History

Roman Naval Warfare

History of the Roman Navy

In the early days of the Republic, the Roman navy didn't amount to much. Rome's economy was largely agricultural, and imported goods could be brought to Italy by traders rather than the Romans themselves. If Rome ever needed to expand, that objective could be accomplished by land forces working in Italy to subdue the neighboring tribes. The chief threat of external attack came from the Gauls in the north, but they could also be repulsed by land forces. Rome, therefore, found itself with little need of a navy either to protect commerce, extend its territory, or defend itself.

The largest sea power at the time was the North African city of Carthage, in modern Tunisia. As the commercial capital of the Mediterranean, Carthage controlled ports throughout the western half of the sea, in Spain, northern Africa, Sardinia, and Sicily, and supplied the trading needs of at least 5 million people.

Rome and Carthage were able to coexist peacefully at first. Treaties kept Roman ships away from Carthaginian territories. In return, the Carthaginians promised not to attack Italy. Control of Sicily, however, would soon become an issue.

In 281 BCE, King Pyrrhus of Epirus attacked southern Italy. The Romans sent an army to defeat him and gained control over this Greek-speaking region as a result. Because the culture of southern Italy was based more on seafaring than that of Rome, the Romans soon realized that they would need to take a greater interest in naval security.

Meanwhile, the Carthaginians were engaged in a struggle over the fertile farmlands in Sicily. Their opponent, King Hiero of Syracuse, tried to bolster his position on the island by recapturing the important port city of Messana from a band of mercenaries who had once served under the king. The mercenaries, called Mamertines, asked for aid from both the Carthaginians and the Romans now stationed at Rhegium, just across the strait. With the support of a popular referendum, Rome agreed to intervene in 264 BCE.

The Romans, still lacking a real navy, crossed the straits in makeshift boats and joined the mercenaries in driving out the "helping" Carthaginians, who had already garrisoned the city for themselves. In retaliation, Carthage formed an alliance with Hiero against the Romans. The Roman forces, however, were able to hold the city, defeat the Carthaginians, and force Hiero into an alliance with Rome. Encouraged by this success, the Roman Senate resolved to expel the Carthaginians from all of Sicily. To accomplish their objective, however, the Romans would have to create their first real navy. Construction of new ships began in earnest in 261.

Rome's existing fleet, such as it was, consisted of about 40 triremes (ships needing three rowers for each oar), some of which may have been supplied by her allies. The Senate commissioned 20 new triremes and 100 quinqueremes (with five men to an oar), giving the Romans a numerical superiority over the Carthaginians' 130 ships. The ancient historian Polybius records that this undertaking was completed in 60 days. W. L. Rodgers, a modern naval historian, estimated the manpower required to complete such a task on schedule:

If we take it that the Roman ships averaged not over 120 tons and that, being built in haste of green timber, they were not so well built as they might be and that in consequence they only called for 80 days' labor per ton, in the forest as well as in the dockyards, it follows that about 165 woodcutters, carpenters, and metal workers must have been employed on each of these ships, in order to complete the task in 60 days, or 20,000 men in all.20

The wars with Carthage lasted nearly 100 years. The first major battle was fought near Ecnomus in 256 BCE. Skirmishes and minor battles caused losses on both sides, but neither could win a decisive victory, and both continued building new ships to make up for the losses. Finally, a huge naval fight decided the issue: The Romans were victorious, sinking 64 of the Carthaginians' ships while losing only 22 of their own. Though many of the most famous battles of the Punic Wars were waged on land, the Romans still needed to maintain a substantial fleet to transport troops, disrupt the movements of the Carthaginians, and combat the enemy at sea whenever opportunities presented themselves.
After the Second Punic War, Rome's navy stayed active by aiding its allies in the Macedonian Wars. With the defeat of Antiochus in 190, however, the Romans eliminated their last major threat at sea, and the navy played a relatively minor role in the ultimate defeat of Carthage in 146. In fact, for the next 100 years, the fleet fell into something of a decline. Only in the middle of the first century BCE would Rome's once-mighty navy regain its former strength when Julius Caesar built up the fleet for his campaigns in Gaul, Britain, Spain, and Africa.

**The Ships at Actium**

Although Julius Caesar had left behind a capable navy, much of it had fallen under the command of Sextus Pompeius. In order to combat this rival, Octavian and Agrippa had to build up a fleet of their own. Thus, before Octavian began his campaign against Antony, he already had an able fighting force at his disposal, for many of these ships survived and were available for use at Actium. Nevertheless, he needed an even bigger fleet if he hoped to be successful against the combined forces of Antony and Cleopatra.

According to Rodgers, the preexisting ships, which were a bit smaller than the ones Octavian would later have made for Actium, were probably about 105 feet long and 16.5 feet wide with a displacement of 81 tons. Although the ships were equipped with sails, their primary means of propulsion, especially in battle, was the team of 108 rowers who sat in two tiers below the deck. The rowers on the lower tier, 18 to a side, each worked a shorter oar, while the rowers on the top tier sat in pairs with the two men working a single oar, again 18 to a side. These rowers were well trained and paid for their work; they were not slaves as often portrayed in the movies. Powered by rowers alone, the ship could achieve an attack speed of 7.3 knots and a cruising speed of 4.8 knots. The ship was maneuvered by the rowers, the sails (if used), and the two large rudders, one on each side of the stern. About 25 sailors were required to keep the boat in operation.

The weapons on Agrippa's triremes consisted chiefly of a ram on the bow and 60 soldiers standing on the edge of the deck. It is thought that these vessels also had platforms on each side extending over the oars but slightly below deck level. Thus, the soldiers on deck could throw their javelins over the heads of those standing on the platforms. At each end of the ship there was also a tower from which weapons could be deployed. We are fortunate to have a flat-relief sculpture depicting one of these ships. It is now housed in the Vatican Museum.

**Further Information**


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