

ATHENS AND ROME: LIFE AND CULTURE IN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

Lecture 14 – Navies in the Ancient World

CLCS4007

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Navies in Classical Greece

Sailors in Greek *Poleis*

- ▣ Free, metics, slaves.
- ▣ Often poor, cannot afford hoplite armour – pay often 3 obols a day.
- ▣ Can become very skilled, notably Athenian navy.
 - Oarsmen.
 - Helmsman.
 - Deck fighters (marines).
 - Officers.



Vessels in the Classical World

- ▣ Pentaconters in use in Archaic period (50 oared ships).
- ▣ Biremes (two banks of oars) and Triremes (three banks of oars).
- ▣ Ameinocles “first” to develop triremes – **Thucydides 1.13; Pliny NH 7.57.**
- ▣ Trireme crew made up of c.200 men (mostly rowers, about 10-15 “marines” and few officers and a helmsman).

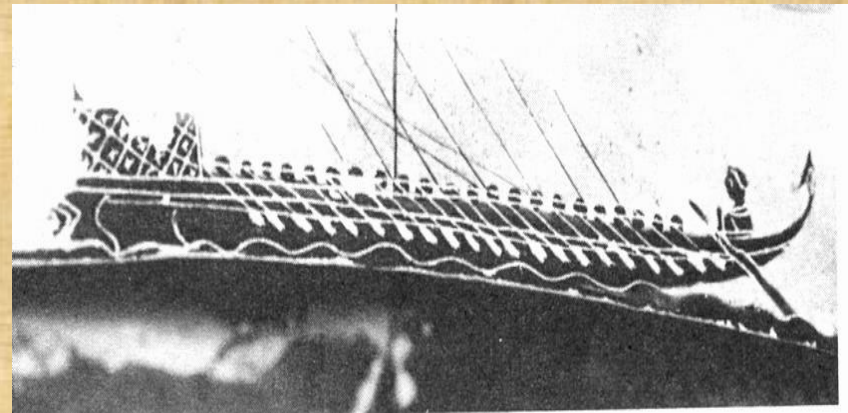
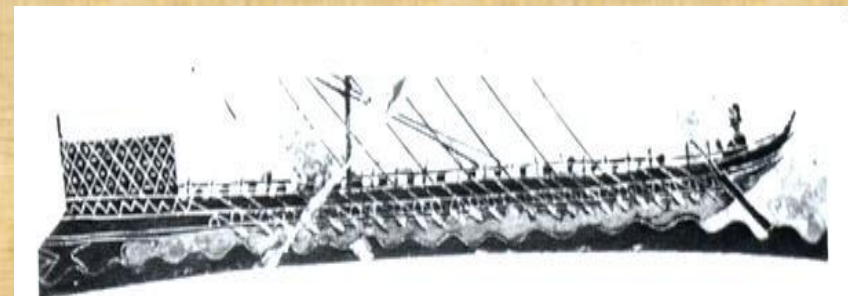


Image of a Pentaconter – Attic vase c.520 BC



102 Detail within a dinos rim, by Exekias

Bireme – Attic vase c.6th century BC

Reconstruction



Modern reconstruction of a trireme – The Olympias.

Trireme (1)

- ▣ The were usually around 120 feet in length.
- ▣ Overall beam (width) of just under 20 feet.
- ▣ Oarsmen were spaced just under 3 feet - one man per oar.
- ▣ Length of the oars were between 13-14 feet (longer oars for higher banks).
- ▣ Speed varied depending on us of sail or oars, and whether in battle conditions – 6-10 knots.

Trireme (2)

- ▣ Principal weapon is the ram.
- ▣ Usual aim is to hit vessels side on, emphasis on speed and manoeuvrability.
- ▣ Also break the enemies oars.
- ▣ Ships usually break up, not sink, timbers float.
- ▣ Exchanges of missiles and attempts at boarding also possible tactics (especially when manoeuvrability limited).



[Battle of Arginusae] “ Consequently he [Callicratidas] was the first to drive at the ship of Lysias the general, and shattering it at the first blow together with the triremes accompanying it, he sank it; and as for the other ships, some he rammed and made unseaworthy and from others he tore away the rows of oars and rendered them useless for the fighting. – **Diodorus Siculus** 13.99.3.

Boarding and Combat

[Battle of Arginusae] “Last of all he rammed the trireme of Pericles [the Younger] with a rather heavy blow and broke a great hole in the trireme; then, since the beak of his ship stuck tight in the gap and they could not withdraw it, Pericles threw an iron hand [grappling iron] on the ship of Callicratidas, and when it was fastened tight, the Athenians, surrounding the ship, sprang upon it, and pouring over its crew put them all to the sword.” – **Diodorus Siculus 13.99.4.**

Sailing on a Trireme

- ▣ Limited space – cannot carry many supplies, not troop transport ships.
- ▣ Often sailed close to coast.
- ▣ Ships generally “beached” (or in a ship-shed) at the end of every day – need to keep hull dry.
- ▣ Crew normally “beach” in order to eat, rest etc.

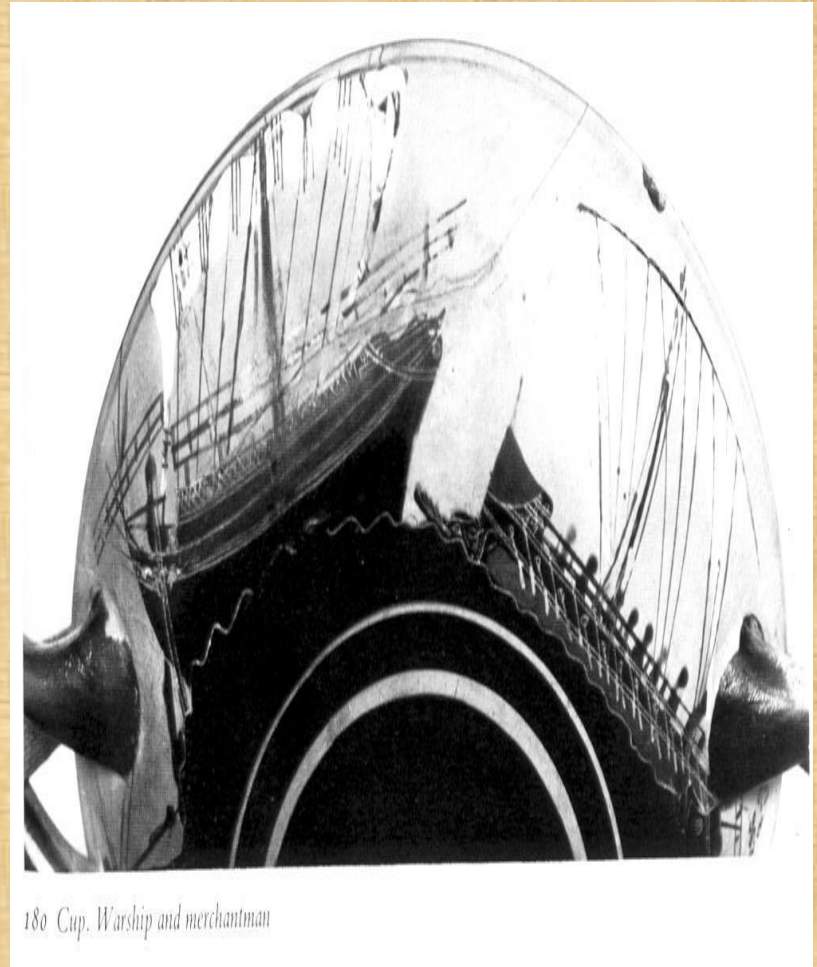


Image of a cargo vessel and a bireme – 6th century BC Attic vase

Equipment

- ▣ Cushion – for comfort.
- ▣ Oar – for rowing (obviously).
- ▣ Thong (to hold the oar in place).

“[Peloponnesian forces preparing for a surprise attack on the Piraeus] – “Each sailor was to carry his cushion and his oar with its thong, and cross on foot with all haste from Corinth to the Athenian side of the Isthmus; they were to go to Megara and from Nisaea, the harbour of Megara, to launch forty ships which happened to be lying in the docks; thence they were to sail straight for the Piraeus.” – **Thucydides 2.93.**

Leadership

- ▣ Generals (*Strategoí*) – may command army and navy.
- ▣ Trierarchos – responsible by liturgy for maintaining the ship (wealthy citizen duty); can accompany ship or delegate duty.
 - Commander (*keleustes*).
 - Helmsman (*Kybernetes*) – steered.
 - Lookout (*prorates*).

[Build up to the Sicilian expedition]
“The fleet had been elaborately equipped at great cost to the captains and the state; the treasury giving a drachma a day to each seaman, and providing empty ships, sixty men of war and forty transports, and manning these with the best crews obtainable; while the captains gave a bounty in addition to the pay from the treasury to the thranites [rowers of the top bench] and crews generally, besides spending lavishly upon figure-heads and equipment, and one and all making the utmost exertions to enable their own ships to excel in beauty and fast sailing.” – **Thucydides 6.31.**

Coordinating the Crew

- ▣ Flute players – for keeping ship coordinated (not using drums!)
- ▣ Oarsmen
 - Thranites (upper bank) 62 men.
 - Zygitēs (middle bank) 58.
 - Thalamites (lower bank) 54.
- ▣ Sailors (handling sails) c.10 men.
- ▣ Besides officers and sailors are “Marines” 10-20 hoplites and archers.



Lenormant Relief c. 400 BC

Manoeuvring

- ▣ Athenian ships often less heavily equipped (lighter).
- ▣ Athenians by mid-fifth century preferred combat in open water.
- ▣ *Diekplous* ('sailing through and out') – charging through enemy lines.
- ▣ Turning about for a new attack (*anastrophe*).
- ▣ *Periplous* ('sailing round') – envelopment (attacking both flanks); requires superior manoeuvring or numbers.
- ▣ *Anakrousis* ('pulling back') – i.e. to row the ship backwards.

Weather and Currents

- ▣ Sailing season was May to September – sailing in winter in Mediterranean is difficult due to weather and current conditions.

[Xerxes navy stationed along the coast of Magnesia] “It is not a large beach, and so there were eight rows of ships from shore into the sea. They passed the night in this formation, but early in the morning there was a change in the weather. The sea became choppy and they were lashed by violent storms coming from the north-east on a strong wind... All the ships found out at sea, however, were either driven on to the so-called Ovens of Mount Pelium or the beach, or wrecked on Cape Sepias itself... It was a monster of a storm quite impossible to ride out.” – **Herodotus 7.188.**

[Battle of Arginusae] “The Athenians learned at once of the approach of the enemy... but refused battle because of the strong winds and made ready for the conflict on the following day, the Lacedaemonians also doing likewise... - **Diodorus Siculus 13.97.4**

Trail of the Generals

“The Athenians, while they pursued the defeated foe for a considerable distance, filled the whole area of the sea in the neighbourhood of the battle with corpses and the wreckage of ships. ... in the meantime a great storm arose, so that the ships were tossed about and the men, by reason both of the hardships they had suffered in the battle and the heavy waves, opposed picking up the dead. And finally, since the storm increased in violence, they neither sailed to Mitylenê nor picked up the dead but were forced by the winds to put in at the Arginusae... as a result of the loss of so many ships and of the sailors who manned them the coastline of the territory of the Cymaeans and Phocaeans was strewn with corpses and wreckage.” – **Diodorus Siculus 13.100.**

“After this they condemned the generals who took part in the battle, eight in all; and the six who were in Athens were put to death.” – **Xenophon *Hellenica* 1.7.34.**

Building and Maintenance

- ▣ Athens paid for construction of ships and for crew – silver mines.
- ▣ Triarchs, paid for equipment and repairs, money also pay extra money for crew – also liable for unnecessary losses.
- ▣ High cost of keeping a trireme, building a fleet.
- ▣ Athenian silver at Laurium - Spartans receiving Persian gold.



[Nicias' report to Athens] - "They (the Syracusans) have discovered that the length of the time we have now been in commission has rotted our ships and wasted our crews, and that with the entireness of our crews and the soundness of our ships the pristine efficiency of our navy has gone. For it is impossible for us to haul our ships ashore and careen them [Turning a ship on its side for cleaning, caulking, or repair], because, the enemy's vessels being as many or more than our own, we are constantly anticipating an attack. Indeed, they may be seen exercising, and it lies with them to take the initiative; and not having to maintain a blockade, they have greater facilities for drying their ships." – **Thucydides 7.12.**

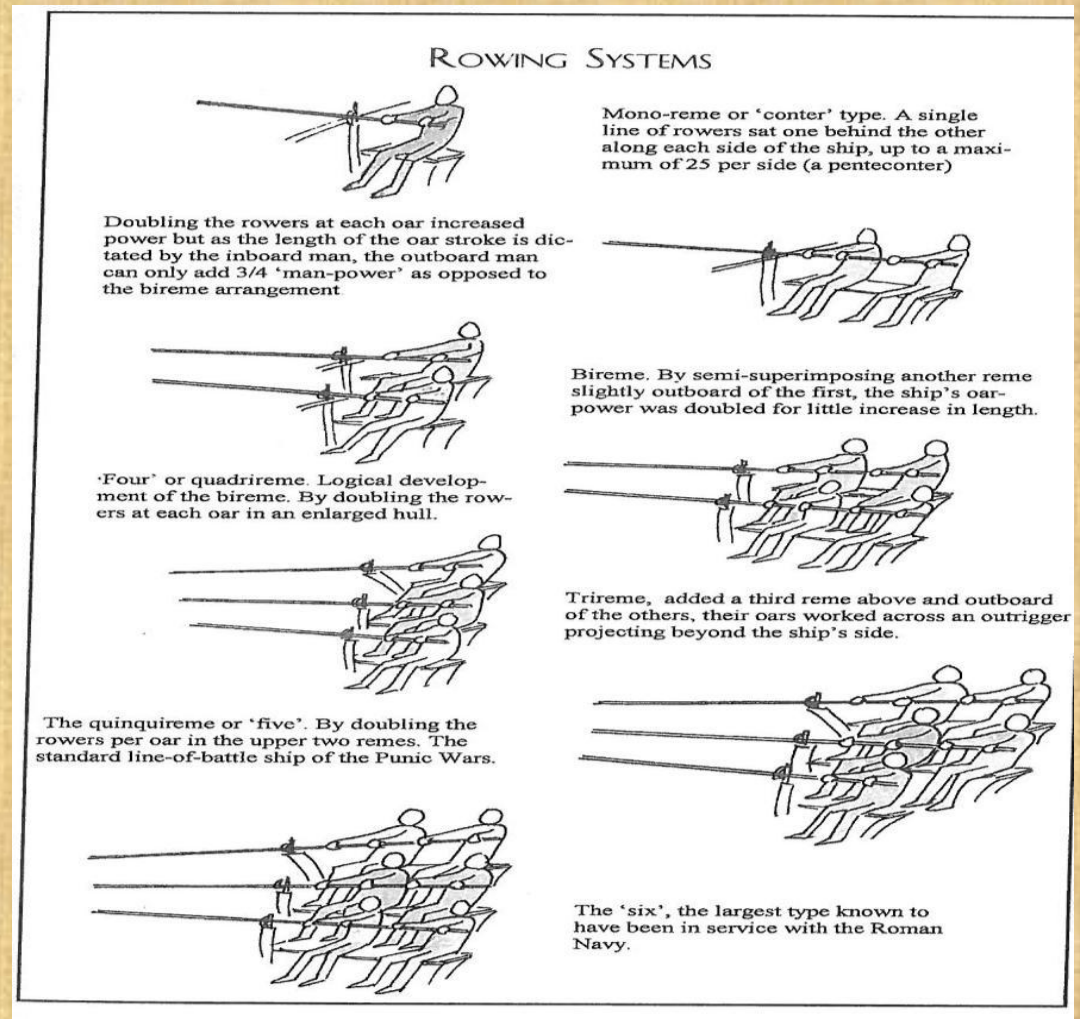
Roman Navy

Early Roman Warships

- First specific reference to a warship in 394 BC, when the Romans sent a votive gift to the temple of Apollo at Delphi (Livy 5.28).
- First specific reference to a Roman naval battle takes place at end of Latin War (340-388 BC); a Roman fleet under Gaius Maenius defeated the Latins and Volscians in a sea battle near Antium (338 BC) – prows decorate *rostra*.
- In 311 BC a naval board is set up to provide and equip a fleet – under the direction of two *Douviri Navales*.

Polyremes

- ❑ “Naval arms race” in Early Hellenistic period.
- ❑ System of superimposed banks (as seen with trireme) more implausible for ship sizes above “fours” or “fives”.
- ❑ Larger sizes must have had multiple rowers per oar.



The *corvus* “Raven”

- ▣ A gangplank mounted on a pivot, and slung from a vertical post set in the deck – large metal spike at the end.
- ▣ Up to 36 ft. long (11m), and raised by a rope and pulley.
- ▣ About 4 ft. (1.22m) wide, enough for two men to cross abreast.
- ▣ Quinquiremes or larger need for this installation.



Disasters and Victories

- ❑ Battle of Ecnomus – 256 BC – naval battle of the south coast of Sicily – Romans had lost 24 ships to Carthaginian ramming but had themselves sunk 30 ships and captured another 64 by boarding.
- ❑ Large portion of Roman fleet lost to a storm in 255 BC when sailing between Melita and the southern tip of Sicily – perhaps over 300 ships lost.
- ❑ Battle of Drepanum – 249 BC – 123 Roman ships attempt to trap Carthaginian ships in harbour at Drepanum but fail. Roman ships strung out in a line parallel to the shore. The Roman lose 93 ships, but large numbers of the crews able to get ashore.
- ❑ Romans successfully attack Carthaginian fleet sailing by Aegades Islands.

Piracy during the Late Republic

- ▣ Major wars and Roman weakening and subjugation of major Hellenic powers.
- ▣ Attacks on shipping, coastal towns, and kidnaping for ransoms:

“...on his voyage back, [Caesar] was captured, near the island Pharmacusa [of west coast of Turkey], by pirates, who already at that time controlled the sea with large armaments and countless small vessels. To begin with, then, when the pirates demanded 20 talents for his ransom, he laughed at them for not knowing who their captive was, and of his own accord agreed to give them 50...” – **Plutarch *Life of Julius Caesar* 1.5-2.1.**

“Pirates always used to harass those who sailed the sea, even as brigands did those who lived on land. There was never a time when these practices were unknown, nor will they ever cease probably so long as human nature remains the same. But formerly marauding was limited to certain localities and small bands operating only during the summer on sea and on land... For while the Romans were busy with their adversaries, the pirates had gained great headway, sailing about to many quarters, and adding to their band all of like condition, to such an extent that some of them, after the manner of allies, assisted many others. When those wars had been ended, the pirates, instead of ceasing, did much serious injury by themselves both to the Romans and to their allies. They no longer sailed in small numbers, but in great fleets; and they had generals, so that they had gained a great reputation.” – **Dio Cassius 36.20-21.**

Pompey's War against the Pirates

- In 67 BC Pompey is granted to a special command for unlimited powers to operate in the Mediterranean and 50 miles inland – *Praefectus Classis et Orae Maritimae*.
- Pompey granted 6,000 talents [144 million sesterces], 120,000 troops and 500 ships, with 24 legates to assist.
- Western Mediterranean cleared of pirates in 40 days.
- Pompey's naval forces fight a major naval battle with the pirates of the coast of Coracaesium.
- The major pirate stronghold at Coracaesium in Cilicia is captured.
- Pompey claims to have captured 71 pirate ships with 300 surrendering to him, with 10,000 pirates killed and another 20,000 captured.

“Not only through the force that he commanded which was vast both in fleet and infantry, so that he was irresistible on both sea and land, but his clemency toward those who made terms with him was equally great, so that he won over large numbers by these actions; for those who were defeated by his troops and experienced his moderation went over to his side very eagerly. Besides other ways in which he took care of them he would give them any lands he saw unoccupied and cities that needed more inhabitants, in order that they might never again through poverty fall under the necessity of criminal deeds.” – **Dio Cassius 36.37.4-5.**

Armed Sailors on Merchant Ships

“At the present day voyages are made to India every year: and companies of archers are carried on board the vessels, as those seas are greatly infested with pirates.” – **Pliny** *NH* 6.26.101.

- ▣ Armed men used to protect ships sailing in Red Sea – **Philostratus** *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 3.35.

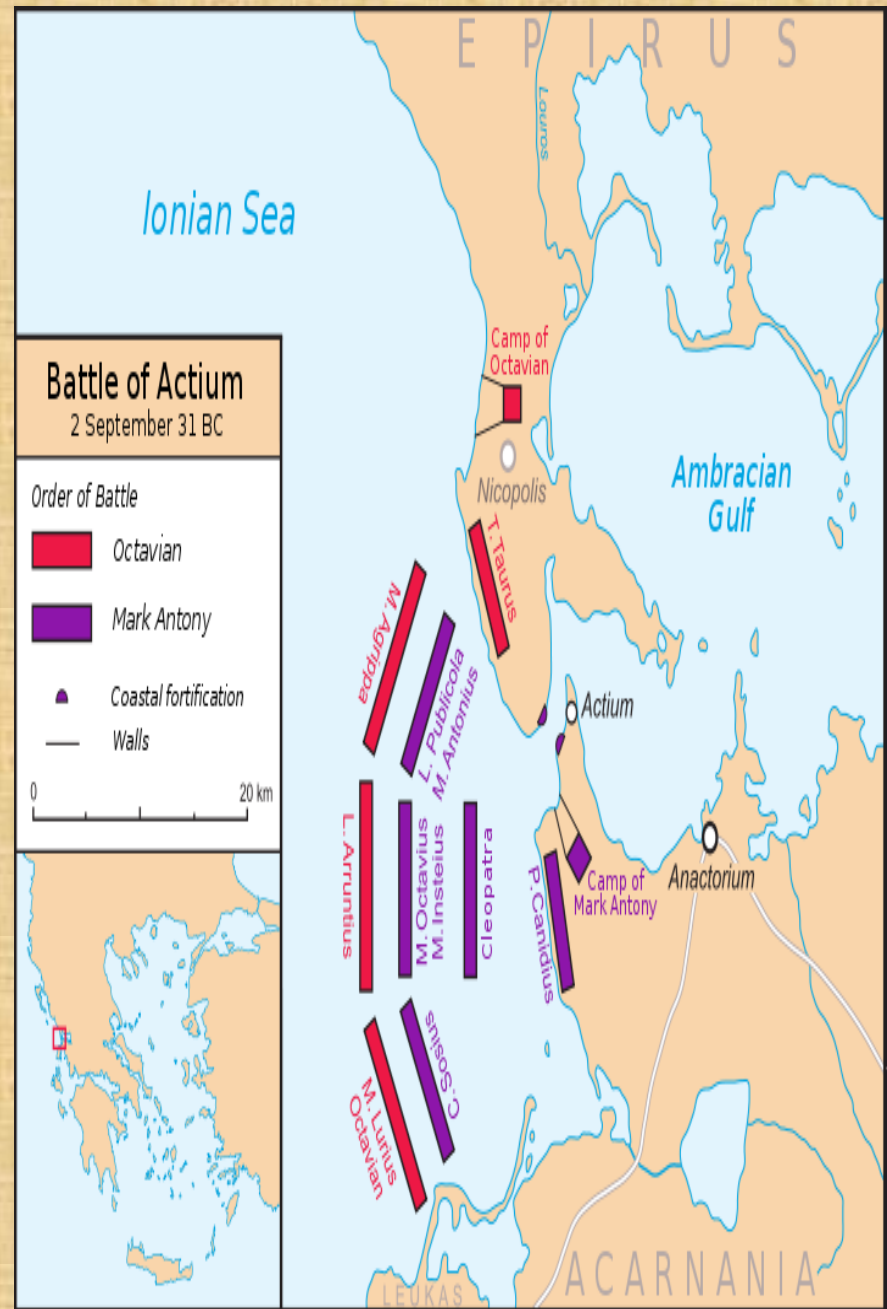
“Then in the winter time, when the merchant Jason is shut out from view, and his armed sailors are blocked out by the white booths...” – **Juvenal** *Satires* 6.153-57.

Battle of Actium – 2nd September, 31 BC



“For seeing that the size of Caesar's [Octavian's] ships and the number of marines were chiefly responsible for the defeat of Sextus, Antony had built his vessels much higher in the water than those of his opponents, constructing only a few triremes, but instead some ships of “fours” and some “tens”, and all the remainder in between these two; upon these he had built lofty towers, and he had put aboard a large number of men, who could thus fight from walls, as it were... Caesar's followers, having smaller and swifter ships, would dash forward and ram the enemy, being armoured on all sides to avoid receiving damage.” – **Dio Cassius 50.23.2-3, 32.2.**

- Antony's ships bigger and sturdier – Octavian's speedier.
- Octavian attempts to encircle Antony's ships.
- Octavian's tactics ramming.
- Antony's tactics to use volleys of missiles and to use grappling hocks.
- Use of flaming missiles and jars of charcoal and pitch.
- Cleopatra prematurely retreats – **Dio 50.33.1.**



Imperial Naval Forces

- ❑ After the battle of Actium there are 800 warships in active service.
- ❑ Major naval stations at Forum Iulii (Frejus, southern France), Ravenna (northern Adriatic coast), Misenum (Naples).
- ❑ Fleets also based in the outer provinces, including a Rhine fleet, Moesica (patrolling the Danube), possibly one in the Red Sea based at Myos Hormos, and perhaps also one based on Black Sea.

Recruitment and Service

- ❑ In earlier periods oarsmen (*remiges*) and sailors usually recruited among the allies (*socii navales*), the lowest class of citizen in the *census*, and freedmen (*liberti*) – rare to employ slaves.
- ❑ Over time naval service grew in status, though still tended to be heavily recruited from *peregrini*.
- ❑ Military diplomas indicate that usual length of service was 26 years.
- ❑ Marines had the same legal rights as land troops.

Clothing and Equipment

- ▣ Heavy cloaks or tunics depending upon the environment – especially to be resistant of ware and sea-water.
- ▣ Pictorial and literary evidence suggests light troops with wide variety of weapons.
- ▣ A variety of different helmets appear in the pictorial evidence.
- ▣ Varying use of metal or leather armour, some imagery shows corselet of felt or pressed linen.
- ▣ *Hasta navalis*, spears, long pikes (*kontoι*) and there is reference to the use of *pila* (**Prop. 4.6.22**) in naval engagements.
- ▣ Swords and axes cf. **Dio 50.33.7**.
- ▣ Grapnels for throwing on to enemy vessels.
- ▣ Slings and bows and arrows.

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