

Ancient sea travel: The social impact of early sea travel has been rather overlooked, probably because few historians are seamen and early seamen had little need of writing, particularly since any voyage, as Chaucer's Shipman tells us, might be enlivened by some piracy. Madness to note it all down, even if you knew how to write:

...

Monday 12th May 4 bells forenoon watch, on passage, 13 leagues SE St Catherines Head IoW, light breeze at N by NW, some mist. Fell in with cog *Holie Marie* out of Barfleur. Ship suddenly sank, crew walked home. Managed to salvage cargo of wine, *deo gratia*.
8 bells: wind at W, visibility good.

...

Consequently ancient mariners get overlooked but there is no reason to think they did not exist.

Ancient shipping

The oldest cargo ship we know about is the wreck, off the entrance to Marmaris, south western Turkey, of what seems to have been a mobile foundry in about 3000 BC. The ship was of a pattern that could have been seen in European waters at any time up to the mid 1800s AD: short, round, solid, slow, with a square sail, carrying some 300 tons of cargo. Jason the Argonaut would have been at home in one; Captain Cook, as a boy, learned his trade in ships that differed only in size, solidity and detail.

The rich palaces of Knossos, Pylos and Mycenae would have been unthinkable without reliable shipping. The besiegers of Troy arrived, and after a long campaign, left by ship. Wrecks of seaworthy ships have been found from at least 3000BC. Pythias the Greek, around 300BC, got as far as the pack ice north of Iceland. Since he doesn't seem to have had a ship of his own, one assumes he was travelling as a paying passenger on normal commercial lines.

Faced with the Carthaginians, the Romans built, manned and trained an effective fleet in an astonishingly short time. Over the next hundred years they finally beat the Carthaginians and put their *classis* on a sound professional footing, though as with the Royal Navy in the eighteenth century, sons of smart families went into the army rather than the navy and the sea service got rather a poor press. The establishment of the ancient Celtic church along the Atlantic coast suggests routine trade and travel by sea between AD 50 and AD 300. Cornwall was a source of tin for the Romans – and you would hardly walk across Europe to Dover and then 300 miles west to Lands End to get a few mule loads. Allowing a slow cargo boat's average speed of 4kts, Cadiz is 880 sea miles or 10 days sailing; Ostia is another 1300 sea miles or 2 week's passage.



Cog drawing by Axel Nelson

Roman occupation of the Rhine area and the low countries could not have been effective without boats and boatmen. The two Roman invasions of Britain could not have happened without substantial fleets and in the second, and successful invasion, the army seems to have developed a new way of advancing along the coast in collaboration with the ships. The fleet would supply the soldiers and leapfrog marines ahead to attack Celts defending river crossings from behind. Tacitus describes the soldiers, sailors and marines feasting together afterwards and boasting about their prowess in a way that would be very familiar today. In later years the *classis Britannorum* existed to supply the main bases – all on the coast – at Exeter, Chester, York and Colchester (and see the picture of the Fleet above). They also seem to have fed the troops on Hadrian's Wall by water, via a network of locks and dammed up streams. Records of boatmen from the marshes of Iraq have been found there. See Raymond Selkirk's *The Piercebridge Formula*¹. Also <http://www.brigantesnation.com>).

The fleet was also responsible for keeping the North Sea clear of Anglo Saxons (two different kinds of German): a mission which would have made immediate sense to the author, characters and readers of *The Riddle of the Sands* at the beginning of the twentieth century and to British MTB crews in WW2.

By the second half of the first millennium Vikings and Norsemen travelled across and around northern Europe – and also as far as Sicily and the Greek islands - in their longships, with as much ease and facility as today's yachtsmen.

Let us imagine ourselves in Abbotsbury round the turn of the first millennium. Since Europe – and England - was full of warring factions and the excellent Roman road system had long since been potholed and overgrown, it would take 8 uncomfortable hours a day to travel, at most, 30 miles by what was humorously called a road. The easiest way to move about would be by water: in Abbotsbury, Orc or Alfred the Great or anyone of importance, would have had a seaworthy ship with its crew,

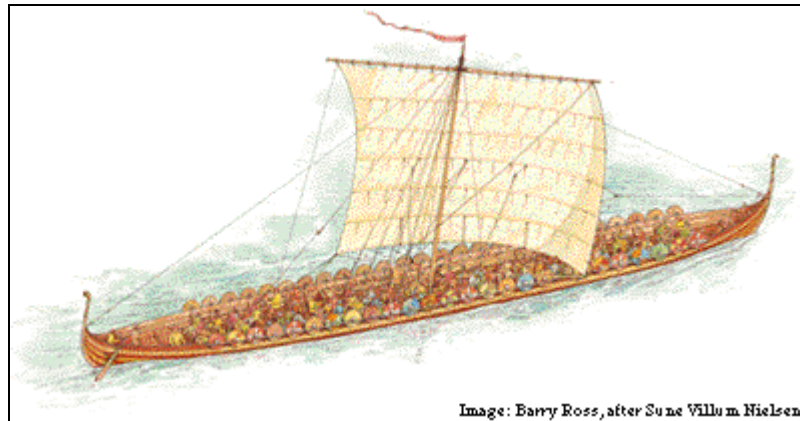
¹ [Piercebridge Formula: Dramatic New View of Roman History](#) ~Raymond Selkirk P Stephens
Hardcover - September 26, 1983 #

An alternative view:

Roman Military Supply in North-east England: An Analysis of and an Alternative to the Piercebridge Formula (British Archaeological Reports (BAR) British S.)

[James D. Anderson](#)

permanently lying in the Fleet. It might have been 50' long², in which case its maximum speed would have been 10kts.



Rouen, 140 miles away or 14 hours by longship (with a good wind) as probably much easier to get to than Winchester (3 days) , Bristol (3 days). Salisbury (4 days) or London (6 days). Yachts much smaller, slower and not much more comfortable than the longships routinely sail today from Portland to the French coast and indeed all over the coasts of Europe and the Mediterranean and back. Rouen could well have been where you went shopping and when you came home again, you might have brought St Catherine with you.

² The huge Roskilde longship, built in Canute's reign, was 35m long, with a maximum speed of 14kts