

A wee bit of maritime history... 40

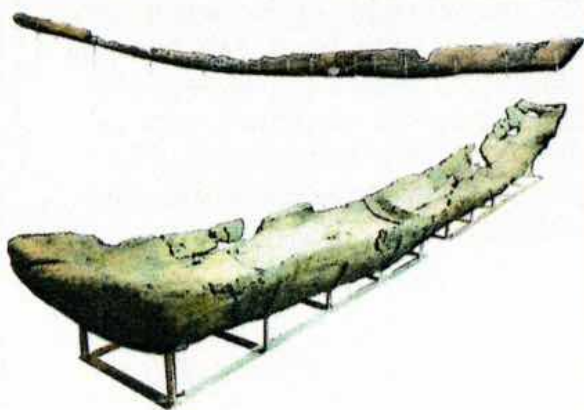
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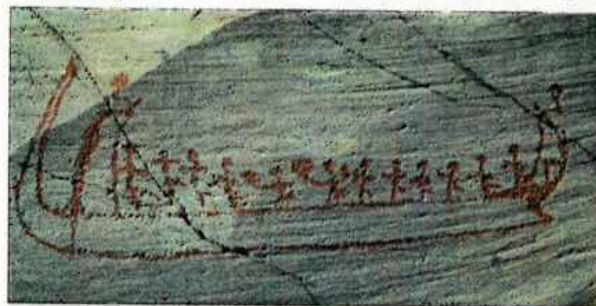
Maritime Communication : *Part 1 Who are you?*

caution – this leaflet contains suggestions for sources of extra information, also known as rabbit holes

Even in the not-so-distant past, travelling by water was much easier than on land. Modern humans got to Australia (by boat) at least 60,000 years ago, and there are stone tools on Indonesian islands dated to more than half a million years ago – implying that *Homo erectus* was travelling by boat! But, tens of thousands of years ago, setting out on a sea voyage, meant it was entirely probable that you and your companions would never return home. However, archaeology is providing us with ever more evidence that communication and trading routes developed very early in human pre-history. It would seem that people began travelling regular routes, to Cyprus for example, which took several days out of sight of land. But the island was settled by early farmers more than 11,000 years ago, with people, sheep, goats and cattle carried over the sea in huge dug-out canoes over 10m long.



← Neolithic log boat, 7,000 years old, 10m long, found near Rome. Rock-art from North Norway ↓



By the times of ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt and coastal China, well established international trade routes existed (based on the evidence of pottery from one region being found elsewhere) and so it must have been possible to get messages sent to and fro between coastal settlements – although this would be slow and not necessarily in writing!

Friend or Foe? As soon as people started travelling on the sea it became important to know who it was that was sailing or rowing towards you. In the earliest times all boats looked pretty much the same, so telling friend from possible foe was not at all easy – maybe until it was too late! Being able to recognise other boats must have been critically important.



Replica Greek war trireme
"Olympias" (sailed by the Greek Navy)



Replica Roman merchant ship.

What are you doing? Basic communication at sea started by just shouting! But, in 480 BC there was a sea battle (Battle of Salamis – see *Wikipedia*) between the ships of the Greeks (led by Themistocles, and assembled by leaving messages at important re-watering springs) and the invading Persians (led by Xerxes). It was a huge battle between hundreds of ships: The complex manoeuvres were described by contemporary writers, including that orders were shouted from ship to ship – using megaphones. These simple, conical devices remained common on board ships until battery powered megaphones were invented in 1915.



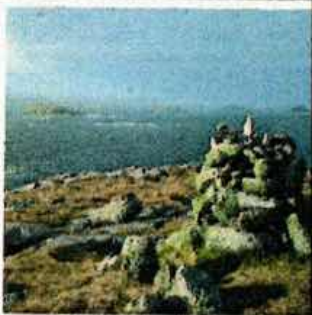
Greek archer
replica ancient
megaphone



Ancient communications could also be sent as notes shot by archers, or signal smoke, whistles, horns and drum beats. It was line-of-sight only for *thousands* of years. The only other option was to write messages, and either leave them in a conspicuous cairn on land (in the hope they would be found) or send them home by another ship if one were passing. The maritime trade routes were vital international links.

Ancient Egypt imported cedar from Lebanon, gems from Ceylon, pepper from Kerala; the Phoenicians were trading across the known world for tin & copper at the end of the Stone age; Greeks and Romans traded vast amounts of grain, wine, olive oil, people, silk and spices. China traded from Japan to the coasts of India and onwards to the shores of Africa.

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message cairn



Packet ship (early 1800s)

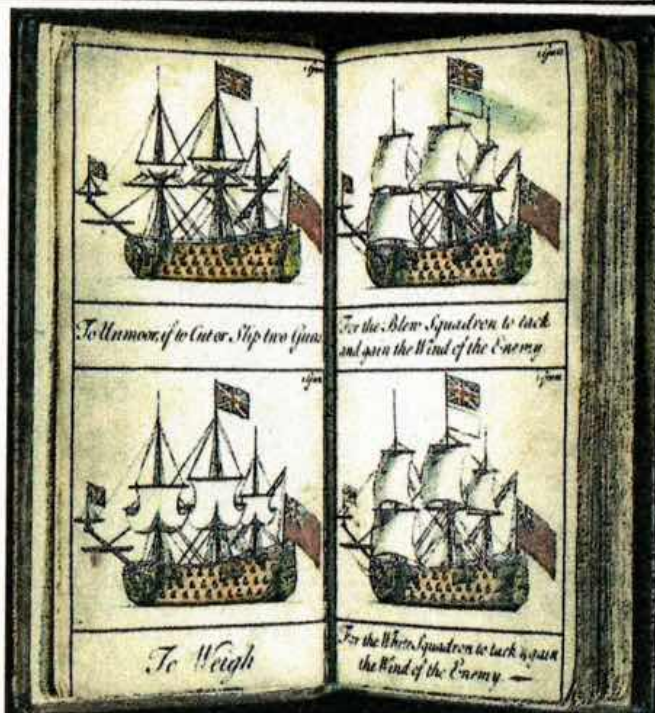
The ancient traders needed good communication routes and trust between mariners that messages would be delivered as vast amounts of valuable cargo were moving about on the seas.

Who exactly are you? For thousands of years the ship-builders improved their hulls and sails. Designs improved drastically in the early middle ages, thanks to the Vikings. But communication at sea didn't really change at all. Then, as naval warfare developed, flying an identifying flag became commonplace. And code flags for communications began to be used.






FLAGS OF EUROPE - 1318



It was considered good manners to 'hoist your colours' before attacking another ship, sailing within sight of shore or attempting to enter a harbour. The use of National flags developed rapidly, together with flags which identified the commander of a ship.



Early instruction book of "What Flags to Fly"

-  Admiral of the Fleet
-  Admiral
-  Vice-Admiral
-  Rear-Admiral
-  Commodore



Who is in charge of this vessel?

Flags for the



Royal Navy (white ensign) adopted 1707 – see [Wikipedia](#)



UK Merchant Navy (red ensign/duster) in use since 1707

by passenger and

In the 13th century, Venice came up with the idea of quarantine for arriving ships (40 days isolation in harbour). Ships had to fly a large white flag according to a law of 1710. From 1789, Britain introduced signal flags for vessels approaching harbour – plain yellow for healthy, black and yellow for illness on board. These became the Q and L flags respectively. By 1777, the Royal Navy was already using what became the P flag to signal the imminent departure of a vessel. Even Pirate ships took to identifying themselves and their intentions!



Yellow Jack "Q"



Plague flag "L"



The Blue Peter "P"

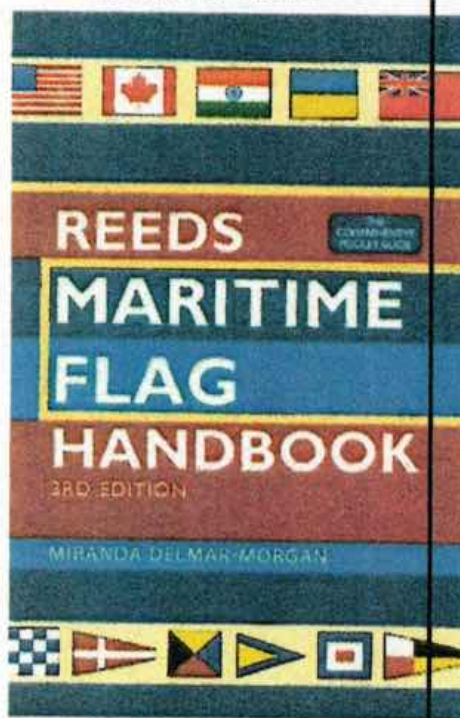


Up to no good flag

undressed tall ship



modern instruction book on what flags to wear, when, where and how.



correctly flagged tall ship



HMS Royal Charles
c. 1680

Continued in Part 2.
"What's going on?"
with more flags, sema-
phore, and talking after
dark!



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