

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Age of Titans: The Rise and Fall of the Great Hellenistic Navies.* By William M. MURRAY. Onassis Series in Hellenic Culture. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. xxv + 356. Hardcover, \$45.00/£30.00. ISBN 978-0-19-538864-0.

The trireme, a “three,” was a ship approximately 121 feet long and about 19 feet wide. Propelled by 170 oarsmen placed at three levels and supported by 30 men on deck, it was the preeminent war vessel of the 5th century BC. Generally, its most effective deployment was as a missile ramming the enemy ship on the beam or stern.

In the following century larger vessels, polyremes, ranging from “fours” to “sixteens,” emerged and became the top war vessels of the Hellenistic Period. The rowing arrangements for these vessels are a matter of scholarly debate but it is most likely that the rowers worked from two levels. In the triremes there was one man to an oar but in polyremes there were several, the number depending on the class of ship. Vessels larger than “sixteens” were catamarans, double-hulled ships. The aim of Murray’s book is to demonstrate that the Greeks developed these vessels specifically for harbor warfare.

For Murray the trireme engagements of 413 BC between the Athenians and Syracusans in the harbor of Syracuse marked the “appearance” of tactics that would become standard in subsequent naval warfare. The Syracusans defeated the Athenians in part by diverging from customary procedures and following a recent Corinthian innovation of strengthening the bows of their triremes, specifically the catheads, for frontal ramming. Archers, javelin men, and hoplites with the aid of boarding equipment contributed to the defeat of the once invincible Athenian trireme navy. The polyreme emerged about a decade later. Dionysius I (432–362 BC), tyrant of Syracuse, probably built “fours” and certainly “fives” in small numbers as prestige ships and apparently for frontal ramming in harbor battles. Alexander the Great during the siege of Tyre (332 BC), an off-shore island, deployed polyremes as platforms for artillery and Alexander’s successors built larger polyremes as siege-winning weapons.

Murray, who has an admirable knowledge of ancient galleys and the naval history of classical antiquity, makes a persuasive case for his thesis. But some tactics associated with polyremes were part of early trireme battles. Herodotus (8.84–95) in his perfunctory description of the battle of Salamis in 480 BC downplays trireme ramming attacks. But he reports that javelin men on a Samothracian trireme fighting in the Persian navy cleared the deck of an Aeginetan trireme and then took possession of it. The Greeks probably countered with similar tactics during the battle. This is implied by Herodotus (9.98.2) who mentions that in 479 BC the Greeks sailed to Ionia with boarding gangways.

Ptolemy IV Philopator (224–204 BC) built a great polyreme navy, including a “forty, in his competition with the Seleucids to control ports along the Syrian-Palestine coast and the Aegean. The purpose of the “forty,” the ultimate of the polyremes, with its 4,000 oarsmen and 25,800 marines, is baffling. Murray suggests that Philopator built it to celebrate his victory at Raphia (217 BC) over Antiochus IV. This behemoth, whose seven rams were designed specifically for defensive purposes, apparently never appeared in battle and Murray makes the reasonable suggestions that Ptolemy wished to impress those who witnessed its launching. There were doubtless other factors as well. It may be suggested that beyond its propaganda value such an expensive weapon must have been designed for a practical purpose, perhaps to block the mouth of the Nile precluding any seaborne attack on Egypt. The “forty” was a sort of Star Wars project. There could also have been a security issue. The Ptolemies relied on their oppressed subjects for naval service. After the battle of Raphia the Egyptians, who had been for the first time conscripted in large numbers into the Ptolemaic army and had proved effective in battle, had become rebellious. It may have been too risky to man the “forty” with a potentially problematic crew.

The polyremes proved of little use to the Hellenistic Kingdoms against the Romans who defeated them in a series of land battles. The Romans were nonetheless fascinated with these large vessels and may have made good use of them in harbor sieges during the First and Second Punic Wars but the Roman senate, Murray maintains, would not allocate funds for such expensive weapons. Marc Antony, however, built polyremes for the final confrontation with Octavian at Actium in 31 BC. After the battle the victorious Octavian embedded some of the rams from Antony’s polyremes in the Actian victory monument at Nicopolis. The rams are long gone but Murray’s careful study of the sockets indicates the large number of polyremes in Antony’s navy. Murray is surely right in arguing

that the larger polyremes, which were of little use in the naval battle, were intended to take harbors in Italy.

The half-ton Athlit ram discovered in 1980 remains an enigma. Some scholars maintain that it belonged to a great polyreme but Murray, assessing the ram in the context of the sockets in the Actium monument, argues that it was fitted to a "four." But the possibility that it was from a trireme cannot be excluded. While Murray has not ended the debate on some issues of ancient Greek naval warfare he has shed much light on the subject. This is an original work of sound scholarship. Specialists in ancient naval history will benefit from this book and students of classical antiquity will also profit from it.

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