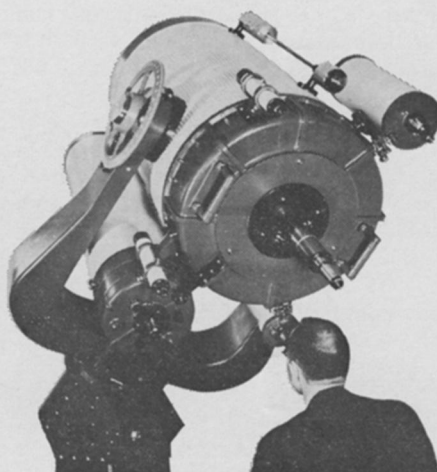


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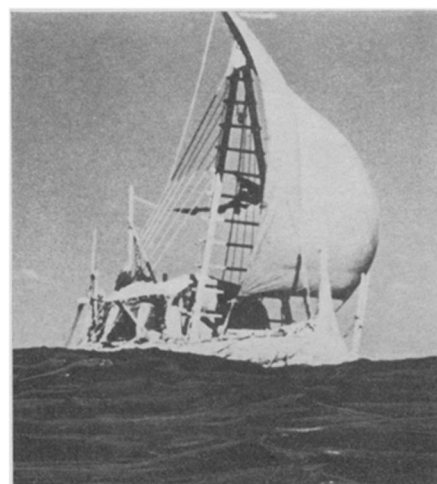
RA ABANDONED

Close is close enough

As the crew of *Apollo* was about to land on the moon, 240,000 miles away the crew of the papyrus reed boat *Ra* was abandoning ship.

Two months ago Norwegian anthropologist Thor Heyerdahl set out from North Africa with a seven-man international crew to reach Mexico and prove the possibility that ancient Egyptians could have reached the coast of the Americas centuries before Columbus (SN: 5/31, p. 534).

The voyage of the *Ra* was stricken



The Ra: Could have used Egyptians.

The papyrus ship *Ra* was abandoned today [July 19] by its seven-man international crew, but the now-empty raft continues its westward drift to the New World.

When it was discovered that the two papyrus rolls on the starboard side had come loose once more and the opportunity for repair was minimized with the appearance of sharks, it became clear that further movement was impossible.

Expedition members and the crew of *Shenandoah* [which had been escorting the *Ra*] attempted to attract the sharks from the raft without success. At one point, our underwater expert Georges Sourial tried to make repairs to *Ra*'s bottom, but a large blue shark came within six feet of him before he managed to get up on the papyrus.

I decided to discontinue any further repair to avoid unwarranted risk or loss of human life on a voyage which had no objective other than scientific research and the test of the relations among men in conditions of stress.

Some repairs were made above deck and, with all provisions and cargo transferred to *Shenandoah*, *Ra*, with its empty wickerwork cabin and reduced steering sail, was sent on its westward

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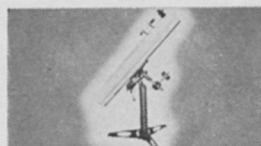
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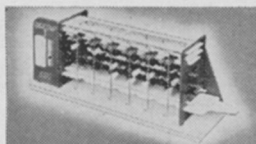
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with serious mishaps from the very start. Severe storms, harsh winds, raging seas and sharks prevented them from completing the voyage. Rudders and oars were splintered and lost, their life raft was used for repairs and their sleeping quarters were destroyed.

Despite the premature end of the voyage, Heyerdahl believes the *Ra* trip has proved that a papyrus reed craft is a capable ocean-going vessel.

Below is Heyerdahl's own account of the *Ra*'s success and failure.

course which will probably bring it to the vicinity of Barbados in the wake of Shenandoah.

Ra's port side still rides high above the water while the starboard and stern are awash. This circumstance has been evident to us for the past few weeks but, despite several treacherous storms which contributed to our disability, we were still able to make necessary repairs and press on.

But now, further repairs are impossible; our decision to abandon was unanimous and without dissent. I do not, of course, consider our voyage in any way a failure although we are disappointed that we are unable to stay with our good *Ra* as it continues its westward drift. The questions that we had set out to answer have been answered to our complete satisfaction.

Science will have to abandon its notion that papyrus disintegrates after two weeks in salt water. Our papyrus retains its original strength. The continued stability of the raft amazes us all. When, last week, the 500-pound bipod mast was blown over, *Ra*'s stability was not affected at all.

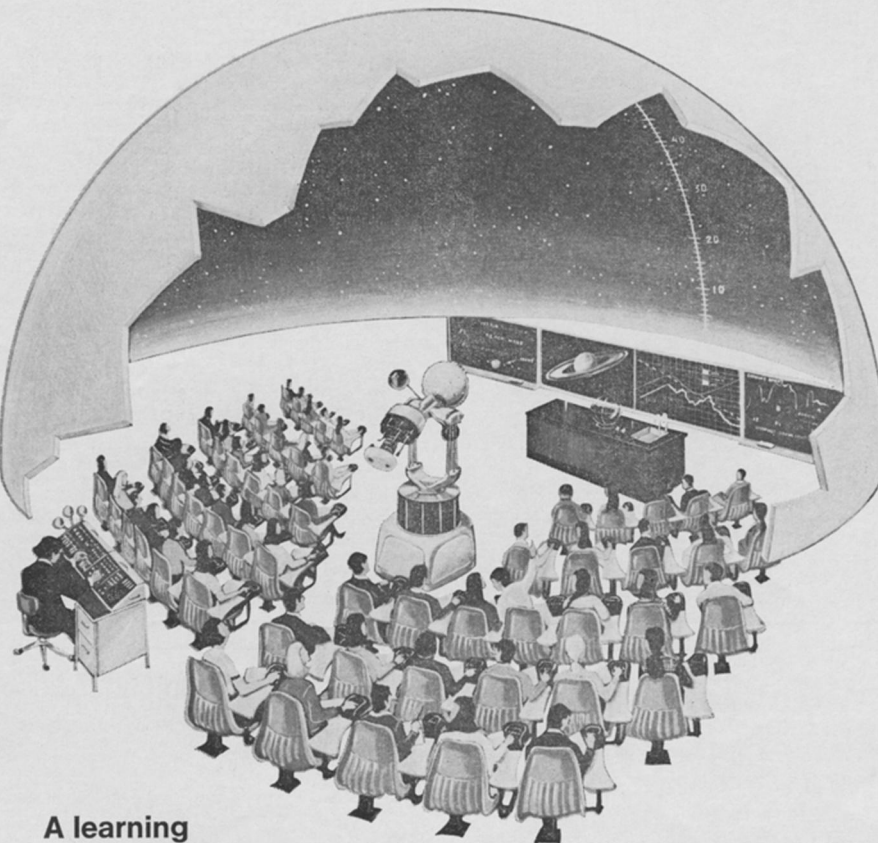
Further, science will have to accept the possibility that ancient Egyptians were indeed able to take their papyrus sailing ships away from the placid waters of the Nile and operate satisfactorily on the high seas.

We had been able to sail more than 2,700 miles before we gave up. Our decision to abandon ship was reached 600 miles east of Barbados. Nearest land at that point was the northwest coast of South America, 540 miles away.

Our major problem was not the basic design or capability of *Ra* but our ignorance of the sailing techniques known to Egyptian seamen several thousand years ago. We learned, too late, that the craft should have been loaded heavily on the leeward side and not, as is conventional today, on the windward side.

Still, we are pleased with our efforts and in good health.

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