

(In response to prompt 1, for a roundtable conversation)

Go-Betweens on the Middle Sea:
Studying the Muted Maritime Community of the Ancient Mediterranean

Many animate and inanimate intermediaries in the Mediterranean region were dependent upon another go-between group: the sailors of the maritime community that carried people, technology, and ideas from one port to another. As a highly marginalized cohort, the maritime community in the ancient Mediterranean region was, perhaps, the epitome of a 'muted' or 'invisible' underclass. They were often derided as untrustworthy or unreliable, and have very few primary records to claim as their own. The details we have, such as the 1st-century AD tomb of Flavius Zeuxis celebrating his passage of Cape Malea 72 times, only emphasizes the amount of other general information we lack. As Purcell (2020, 427-8) has similarly noted, the epigraphic record for port communities is tantalizingly thin. Nevertheless, it is this community's character and nature, facing the physical and existential threats of sea travel whilst crossing the maritime space between polities, that makes them vital for the development of the states and empires that surround them.

This paper has two goals. First, to highlight examples from archaeological and historical sources demonstrating the essential nature of the maritime underclass to maintaining economic and diplomatic relations around them. Much like the present, ships from the Bronze Age to the early Medieval era contained gift exchanges and multi-cultural content that cross conventional political borders. Second, this paper emphasizes the need to investigate the muted maritime community of the ancient Mediterranean much more in depth, and will propose a number of postmodern interpretive approaches based on current social dynamics that may be useful.

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