

ARMIES AND NAVIES

Lecture 3: Early Ships

The Earliest Ships

- ▣ The earliest ships were probably boats and rafts of reeds or hollowed out trunks of trees.
- ▣ Oars start to appear in the record from the 3rd millennium BC.
- ▣ The earliest representations of ships with sails come from Egypt (c3000 BC).



Egyptian representation of ship under sail, C2500 BC.

Shipwrecks

- ▣ Shipwrecks are a great source of information about ancient ships.
- ▣ However, often only parts of the ship survive, often depending on the cargo it had.

Site plan of the Ulu-Burun shipwreck,
The earliest known sea-going shipwreck
14th century BC



Homer

- ▣ Ships are found in abundance in Homer.
- ▣ They are considered a part of daily life.
- ▣ These are the standard ships of the archaic period, powered by both oars and a square sail.
- ▣ Some of them appear to be pentekonters (ie ships with 50 oars each side).
- ▣ They were used both for war and for trade, although there are references to trading ships only.

The Commonality of Sailing in Homer

- ▣ For like little children or widow women [290] do they wail each to the other in longing to return home. Verily there is toil enough to make a man return disheartened. For he that abideth but one single month far from his wife in his benched ship hath vexation of heart, even he whom winter blasts and surging seas keep afar; [295] but for us is the ninth year at its turn, while we abide here; wherefore I count it not shame that the Achaeans have vexation of heart beside their beaked ships; yet even so it is a shameful thing to tarry long, and return empty Homer *Iliad* 2.289-99

The Homeric Pentekonte

- ▣ Of the Boeotians Peneleos and Leitus were captains, [495] and Arcesilaus and Prothoënor and Clonius; these were they that dwelt in Hyria and rocky Aulis and Schoenus and Scolus and Eteonus with its many ridges, Thespeia, Graea, and spacious Mycalessus; and that dwelt about Harma and Eilesium and Erythrae; [500] and that held Eleon and Hyle and Peteon, Ocalea and Medeon, the well-built citadel, Copae, Eutresis, and Thisbe, the haunt of doves; that dwelt in Coroneia and grassy Haliartus, and that held Plataea and dwelt in Glisas; [505] that held lower Thebe, the well-built citadel, and holy Onchestus, the bright grove of Poseidon; and that held Arne, rich in vines, and Mideia and sacred Nisa and Anthedon on the seaboard. **Of these there came fifty ships, and on board of each [510] went young men of the Boeotians an hundred and twenty.** Homer *Iliad* 2.494-511

Homeric Shipbuilding (1)

- Then she set herself to plan the sending of the great-hearted Odysseus. She gave him a great axe, well fitted to his hands, [235] an axe of bronze, sharpened on both sides; and in it was a beautiful handle of olive wood, securely fastened; and thereafter she gave him a polished adze. Then she led the way to the borders of the island where tall trees were standing, **alder and poplar and fir, reaching to the skies, [240] long dry and well-seasoned**, which would float for him lightly. But when she had shewn him where the tall trees grew, Calypso, the beautiful goddess, returned homewards, but he fell to cutting timbers, and his work went forward apace. **Twenty trees in all did he fell, and trimmed them with the axe; [245]** then he cunningly smoothed them all and made them straight to the line. Meanwhile Calypso, the beautiful goddess, **brought him augers; and he bored all the pieces and fitted them to one another, and with pegs and morticings did he hammer it together.** Homer *Odyssey* 5.233-49

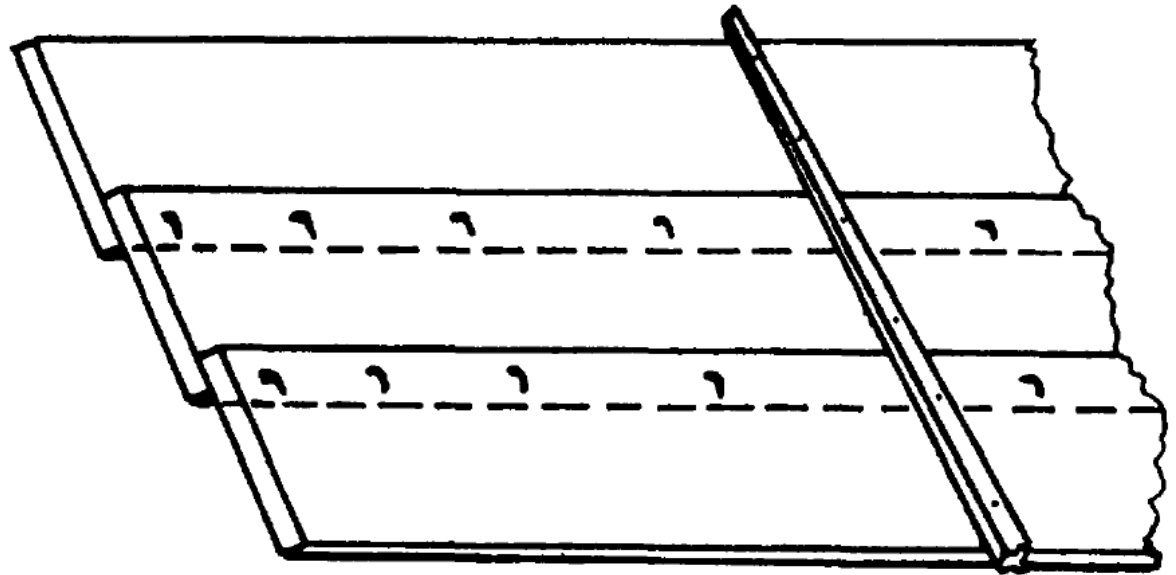
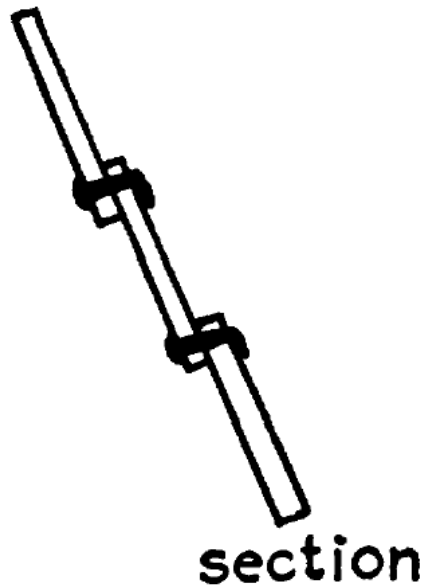
Homeric Shipbuilding (2)

- ▣ Wide as a man well-skilled in carpentry marks out the curve of the hull of a freight-ship, [250] broad of beam, even so wide did Odysseus make his raft. And he set up the deck-beams, bolting them to the close-set ribs, and laboured on; and he finished the raft with long gunwales. In it he set a mast and a yard-arm, fitted to it, [255] and furthermore made him a steering-oar, wherewith to steer. Then he fenced in the whole from stem to stern with willow withes to be a defence against the wave, and strewed much brush thereon. Meanwhile Calypso, the beautiful goddess, brought him cloth to make him a sail, and he fashioned that too with skill. [260] And he made fast in the raft braces and halyards and sheets, and then with levers forced it down into the bright sea. Homer *Odyssey* 2.249-61

The Shell-First Technique

- ▣ the "shell-first" technique (fig. 1), is done by building up a shell of planking from the keel with long planks which are attached to one end of the ship, bent to the desired curve, then fastened to the other end. The ship-wright can adjust each plank so that it corresponds precisely to its opposite on the other side of the ship. Once the shell of the hull is built, frames (ribs) and timbers, which can give the hull added strength, may be fitted inside it. The basic principle of shell-first building is that the longitudinal curve of the planks gives the ship its shape. Weinberg et al TAPS 1965 p39

Shell-First Technique



Shell-First Technique

- ▣ The shell-first technique was the technique used for ship-construction throughout antiquity.
- ▣ The trireme was also built with the shell-first technique.
- ▣ The shell-first technique not only meant considerable expertise was needed for construction but also that the timber had to be cut to the specifications of the ship, especially for long ships.

Sailing

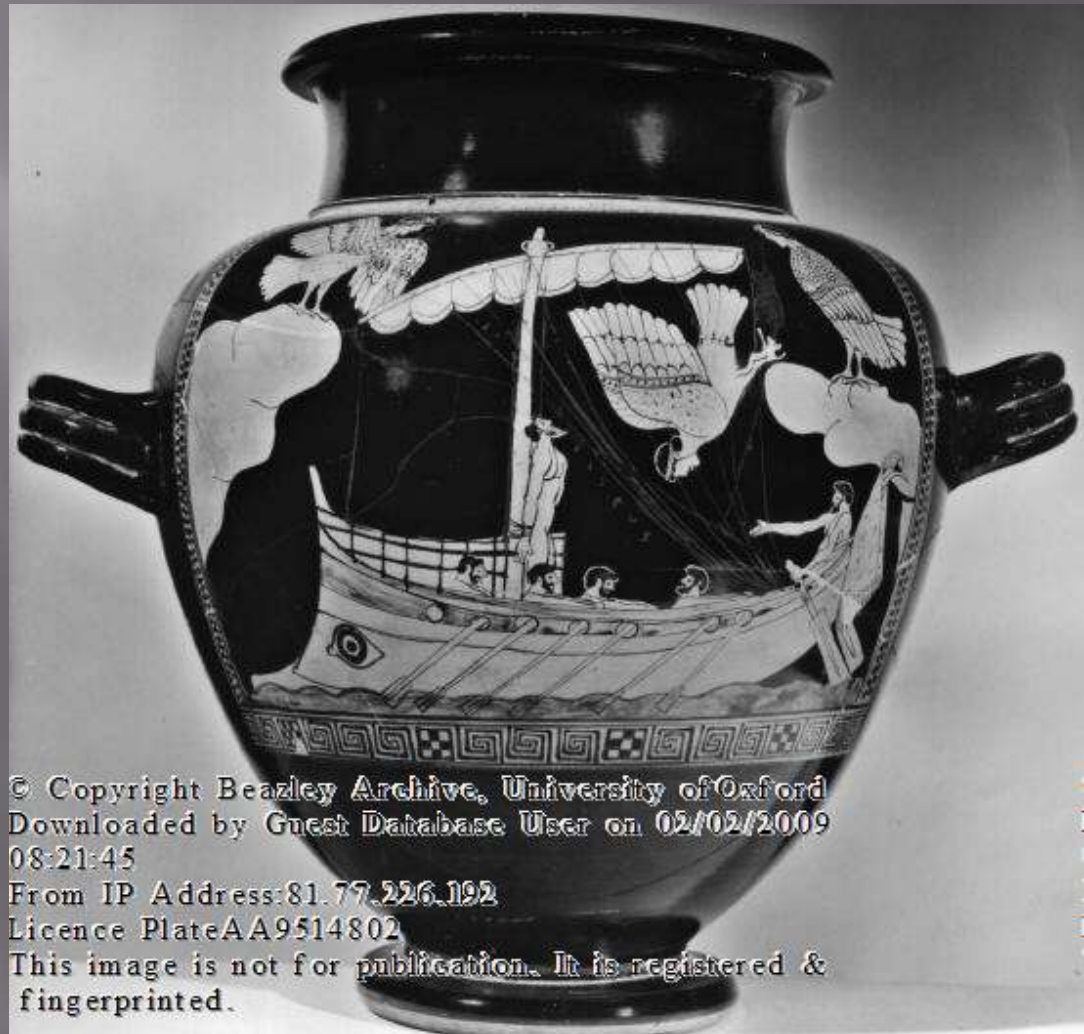
- ▣ Then on board the ship stepped Telemachus, and Athena went before him and sat down in the stern of the ship, and near her sat Telemachus, while the men loosed the stern cables and themselves stepped on board, and sat down upon the benches. [420] And flashing-eyed Athena sent them a favorable wind, a strong-blowing West wind that sang over the wine-dark sea. And Telemachus called to his men, and bade them lay hold of the tackling, and they hearkened to his call. The mast of fir [425] they raised and set in the hollow socket, and made it fast with fore-stays, and hauled up the white sail with twisted thongs of ox-hide. So the wind filled the belly of the sail, and the dark wave sang loudly about the stem of the ship as she went, and she sped over the wave accomplishing her way. Homer *Odyssey* 2.417-29

Hauling up a ship to shore

- ▣ But if desire for uncomfortable sea-faring seize you when the Pleiades plunge into the misty sea⁴ [620] to escape Orion's rude strength, then truly gales of all kinds rage. Then keep ships no longer on the sparkling sea, but be sure to till the land as I bid you. Haul up your ship upon the land and pack it closely with stones [625] all round to keep off the power of the winds which blow damply, and draw out the bilge-plug so that the rain of heaven may not rot it. Put away all the tackle and fittings in your house, and stow the wings of the sea-going ship neatly, and hang up the well-shaped rudder over the smoke. Hesiod *Works and Days* 618-29

The Helmsman

- ▣ Greek ships did not have a rudder.
- ▣ They were steered by one or two oars at the stern, with traverse handles.
- ▣ Thus, the job of the helmsman was very important.



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Part-time Seafarers

- ▣ You yourself wait until the season for sailing is come, and then haul your swift ship down to the sea and stow a convenient cargo in it, so that you may bring home profit, even as your father and mine, foolish Perses, used to sail on shipboard because he lacked sufficient livelihood. And one day he came to this very place, crossing over a great stretch of sea; [635] he left Aeolian Cyme and fled, not from riches and substance, but from wretched poverty which Zeus lays upon men, and he settled near Helicon in a miserable hamlet, [640] Ascra, which is bad in winter, sultry in summer, and good at no time. Hesiod *Works and Days* 630-42.

The Commonality of Ships in early literature

- ▣ This wave in turn, like the earlier one,
- ▣ comes on, and it will give us much labor
- ▣ to bail out once it enters the ship's . . .
- ▣ [one line missing]
- ▣ [two lines missing]
- ▣ Let us strengthen the ship's sides as quickly as possible,
- ▣ and make a run to a safe harbor;
- ▣ and let no craven hesitation seize
- ▣ any of us, for clear before us stands a great ordeal.
- ▣ Remember our previous trouble;
- ▣ now let every man prove himself reliable,
- ▣ and let us not put to shame by cowardice
- ▣ our noble fathers lying under the earth....
- ▣ Alkaios F6 *The Ship of State*

Raiding

- ▣ In the archaic period, part of sailing was raiding.
- ▣ Unlike later views of piracy, the archaic Greeks did not disapprove of raiding.
- ▣ On the contrary, it was considered brave, daring and part of a leader's responsibilities.

Raiding in Homer

- ▣ But when they had put from them the desire of food and drink, the horseman, Nestor of Gerenia, spoke first among them: “Now verily is it seemlier to ask and enquire [70] of the strangers who they are, since now they have had their joy of food. Strangers, who are ye? Whence do ye sail over the watery ways? Is it on some business, or do ye wander at random over the sea, even as pirates, who wander hazarding their lives and bringing evil to men of other lands?” Homer *Odyssey* 3.68-74
- ▣ “From Ilios the wind bore me and brought me to the Cicones, [40] to Ismarus. There I sacked the city and slew the men; and from the city we took their wives and great store of treasure, and divided them among us, that so far as lay in me no man might go defrauded of an equal share. Then verily I gave command that we should flee with swift foot, but the others in their great folly did not hearken. Homer *Odyssey* 9.39-44

Raiding and Colonisation

- ▣ The pentekonter was a raiding ship par excellence.
- ▣ It was also the preferred ship for settlement abroad.
- ▣ Knowledge of far-away lands in other parts of the Mediterranean was as much due to trade as it was due to raiding.

Questions?

Follow-Up reading

- ▣ Thomas J. Figueira 'Xanthippos, Father of Perikles, and the "Prutaneis" of the "Naukraroi"' *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (3rd Qtr., 1986), pp. 257-279 Stable URL:
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4435967>
- ▣ G. L. Cawkwell 'Early Colonisation' *The Classical Quarterly*, New Series, Vol. 42, No. 2 (1992), pp. 289-303 Stable URL:
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/639408>