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The Layout and Management of ‘Double Harbour’ Systems in the Hellenic World*

CHIARA MARIA MAURO

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to perform an analysis on a particular coastal feature exploited in Antiquity for its advantageous nautical and strategic characteristics, namely, the ‘double harbour’. Double harbours could be found either close (1) to headlands projecting into the sea and connected to the mainland by an isthmus or (2) to islets separated from the mainland by a narrow sound. Such an arrangement allowed to make use of two harbour basins, generally situated on each side of a headland (or islet) and exposed to different weather and sea conditions. Accordingly, the intention here is to examine – on the basis of several case studies – ‘double harbours’ established in areas with landforms conducive to this. This is followed by a description of how some cities created two artificial basins – through anthropogenic action – destined to be used as harbours and of how, in some cases, they were connected by one or more channels. Lastly, using mainly first-century AD Cyzicus as a case study, the problems that the existence of channels linking the two harbours might have posed in terms of their management are examined.

Keywords: double harbours, *amphídumos limén*, *antípugos limén*, ancient geography, seafaring, headlands, isthmuses

1. Introduction

Although the types of harbours used in Antiquity were dissimilar to an extreme because of the changing coastal morphology,¹ ‘double harbours’ – viz. two basins facing

* A first version of this contribution was presented at the conference ‘*Halbinseln und Isthmen als geographische Faktoren und Räume des Austausches oder Rückzuges – Penisole e istmi come fattori geografici e spazi di scambio o di isolamento*’, held in Villa Vigoni (Menaggio, Italy) in April 2023. I would like to thank the organisers, V. BUCCIANINI and M. RATHMANN, for inviting me to participate, thus allowing me to discuss this topic. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments.

¹ MAURO 2019, 25–43.



different directions – were particularly appreciated, especially in the Hellenic world.² Documented at least since the beginning of the first millennium BC in the Phoenician East,³ the first Greek literary account of the exploitation of this specific type of harbour probably appears in the *Odyssey*,⁴ where the expression λιμὴν ἀμφίδυμος (literally, ‘double harbour’) could conceivably refer to such a harbour,⁵ specifically to that located on Scheria, the island of the Phaeacians.⁶

Besides offering many strategic advantages, since cities were *bimaris*, namely, with access to two different stretches of sea, the two specular harbours made them very safe (both against enemy attacks and adverse weather conditions), while also facilitating a more efficient harbour system.⁷ Cities equipped with two harbours could indeed have decided to use them alternately, depending on the weather and sea conditions. This meant that they could be employed practically all year round, since when one was battered by high winds and/or waves and thus temporarily out of use, the other (generally facing a different direction) could be used to beach or moor vessels.

Additionally, it was possible to assign the two harbours different functions, like, for example, using one for commercial purposes and the other as a naval basin. This last option, however, only caught on as of the fifth century BC probably as a result of the creation of the first public fleets,⁸ as was the case with the new layout of the Themisto-

2 One of the two basins might have also been a mere beach. The ‘Hellenic world’ refers here to the geographical area affected by the spread of Greek culture.

3 See, for example, the city of Tyre, which had two harbours: one whose mouth faced north (also called the ‘Sidonian harbour’ because Sidon was located in that direction) and another whose mouth faced south (also known as the ‘Egyptian harbour’, for obvious reasons): CARAYON 2008, 293–311, with related bibliography; BROCARD et al. 2024. On ‘double harbours’ in the Phoenician world, see CARAYON 2008 and 2011.

4 It can therefore be dated to the end of the eighth century BC (SHERRATT 1990; RAAFLAUB 1997) or even before. As a matter of fact, the Homeric corpus combined contemporary elements with others possibly pertaining to the so-called ‘Dark Ages’.

5 Hom. *Od.* 4.847. In the *Odyssey*, this expression refers to the harbour of Asteris, a small island perhaps identifiable with Daskalion, located between Ithaca and Cephalonia (MAURO 2019, no. 25); although the expression can be translated as ‘double harbour’, the text does not offer a precise description of the layout of the two basins. The same expression is subsequently found in Apoll. Rhod. (*Arg.* 1.937–941) and Strabo (10.2.16). Another word that could more likely have referred to this particular type of harbour is ἀντίπυγος, which appears twice in Pseudo-Skylax (§§ 46 and 108).

6 Hom. *Od.* 6.263–264: καλὸς δὲ λιμὴν ἑκάτερθε πόλῃος (‘a fair harbour lies on either side of the city’). Phaeacians were not for nothing famous for their seafaring prowess and their harbours figured among the few that, in this period (i. e. during the ‘Dark Ages’), might have been equipped with some facilities, such as permanent slips for launching ships. *Contra* SALVIAT 1987, who considers that the word ἐπίστιον actually means sail (ἴστιον) and therefore should not be identified with any artificial structure, but with ships per se.

7 FELICI 2018, 3. According to the definition established in the project Rome’s Mediterranean Ports (RoMP), a harbour system is considered as ‘a set of harbour-sites working together as parts of a maritime potential, related and geographically linked to a focal point’.

8 The creation of the first public fleets in the Greek world can probably be backdated to the end of the sixth century BC, when it was claimed that some *poleis* (e. g. Corinth, Thuc. 1.13–14; Aegina,



clean Piraeus, where the eastern harbour basins (i. e. Zea and Munychia) were mainly given over to naval activities.⁹ Possibly following the example of Athens, other Greek cities also decided to put the two basins of their double harbours to different uses, namely, civil and military roles. Nonetheless, even though it is possible to observe a certain division of roles, it is important to stress that the two basins of double harbours were not put strictly or exclusively to different uses, since the so-called 'commercial basins' frequently included facilities for accommodating part of a city's fleet.¹⁰

The intention here is to explain, on the basis of a selection of case studies from the Hellenic world, how this particular type of harbour was used and kept operational (Fig. 1).¹¹



Fig. 1 Map showing the double harbours mentioned in this paper

Thuc. 1.14; Eretria, Hdt. 5.47 and 6.39) already owned public warships or penteconters (which were polyvalent vessels that could be used, among other things, for navy expeditions).

- 9 The Piraeus had, in fact, not just two but three harbour basins: the two smaller ones (Zea and Munychia) were located to the east of the Akte peninsula, whereas the widest bay (Kantharos) lay on the western side. Before Athens, Syracuse might have adopted a similar division of roles for the two basins of its double harbour (more on which below).
- 10 For instance, Kantharos (traditionally considered as the 'commercial basin' of Athens) was equipped with 96 shipsheds, a kind of structure generally associated with military harbours. Also in the case of Syracuse, the 'military harbour' (also known as 'Small Harbour') was occasionally used for commercial purposes as well (MIGNOSA 2020, 53).
- 11 Since a systematic overview of 'double harbours' in the Hellenic world would go far beyond the scope of a single paper (given the significant number of cases that have been documented), it was decided to address this topic on the basis of a selection of case studies. For further examples of 'double harbours' in the Aegean and in the Eastern Ionian Sea, see MAURO 2019.

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