

It has long been claimed (e.g. by Carpenter 1966, 63-7) that Carthage at the height of her power in the fifth to mid-third centuries BCE held a monopoly of naval force in the Western Mediterranean. This force, so the old view maintains, allowed Carthage to prevent ships of rival Greek cities (and later Rome) from traveling to the Western Mediterranean, and through the Pillars of Hercules (Straits of Gibraltar) out into the Atlantic Ocean. The blockade gave the Phoenicians and their Punic offspring the ability to assert control over the southern Spanish and North African shores west of Carthage, as well as the islands of the western Mediterranean, and to expand their trade empire to Gades and beyond, perhaps as far as the British Islands, as well as south along the African coast. The Greeks, meanwhile, were limited to their colonies and emporia along the French coast as far west as Emporion in Spain, and were largely prevented from journeying through the Straits of Gibraltar; thus the Atlantic remained a mystery to them. The Etruscans and Romans too were barred from the western Mediterranean, the latter by formal treaty, until 241 BCE, when Rome ended the Carthaginian naval hegemony in the west.

Yet the notion that the Carthaginians controlled the western Mediterranean and the sea beyond the Pillars on the basis of a naval blockade (which endures in Cunliffe 2002, 53; Roller 2006, 14, 60-1, 67-9) is based on astonishingly little evidence. Indeed, the fundamental assumption that Carthage attempted to assert hegemonic control of the western Mediterranean before the first Punic War has been questioned; and Carthage's relations with the Greeks are now understood to be far from wholly antagonistic (Whittaker 1978; Krings 1998). The purpose of this paper is to challenge the view that the Carthaginians were able to maintain a long-term blockade of the sea-lanes in the western Mediterranean. Instead I shall argue that the Greeks and Carthaginians engaged in a rivalry whose primary sphere was not naval power but intelligence. The key to extending one's reach into the far west, and therefore to exploiting the resources of these lands, lay in knowledge of the harbors that made long journeys possible. By controlling the spread of that knowledge, each side sought to gain an advantage in the race to secure new trade partners and tap new markets. The Greco-Punic rivalry can be traced in the whole and fragmentary accounts of exploratory voyages that survive from this period: on the Carthaginian side, Hanno's *Periplous* and the sparse references to the voyage of Himilco; on the Greek side, Kolaios of Samos' voyage to Tartessos (described in Hdt. 4.152), the so-called "Massaliote sailing manual" preserved in Avienus, as well as the accounts of the voyages of Euthymenes and Pytheas, and the *Periplous* of the Mediterranean and African coasts wrongly attributed to Skylax. A careful review of these texts will show that their function was not to disseminate knowledge of the far west, but to promote the interests of their sponsors by obscuring the nature of the distant lands, exaggerating the dangers of long voyages, and asserting the prior claim of their respective home cities to trade with the peoples encountered in the course of the journeys.