

Reassessing Polybius on Naval Power in the First Punic War

This paper examines the construction and maintenance of fleets in Polybius' narrative of the First Punic War. The paper argues that Polybius carefully distinguishes between the building of new ships and the refitting or repairing of existing ships, a distinction, often obscured in translation and hitherto unremarked upon. Nevertheless this distinction between refitting and building emerges clearly with a close study of Polybius' language surrounding naval activity and has important ramifications for understanding Polybius' narrative of naval aspects of the First Punic War.

Recently, Michael Pitassi (2009 and 2012) has argued that the Romans produced ships at a continuous and mostly steady rate starting in 267 BCE. Pitassi relies for this reconstruction on modifications to Polybius' fleet size figures made by W. W. Tarn (1907) and J. H. Thiel (1954), which mostly serve to reduce the size of the largest Roman fleets based primarily on an assumption of implausibility, as noted by J.D. Grainger (2011). Despite an evolving respect for Roman maritime skill in the First Punic War (Steinby 2007, Murray 2012), these adjustments to Roman and Carthaginian fleet numbers have been directly disputed only by G. K. Tipps (1985). This paper demonstrates that a closer reading of Polybius' narrative renders Pitassi's model of Roman shipbuilding untenable. Instead, the picture which emerges out of Polybius' narrative is one in which the Romans engage in relatively short bursts of production: in 261, 257, 255, 250, and finally in 243. Moreover, the paper shows that this method of rapid fleet construction was not isolated to the Romans, but was a common response to the need to build large numbers of galley warships at once, as the Spartans did after Cyzicus (410 BCE) and Arginousae (406 BCE), or the Ottomans after Lepanto (1571 CE). Moreover, the very large Roman fleets reported by

Polybius are plausible both within Polybius' narrative and in comparison to other large battles between galley fleets.

In contrast, Polybius notes only one period of intensive Carthaginian shipbuilding in 256 after the defeat at Ecnomus. Once the confusion surrounding Polybius' text for the Battle of Hermaeum (Plb. 1.36.10-12) is resolved, the lack of ship building is consistent with relatively lower Carthaginian losses. This paper argues that Polybius' language after the battle indicates that the Carthaginians refit, rather than rebuilt their fleet, supporting the supposition that Carthaginian losses were less severe. In light of this correction, the lack of reports of aggressive shipbuilding fits with the general pattern of less severe Carthaginian losses. As Carthaginian fleets tended to survive battles, the Carthaginians devoted more resources to repairing and maintaining older ships, many of which would have been captured Roman ships, as appears to be the case with some of the Egadi rams (Prag 2014), reducing the need for Carthaginian ship construction further. The high cost of maintaining fleets of galleys would have restricted the ability of the Carthaginians to build new ships while still supporting their existing navy. Catastrophic Roman losses to storms as well as at the Battle of Drepana, ironically freed the Roman Republic from the costs of having to maintain existing fleets and thus allowed for fresh expenditures in building new fleets.

The result of this interaction was to make individual naval engagements less decisive. Because fleets could be replaced quickly if they were lost, or repaired quickly if they survived, while existing fleets were nearly as expensive to maintain, victories at sea provided only narrow windows of opportunity and defeats at sea only narrow windows of vulnerability. As a result, it was only in 241 when the Carthaginians were not just exhausted, but also already exposed by the

presence of a trapped army in Sicily in need of resupply, that a naval engagement could be decisive.

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