Maritime. One of them was about a Greek captain — Skylax of Caryanda.

The complete series of articles has been published in my book *Periplus – A Journey through the Ancient Mediterranean*.

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Skylax the Explorer

522 BCE was the year of death of Polycrates, the tyrant of Samos, famous for having assembled a great navy of 100 *pentékónteroi*.¹ In Athens, Hippias has succeeded Peisistratos as the tyrant of Athens. In the same year, 522 BCE, Darius I gains kingship of Persia.² He would create an empire comparable to the *Imperium Romanum*; an empire without bounds in space, but instead focusing on people and defendable borders. Quite soon after the start of his reign, Darius entrusts a Greek captain—Skylax of Caryanda—to do the reconnaissance for his Indian aspirations:

“There is a river, Indus, second of all rivers in the production of crocodiles. Darius, desiring to know where this Indus empties into the sea, sent ships manned by Skylax, a man of Caryanda, and others whose word he trusted.”³

Caryanda is a small island lying off the coast of ancient Caria.⁴ Nineteen kilometers to the south is Halicarnassus; the Dorian city of Artemisia, the famous naval commander.⁵ Forty kilometer to the north is Miletus which by the time of this story is a maritime empire with many colonies.⁶ The island, the town which lies on it, the bay [*limnē*] which forms its harbor [*limēn*], and Skylax himself; they all carry that same name: Caryanda.⁷ Skylax starts his journey by joining King Darius on his expedition towards Caspatyrus, a place

¹ Polycrates did not only operate the *pentékónteros*, but also he introduced a fully-decked *díkrotos*, the *samaina*.

² The estimate for the year of death of Polycrates and the start of the reign of Darius are based upon Herodotus, *The Histories* 3.126.1 “After the death of Cambyses”.

³ Herodotus, *The Histories* 4.44. The first river in terms of crocodiles [*krokódeilos*] was the River Nile.

⁴ Near present-day Bodrum, Turkey.

⁵ Artemisia, the Queen of Halicarnassus, commanded five of the 70 Carian ships at the battles of Artemision and Salamis. [Herodotus, *The Histories* 7.93, 7.99]

⁶ “Miletus was first founded and fortified above the sea by Cretans, where the Miletus of olden times is now situated, being settled by Sarpedon, who brought colonists from the Cretan Miletus and named the city after that Miletus.” [Strabo, *Geography* 14.1.6]. At the time of the Trojan War, Miletus was inhabited by Carians, “who do not even speak Greek” [*barbaro-phonos*]. [Homeric *Iliad* 2.867].

William Smith. 1854. (entry on Miletus): “Owing to its excellent situation, and the convenience of four harbors, one of which was capacious enough to contain a fleet, Miletus soon rose to a great preponderance among the Ionian cities. It became the most powerful maritime and commercial place; its ships sailed to every part of the Mediterranean, and even into the Atlantic; but the Milesians turned their attention principally to the Euxine, on the coasts of which, as well as elsewhere, they founded upwards of 75 colonies.” [Pliny, *N.H* 5.31; Senec. Cons. ad Helv. 6; Strab. 14 p.635; Athen. 12.523]

⁷ Strabo, *Geography* 14.2.20. “Caryanda, a harbor, and also an island bearing the same name, where the Caryandians lived. Here was born Skylax, the ancient historian.”

somewhere in the valleys of the Kabul River, in the Satrapy [*satrapeia*] of Gandara. Herodotus adds that this Satrapy belongs to the seventh and least profitable tax district of the Achaemenid Empire.⁸ For Darius and Skylax, however, Caspatyrus was the door to a new world.⁹ From here they would conquer the shores of the Indus River and explore the seas in which the Indus River empties.

The land surrounding Caspatyrus was a desert, full of unknown and strange creatures. Herodotus shares a wonderful story in which he describes a population of a large type of ants [*murmēx*], not as big as dogs, but larger than foxes; “These ants live underground, digging out the sand ... and the sand which they carry from the holes is full of gold”.¹⁰

This sand that contains gold is of such interest to the Indians, Herodotus tells us, that they “harness camels three apiece, males on each side... and a female in the middle: the man himself rides on the female, that when harnessed has been taken away from as young an offspring as may be. The Indians ride after the gold in teams, being careful to be engaged in taking it when the heat is greatest; for the ants are then out of sight underground”. Herodotus goes on to explain:

*“So, when the Indians come to the place with their sacks, they fill these with the sand and drive back as fast as possible; for the ants at once scent them out, the Persians say, and give chase. They say nothing is equal to them for speed, so that unless the Indians have a head start, while the ants were gathering, not one of them would get away. They cut loose the male trace-camels, which are slower than the females; ... the mares never tire, for they remember the young that they have left. Such is the tale. Most of the gold (say the Persians) is got in this way by the Indians.”*¹¹

Meanwhile, Skylax and his companions do not stay in Caspatyrus too long, but for some 200 miles in easterly direction, they follow the downstream course of the Kabul River—a trickle of brown, muddy, water for most of the year. Close to the gorge where the Kabul River joins the Indus River, Skylax finds a place to assemble or build his river ships.¹²

He then follows the course of the Indus River, moving southward. He and his companions serve as the reconnaissance team for the army of King Darius, who occupies the lands surrounding the Indus River. Around 516 BCE, Western India becomes the Achaemenid satrapy of Hinduš, referred to as “India” by the Greek writers.¹³ Further to the east, but in

⁸ Herodotus, *The Histories* 3.91.

⁹ Godley’s note to his translation of Herodotus 3.102.1 says: “N.E. Afghanistan. Caspatyrus is said to be probably Kabul”.

¹⁰ Herodotus, *The Histories* 3.102.2.

¹¹ Herodotus, *The Histories* 3.105.1-105.2.

¹² Described in Herodotus, *The Histories* 3.100.

¹³ In the spring of 480 BCE, Indian troops would march with Xerxes’ army across the Hellespont and fight for him in the Battle of Thermopylae [Herodotus, *The Histories* 7.65]. They became the first-ever force from India to fight on the continent of Europe.

the same period, Siddhārtha Gautama, “Buddha”, attains enlightenment and begins his ministry.



Figure 1 - Kabul River, Old Bridge, with Bala Hissar in the Distance.¹⁴

When Skylax finally reaches the seven mouths of the river, he finds that only one of the mouths, the one in the middle, is navigable; the others are shallow and marshy. By the shore was a settlement that later would become the market-town **Krokola; the place where Alexander the Great prepared for his travel back to Babylon.**¹⁵ Nowadays the place is called **Karachi**, a city with a population of 21 million people.

King Darius turns around and travels back to Persia. From there he would move across the Hellespont, into Thrace (513 BCE).¹⁶ The Ionian Sea-captain, however, continues his journey, exploring the quite fearful coastline from the delta of the Indus to the Persian Gulf. This voyage through the Erythraean Sea can be done best during the period of the northeast monsoon; December-January.¹⁷ Map 1 depicts the later route of the Cretan

¹⁴ Kabul River, Old Bridge, Bala Hissar in the distance. Burke, J. 1878-1880.

¹⁵ Based on Herodotus, *The Histories* 4.44. The place was recorded by various names, such as Krokola and Barbarikón. In a first-century Greco-Roman *periplus*, the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* 10.39, the ships lie at anchor at “Barbaricum” [Schoff, W.H. ed. 1912]. Casson, however, uses the Greek text, the *Periplus tēs Eruthrās Thalássēs*, in which the same place is called Barbarikón.

¹⁶ Vasileff 2015 notes that the Scythian campaign of Darius I was a military expedition into parts of European Scythia by Darius I, the king of the Achaemenid Empire, in 513 BCE.

¹⁷ *Eruthra Thalassa*, a Greek name, literally “Sea of Erythras”, involving the maritime area of the Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean and the modern Red Sea. Compare Gildersleeve’s note to Pindar *Pythian Ode* 4.20: “On their return from Kolchoi, the Argonauts passed by the River Phasis into Ōkeanós, thence to the

admiral Nearchos (red line), which approximates the route of Skylax, and of Alexander the Great (green line).¹⁸



Map 1 - The coastal route from the delta of the Indus to the Persian Gulf.¹⁹

The people who lived on the sandy strip between the Ommanitic desert and the crystal clear ocean would later be described by Nearchos as nomads and “fish-eaters” [*ikhthuophagoi*].²⁰ Much later, in the first century CE, this coast had small ports and market places that would host vessels under way from India to Arabia, shipping copper, red sandal

Red Sea, carried their ship overland twelve days, reached Lake Tritonis in Libya, and found an outlet from Lake Tritonis to the Mediterranean”. Compare Herodotus 1.180.1: “The city (Babylon) is divided into two parts; for it is cut in half by a river named Euphrates, a wide, deep, and swift river, flowing from Armenia and issuing into the Red Sea”.

As discussed by Schoff (1913), *Erythrin thalassan* more accurately is the Sea of Erythras; Red Sea would be *Thalassa Erythra*, in which *Erythra* is the adjective. The former, Sea of Erythras, is more accurate, because the sea is not red, except in the rare case of Exodus 7.17-21, while Erythras may have been the name of an illustrious hero, a priest of this area: a king “of the rosy morn”.

¹⁸ Nearchos (c. 360-300 BCE) was one of the officers, a navarch, in the army of Alexander the Great. When Alexander reached the end of his expedition, he decided to return by sailing down the Hindu River and by circumnavigating the Indian peninsula. The Cretan Admiral Nearchos commanded the fleet of 150 ships with 14,000 men in a monumental voyage from Nikea to the Euphrates.

¹⁹ Map titled *Nearchos' Voyage*. S. Phalieros, Maios 1998 Chania, on display in the Nautical Museum of Chania, Crete.

²⁰ Arrian: *Anabasis Alexandri* 8 (Indica). Translation Robson E.I. 1933: XXVI “...Below the Gedrosians, as you follow the actual coast, dwell the people called the Fish-eaters. The fleet (of Nearchos) sailed past their country.”

wood, timbers of teakwood, logs of blackwood, ebony, many pearls, clothing, wine, dates, gold and slaves.²¹



Map 2 - The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea (1597 CE).²²

Eventually Skylax may have reached Bandar Abbas, which during the reign of Darius already was a Persian settlement. Bandar Abbas would become known as the location from which Darius' commander Silacus embarked and sailed to India, after which Bandar Abbas became the corner stone for the ancient trade between Euphrates and Western India.

Skylax, however, resumed his journey towards the west. He crossed the Strait of Hormuz and continued his voyage following the southwestern coastline of the Arabian Peninsula. He passed by the barren coast on which Asikh, Moskha, and Cani may have been settlements—with roadsteads where ships could lie reasonably safe at anchor and of which the locals controlled the trade along the coast.

Finally, Skylax arrives at the southwestern tip of ancient Yemen. Her main port was then called Eudaemon ("Prosperous"), now modern Aden. In Eudaemon all cargo from India and Egypt came together for transshipment, as nobody yet dared to sail from Egypt to India, or vice versa.²³

²¹ The Greco-Roman periplus, the *Periplus tēs Erythrās Thalássēs*, mentions the settlements of Ommana and Oraea.

²² Abraham Ortelius, 1603. *Map for the Periplus Maris Erythraei*.

²³ Strabo, *Geography* 2.5.12: "At any rate, when Gallus was prefect of Egypt, I accompanied him and ascended the Nile as far as Syene and the frontiers of Kingdom of Aksum (Ethiopia), and I learned that as many as 120 vessels were sailing from Myos Hormos ("Harbour of the - Pearl's - Muscle") to India, whereas formerly,

While staying close to the shore, Skylax passed through the eastern section of the sea strait which is named Bab-el-Mandeb; the Gate of Tears. This section would later be called “Bab Iskender”; Alexander’s Strait.²⁴ The trade across the Bab-el-Mandeb was then controlled by the Sabaean kingdom, so this may have been the most dangerous part of his journey.

We do not know whether he followed the coast of Arabia, or that of the Berber [*barbaroi*] country, but steadily he moved north, in tremendous heat and against the prevailing winds. For safety he may have had to avoid the shallow water of the coral reefs which extend—till tenths of miles—from either side of the Red Sea coastline.

Finally he arrived at the Egyptian port of Mussel Harbor [*Myos Hormos*] near the entrance of the Gulf of Suez.²⁵ ²⁶ Strabo mentions that, later, from this port sailed around a 120 ships to Arabia and India.²⁷ Here Skylax ended his 30-month journey, in which he covered the 3200 miles that separate the delta of the Indus River from the northern part of the Red Sea.

From his port of arrival Skylax may have traveled overland to the Persian garrison in Memphis, to report and document his findings. His work, the *Periplous of Skylax*, is referred to by Hekataios of Miletus when he wrote about the Indus Satrapies of the Achaemenides, and by Strabo who refers to Skylax as an ancient writer.²⁸

Following the exploration of Skylax, King Darius commanded a canal to be excavated, providing access firstly to the Bitter Lakes and from there through the 50 km long valley of the Wadi Tumilat towards Zagadis in the eastern Nile delta. He set up stelae (c. 490 BCE) and the inscription on one such stele says:

*“I commanded to dig this canal from the Nile...to the sea which goes from Persia; afterwards this canal was dug, thus as I commanded, and ships passed from Egypt by this canal to Persia as was my will.”*²⁹

under the Ptolemy’s, only a very few ventured to undertake the voyage and to carry on traffic in Indian merchandise”.

²⁴ According to an Arabic legend, the Bab-el-Mandeb (Gate of Tears) derived its name from the numbers who were drowned by the earthquake which separated Asia and Africa.

²⁵ Berbers, or *Barbaroi*: “foreigners”; them speaking a tongue foreign to the ancient Greeks. With more familiar peoples, like Cretans, Cydonians, Dorians and Pelasgians, the Achaeans would mix their languages together, resulting in some sort of *lingua franca*. [After Scott, S. 2021 on *Homeric Odyssey* 19.172–177]

²⁶ Herodotus, *The Histories* 4.44: “...and voyaging over the sea west, they came in the thirtieth month to that place from which the Egyptian king sent the above-mentioned Phoenicians to sail around Libya”. The ancient port of Myos Hormos is located in modern Qūṣayr al-Qadīm. [Buhkarin, M. 2012]

²⁷ Herodotus describes the length of the Red Sea as follows: “Now in Arabia, not far from Egypt, there is a gulf of the sea entering in from the sea called Red, of which the length is such as I shall show: for length, it is a 40 days’ voyage for a ship rowed by oars from its inner end out to the wide sea”. [Herodotus, *The Histories* 2.11]

²⁸ Hec. fr. 179; F. H. G. i. 12 cited in How & Wells’ *Commentary on Herodotus* 4.44. Strabo, *Geography* 14.2.20: “Skylax the ancient historian was a native of this island.”

²⁹ Gray & Cary, 1926 p. 200. Herodotus, *The Histories* 2.158, Aristotle, *Meteorology* 1.14.

The Athenian polymathēs Aristotle, however, also considered the matter and wrote:

“One of their kings tried to make a canal to it, for it would have been of no little advantage to them for the whole region to have become navigable; Sesostris is said to have been the first of the ancient kings to try, but he found that the sea was higher than the land. So, he first, and Darius afterwards, stopped making the canal, lest the sea should mix with the river water and spoil it.”³⁰

When Skylax returned to Greece, then he would find the building of a temple in progress.³¹ A new temple—complete with propylaia and all—dedicated to Athena Polias, was being built on the Acropolis.³² Slightly later, by 510 BCE, the tyrant Hippias would be expelled by the people of Athens.

The next ancient Athenian lawgiver in line, Cleisthenes, reformed the political structure of Attica by putting in place a more democratic constitution. He is credited with increasing the power of the Athenian citizens' assembly [*ekklēsia*], and for reducing the power of the nobility over Athenian politics. He installed isonomic institutions—equal rights for all citizens (though only men were citizens)—and became the founding father of the Athenian democracy [*democratia*].³³

Cleisthenes changed the four traditional tribes of Solon, which were based on family relations, into ten tribes according to their area of residence [*deme*]. A ship was then named for each of the ten tribes that he created. The political structure of 48 wealthy ship-commissioners [*naukraría*] was replaced by a people's assembly consisting of 50 demarchs.³⁴ A military organization was established, consisting of ten elected army leaders [*strategoī*], which stood under command of the archon polemarchos. This structure would hold till about 478 BCE, after which the position of the polemarch became redundant.

³⁰ Aristotle, *Meteorology* 1.14. Translated by E.W. Webster. *Polymathēs*: “having learned much”, a great scholar and thinker.

³¹ This temple became known as the Old Temple of Athena, the *Archaios Neos*, which would be destroyed in 480 BCE, during the destruction of Athens by the Persians.

³² *Propylaia*; monumental gateway. Derived from *pro-*, “before, in front of” and the plural of *pyle* “gate”, meaning literally “that which is before the gates”.

³³ *Isonomia*; equality before the law. Derived from *iso-* + *nómos*, “law”. *Democratia* is “rule by the people”.

³⁴ Aristotle, *School of*, *Constitution of the Athenians* 21.5. Note that the number of ships, fifty, corresponds with the size of Athenian contingent that sailed to Troy. [Homeric *Iliad* 2.546-556]



Figure 2 - Model of a Magan boat, Muscat, Oman.³⁵

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³⁵ Model of Magan Boat. Cherry wood, straw bundles, leather and sewn coir rope. Length: 0.8 m (scale 1:15). The National Museum in Muscat, Oman. The Magan civilization lasted from around 2300 till 550 BCE. The two-legged type of mast—the legs planted on the plank gunwales—was a necessity for reed boats, the bottom of which was not strong enough to absorb the resultant forces. The boat was suitable for operation along the East-Arabian coast only.

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None of them should be supposed to agree with my arguments, let alone share responsibility for any of my errors or abundancies. I tried to make proper reference when I used or paraphrased text written by others.

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