The Story of the Half-Drowned Sailor

More than two thousand years ago, in the year 116 BC, a shipwrecked Indian sailor was found half dead along the sands of the Red Sea. Coast guards brought the sailor to the Egyptian court where he spoke in broken Greek before King Ptolemy VIII. To save his life and to gain favor with the king, the sailor promised to guide the king's navigators to India using an open-sea route that was far shorter than was known to the Egyptians at the time.

Indian and Arabian merchant sailors had long known the uses of the monsoon winds that enabled them to sail directly to and fro across the oceans. By keeping the knowledge of the winds to themselves, they controlled the sea trade for many centuries. Until this time, Egyptian and Roman ships laboriously hugged the coastlines, fearful of the open sea. Trading voyages took many months longer.

King Ptolemy entrusted an adventurous seaman, known as Eudoxus of Cyzicus, with this mission. As recorded by Strabo in his *Geography*, a direct successful journey to India was guided by the Indian sailor in 118 BC. Departing in mid-summer (July), they took advantage of the winds as they sailed across the Red Sea. With the help of the southwestern monsoon, it would have taken them only three weeks to cross the Indian Ocean. They would have made their stops and ended their voyage at the northwest harbors of India in September. Relying on the northeastern monsoon winds, Eudoxus would have set sail for home during the month of December or January. The king's navigator Eudoxus returned to Alexandria with a cargo of ivory, aromatics and precious stones within that year. Previously such a voyage would've taken more than a year.

Two years later, in 116 BC, Eudoxus repeated the journey traveling without the Indian sailor. Though using the monsoon winds, he was blown off course and landed on the coast of Ethiopia, perhaps not yet mastering the northeastern monsoon. Eventually he did make his way back to Alexandria.

Curiously, The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, a sailing manual written about 40 BC, attributes the discovery of the monsoon winds to a navigator named "Hippalos." Both Pliny and Ptolemy also credit this to Hippalos, with no mention of Eudoxus. Opinion remains divided even to the present day.

In any case, the discovery of the monsoon winds was an event of global significance. During the next two centuries, vast numbers of Alexandrian ships sailed directly to Indian markets bypassing the Arabian ports. Trade between Asian and European markets dramatically increased due the demand for exotic goods.

The secret of the monsoon winds, shared by a shipwrecked Indian sailor, connected east and west for the millennium to come.