THE CASSITERIDES

Introduction

The extraction and working of metals seems to have arrived in the British Isles with the Beaker People, who immigrated from Central Europe in about 2400 BC. At that time, DNA analysis suggests, the previous population of Britain was all but wiped out, and 90% of the DNA of the population was replaced within a century. The Amesbury Archer, whose grave (dated to c.2300 BC) near Stonehenge was found in 2002, seems to have been a member of this new population, and indeed he may have been a metalworker, specifically a goldsmith.

At some point thereafter, British metals, especially tin, were being exported into Europe and the Middle East. Tin was essential to the Bronze Age, because it is the metal which, when combined with copper, makes the alloy called bronze. (Archaeology, archived August 2016). And creating bronze was the technological advance that took the world out of the stone age.

Examples of the archaeological evidence for this trade include the tin ingots found at the site of a shipwreck off Haifa, Israel, which date from the 13th to the 12th centuries BC, and which most probably came from Cornwall. And evidence for the reciprocal trade in manufactured goods includes the Pelynt Dagger, found in a burial near Looe in Cornwall, which is of Mycenaean Greek origin and dates from c.1400 BC.

So, we may not know when this trade started, but it seems to have been in full flow by the 14th century BC. My purpose here is to explore the trade routes by which Cornish tin and other metals from the British Isles were reaching the eastern Mediterranean, and in particular the involvement of some mysterious islands which the Greeks called 'the Cassiterides' ('the tin islands', from the Sanskrit word for tin – *Kastira*).

Logically, the tin from Cornwall reaching the eastern Mediterranean, could have got there either by a partially overland route – across modern France – or by sea direct from Britain to the eastern Mediterranean. We will explore both options.

The literary and archaeological sources

The earliest surviving reference to a trade route for British tin, involving the 'Cassiterides' is contained in the works of Herodotus (c.484 – 425 BC). He wrote that "of the extremities of Europe towards the west, he cannot speak with certainty. Nor is he acquainted with the islands called the Cassiterides, from which tin is bought." Pliny the Elder (ad 23/24 – 79) tells us that the first person to buy tin from the Cassiterides was a Greek trader called Midacritus, but he was clearly describing supposed transactions that took place many centuries before his lifetime, and this detail is unimportant.

The earliest account of the source of the tin was contained in the work of Pytheas of Massalia (Marseilles), who visited Britain in about 325 BC on a voyage of exploration which took him around Britain, possibly as far north as Iceland and possibly into the Baltic Sea. Since the tin trade was by then well established, and it is known that the tin passed through Marseilles, it is likely that Pytheas had indirect knowledge of its source, but he clearly wanted to learn the facts at first hand.

He wrote a book called 'On The Ocean', which was widely circulated in ancient times, but which has not survived. Fortunately, however, some of his work was quoted by later authors, not always in flattering terms. I have some comments on the voyage of Pytheas below, which discuss the problems with the traditional account.

'On the Ocean' may have been the source for an account by Diodorus Siculus, a Greek man born in Sicily – then a Greek colony – and working in about 60 – 30 BC. Alternatively, Diodorus may have based his text on the later record of a visit to Britain by Posidonius, a Stoic, in about 90 BC. Diodorus described the first stage of the tin on its journey to the Mediterranean. 'The inhabitants of that part of Britain which is called Belerion [Cornwall] are very fond of strangers, and from their intercourse with foreign merchants are civilised in their manner of life. They prepare the tin, working very carefully the earth in which it is produced. The ground is rocky, but it contains earthy veins, the produce of which is ground down, smelted and purified. They beat the metal into masses, shaped like astragali [shaped like an anklebone, to make the ingot easier to transport on a horse] and carry it to a certain island called Ictis [or Ictim]. During the ebb of the tide the intervening space is left dry, and they carry over into this island the tin in abundance in their waggons.'

The next stage is described by Pliny the Elder (AD 23/24 – 79): 'the historian Timaeus sailed six days inward from the island called Ictis, where tin comes from, to which Britons sail in boats made of wicker covered in hides.' These boats were what we call curraghs, a type of boat then in use in the British Isles (and still made in Ireland today) but not common elsewhere.

So it appears that the tin was transported by boat over a period of about 6 days from Ictis to a place where it was traded – presumably the Cassiterides (the islands "from which tin is bought", per Herodotus). It is important to note that Herodotus does not say the tin was mined in the Cassiterides, but only that tin could be bought there.

Strabo, a Greek writing in AD 24 provides considerable detail on these islands. They were 'ten in number, lying near each other in the ocean, towards the north from the haven of the Artibri'. 'One of them', he tells us, 'is a desert, but the others are inhabited by men in black cloaks, clad in tunics reaching to the feet, and girt about the breast, walking with staves, and bearded like goats. They subsist by their cattle, leading for the most part a wandering life.' And he notes "they have metals of tin and lead", which Strabo thought were mined on the islands.

Diodorus provides further details of these islands: 'now there is a peculiar phenomenon connected with the neighbouring islands, I mean those that lie between Europe and

Britain; for at the flood tide the intervening passage is overflowed, and they seem like islands; but a large space is left dry at the ebb, and then they seem to be like peninsulas.'

He then goes on to describe the next stage in the journey: 'Here, then, the merchants buy the tin from the natives and carry it over to Gaul; and after travelling overland for about thirty days, they finally bring their loads on horses to the mouth of the Rhône.' [Marseilles, at the mouth of the Rhône, was then a Greek colony].

From the mouth of the Rhône, it is safe to assume that the cargo would have been transported by ship to Sicily and onwards around the heel of Italy to Greece and the eastern Mediterranean. There is an abundance of shipwreck archaeology in the Mediterranean to evidence this trade route.

However, it is clear that both Ictis and the Cassiterides have since been renamed, so there is room for controversy over the identity of both. And marine archaeology is not nearly as helpful in the tidal waters of the Atlantic and the English Channel as it is in the Mediterranean. Around the west and northern coasts of France, hardly any wrecks older than 300 years survive.

The archaeological evidence for a trade in tin around the coasts of Britain consists of:

a) Material recovered south of Looe Island, off the coast of Cornwall. A survey of Looe and Looe island by Wessex Archaeology in 2009 reported that "a number of late prehistoric or Romano-British finds have been made in the vicinity of the two sites, including a large bronze ingot found by divers south of Looe Island, which has led a number of people to suggest the island is possibly Ictis." (Archaeology, Looe Cornwall; Archaeological Evaluation and Assessment of Results, 2009) We should not forget that the Pelynt Dagger was found near Looe, so it seems likely that Looe was at or near the source of the outbound tin.
b) Ankle-shaped ingots of tin have been found in the mouth of the river Erme in south Devon. Naturally, no trace of the ship survives.
c) A site off Salcombe, found in 2009 has yielded 259 copper ingots and 27 tin ingots along with other objects including a gold torc (solid necklace), dating from around 1000 BC.
d) Moor Sand, off Prawle point, just to the east of Salcombe, holds the wrecks of two vessels, and, has yielded eight bronze weapons of northern Gallic origin dating from about 1300 BC – 900 BC. Prawle Point is the southernmost tip of Devon, and a natural 'jumping off point' for ships crossing the Channel. (Oxford University Press, 2013)

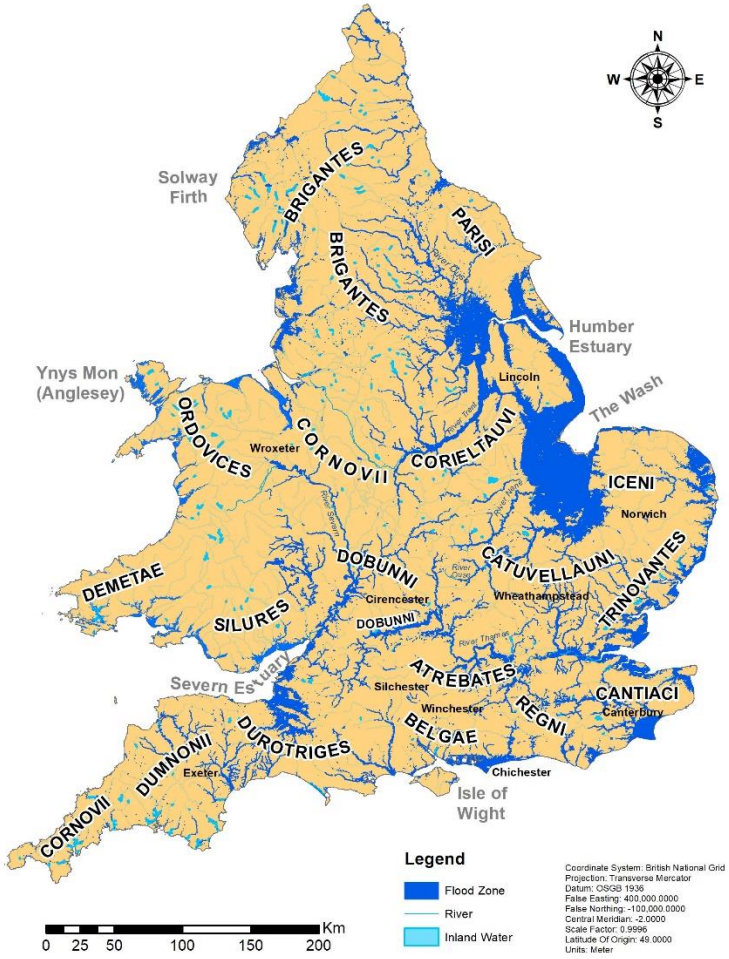
I would emphasise two points about this list: firstly, all of the ingots of raw tin found have been found to the east of Looe – and not west towards the Scilly Isles. And secondly, the trail of tin ingots stops at Salcombe in South Devon. There are none further east, so there is no evidence that the tin crossed the Channel at Dover, for example.

The archaeological evidence for Bronze Age cross-Channel trade in other artefacts found in the English Channel is more extensive but does not confirm a trade route for tin. Most of the Bronze Age finds in the central and eastern portions of the Channel (on the British side) have consisted of manufactured goods, e.g. axes, swords, torcs or scrap metals, and are not directly relevant to this paper. A good example is the Langdon Bay assemblage (of scrap metal), found in the sea off Dover, but there have been more than a dozen finds of individual axes etc. (V.M.Samson, 2006)

However, there are three other sites that I believe are relevant to an investigation into the trade in British metals in antiquity:

e) The remains of several Gallo-Roman merchant ships found outside the harbour mouth of St Peter Port in Guernsey. One of these, which has been nicknamed 'Asterix', was about 25 metres in length, and is the largest Roman-era ship found outside the Mediterranean. The Asterix burned to the waterline between AD 280 and 286. (The County Hall ship, found in the River Thames, seems to have been similar to the Asterix and about 18 – 21 metres long). (Rule & Monaghan, 1993)
f) Stone ballast, of Guernsey and Jersey origin, has been found in a 1st century AD context at Fishbourne in Sussex, the palace of the king of the Atrobates. So it is clear that Guernsey and Jersey were involved in cross-Channel trade in the Roman era. (Greene, 1986)
g) 271 ingots of British lead were found off the Sept-Iles, near Perros Guirec in northern Brittany. The lead bears the marks of two British tribes, the Brigantes (of northern England) and the Iceni (of Norfolk), and has been dated (with some uncertainty) to the late 4th century AD. (L'Hour, 1987)

Territories of the Pre-Roman Celtic Tribes



This last find is really the only archaeological evidence from French waters of any use to us, because, in the tidal waters of the Atlantic and the Channel, sunken ships are soon destroyed by the action of the sea. But for completeness, the remains of a galley of the Classis Britannica (the Roman fleet in Britain) have been found at Tardinghen (near Calais). And a few individual ancient objects have been retrieved from the sea, e.g. a gold torc found near Sotteville-sur-Mer (at the mouth of the Seine) and some amphorae trawled up south of Belle Île.

The Route Across the Channel and Through Gaul by Road

Various candidates have been suggested for Ictis, the island from which the tin was despatched. One favoured by Barry Cunliffe is Mount Batten, now a peninsula in Plymouth Sound, but possibly an island in the past. I think that Looe Island is plausible, although one cannot walk to the island today at low tide. When sea levels were lower in the past, this may have been possible.

However, the identity of the Cassiterides seems to me more clear-cut. If we take a map and draw a line between Cornwall and Marseilles, and ask ourselves “which group of 10 islands, with a massive rise and fall of tide, could the tin have passed through?”, the

identity of the Cassiterides is pretty obvious. They were the Channel Islands, which have a tidal range among the largest in the world (about 10m, which would have been astonishing to visitors from the Mediterranean).

Despite this, there are serious scholars who argue that the Cassiterides were the Scilly Isles or even the Azores. In response I would simply say that the archaeological trail of tin heads east from Cornwall along the Devon Coast towards Prawle Point, and not west towards the Scilly Isles.

From a navigational point of view, a route from South Devon through the Channel Islands makes perfect sense. And indeed, we can be more specific: the tin was probably traded at St Peter Port. Sailing vessels crossing the western end of the Channel, even today, tend to stop at St Peter Port, to catch the rising tide into the Bay of St Malo. With tides in the Bay of St Malo running at up to 5 or 6 knots, even modern racing yachts don't attempt to punch the tide. And St Peter Port enjoys unusual advantages for any voyage in the English Channel. It is accessible at all states of tide and sheltered from almost any wind direction.

From the archaeological evidence of settlement in the town, and the shipwrecks outside the harbour, it is quite clear that St Peter Port was a major entrepôt in Roman times, and there is no reason to suppose that this trade route did not exist until the Roman era. The vessels of the late Bronze Age, without compasses or even rudders (they were steered by an oar on the starboard side of the ship – ie the 'steerboard side'), would have stayed within sight of land as much as possible. And they would have broken their journey up into short segments that could be completed by slow-moving boats in the daylight hours. 'Island-hopping' across the western Channel would have been the natural choice. And it could easily have taken 6 days to get from St Peter Port to Looe.

Where the Gaulish merchants would have taken the metals to in what is now France is open to more debate. A candidate is St Servan in northern Brittany, which is possibly the modern identity of a town known in antiquity as Alet. A Roman military itinerary, the Peutinger Table (a 13th century map, possibly based on a 4th century original) shows a road to the north Brittany coast passing through Rennes (*'Condate'*) and terminating at '*Reginca*' on the coast. The only other road into Brittany shown is the road to Brest, along the south coast of the peninsula.

Reginca is generally taken to be the Roman name for Alet, which is now St Servan at the mouth of the Rance river, where there is extensive Roman archaeology.

However, a number of other ports along the Brittany coastline would be plausible candidates. Strabo, we may recall, described the Cassiterides as lying to the north from 'the haven of the Artibri', but this is not particularly helpful. Possibly the Artibri were the Atrebrates of West Sussex, who may have controlled the trade between what is now Brittany and southern Britain, but that still doesn't tell us what port they used in France.

But supporters of the Scilly Isles as candidates for the Cassiterides will point to the fact that a tribe of north-western Spain were called the Arrotrebae, and argue that the Scilly Isles are vaguely to the north of Spain. This is true, but they are more than 400 nautical miles from Spain, and they are not a group of 10 islands, nine of which were inhabited. The Azores are not 'to the north' from anywhere, except Antarctica, so, if nothing else, the description at least eliminates the Azores as candidates.

Diodorus then describes the journey from the coast: 'And tin is brought in large quantities from the island of Britain to the opposite Gaul, where it is taken by merchants on horses through the interior of Celtica both to the *Massalians* (Marseilles) and to the city of *Narbo* (Narbonne), as it is called. This city is a colony of the Romans, and because of its convenient location it possesses the finest market to be found in those regions.'

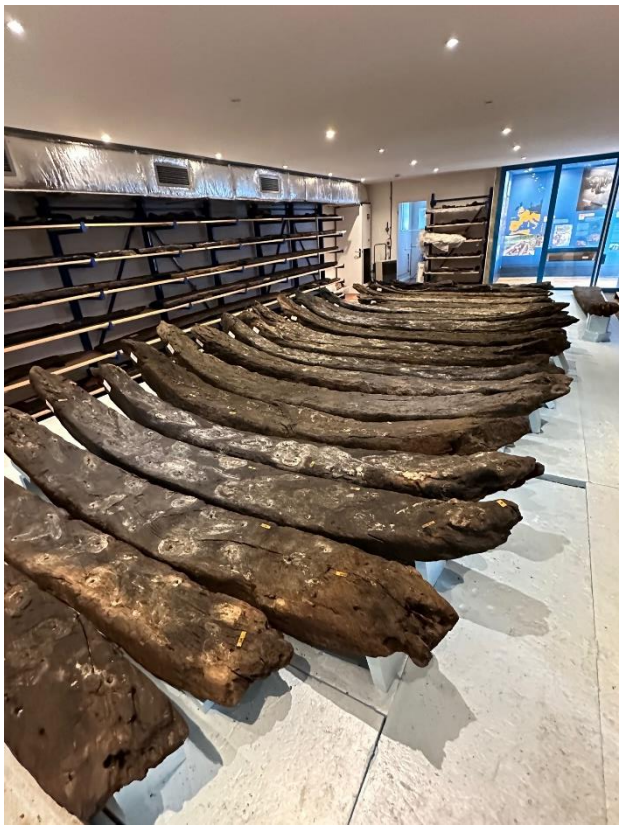
From northern Brittany, a 30-day ride across France to Marseilles, as described by Diodorus, would be entirely plausible, but clearly could have entailed some risk of being waylaid by bandits, or rival tribes in pre-Roman Gaul. So why would the metal merchants not have sailed from Cornwall all the way round the Atlantic coast of Europe to the Mediterranean? We need to explore that option.

A Sea Route?

There are two possible ways that sailors from Britain could have reached the Mediterranean along the Atlantic coasts of France, Spain and Portugal. Navigators could have hopped from port to port down the coast, making short journeys in daylight hours; or they could have made a few longer journeys further offshore. So let us explore these possibilities:

a) The Coastal Route

Sailing along the Atlantic coasts of Europe is hazardous, because these coasts are a classic lee-shore; the prevailing westerly wind is trying to blow the ship ashore. The Bay of Biscay is prone to sudden and violent storms, and the coast of Finisterre is rocky and exposed.
But nevertheless, by the Roman era, ships of up to 25 metres in length were routinely making such journeys. In Book III of Caesar's Gallic Wars, Julius Caesar tells us "These Veneti [from the Morbihan in southern Brittany] exercise by far the most extensive authority over all the sea-coast of those districts, for they have numerous ships, in which it is their custom to sail to Britain, and they excel the rest in the theory and practice of navigation."



The wreck of a Gaulish ship dating to c.AD280, found in the harbour mouth at St Peter Port, closely resembles the Gaulish ships described by Julius Caesar in his 'Gallic Wars', written between BC 58-49. This shows that ships of this type were used for centuries, and probably back into pre-history. The ship was about 25 metres long, flat-bottomed, and powered by a single sail. Ships like this obviously visited Guernsey, carrying cargoes which included olive oil, wine and pitch. They could easily have transported tin ingots. The goods on this ship included products and articles made in Dorset, Bordeaux, Spain and North Africa.

Moreover, the Romans also left written clues as to the trade route along the Atlantic coast of Gaul. The Antonine Itinerary, which dates from the end of the 3rd century AD, lists the islands to be found in "the sea which separates Britain from Gaul". A rather scattergun list follows, which appears to include islands which stretch the definition of 'between Britain and Gaul'. For example, the first named islands on the list are '*Orcades No 3*' – presumably the Orkneys (which Pytheas had discovered).

However, the main part of the list appears to identify the islands that would be passed on a voyage from the Solent, around Ushant and into the Bay of Biscay – ie precisely the route of the trade around the western coasts that one might expect. This section reads '*Vecta, Riduna, Sarmia, Caesarea, Barsa, Lisia, Andium, Sicdelis, Uxantis, Sina, Vindibilis, Siata, Arica'*. Obviously, the names of many of these islands have changed since the Roman era.

Vecta is certainly *Vectis*, the Isle of Wight. *Riduna* has long been accepted as being Alderney. *Sarmia* is most likely Sark. There are debates about the identities of the next islands, but it is suggested that *Caesarea* may have been the name of St Peter Port, *Barsa* may have been Herm, *Lisia* was probably Guernsey, or at least the north part of it (Guernsey consisted of two islands at the time) and *Andium* was probably Jersey ('*Lesia'* and '*Augie*' are mentioned in the first *Vita Samsonis,* probably of the 7th century AD, as places visited by St Sampson to raise a fighting force for a campaign in Brittany).

While others have speculated that *Sicdelis* was the Scilly Iles, I don't think this makes sense, because no plausible route from the Isle of Wight to Ushant would have passed through the Scilly Isles. It is far more likely, in my opinion, that *Sicdelis* was the Sept-Îles, where the 4th century lead ingots were found.

Uxantis was certainly Ushant, and *Sina* was almost certainly the Île de Sein. Vindibilis, Siata and Arica could then have been islands in the Bay of Biscay, e.g. Belle Île, Île d'Yeu etc.

So, when was this coastal route established? The answer is that it was probably very ancient indeed. There were of course cultural, linguistic and genetic exchanges all along the Atlantic coast from the Stone Age onwards connecting Ireland with the continent.

We have to conclude that a coastal shipping route was possible in the Bronze Age, but that we have no archaeological or literary evidence for it.

b) The Offshore Route

The case for an offshore route, in the Atlantic, is more speculative, and based on a theory that the Phoenicians travelled to Britain. The Phoenicians are the only people of the ancient world who are known to have had the capability of making long ocean voyages in the Atlantic.

The theory that the Phoenicians may have made such voyages to Britain rests on a limited number of literary references, some archaeological evidence of the navigational capabilities of the Phoenicians, and some suggested evidence of the influence in Britain of the Phoenician language.

Strabo's 'Geography', Book III, Chapter 5, was written over a number of years between 7 BC and AD 23, i.e. after the two invasions of Britain by Julius Caesar (in 55 and 54 BC), but before the Roman conquest of Britain in AD 43. We can assume that Strabo knew something of Britain, but that information on the British people and the geography of the British Isles would have been incomplete in Rome during his lifetime. After describing the Cassiterides and their inhabitants (supra), he commented on the trade route:

'Now in former times it was the Phoenicians alone who carried on this commerce (that from *Gades* (Cadiz)), for they kept the voyage hidden from everyone else. And when once the Romans were closely following a certain ship-captain in order that they too might learn the markets in question, out of jealousy the ship-captain drove his ship out of its course into shoal water, and after he had lured the followers into the same ruin, he himself escaped by a piece of wreckage and received from the State the value of the cargo he had lost. Still, by trying many times, the Romans learned all about the voyage. After Publius Crassus crossed over to these people and saw that the metals were being dug from only a slight depth and the men were peaceable, he forthwith laid abundant information before all who wished to traffic over this sea, albeit a wider sea than that which separates Britain from the continent. So much then for Iberia and the islands that lie off the coast'

The Phoenicians originated from what is now the Lebanon, and they dominated the Mediterranean Sea from about 1550 BC to 300 BC. They established various trading

posts around the Mediterranean, of which the most important was Carthage on the coast of what is now Tunisia. The Phoenicians of the western Mediterranean eventually acquired their own tribal identity, and they were known to the Romans as the Punic people.

In general, the Phoenicians must have been familiar with the trade in tin, because it is inconceivable that they were not involved in the transport of tin in the eastern Mediterranean in the late Bronze Age. But did they use an Atlantic route to bring tin to the Mediterranean?

They certainly ventured through 'the pillars of Hercules' (the Straits of Gibraltar) and out into the Atlantic, establishing trading posts along the coast of Portugal as far as Santa Olaia, near modern Lisbon. And Phoenician coins of the 3rd century BC have been found on the island of Corvo, in the Azores, 900 miles west of Portugal. So it is possible that the Phoenicians had established a maritime route to the British Isles before the Roman era.
But did they cross the Bay of Biscay and round the western cape of Brittany into the English Channel?

The Phoenicians were clearly prodigious sailors and highly competent navigators, who no doubt maintained meticulous logbooks (*periplus)* and charts detailing their voyages. But unfortunately for history, every vestige of these records seems to have been destroyed when the Romans sacked Carthage in 146 BC.

Other literary references to the navigational feats of the Phoenicians are scant. Pliny the Elder tells us 'When the power of Carthage flourished Hanno sailed round from Cadiz to the extremity of Arabia, and published a memoir of his voyage, as did Himilco when he was dispatched at the same time to explore the parts beyond Europe.' These voyages took place about 500 BC, when the trade in British tin was already about 1000 years old. But it is just as likely, as Barry Cunliffe suggests, that Himilco was trying to discover the limits of the Atlantic, rather than the choppy waters of the English Channel. And he cites the coins on Corvo as evidence in support of this view.

A poem called the '*Ora Maritima'*, written by a Roman called Rufus Festus Avienus in about AD 350, but based on an earlier Greek source, describes a journey beyond 'the Pillars of Hercules'. It relates a voyage to some islands called 'the Oestrymnides' (the western extremities) which are "rich in tin and lead". There, the people voyage on 'boats joined with skins' (i.e. curraghs, as described above), which suggests a voyage to the British Isles at some earlier point in time. The poem is a flight of the imagination which adds little to our knowledge of history, but Avienus does tell us that the Phoenicians were not the first to sail this route; they were following in the wake of the Tartessians.

The Tartessians were a people from south-west Spain, in the area around modern Cadiz. Tartessus was famous in ancient, and indeed Biblical, times as a kind of 'El Dorado', where all manner of metals were abundant. It flourished from the second half

of the 10th century BC until the 6th century BC, but we know very little of the navigational prowess of the Tartessians.

Nor is it obvious why people who had productive sources of copper, tin and lead, but also gold and silver, 'in their own backyard' would have wanted to travel further north to find these metals. So, if there is any substance to the suggestion by Avienus that Tartessians made the journey north, it is elusive.

If Himilco made the first Carthaginian voyage out of the Mediterranean in about 500 BC, and the power of Carthage began to wane in abut 300 BC, reaching its final demise in 146 BC, any Phoenician trade route to Britain could only have lasted a few centuries, and in the period when iron had supplanted bronze as the metal of choice for most purposes.

There is almost no archaeological evidence for such a sea route between the British Isles and the Mediterranean in the pre-Roman era. One object of Mediterranean origin has been found in the British Isles which is both pre-Roman and not likely to have arrived through a cross-Channel trade, namely the lead stock of a Graeco-Roman anchor dating from the late 2nd century or early first century BC found at Porth Felen in north Wales. But that dates from after the fall of Carthage.

What was possibly the lead core of a Mediterranean-style wooden anchor, of a type used from the 5th century BC to the middle of the second century BC has been found in Plymouth Sound. But even if the object has been correctly identified, we cannot be certain that it arrived in Britain as an anchor. The object was found among a collection of lead ingots, and so it may simply have been scrap lead of uncertain origin.

Nevertheless, Richard Coates, Caitlin Green and others believe that there may be toponymic evidence for a Phoenician presence around the coasts of the British Isles, because certain placenames could have a semitic or Punic origin. Examples of the names cited include the Isle of Thanet (possibly from *Y TNT* – the principal goddess of Carthage), Rame Head in Plymouth Sound (possibly from the semitic word for height, *rām*, and the island of Sark, possibly from the proto-semitic *šra* meaning rise (of the sun). Even the name of Britain itself, it is suggested, could derive from the word *pretan*, meaning tin.

Renaming local places in their own language would surely have implied a very substantial Phoenician presence in the localities concerned, and one might have expected to see the evidence of that presence in the local DNA or archaeology, but this is not apparent. And even if semitic roots for certain British place names are genuine, we cannot easily discount other linguistic migration routes. We know very little about Gaulish or the languages of pre-Roman Britain, so it is difficult to trace any foreign influences on those languages.

But, the reader may ask, does not the fact of the voyage of Pytheas in itself demonstrate that people from the Mediterranean were capable of sailing to the British Isles in the

pre-Roman era? It is certainly generally assumed that Pytheas sailed through the Straits of Gibraltar and up the coasts of western Europe – and in about 325 BC.

This may be assumed, but it is nowhere made explicit. And it seems to me unlikely.

First of all, Polybius (c.208 – 125 BC) who frankly regarded Pytheas as a liar, scornfully dismissed him as 'a private citizen' and 'a poor man'. Incidentally, Polybius was present at the sack of Carthage in 146 BC and may have known something about the maritime exploits of the Carthaginians. Perhaps he knew or suspected that a voyage up the western coasts of Europe was an unlikely feat. If Polybius was right about the personal circumstances of Pytheas, how could Pytheas have promoted and conducted a major expedition to northern Europe, involving a ship and its crew for many months?

Secondly, Pytheas came from Marseille, a city that had been involved in the tin trade for probably more than 1,000 years. It is inconceivable that residents of Marseille had no idea where the tin came from.

Thirdly, Pytheas, apparently, claimed to have explored much of Britain on foot. If he had a ship, what were his crew doing all this time?

If we put ourselves in the shoes of a possibly penniless resident of Marseille, who was curious to learn more about the country where this precious metal originated, surely, we would have simply followed the trail back through Gaul to its source? We would have hitched a ride on one of the boats crossing the English Channel, and then we would have explored Britain on foot.

If we wanted to explore the coastline, or trade routes of the British Isles and North Sea, we would have hitched a ride on the ships plying those routes on a commercial basis. Ships with captains who knew the waters, and with crews that were well-prepared for the cold weather and rough seas they would encounter, and who could provide useful information on the peoples and lands they encountered.

Pytheas may have been intrepid, and the account of his voyage(s) may have been genuine. But I suspect that he wasn't a navigator. And, if Pytheas made a journey up the tin road to Britain, he certainly wasn't the only person in the ancient world to do so. For example, we have noted above that Posidonius paid a visit in 90 BC, and there must have been many others.

English legend maintains that Joseph of Arimathea made a visit to England, and. In one version of the story, he was accompanied by a young Jesus (clearly before the Roman invasion of England) in AD 43). There is no historical evidence to support this legend, but whether or not there is any substance to the story, it is the inspiration for the hymn (almost the English national anthem) 'Jerusalem'. According to the legend, Joseph of Arimathea arrived in England at Looe, so we can guess the route that supposedly brought him to the island.

Another early visitor to the British Isles may have been Publius Crassus, noted above, in Strabo's account of the Cassiterides. Crassus was the very young commander of the VIIth Legion which was sent by Caesar to Armorica to subdue the local tribes in 57 BC. When some tribes, including the powerful maritime tribe the Veneti in southern Brittany, revolted, Caesar sent reinforcements, who spent the winter of 57 – 56 BC building a fleet of galleys on the Loire to mount a naval campaign against the rebels. This ultimately led to the defeat of the Veneti in 56 BC (by which time Crassus had been posted to Aquitaine).

Crassus was based at Angers during his sojourn in Armorica, and it is entirely possible that he visited the Channel Islands to investigate the source of tin. It is far less likely that he visited Britain, which Caesar invaded in 55 and 54 BC, because the Romans would have been perceived as a threat to the British. He may have been equally unwelcome to the inhabitants of the Channel Islands, but it is unlikely that they would have been able to resist him.

The fear of imminent conquest by the Romans, as experienced in northern Brittany at this time, is vividly illustrated by the discovery of a hoard of about 70,000 Coriosolite coins (the largest hoard of pre-Roman coins found in the British Isles) at Grouville in Jersey. Clearly, the Coriosolites of northern Brittany thought that their state treasury would be safe from Roman predation (or taxation) if it was buried on Jersey. And they were right – the Romans did not find the hoard. In fact, there is hardly any Roman archaeology on Jersey, which demonstrates that the Romans did not consider the island to be of strategic importance, and probably did not occupy it.

As to the comment in Strabo's account that Crassus found that the tin was being "dug from only a slight depth", this would of course be consistent with tin ingots being retrieved from the place where they were stored (and, indeed, possibly buried).

Conclusion

While trade routes along the western coasts of Europe may have existed before the Roman era, there is no archaeological or literary proof of them. Moreover, when a commercial maritime trade along the coast did develop, the cargos were probably wine, olive oil etc, rather than tin. During the Bronze Age and for many centuries after that period, it is highly likely that 'the tin route' crossed the Western end of the English Channel and then passed overland through Gaul from north-west to south-east.

It is also highly likely that this route passed through the Channel Islands, and that the Islands may have been known to the Greeks as the Cassiterides. However, that, of course, is not the name by which the inhabitants of north-west Europe would have known these islands.

The Peutinger Table shows an island, or perhaps islands, off the western extremity of the Armorican peninsula which are marked 'I.Lenur', and some have taken this to be a Roman name for the Channel Islands. But I think this is more likely to be the island of

Ennor, the single ancestor of the Scilly Isles, before the sea flooded the central plain to make the present archipelago.

We have seen that it is possible to guess the names of individual Channel Islands in the Roman era, but we do not have a collective name for the group. Pliny the Elder wrote the world's first encyclopaedia, his 'Natural History'. In Book IV Chapter 36, under the heading 'The Islands in the Atlantic Ocean', he wrote 'Opposite to Celtiberia are a number of islands, by the Greeks called Cassiterides, in consequence of their abounding in tin: and, facing the promontory of the Arrotrebae, are the six islands of the Gods, which some persons have called The Fortunate Islands.'

Pliny clearly associated all of these names, but evidently believed that they were describing two different groups of islands. But is it possible that the Cassiterides were the Fortunate Islands? What is clear is that the islands referenced cannot have been near Celtiberia – which was in central and eastern Spain. The only islands opposite this region are the Balearics, which are both completely devoid of metals. and not in the Atlantic Ocean. We may conclude that the Cassiterides were somewhere else entirely.