



Taking a City: Siege Warfare

HPAH5044/6044 – ARMIES AND NAVIES

Siege Warfare

▶ Outline:

- ▶ Trace the key developments in Hellenistic and Roman siegecraft.
- ▶ Explore how these developments affected the city

Early Republican Sieges

- ▶ Prolonged siege difficult with farmer-soldiers.
 - ▶ The cycle of expansion?
 - ▶ The rudimentary siege equipment?

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- ▶ ‘And deciding to attack the Volscians first, he [Postumus Cominius] took a city of theirs called Longula at the first assault, though the inhabitants undertook to make some show of bravery and sent some forces into the field in hopes of holding back the enemy; but these were put to shameful flight before they had performed any brilliant action and did not display the least courage even during the assault on their walls. At all events the Romans in one day not only possessed themselves of their country without effort, but also took their city by storm without much difficulty.’

- ▶ Dion. Hal. 6.91.2

DISCUSS:

- ▶ Compare this to Livy's version of the capture of Longula (2.33.4-10).
 - ▶ Similarities and Differences?
 - ▶ Think about the style and tone.
 - ▶ How are the Romans and the Volsci presented?

Sieges in the Greek world

- ▶ The beginnings of siege warfare and machinery.
- ▶ Aeneas Tacticus, *Poliorketica* (4th cent BCE treatise).
- ▶ Basis for later siege warfare tactics?



► With those, then, in the city who are opposed to the existing order one may deal in the manner already prescribed. In the meantime it is of primary importance to win over the mass of the citizens to a spirit of loyalty, both by other influences and in the case of the debtors by the reduction or complete cancellation of interest, and, in cases of especial danger, of some part of the principal, or even all of it when necessary; for such men as these are the most formidable of adversaries. Adequate provision must also be made for those who are in want of the necessities of life. [2] How these measures may be taken fairly and without offence to the wealthy, and from what revenues the expenses may be met, has also been clearly explained in the book on *Finance*.

► Aeneas Tacticus 14.1-2

Siege of Rhodes: 305-304 BCE

Rise of the Machines:

- Diodorus 20.81-88 (handout).
- The impact of siege engines.
- Effects on the population.

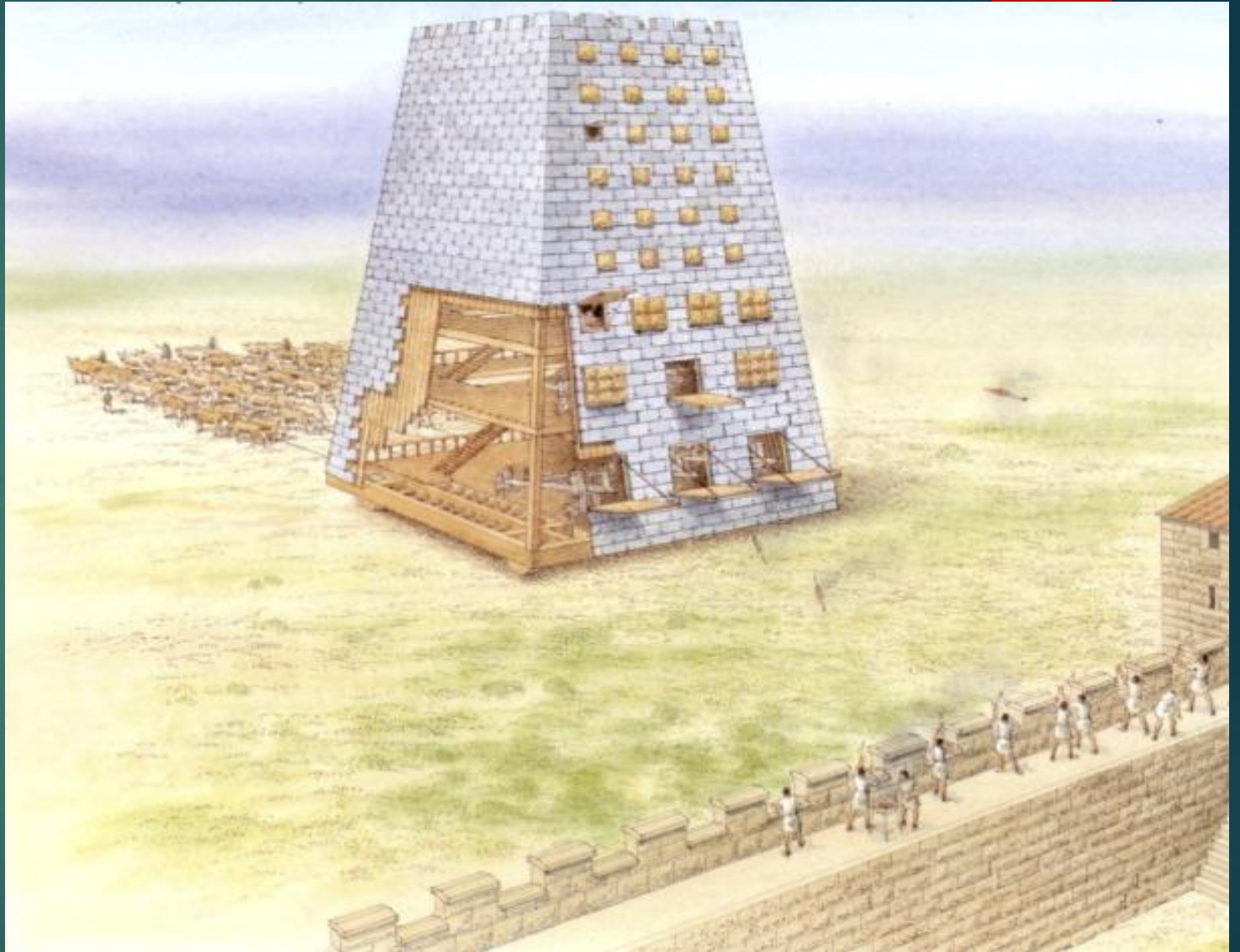
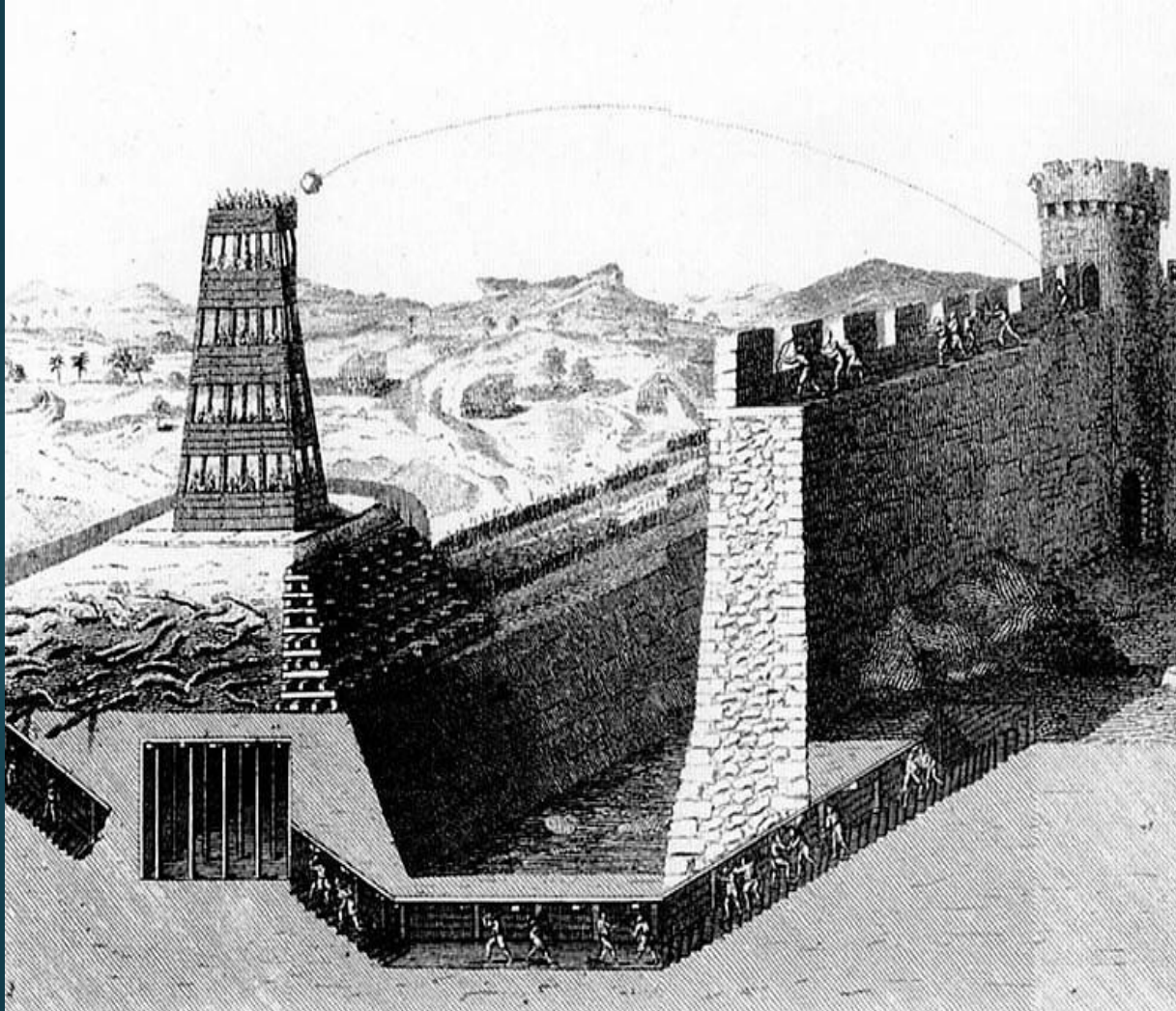


Fig. 1: *Helepolis* ('City-taker') of Demetrios

Pyrrhus in Sicily

- ▶ Siege of Eryx: 278 BCE
 - ▶ Plutarch, *Pyrrhus*, 22.5: '...[Pyrrhus] ordered the trumpets to sound, scattered the barbarians with his missiles, brought up his scaling-ladders, and was the first to mount the wall.'
 - ▶ The absence of siege engines?

Siege of Lilybaeum: 250 BCE



- ▶ Plb. 1.55:
- ▶ The importance of Eryx.
- ▶ The impact of undermining fortifications.

Walls of Pompeii

The north wall of Pompeii, east of the Herculaneum Gate, survives up to 7m in height. The pock-marking visible here appears to have been caused by a barrage of missiles ranging from sling bullets to small-calibre *ballista* balls. These are likely to represent shots that fell short or were accidentally skewed during the siege of 89 BC, as Sulla's men directed their missiles at the timber gate or at the defenders on the battlements. (© M. Burns / Anglo-American Project in Pompeii)



Fig. 2: Campbell 2005: 15.



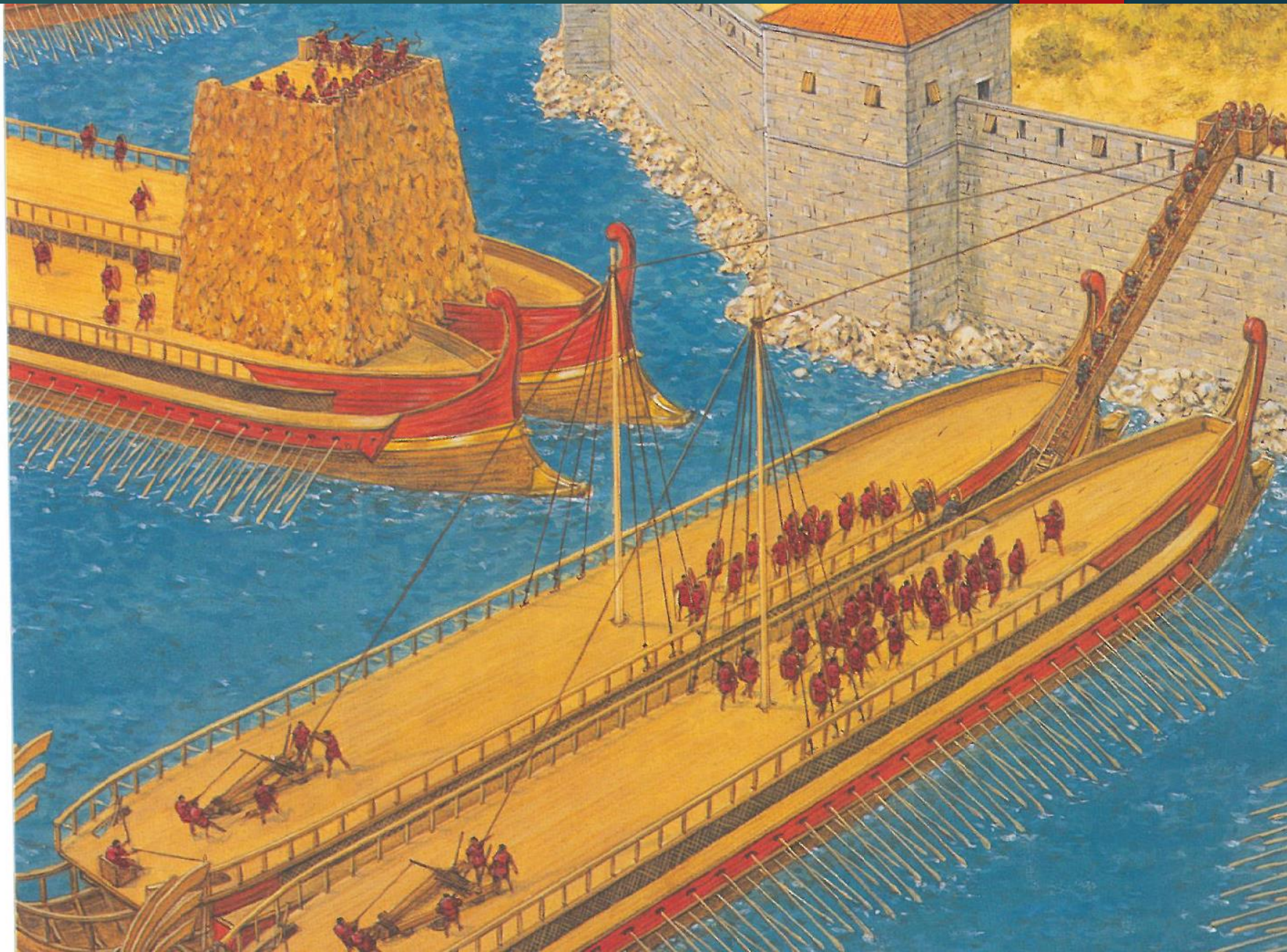
- ▶ Kingdom of Pontus (green).
- ▶ Development of siege machines in the 1st cent BCE.
- ▶ Eastern influences?

► Siege of Rhodes (2): 88 BCE.

- 'The Rhodians were most dismayed by the *sambuca*, which was moved against the wall where the temple of Isis stands. It was operating simultaneously with weapons of various kinds, both rams and projectiles. Soldiers with ladders in numerous small boats passed alongside of it, ready to mount the wall by its help. Nevertheless the Rhodians awaited its attack with firmness, until the *sambuca* began to collapse of its own weight, and an apparition of Isis was seen hurling a great mass of fire down upon it. Mithridates despaired of this undertaking too and retired from Rhodes.'
- Appian, *Mith*, 27

- ▶ Siege of Cyzicus: 73BCE,
- ▶ Plutarch, *Lucullus*, 10.2:
- ▶ Mithridates runs into difficulties again.
- ▶ Complex combination of ships and siege engines

Fig. 3: Campbell 2005: 33.



Siege of Masada: AD 74

- ▶ Carried out by Romans after the capture of Jerusalem by (future emperor) Titus.
- ▶ In this case, we can reconstruct the siege, with a combination of literary and archaeological evidence.

- ▶ The Roman problem: Masada fortress on top of a hill accessible only by a winding 'snake path'.
- ▶ Build a ramp to allow siege towers to reach the walls.



Battering ram, Trajan's Column, XXXII



Aftermath of a siege: Cremona AD

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Livy, Hist. 3.33:

Forty thousand armed men burst into the town; the number of camp-followers and servants was even greater; and they were more ready to indulge in lust and cruelty. Neither rank nor years protected anyone; their assailants debauched and killed without distinction. Aged men and women near the end of life, though despised as booty, were dragged off to be the soldiers' sport. Whenever a young woman or a handsome youth fell into their hands, they were torn to pieces by the violent struggles of those who tried to secure them, and this in the end drove the despoilers to kill one another. Individuals tried to carry off for themselves money or the masses of gold dedicated in the temples, but they were assailed and slain by others stronger than themselves. Some, scorning the booty before their eyes, flogged and tortured the owners to discover hidden wealth and dug up buried treasure. They carried firebrands in their hands, and when they had secured their loot, in utter wantonness they threw these into the vacant houses and empty temples. In this army there were many passions corresponding to the variety of speech and customs, for it was made up of citizens, allies, and foreigners; no two held the same thing sacred and there was no crime which was held unlawful. For four days did Cremona supply food for destruction. When everything sacred and profane sank into the flames, there stood solitary outside the walls the temple of Mefitis, protected by either its position or its deity.



Questions?

Reading

- ▶ Aeneas Tacticus, *Poliorketica*. Link on moodle.
- ▶ Campbell, D.B. (2005). *Siege Warfare in the Roman World*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing.
- ▶ Schofield, A. (2014). *Experimental Archaeology and Siege Warfare*. Unpublished PhD thesis, see moodle bibliography for link.