

THE ATHLIT RAM



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THE EVOLUTION IN SHAPE OF THE ANCIENT RAM

Lionel Casson and Elisha Linder

In military history war at sea is a relative newcomer. It does not play a role, certainly not a significant one, until the second half of the second millennium B.C., when the eastern Mediterranean gradually became a battlefield for the fleets defending the interests of the dominant entities — the Egyptians, Hittites, and Mycenaeans.¹

In those early days naval combat was like that on land, save that the opposing warriors fought from the deck of a ship instead of on the soil of a field. Then there came a time when the ship itself was made into a weapon by giving it a prow with a projection on the waterline and enveloping this with a casing of bronze. The prow was thus converted into the naval equivalent of a battering ram, a device that had been used from early antiquity in siege warfare. Just as a battering ram was thrust forward by soldiers to smash at the gates or walls of a city, so the naval ram was thrust forward by oarsmen to smash at and damage the hull of an enemy vessel.

Numerous types of ancient craft, from mere rowboats to big sailing freighters, were made with a prow that ended in a projection on the waterline.² The reason is unclear; perhaps the feature was structural, resulting from the setting of the stempost into the keel not at its tip but a bit abaft of it.³ To create a warship with a ram, all the shipwrights had to do was take a galley with such a prow — it had to be a galley; in a battle, one could not risk total dependence upon the vagaries of the wind — strengthen and extend the timbers in the forward area, and sheath them in armor. This was a crucial step that transformed the nature of naval combat as well as the ships. When did it take place?

There are representations of ships with prows jutting forward at the waterline that date from as early as the third millennium, but the projections depicted manifestly lack the length and strength a ram must have.⁴ What we see in these representations is a prow configuration, not a ram. Moreover, in the two earliest illustrations of naval battles that have survived, a Minoan wall painting of around 1500 B.C.⁵ and an Egyptian relief of around 1200 B.C.,⁶ the action consists only of fighting between the warriors aboard; there are no ships with rams.

But then, around 900 B.C., a change takes place. A series of pictures dating from this time down to ca. 700 B.C. shows galleys that boast a massive prow ending in a long, pointed extension at the waterline (Fig. 5-1). The ponderous size and the shape indicate unmistakably that it is a ram.⁷ In addition, a decisive detail is supplied by a relief of a war galley from the palace of Sennacherib, the Assyrian king who ruled from 705 to 681. Here the projection is crossed by vertical lines that mark the after edge of the bronze sheath enveloping the point (Fig. 5-2). The relief portrays a Phoenician galley. Greek galleys are illustrated in the paintings on vases done in the so-called Geometric Style, which dates roughly from 900 to 700 — in other words, earlier than but also contemporary with, the Phoenician galley — and they bear rams of the same general shape.⁸ The massiveness of the prow is especially accentuated; these were truly prows made to withstand the brutal shock of ramming (Fig. 5-3).

A ram that ends in a point will drive a hole into a hull. This no doubt would satisfactorily harm an enemy

¹Cf., e.g., L. Casson, *The Ancient Mariners* (New York, 1959), pp. 27–33.

²On the waterline projection, see L. Casson, *Ships and Seaman-ship in the Ancient World*, 2d ed. (Princeton, 1986), p. 331.

³Cf. L. Basch, *Le musée imaginaire de la marine antique* (Athens, 1987), p. 151.

⁴See, e.g., *ibid.*, fig. 318, nos. 1–6.

⁵*IJNA* 4 (1975): 6, fig. 5 = Basch, *Musée imaginaire*, p. 132, fig. 271.

⁶Casson, *Ships and Seaman-ship*, fig. 61; Basch, *Musée imaginaire*, p. 68, figs. 123–30.

⁷Cf. the sketch in Basch, *Musée imaginaire*, p. 151, fig. 318.

⁸See J. S. Morrison and R. T. Williams, *Greek Oared Ships, 900–322 B.C.* (Cambridge, 1968), pls. 1–6.

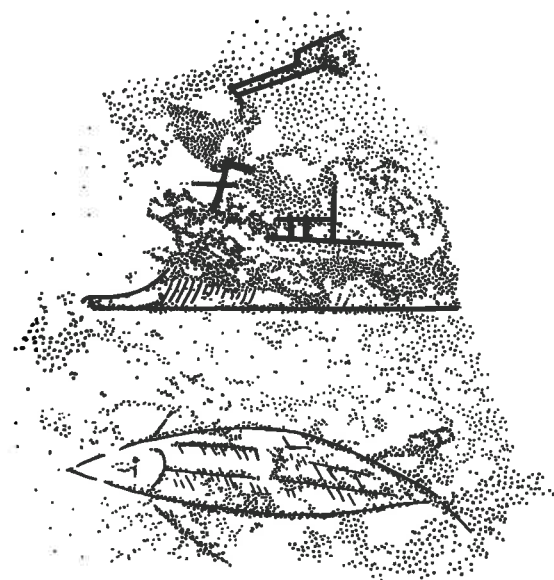


FIG. 5-1. Ship engraved on the catchplate of a bronze fibula found at Athens (ca. 850 B.C.) (Courtesy F. van Doorninck, Jr.)

ship but might well harm the attacker in the bargain. If the ram stuck fast, the attacker could not back off and thus would be open to boarding by the enemy's marines. Or, in backing off, an unexpected or inadvertent wrench might cause the tip to bend or break.

Late in the seventh century B.C. a new form of ram came into being, one designed to avoid the dangers just described. It ended not in a point but in a blunt face: this made the prow look rather like a boar's snout and, indeed, decoration was added to enhance the resemblance (Fig. 5-4).⁹ Such a ram did not wreak its damage by driving a hole into an enemy hull but, as J. R. Steffy has pointed out in chapter II, by delivering a pounding blow on it, which would cause the seams to open up. The pictures of ships with the boar's snout hull, done in a more realistic fashion than those from the previous centuries, include welcome details, such as vertical lines to indicate where the metal sheath ended and, occasionally, a long horizontal line that may indicate a seam in the sheath.¹⁰

The earliest representation of the blunt ram dates somewhat before 600,¹¹ and from then on it is the shape par excellence down to the opening decades of the fifth century.¹² Presumably it was the type used in the great naval engagements of 480 that contributed to the Greeks' victory in the Second Persian War. The following hundred years are relatively sterile so far as illustrations of ships are concerned; we have very few in comparison with the great abundance from the previous age. Curi-

⁹Ibid., pls. 11-21.

¹⁰E.g., *ibid.*, pl. 13.

¹¹Ibid., p. 81.

¹²Ibid., pl. 20e, coin of Zankle-Messana dated ca. 489.

ously, these few include two, of eastern galleys, that have the old-fashioned ram ending in a point.¹³ Perhaps they are anachronistic, portraying ship types of bygone days.

The next stage in the development finally brings us to the Athlit ram, the version ending in a head with three horizontal fins crossed down the center by a solid vertical section. The first appearance of this type is in two representations that date more or less around 400,¹⁴ but its introduction might well have taken place before that, perhaps decades before. Quite possibly this was the form of ram borne by the galleys that fought in the numerous naval actions of the Peloponnesian War (431-404), if not in the earlier actions, then surely in the later. Many ship pictures have survived that show it,¹⁵ and in them the prow is rendered in profile, and the ram as a consequence seems to end in three prongs, while the vertical section is, of course, invisible (Fig. 5-5). But the Athlit ram reveals the true state of things: the apparent prongs are merely the artist's way of portraying the fins in side view. And the shape exemplified by the Athlit ram, with its grid of three horizontals and a vertical, was standard; it is replicated almost exactly in a sculpture of the first century B.C.¹⁶ and another dating to the time of Augustus (Fig. 5-6).

The three-finned ram, like the blunt-faced that preceded it, delivered a pounding blow, but one that was more effective than its predecessor's, a blow "that concentrated enormous forces into a very small contact area, but which was prevented by a sufficiently widespread grid from penetrating too far into the hull."¹⁷

Even after the introduction of the superior three-finned ram, the blunt-faced continues to appear in representations of ships. The city of Cius in Bithynia, for example, minted coins in the last third of the fourth century that show both shapes, on some the new three-finned and on others the old blunt-faced.¹⁸ From the beginning of the third century on, however, only the three-finned is to be seen, and it long held the field. It was the type borne by the galleys that fought in the great naval battles of the next three centuries — between Demetrius Po-

¹³Basch, *Musée imaginaire*, p. 321, fig. 677 (coin of Sidon dated end of fifth century B.C.; Casson, *Ships and Seamanship*, fig. 105 = Basch, *Musée imaginaire*, p. 327, figs. 699-700 (Persian seal impression dated 520-331, probably earlier rather than later).

¹⁴Basch, *Musée imaginaire*, p. 299, fig. 633 (relief on a tombstone dated beginning of the fourth century B.C.); p. 274, fig. 582 (coin of a Cypriot city dated end of fifth century B.C.).

¹⁵E.g., Morrison and Williams, *Greek Oared Ships*, pl. 27a (coin of Cius in Bithynia dated toward the end of the fourth century B.C.); Basch, *Musée imaginaire*, p. 387, fig. 808e and f (coins of Sinope, 306-290); p. 300, fig. 639 (coin of Magnetes dated 196-146); p. 301, fig. 640 (coin of Leucas, after 167 B.C.).

¹⁶Basch, *Musée imaginaire*, p. 391, figs. 816, 817 (monument found at Cyrene).

¹⁷Richard Steffy, chap. II, this volume.

¹⁸Basch, *Musée imaginaire*, p. 299, fig. 634 (three-finned); p. 275, fig. 583 (blunt-faced).

liorctes and Ptolemy I off Salamis in Cyprus in 306 (Fig. 5-5), between Rome and Carthage in the waters off Sicily during the First Punic War in the middle of the third century,¹⁹ between the fleets of Rome and those of Antiochus III off the coast of Asia Minor in the beginning of the second century,²⁰ and in the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C. that eliminated Antony and put the Roman Empire in Augustus' hands.²¹ Augustus undertook to establish a permanent navy; its ships were equipped with three-finned rams.²²

Then, around A.D. 100, there is a change: the Roman warships pictured on Trajan's column, erected in 113, are equipped with blunt-faced rams (Fig. 5-7). And representations from this time on show the blunt-faced or the pointed (Fig. 5-8) but no longer the three-finned.

The change may well be connected with the change in the role played by the Roman navy. Well before Trajan ascended the throne, no power was left to challenge

Rome's domination of the water and hostile fleets had disappeared from the Mediterranean. Roman war galleys no longer saw battle action; they now were employed in anti-pirate patrols, the transporting of high government personnel, and other such peacetime duties.²³ A galley still had to have a ram, for it was the distinguishing mark of a warship, but even before Trajan's time it had become nothing more than a symbol. Perhaps Trajan elected to fit out his ships with a version that must have been easier to cast and doubtless was less costly, and subsequent rulers followed this convenient course.

In the latter centuries of the Roman Empire naval combat flared up again in the Mediterranean. But a new weapon, fire, came to the fore, and the ram gradually lost even its significance as the badge of the warship.²⁴ At some point in Byzantine times it disappeared, not to be revived until the age of iron warcraft.



FIG. 5-2. Phoenician warship relief from the palace of Sennacherib (705-681 B.C.) (Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum)

¹⁹Cf., e.g., H. Grueber, *Coins of the Roman Republic in the British Museum* (London, 1910), I, 17, no. 23 = pl. x.2 (268-40).

²⁰Cf., e.g., *ibid.*, I, 63, no. 531 = pl. xviii.4 (217-197); p. 79, no. 600 = pl. xix.14 (196-173); p. 101, no. 763 = pl. xxiii.3 (172-151).

²¹Cf., e.g., Casson, *Ships and Seamanship*, fig. 120 (coin minted 38-36 B.C.).

²²Cf., e.g., Basch, *Musée imaginaire*, p. 427, figs. 920, 921 (prows pictured in the reliefs on the arch of Orange, A.D. 21-27).

²³Cf. C. Starr, *The Roman Imperial Navy 31 B.C.-A.D. 324*, 2d ed. (Cambridge, 1960), chap. 8.

²⁴Cf. Casson, *Ships and Seamanship*, pp. 152-53.

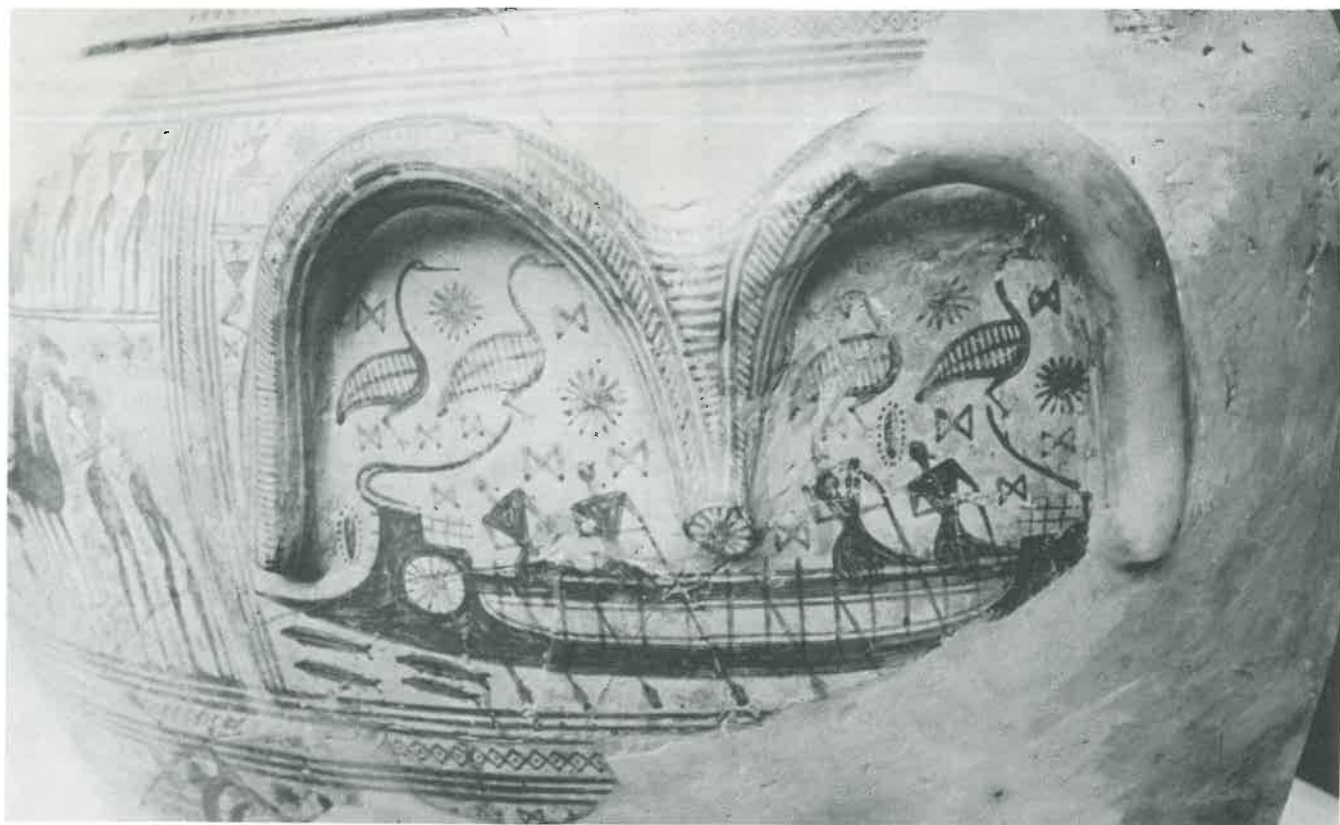


FIG. 5-3. Galley pictured on a Greek Geometric Style bowl (mid-eighth century B.C.) (Courtesy Giraudon)

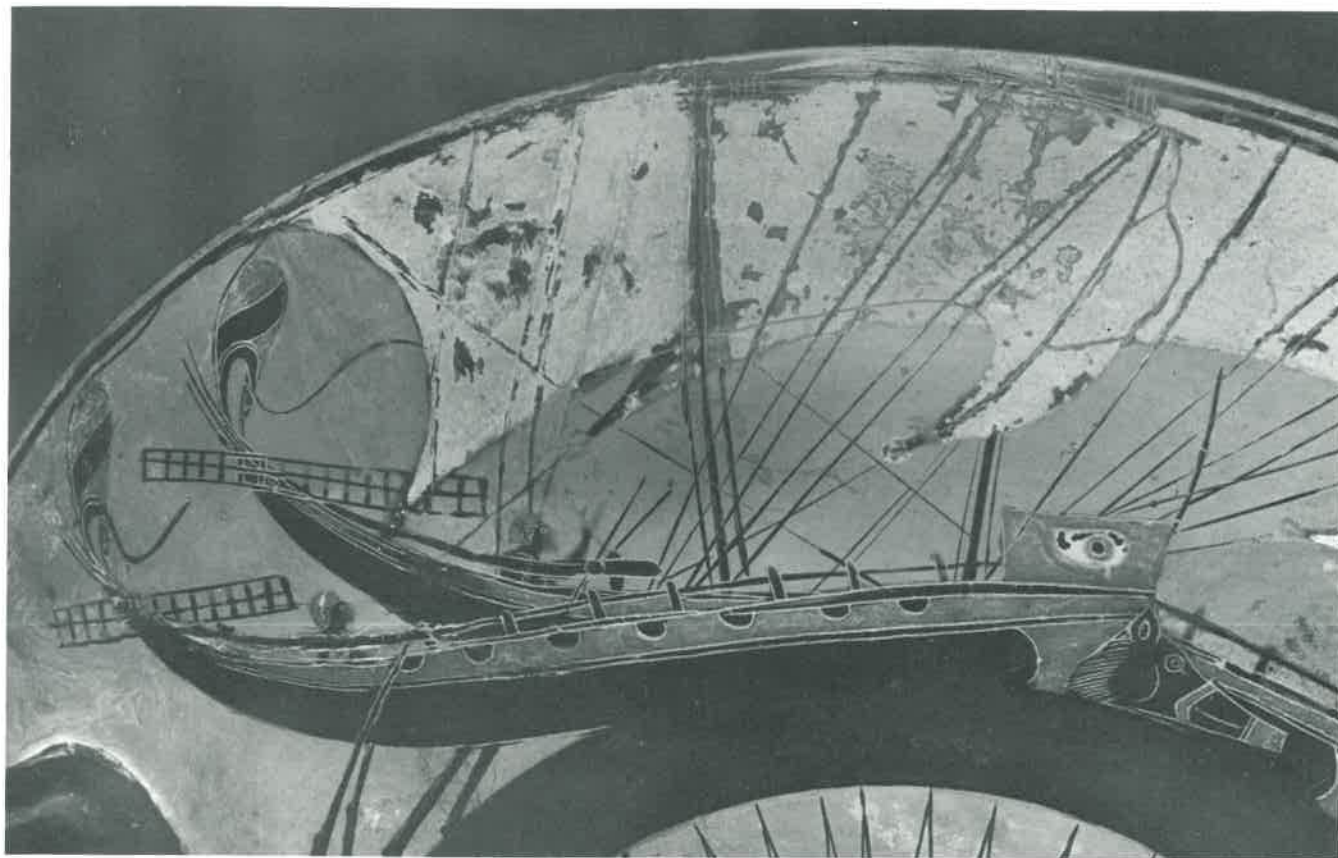


FIG. 5-4. Galley pictured on an Athenian cup (second half of sixth century B.C.) (Courtesy Hirmer)



FIG. 5-5. Coin of Antigonus Gonatas (ca. 253 B.C.) (after G. Hill, *Select Greek Coins* [Paris, 1927], pl. 46.5)



FIG. 5-6. Part of a monument found at Ostia (time of Augustus [27 B.C.-A.D. 14]) (Photograph by L. Casson)



FIG. 5-7. Detail of relief on Trajan's column (A.D. 113) (Photograph by L. Casson)



FIG. 5-8. Coin of Hadrian (A.D. 117-38) (Photograph by L. Casson)