

Project

The Roman Navy

by Nathan Shepard

The Roman Navy was an interesting extension of the Army. The Romans believed the navy was inferior to the army, and, unofficially, Roman officers scoffed at the navy. Once a famous commander said, “Let the Egyptians and the Phoenicians fight at sea, but give us land...” The Roman doctrine on conquering bodies of water was to first conquer the land, then take the sea; never did they attack the land from the sea. They so disregarded naval warfare, they built just enough warships to guard coastal territories and keep pirates from important shipping lanes. If they had a surplus of ships, they would sell them to merchants. Eventually though, they found that if they wanted to control all the lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, they needed to firmly control the monstrous body of water which their empire surrounded. They made practical ships, formed an inventive, effective strategy, and made some incredible naval history.

In the Roman navy there were two classes of ships. First were the merchant ships. By definition, a Roman merchant ship was anything that could float and carry cargo to a destination at the same time. These ships had poor hulls, lightweight and thin, but this increased their speed and loading capacity. They found that if they hopped from island to island across the Mediterranean, they wouldn’t run into strong storms or treacherous winds in which reinforced hulls would be necessary. A small crew was ideal for such a ship because there was more cargo space and less expenses. In most cases, a two-person

crew would be sufficient to sail a 50m boat across the Mediterranean. Many wealthy noblemen invested in merchant ships during the Pax Romana because the routes were short, denoting quick income, the taxes were lower because war funding was no longer needed, there were no tariffs on trade within the empire, and there were few pirates or enemy ships on the sea, resulting in a sturdy investment. All in all, trade by ship was a win-win venture. The second type of ship was the warship. These huge floating fortresses were garrisoned with up to two dozen soldiers and ten crewmen. However cramped this made the ship, the soldiers were always needed and appreciated. The ship's prows were heavily reinforced and the hull was thick and strong, but this feature also contributed to the main weakness of the ship, its sluggish speed. During battles, the sails would be dropped, and all the crewmen would row the ship from behind armored hull, so as to preserve the ship's rowers and sails. This technique was designed to prevent the main predicament the Phoenician ships experienced, losing all propulsion during engagement.

In the battle of Actium, an outnumbered and unprepared Roman navy devised a simple yet effective strategy to play towards the strength of supreme Roman footsoldiers. By ramming the side of an enemy vessel, they would cause it to begin to sink. Then, before it went down, Roman troops could board the vessel, kill anyone they found, set fire in the hold of the ship, and return to their mothership to strike again. The enemy vessel would ultimately be lost, no rescue effort was plausible, survivors were going to die, it couldn't fight while it sank, and it flared and burned while its allies watched, defeating their morale utterly. For every ship they had, they could take out a corresponding enemy vessel of any size with relatively low losses every half hour.

There were few pivotal Roman naval battles, but there were three that were very important to the Roman Empire. During the battle of Mylae in about 480BC, many of the small states near the border of the Roman conquests in Italy were distraught because their neighbors had been conquered mercilessly and their small militias turned to dust. Afraid of being so conquered, they joined together and allied with Greece to attack the Romans in their weak spot, the sea. After surrounding Rome, it soon became clear that their plans were not effectual. The Romans were unimpressed by the blockade, holding the ships far from shore with simple artillery and using their superior soldiers to kill any ground invasion force upon its landfall. The attackers, their supplies dwindling, couldn't keep up the blockade any longer. They returned to their home ports, told their story, and then the attacking countries were immediately and unmercifully conquered and enslaved by the mighty Romans. Although the Romans saved face during this ordeal, and were happy with the outcome, the military leaders were uneasy with the situation. They ordered an immediate buildup of Roman warships to protect and patrol Roman coasts. The Romans would not be so unprepared the next time. Soon the new navy had a chance to practice their skills when Carthage disputed the Roman attempt to conquer Sicily, an island off the tip of Italy. Using conventional strategy adopted from more powerful navies, the Romans drove off the Carthaginians and conquered Sicily. Over seven hundred years later, when the Roman Empire was nearing its greatest power, Octavian and Anthony trapped Octavian and Cleopatra in their own waters in Asia Minor. Octavian, outnumbered and out skilled, thought of all his troops that were going to be of no consequence, and devised the hit-burn-and-run strategy mentioned earlier. This brilliant plan allowed him to pass

through and escape 450 of Anthony's best warships with his bride Cleopatra and over 100 of his original 230 ships, leaving less than 175 of Anthony's fleet to pursue.

In conclusion, the early Roman navy was undeveloped, but the superior minds of Roman commanders allowed it to flourish and fight off enemy navies of all naval skill. The Romans were beyond a doubt the strongest and smartest military power of the ancient world.