



The Mediterranean World

CHAPTER ONE

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TO THE PEOPLE of the ancient world the Mediterranean was “The Sea”; they knew almost nothing of the great ocean that lay beyond the Pillars of Hercules. A few of the more daring of the Phoenician navigators had sailed out into the Atlantic, but to the ordinary sailor from the Mediterranean lands the Ocean was an unknown region, believed to be a sea of darkness, the abode of terrible monsters and a place to be avoided. And then, as they believed the world to be flat, to sail too far would be to risk falling over the edge.

But the Mediterranean was familiar to the men of the ancient world, it was their best known highway. In those ancient times, the Ocean meant separation, it cut off the known world from the mysterious unknown, but the Mediterranean did not divide; it was, on the contrary, the chief means of communication between the countries of the ancient world. For the *world* was then the coast round the sea, and first the Phoenicians and later the Greeks sailed backwards and forwards, North and South, East and West, trading, often fighting, but always in contact with the islands and coasts. Egypt, Carthage, Athens and Rome were empires of the Mediterranean world; and the very name Mediterranean indicates its position; it was the sea in the “middle of the world.”

In the summer, the Mediterranean is almost like a lake, with its calm waters and its blue and sunny sky; but it is not always friendly and gentle. The Greeks said of it that it was “a lake when the gods are kind, and an ocean when they are spiteful,” and the sailors who crossed it had many tales of danger to tell. The coast of the Mediterranean, especially in the North, is broken by capes

and great headlands, by deep gulfs and bays, and the sea, more especially that eastern part known as the Aegean Sea, is dotted with islands, and these give rise to strong currents. These currents made serious difficulties for ancient navigators, and Strabo, one of the earliest writers of Geography, in describing their troubles says that "currents have more than one way of running through a strait." The early navigators had no maps or compass, and if they once got out of their regular course, they ran the danger of being swept along by some unknown current, or of being wrecked on some hidden rock. The result was that they preferred to sail as near the coast as was safe. This was the easier, as the Mediterranean has almost no tides, and as the early ships were small and light, landing was generally a simple matter. The ships were run ashore and pulled a few feet out of the water, and then they were pushed out to sea again whenever the sailors were ready.

Adventurous spirits have always turned towards the West, and it was westwards across the Mediterranean that the civilization we have inherited slowly advanced. The early Mediterranean civilization is sometimes given the general name of Aegean, because its great centres were in the Aegean Sea and on the adjoining mainland. The largest island in the Aegean is Crete, and the form of civilization developed there is called Cretan or Minoan, from the name of one of the legendary sea-kings of Crete, whilst that which spread on the mainland is called Mycenaean from the great stronghold where dwelt the lords of Mycenae.