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Greek Commercial Endeavors in the Antiquity - A Brief Account of the Ancient Commerce of Cassiterite Between Greece and Northern Europe

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In the Mediterranean Sea the era between 2500-2000 BC was a period of prosperous commercial activity related to the metal known as cassiterite (i.e. tin ore or tin oxide, SnO₂). The historical facts that have been gathered up to date present that the shipping fleets of the Minoans conducted most of this commerce, along with other merchants from the Aegean Sea. Moreover, the sea was not the only route of transport for the aforementioned metal, since also continental paths were in use. In this way, the Greek geographical area was interlocked with the areas of extraction, production and exportation of cassiterite.

There were two primary Kassiterite islands: Ireland and Britain. Almost all ancient writers referring to them placed these islands in the North-Western part of Europe: 'North and across of Artabron' (modern day Galicia), as Strabo notes. Britain at that time was often mentioned as 'Albion', whilst Ireland as 'Hibernia' or 'Hernia'. The latter seemed to have a significant amount of minerals that were exported to the Aegean cities of that time (1). The main bulk of cassiterite was concentrated in Cornwall, which was during the 3rd Millennium BC the undisputed production centre of the known world.

There were cassiterite ores to be found in the Mediterranean basin and specifically in the areas of: Cadiz, Asia Minor and Cyprus. When the intense productions led to the overvaluation of this metal, risk-taking merchants directed their efforts towards the discovery of this ore in more distant lands (2).

Quite a few researchers have argued that the first nation that started the North-South commerce of cassiterite should have been the Phoenicians, who enjoyed a remarkable commercial status in the Mediterranean world, as well as a long string of colonies from modern day Lebanon to the south of Spain. Nevertheless, this nation did not appear on the shores of the Western Mediterranean Sea before the 13th Century BC (3). Therefore, they could not have been the 'culprits' of any mercantile activity prior to that time. According to the archeologist and historian Stanley Casson, the Greeks had been exploring the British Isles from 2000 BC, and ignited a dynamic commercial activity concerning cassiterite as well as pottery.

Having stated the aforementioned point, a question that arises is how the Aegean-Greek communities managed to travel so far from their bases and be able to maintain so disperse commercial networks for such a prolonged period of time. Raymond Furon notes that, 'Already from the Proto-Minoan period I (2800-2400 BC) commerce was very developed. Crete was in the process of becoming then a major commercial power in the world. The industrial use of Bronze was a major factor for the development of the island, which in turn needed cassiterite as the main element for Bronze production. For that reason the Western Mediterranean was firstly explored and gradually came under the economic and political sphere of influence of the Minoans' (4).

During that era a wide commercial network centered in the Aegean Sea spanned across the entire Mediterranean Sea, and when exploitation of the metal had reached its peak, the Cretans were eager to obtain new unspoiled sources of production, so as to retain their dominant position. Thus the need to venture in the North was formed. Dr. Cyrus Gordon notes: 'A small Minoan sword was engraved in a Stonehenge Menir, reflecting in that way the direct or indirect relations between the population of the British Isles and those of the Aegean Sea. Furthermore, Minoan scriptures—1500 BC—were to be found from the Anatolian area to the Hibernian Peninsula and the Metcalf Rock in the USA. The existence of an ancient formidable commercial network on which the Mediterranean Sea was the epicenter, is being revealed' (5).

In addition to cassiterite, electron (amber, C₁₀H₁₆O) was of strong commercial value to the ancient Greeks inhabiting the modern day Aegean Archipelagos. Homer is the first person to name this material 'electron' and mentions it in the Iliad. The lands where electron was extracted were the Jutland Peninsula of today's Denmark (6), the shores of the Northern Sea near present-day Luebek and the mouth of the Elba River (7). The ancient 'electron road' from North to South, traversed the areas of the southern Elba and southern Rhine, and then moved along the bends of the Aar (Aare) River and the Geneva Lake, reaching the Rhone River all the way to the most important Greek colony of the Western Mediterranean, Marseilles. This activity reconstructs a primitive form of European economic integration. In particular, the Greek colony of Marseilles (8) interacted with the local Celtic tribes of modern day France, which in turn were able to facilitate the safe and continuous supply of electron from the northern tribes for a prolonged period and with remarkable continuity.

The British Professor Barry Cunliffe supports the idea that electron commerce was common between the Mediterranean and the Northern European regions since 2,000 BC, as supported by various remains in Wessex (England) and the Mycenae (Greece), along with findings in the south of France and the shores of Northern Germany (9).

Overall, the commerce of cassiterite and electron reveals a network of economic activity during antiquity that spanned across a wide geographical area, as well as the probable first well-documented Mediterranean influence of any kind in the periphery of the Nordic world. Future research might be able to investigate whether this mercantile reality resulted in cultural or even political implications that had a long-term impact on the civilizations involved, both in the North and in the South of Europe. In that sense the hypothesis of an early—in historical terms—European economic and political interdependence cannot be excluded, judging by the variety of indications in this perspective.

Notes:

- (1) Ramin J. "Le problème des Cassitérides", Paris, 1962. P. 25-26
- (2) Ramin J. "Le problème des Cassitérides", Paris, 1962. P.41
- (3) Casson S. "Greece and Britain", London, 1957. P. 34
- (4) Furon R. "Manuel de la Préhistoire Générale", Paris, 1967. P. 410
- (5) Gordon C. "America Before Columbus", New York, 1971. P. 81
- (6) Bunbury E.H. "A History of Ancient Geography", London, 1985-Reprint. Vol. II. P. 9
- (7) The World of Amber Earth Science Department of Emporia State University, "The World of Amber", Emporia, Kansas, 2007 (Last assessed), Link: <http://www.emporia.edu/earthsci/amber/amber.htm>
- (8) Vickers M. "Hallstatt and Early La Tène Chronology in Central, South and East Europe", London, 1984. P.208-211
- (9) Cunliffe B. "The Extraordinary Voyage of Pytheas the Greek", London, 2001, P. 211-214.

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