CHAPTER FOUR

THE EXPORTERS OF TIMBER

The producers of shipbuilding timber can be securely identified, since a list has survived in the work of Theophrastos from the late fourth century:

It is a narrow space, which produces shipbuilding timber. In Europe, it is found in Macedon and in parts of Thrace and Italy, while in Asia, in Kilikia and in Sinope and Amisos. There is also timber in the Mysian Olympos and in Mount Ida, but not a lot. In Syria, there is cedar, and that they use for triremes.¹

Theophrastos specifically notes that it is a very narrow zone that produces the necessary timber, mainly because triremes were preferably constructed of silver-fir or fir, which can be found in the Mediterranean only above 800 m in altitude:

In general, silver-fir, fir and cedar are used for shipbuilding. Triremes and long ships are made of silver-fir because it is light, while the round ships are made of fir because it does not decay. Sometimes triremes are also made of fir when they cannot get silver-fir. Those in Syria and Phoenicia made them of cedar because even fir is rare. In Cyprus, they use pine, for the island has a lot and it is considered better than its fir.²

Relating to Italy, Theophrastos later specifies that the areas producing shipbuilding timber were south Italy, Latium and Corsica:

¹ Theophrastos Enquiry Into Plants 4.5.5: Βρακχίς δ’ ἐστὶ τόπος ὃς ἔχει καὶ ὅλως τὴν ναυπηγήσιμον ὕλην· τῆς μὲν γὰρ Ἑύρωπης δοξεῖ τὰ περί τὴν Μακεδονιαν καὶ ὅσα τῆς Θρᾴκης καὶ περὶ Ἡπείρου· τῆς δὲ Ἀσίας τὰ τε ἐν Κιλικίᾳ καὶ τὰ ἐν Σινώπῃ καὶ Ἀμίσοι, ἐπὶ δὲ ὁ Μύσιος ὁ Ὀλυμπυκός καὶ Ἡ Ἰδὴ πλὴν οὗ πολλῆν· ἥ γὰρ Συρία κέδρον ἔχει καὶ ταύτη θρόντα πρὸς τὰς τριήρεις.

² Theophrastos Enquiry Into Plants 5.7.1–2: Ἐλάτημὲν οὖν καὶ πεύκη καὶ κέδρος ὡς ἄπλος εἶπεν ναυπηγήσιμα· τάς μὲν γὰρ τριήρεις καὶ τὰ μακρὰ πλοία ἐλάτινα ποιοῦσι διὰ χαλαρότητα, τὰ δὲ στρογγύλα πεύκινα διὰ τὸ ἀσάπες· ἐνίοι δὲ καὶ τὰς τριήρεις διὰ τὸ μὴ εὐπορεῖν ἐλάτης. οἱ δὲ κατὰ Συρίαν καὶ Φοινίκην ἐν κέδρον· σπανίζοντι γάρ καὶ πεύκης. οἱ δ’ ἐν Κύπρῳ πίτυσι· ταύτην γὰρ οὗ νήσου ἔχει καὶ δοξεῖ κρείττων εἶναι τῆς πεύκης. Altitude: Meiggs (1982: 119); note that the quality of the fir is dependent on climate, temperature and soil conditions. Note that Greek botanical nomenclature was as complex as modern; in translations, I use ‘silver-fir’ for elate meaning abies cephalonica and abies pectinata, ‘fir’ for peuke meaning mainly pinus laricio (Corsican pine) and ‘pine’ for pitys meaning pinus halepensis (Aleppo pine), following Hort (1968).
They say the largest and most are in Corsica; those of Latium are of very good quality, both the silver-firs and the firs there are larger and better than the south Italian but even these are nothing compared to those of Corsica. 3

Relating to Thrace, other sources pinpoint the Strymon area as the primary timber producer. 4 Since Theophrastos was writing late in the classical period, other areas probably produced shipbuilding timber in earlier times but had been overexploited by his time, such as Arkadia. 5 It is safe to assume that most areas with access to forests of sufficient altitude would be able to construct a limited number of triremes; however, large building programmes or continuous supply must have been dependent on the larger producers. The most striking feature of Theophrastos’ testimony is the absence of any major navies in the territories he lists as the major producers of shipbuilding timber, at least for the Greek world. The great naval powers of the Greek world are well known, Athens, Corinth, Aigina, Chios, Mytilene, Samos, Syracuse and Rhodes. None of them, with the partial exceptions of Corinth and Mytilene, had native timber resources. Most of these poleis had large navies in the archaic period as well, which probably accounts for the depletion of their native resources. However, the fact that their naval power continued after the depletion of their native resources is the most powerful testimony of the effort they expended to acquire sufficient timber for their navies.

Most of the evidence of timber as an export commodity concerns the Macedonian Kingdom. In Macedon, the king owned the forests and had control over the production and export of timber:

Then I imported oars to your troops in Samos, when the Four Hundred had already taken over here. For Archelaos was my family’s xenos and he gave me rights to cut and export as many as I wished. I imported those oars, and at a price of five drachmai, because I did not want to sell them at a higher price than they cost me. 6

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3 Theophrastos Enquiry Into Plants 5.8.1: μέγιστα δὲ καὶ παρὰ πολὺ τὰ ἐν τῇ Κύρνῳ φασίν εἶναι· τῶν γὰρ ἐν τῇ Λατίνῃ καλῶν γινομένων ύπερβολὴ καὶ τῶν ἐλατίνων καὶ τῶν πευκίνων—μείζω γὰρ ταῦτα καὶ καλλίω τῶν Ἰταλικῶν—οὐδὲν εἶναι πρὸς τὰ ἐν τῇ Κύρνῳ.

4 Herodotos 5.23.2 on Myrkinos and Thucydides 4.108.1 for Amphipolis.

5 Theophrastos Enquiry Into Plants 5.2.1.

6 Andokides 2.11: ἀλλ’ αὐτίκα μὲν τὸτε εἰσήγαγον εἰς (τὴν) στρατιὰν ὑμῶν ὡςαν ἐν Σάμῳ κωπέας, τῶν τετρακίων ἄδε πράγματα ἐνθάδε κατείληφτον, ὄντος μοι Ἀρχέλαος ἐξέγερε πατρικὸν καὶ διδόντος τέμνεσθαι τε καὶ ἐξέγερε τὰς ἐμὲ ἐμὲ καὶ ἐμὲ ταῦτας ἐμέ κατέστησεν.†