INTRODUCTION

THE STATE OF MODERN SCHOLARSHIP

It is the long-standing belief among classical scholars that seafaring on the ancient Mediterranean was highly seasonal in nature. This assumption underlies and permeates our present understanding of Graeco-Roman maritime activities and has gone all-but unchallenged by historians and archaeologists. There has, after all, seemed little reason to question the handful of ancient texts relating to the seasonal limits of the maritime calendar, for while such literature is sparse, on cursory examination there appears to be broad agreement that the sailing season of antiquity was confined within a six- to eight-month period centred on the summer. By contrast, the wintertime was regarded as ‘out-of-season’ for Greek and Roman seafarers—the period of *mare clausum*, the ‘closed sea’. A relatively recent study therefore noted: ‘The duration and dates of the sailing season in the ancient Mediterranean are well known and have been fairly thoroughly discussed’.

Throughout the following pages it will, however, be argued that, rather than presenting a single, unified picture of the Graeco-Roman sailing season, critical examination of the ancient texts instead reveals that the maritime calendars surviving from antiquity are far from compatible. Indeed, the literature deals with a wide variety of different types of vessels, sailing on very different regions of the Mediterranean Sea. Many of the surviving ancient texts are also separated by broad spans of time that encompassed considerable technological, political and economic change, all of which had profound implications for the length of the sailing season.

While modern scholarship has generally accepted the seasonal parameters of the maritime calendars set down in the Graeco-Roman literature, it has nevertheless been acknowledged that in times of military, political or economic necessity, both warships and trading merchantmen were required to occasionally sail across the wintertime Mediterranean, and numerous exemptions to *mare clausum* have been teased out of ancient texts by historians. However, while these literary examples are of great importance in

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1 Morton 2001: 255 n. 1.
2 See especially, Rougé 1952; Saint-Denis 1947. Additional examples are also to be found
demonstrating that voyaging did take place on winter seas, they are generally regarded as anomalies; infrequent exceptions to what was very much the general seasonal rule of Graeco-Roman seafaring. Jamie Morton has therefore noted that fleets of warships ‘might be prepared (or forced) to endure hardship and even risk catastrophe out on active service after the end of the sailing season proper’, while M.P. Charlesworth long ago commented that, for trading vessels, ‘navigation in winter was not absolutely impossible, but the ordinary merchant would not dream of trusting himself to the stormy waters save under strong urgency’. As a result of this presumed suspension in commercial seafaring during the wintertime, it is thus argued that piracy also underwent a seasonal downturn: with virtually no merchant vessels plying their trade on the sea-lanes during the winter months, seaborne marauders remained off the water until the spring when, with the resumption of the sailing season, large numbers of their potential prey once again began to sail on the waters of the Mediterranean.

Any seasonal dislocation to commercial shipping must also have had a major impact on the wider economy of the ancient world. If maritime transport was as seasonally constricted as the sailing calendars of antiquity would suggest, then there must have been a severe seasonal disruption in the patterns of Graeco-Roman trade. As the sea-lanes closed for the winter and voyaging came to an end, the communities clustered about the shores of the Mediterranean would have been deprived of what was, by far and away, the fastest and most cost-effective means of transporting commodities around the ancient world. Advocates of a ‘minimalist’ model of the ancient economy—in which manufacturing production is regarded as small in scale and the movement of goods generally limited to a highly localised area—have therefore been keen to draw attention to the wintertime suspension of ancient shipping and the adverse effects which such a seasonal adjournment would have had on inter-regional trade.

in Casson 1995: 270–272. For vessels involved in military operations, see Morrison & Williams 1968 for the Greek Classical period, and Morrison 1996 for the Hellenistic and Roman periods of antiquity.


4 See Ormerod 1924: 18; Pryor 1988: 87. See below, Chapt. 6.

5 For the relative costs of sea, river and land transport in the ancient world, see Duncan-Jones 1990; Greene 1986: 39 f.

6 Both Moses Finley (1985: 199) and A.H.M. Jones (1964: 843; 1974: 248), two of the most influential champions of the minimalist model for the Graeco-Roman economy, therefore emphasised the impracticalities of long-distance trade arising from the wintertime closure of the sea-lanes.