

Where is Tarshish?

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WAS NOT aware until I read Brother Nigel Bernard's article "[Britain in Prophecy](#)" ([Jan. 2005, p. 17](#)) that there was "great controversy" among the experts about whether the Phoenicians ever came to Cornwall or not. This should remind us that reconstructing the past in any detail is a matter of possibilities, with varying degrees of likelihood, rather than certainty. It follows that any uncertainties about the identity of Tarshish are going to introduce consequent uncertainties into any prophetic implications we might think are associated with it.

Is Britain Tarshish?

Any consideration of this question must of course begin in Scripture. There is only one verse from which it might be possible to establish that Britain is Tarshish, and that is Ezekiel 27:12. It is possible to establish from other verses that, at least from the time of Jonah onwards (eighth century B.C.), there was a Tarshish west of Israel and it was involved in trade with Tyre, but there is nothing to identify it with any specific location. So consider Ezekiel 27:12, which, as the context shows, is addressing Tyre: "Tarshish was thy merchant by reason of the multitude of all kind of riches; with silver, iron, tin, and lead, they traded in thy fairs".

This can be understood in either of two distinct ways:

- Tarshish was both the source of the metals and the trader in them
- Tarshish was the trader but obtained the metals from elsewhere.

To get any further it is necessary to go outside the Bible. It is on the ground that Britain was a major source of tin for the ancient world (and possibly less so for the other metals) that the traditional view among us identifies Tarshish with Britain. This is in line with the first of the above alternatives and hence requires that Britain was also Tyre's merchant and that it was inhabitants of Britain (for it is people, "they", who actually trade, not places) who traded in the fairs of Tyre.

As far as I know there is no evidence that this was so in the time of Ezekiel or at any other time, no evidence that any of the diverse inhabitants of these islands had the ships and the

mariners capable of making the long and hazardous journey to Tyre and back. In the absence of such evidence no case can be made for Britain as Tarshish. The proposal is speculation and no more than that.

Notice, too, that with regard to the above, whether the Phoenicians came to Britain or not is totally irrelevant. But if the Phoenicians, or any other merchants, did come to Britain for tin and the other metals, and took them away to trade in Tyre's fairs, then the second alternative above applies, and *it is where these merchants came from* which was Tarshish, not Britain. Britain was merely the source of the metals. Again, there is no case for Britain as Tarshish.

The Phoenician connection, if there is one, raises another problem. John Haywood, in *Ancient Civilisations of the Near East and Mediterranean* (p. 123), states that it was in the *fifth century B.C.* when Phoenicians from Carthage "established direct sea routes through the Pillars of Hercules to Britain, capturing most of the tin trade for themselves". Other sources I have consulted concur with this. But, if true, it is too late for Ezekiel 27:12. The prophet was writing in the *sixth century*, around 100 years earlier, about a trading relationship between Tarshish and Tyre that already existed. So, if this chronology is correct, there is again no case for Britain as Tarshish.

Other verses referring to Tarshish

The problem outlined above arises, only more so, with other references to Tarshish, in Isaiah, Jonah and the Psalms, which range from the eighth to the tenth century. Moreover, when these other references are examined without preconceived ideas, Britain as Tarshish makes little sense anyway. Let us take two examples from the Psalms.

The first is Psalm 72, written by David and hence dating to the tenth century. Here we read: "The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring presents: the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts" (v. 10). Hiram king of Tyre was a friend of David, and later joined with Solomon in sending ships to Tarshish from Ezion-geber on the Gulf of Aqaba (2 Chron. 8:17, 18; 9:21). This must have been in a southeasterly direction

from Israel, the same quarter as Sheba, also referred to in Psalm 72:10. It is likely therefore that this Tarshish is the one referred to in verse 10, not the later western Tarshish, to which the first datable reference is in Jonah, in the eighth century.

The second is Psalm 45:12: “the daughter of Tyre shall be there with a gift”. A reference to Tarshish/Britain here is unlikely on account of the points made at the beginning of this letter. The word ‘daughter’ is often associated with a city or country; Jerusalem/Zion many times, Babylon, Edom, Egypt, etc. Contexts show that it was used metaphorically as a collective noun for the inhabitants of these places, so the term “daughter of Tyre” would refer to the inhabitants of Tyre and not to Tarshish.

An alternative to Britain

So, if Ezekiel 27:12 does not apply to Britain, what is it about? According to John Haywood ([see above](#)) and other sources, long before the fifth century, hence in the time of Ezekiel and earlier, all the metals named in Ezekiel 27:12 were available at various places around the Mediterranean. Tin in particular was brought over the Alps to northern Italy by the Etruscans, until Marseilles took over the trade. So the verse could be describing trade with Tyre by a conveniently placed maritime power which obtained the metals from a variety of Mediterranean sources. Where might it be? There are various possibilities, but for me Carthage, on the north African coast, stands out as being more likely than the rest. It was a colony founded by Phoenicians from Tyre in 816 B.C., and became the dominant trading power around the Mediterranean until destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C.

This finds support in the Septuagint Hebrew to Greek translation of the Old Testament, ‘Tarshish’ being replaced by ‘Carthage’ in Ezekiel 27:12 and in other significant places. This translation by Jewish scholars was spread over more than 100 years but reckoned to be complete by 150 B.C., that is, before the sacking of Carthage, and, being Jewish, were more likely than most to have understood the use of the term ‘Tarshish’ in Hebrew literature. I suggest that their understanding of it as Carthage ought to be taken seriously.

Another example of the Septuagint’s change from ‘Tarshish’ to ‘Carthage’ is Isaiah 23. Verse 6 advises the Tyrians to “Pass . . . over to Tar-

shish” (apparently in the face of attack from the Assyrians) in the AV, but it is “to Carthage” in the Septuagint. Isaiah was writing in the eighth century. There being no evidence of links between Tyre and Britain at this time (if the Tyrians even knew about it), how would they have got there? Moreover, with its colder, wetter climate, primitive living conditions, and alien languages and cultures, it would have been an odd place to recommend. Carthage, being a Phoenician colony, with a familiar language and culture and a similar climate, would have been a natural place for Tyrians to go. This interpretation provides a coherent interpretation of Ezekiel 27:12 and other verses. If not Carthage, one of the other suggested identifications around the Mediterranean would be a more likely possibility than Britain.

Author’s comment

I thank Brother Fitzgerald for his reply. I would argue that there are several verses which, when combined, can be used to provide criteria for identifying Tarshish as Britain. For example, in Genesis 10 Tarshish is shown to be a son of Japheth (vv. 2,4), the descendants of whom can be linked with Europe as opposed to, for example, the African continent. Furthermore, Tarshish is said to be of “the isles of the Gentiles” (v. 5). Strong says the word translated ‘isle’ can also mean ‘coast’, but the fact is that in the AV it is translated thirty-five times as ‘isle(s)’ or ‘island’ and once as ‘country’. If the AV is right then Tarshish is an island.

Another verse which can be used to identify Tarshish is Ezekiel 38:13, where “young lions” are associated with it. As my article showed, Britain fits this criterion. Indeed, what other present-day country can be said to have “young lions”?

I do not think that the verses concerning Tarshish necessarily require that people from Tarshish were building their own boats and sailing to Tyre. It seems that trade by Tarshish in Tyrian trade fairs was facilitated by Phoenician vessels. It is not unreasonable to assume that Phoenicians were reaching Britain by the time of Ezekiel because Herodotus (4.42) records that Phoenicians sailed round Africa during the reign of Pharaoh Necho II. This voyage took place around the end of the seventh and beginning of the sixth century.

With regard to the suggestion that Carthage may be Tarshish, Tunisia is the modern country which occupies the primary site of ancient Carthage. If Tarshish in Ezekiel 38:13 is Tunisia, who are the “young lions” of Tunisia?—N.B.