

THE EARLIEST EXPONENT OF SEA POWER

By SIDNEY GUNN

Reprinted from the
UNITED STATES NAVAL INSTITUTE PROCEEDINGS
Vol. 44, No. 5, Whole No. 183
May, 1918

Bibliothèque Maison de l'Orient



135853

[COPYRIGHTED]

U. S. NAVAL INSTITUTE, ANNAPOLIS, MD.

THE EARLIEST EXPONENT OF SEA POWER

By SIDNEY GUNN

It is well known that Admiral Mahan had many predecessors as advocates of sea power, among them men like Lord Bacon, whose distinction was intellectual and in no wise naval, but it is not generally realized that one of the supreme productions of the human intellect is fundamentally a eulogy of the character and the accomplishments of the sailor.

This work is the *Odyssey* of Homer. Scholars have written libraries expounding it. They have disputed whether it is the work of one author or a syndicate; whether it was composed before or after the Greeks acquired the art of writing; whether it is older or later than its companion poem, the *Iliad*; and whether its hero, Odysseus, is a personification of the sun, the summer, or some other feature or aspect of the natural world. About all these things and many more the learned have vigorously and volubly disputed, but, after the manner of their kind, they have for the most part lost sight of the obvious in their enthusiasm for the recondite, and so have failed to make clear to the world the real reason why this work has for thirty centuries held the interest of mankind, and why it is also regarded as among the greatest of the world's literary monuments.

Of course it is true that it is a combination of primitive material. Man in his infancy personified nature and told stories in which the sun and the moon, the seasons, and all the processes of nature were depicted as creatures with the motives and problems of men. This, however, was only during the earliest stages of society, for very soon the savage began to realize that "the proper study of mankind is man," and so he turned to his own history and began to create fables that reflected the growth of that wonderful thing civilization more than they did the natural world. The natural world, however, is the theater of civilization, and there was felt to be a resemblance, if not an identity, between its laws and those

of civilization, so the old heroes who had mainly depicted the sun and moon or the weather were still the characters in his tales, but they had a new meaning, for they represented social forces. It is thus a very reasonable thing to say that Odysseus is a personification of nature in origin, but it is not the complete truth to say that he is that in the *Odyssey*.

At the time that the *Odyssey* was composed, even if we put it before 1000 B. C., the human race had progressed nearly everywhere beyond the point where the natural world was its chief interest; and so the Greek creator of this masterpiece found his inspiration for it in the development of man individually and collectively. Obviously one of the greatest triumphs of human courage and resource over the powers of nature was the ability to navigate the trackless waters without the guidance of landmarks, and it is by making its hero an embodiment of the qualities in our nature that brought about this triumph that the author of the *Odyssey* gives it its unity and its perennial interest.

The creator of this great epic was, in all likelihood, largely unconscious of the fact that he was celebrating the collective efforts of many men and many generations. He probably thought he was recounting the acts of a single individual whom he admired, and the ninety or more generations of mankind who have found the tale of absorbing interest, have done so because it depicts convincingly the experiences of a clearly defined personality. This, however, is the result of the inability of our minds to perceive the general or the abstract except indirectly or by suggestion. Even the great genius cannot think impersonally, because personality is the very basis of human experience; but, by an intuitive process more subtle than thought, he can make personality a symbol of humanity, and those who delight in his work appreciate its implied meaning by the same superconscious faculty as that by which it was created.

The basis of Odysseus's character is delight in adventure and aspiration for knowledge, and these two things are undoubtedly what did most to induce men to venture out on the sea and learn by slow and painful stages to navigate its pathless wastes. It is admitted that the man who invented the hammer or any other elementary tool was a far greater man than the creator of the most complicated modern device, because first steps are always the hardest to take; but what are we to think of the first man or

men who had the hardihood to venture out on the sea in the frail and clumsy craft that primitive implements and elementary knowledge could devise! Surely this was a superlative exhibition of the adventurous spirit, and it is the qualities displayed by these men and their successors down to his own time that the author of the *Odyssey* made the basis of his hero's character.

But it took more than the spirit of adventure and curiosity to conquer the sea. Hardihood and infinite resource were necessary, for the task was such as to put human courage and ability to the supreme test. So Odysseus is the "much-enduring man," and "the man of many devices." Besides his insatiable thirst to know the world and the ways of men, he had courage that nothing could subdue, and resourcefulness that nothing could exhaust. He is, in short, the embodiment of all the striking characteristics of those hardy specimens of our race, whose restless energy and indomitable perseverance have given us the art of navigation and all the benefits derived from it. Not only this, but the picture is made complete by other qualities that distinguish the mariner in all generations. Odysseus shows a facility for getting into trouble and getting out again, and he displays an even more sailor-like attribute in his ability to find a sweetheart in every port.

To be sure, the story has many elements that do not relate entirely to the sea. It has much in it that is the result of its being a combination of myth and legend, and it has a great deal that was put in to give it concreteness and artistic effect. Nevertheless its theme is the struggle of Odysseus, aided by Athena, to save himself from destruction at the hands of Poseidon. Now Athena is the personification of intelligence and courage, while Poseidon is a symbol of the forces of nature, particularly of such mighty exhibitions of it as are given by the sea.

Not only is there this general basis to show that the *Odyssey* is a picture of the sailor's nature and experiences, but there is also much that reflects the results of the development of the art of navigation. It is a sort of figurative geography. Most of its fanciful episodes have features that probably owe their origin to magnified and distorted accounts of the striking things about the physical or social world that had been made known by sea-faring up to the time of the composition of the poem, as we can see by a brief examination of some of them.

One of the most familiar adventures of Odysseus is the one with Polyphemus. Odysseus and some of his men enter an inhabited cave and await the return of its occupant. Eventually he comes, but he turns out to be an enormous giant with only one eye in the middle of his forehead. His nature is as brutal as his form, for he shows no respect for the sacred obligations of hospitality, but kills and eats some of Odysseus's men, and shuts the rest up for a like fate. Odysseus gives him a skin of wine, which gratifies the giant so much that he asks Odysseus his name, and promises to reward him for his gift by eating him last. Odysseus says that his name is Nobody, and when the wine has overcome its too appreciative recipient, he and his companions put out the giant's single eye, with a sharpened pole. This awakes Polyphemus, and he at once sets up a roar that calls his neighbors of like size to his assistance. When they ask him what is the matter, however, he says: "Nobody has hurt me. Nobody has put my eye out." Whereupon his friends go home in disgust at being called out of bed for nothing. The next day Odysseus and his men escape by hanging underneath the giant's sheep as they pass out of the cave, and suffer nothing more from Polyphemus except the consequences of being under his curse.

It is impossible to analyze this most effective of all nursery tales, and be sure that it expresses anything more than the delight in the wonderful that is so strong in children and primitive people. And yet it can be easily seen that it may reflect the fact that the early navigator often came in contact with a cave-dwelling, cannibalistic people, whose cruelty was only equalled by their stupidity. The enormous size and the single eye may be only the exaggeration stimulated by wonder and demanded by credulity, but it is quite possible that these savages may have been of greater stature than more advanced races, and the single eye may be reminiscent of some idol or some ceremonial headdress connected with the sacrifice of the victims before they were eaten. It may also have arisen from the practice of putting out one of the eyes, for mutilation is a common savage practice.

The interpretation of some of the other episodes is less dubious than this, however. Odysseus is described as reaching a land where night and day are so near together that a shepherd could earn double wages if he could go without sleep. This seems plainly to indicate a vague knowledge of the summer conditions

in high latitudes, and it shows that the "midnight sun" astonished early voyagers as much as it interests tourists to the Scandinavian countries to-day.

Then there are references to floating islands that point to a probable knowledge of icebergs, and there are incidents, like the adventures among the Lotus Eaters and the Sirens, that, although they are probably very largely a poetic presentation of the attractions and temptations that lure the wanderer to forgetfulness of his home or to destruction, yet may also owe their origin to tales of the people of the Orient and Mediterranean littoral, the charms and pitfalls of whose luxurious living and narcotic drugs must have ensnared many a mariner of the ancient world and made him a willing or unwilling exile from his native land.

The *Odyssey* is thus an exposition of the psychology of the sailor, and an enthusiastic recognition of the debt civilization owes to his restless but steadfast spirit. It should therefore have a special interest for all men whose profession is seamanship, and it should be a source of pride to them to realize that their calling and the qualities it necessitates and develops have provided the matter for one of the greatest works of art ever created by the human intellect.