



Craftsbury

Sculling Webinar Series

Wednesday, September 16th, 4:00pm EDT

**Triremes and Trojans: Rowing
in the Ancient Greek and Roman World**

Presenter: Erika Sloan



ORIGINS OF ROWING

- Transportation, Warfare, Recreation
- Development in Ancient Egypt
 - Earliest recreational reference: funerary inscriptions of Amenhotep, c. 1400 BCE
- Bronze Age fresco from the island of Thera (now Santorini) well-preserved by volcanic eruption, c. 1600 BCE:



- Trojan War c. 1200 BCE
- Classical Greece, c. 5th century BCE

THE TRIREME



THE TRIREME

- Oared warships; 170 rowers arranged in three banks of oars on each side; additional 30 on deck
- The name: *triremis/trieres*
- Predecessors: Pentekonter, Bireme
- Phoenician invention (likely), adopted by the Greeks
- Long (~40m) and narrow (~6m); made of lightwood with bronze ram on prow. Oars 13-14ft long.
- Extremely expensive and labor-intensive to construct, maintain
- All space used for rowers – cramped, no room for supplies; had to travel near shore and be carried out of water overnight
- Could likely travel about 8 knots – close to 2:00/500m split!
- Light, agile, fast, maneuverable (provided the rowers were skilled)
 - “Glorified racing-eight *cum* waterborne guided missile.”

TRIREME WARFARE

- Simple tactic: ramming
- Crews must row fast enough to ram prow into enemy ship, disabling it
- Must then quickly row back out
- Ability to turn quickly critical for attack and evasion
- Used combination of oars and sails for travel, but during actual battles ships were powered by rowers alone
- Most naval battles fought at dawn with calm seas for optimal working of the oars
- All this requires highly-trained, highly-skilled rowers– you could not outflank an enemy ship without superior oarsmen

THE CREW



THE CREW

- Oarsmen were generally free citizens or residents from the poorer, lower classes
 - Accessible, unlike hoplite class
- Athens maintained crews of professional rowers who were paid and trained extensively in peacetime
 - Funded by trierarchs
- Fitter than modern rowers?
- Letter from Nicias: indicator of training/periodization?
- Coordinating the crew: piper, rowing calls attested to in literature
- Modern recreation: *Olympias*
 - Sea trials and tourism trips gave insight
 - Showed speed and maneuverability, even with inexperienced crews

A SLIDING SEAT?

- *Hyperesion* – rowing cushion, lit. “under the rower”
- Hale argues that rowers likely used cushion to engage powerful leg muscles
 - Comedies; rowing benches low to feet, not raised; relief – knees bent!
- Possibly lost until development of sliding seat in 1800s



NAVAL WARFARE IN CLASSICAL GREECE



NAVAL WARFARE IN CLASSICAL GREECE

- Greco-Persian Wars
- Themistocles and the Athenian Navy
- Battle of Salamis
- Athenian Hegemony/Naval Supremacy over Greece
- Peloponnesian War



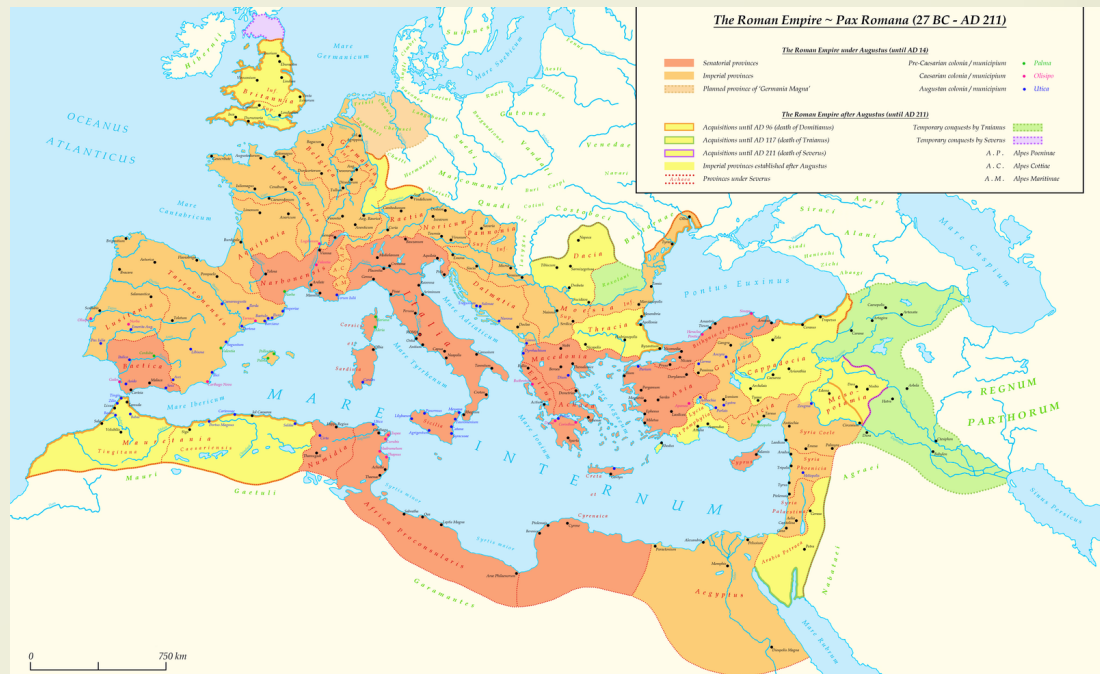
THE GOLDEN AGE OF ATHENS

- With power and finances secured by its formidable navy, Athens had the security to thrive
- Democracy and culture flourished in the ensuing Golden Age
- Can we largely attribute this to the rowers?



ROMAN NAVAL WARFARE

- Development of polyremes and changes in style of naval warfare
- Emphasis shifts away from skilled oarsmen and ramming towards brute force and boarding
- Punic Wars, Civil Wars, Battle of Actium
- End of Republic, establishment of Empire with complete control over the Mediterranean (*Mare Nostrum*)
- *Naumachia* – staged naval battles



LUCAN'S *PHARSALIA*

- *De Bello Civili*. Epic poem of historical, rather than mythological, subject: The civil war between Julius Caesar and Pompey/The Roman Senate (49-45 BCE). Written between 61-65 CE during the reign of Emperor Nero. Translation: Jane Wilson Joyce.

- Naval battle at Massilia:

“The sea lay calm, dead calm, set aside for war. From every anchorage, each captain’s vessel sprang forth. With rival strength, Caesar’s ships on one side, the Greek fleet on the other rose on their drumming oars; urged forward, the hulls shuddered; staccato strokes sent the tall ships tearing along.”

“The Roman fleet formed up – stout triremes and those propelled by a four-tiered bank of rowers, and ships that dip even more oars in the brine. Liburnians – fast craft content with a mere two banks – hang back. Brutus’ flagship, driven by six banks of slapping blades, advances its bulk over the deep, her topmost oars groping for distant water.”

LUCAN'S *PHARSALIA*

- Massilia:

“When only as much as of the sea lay between them as each fleet could rush across with a single beat of the blades, countless voices rose and swirled in the wide clear air, drowning the sound of the oars’ percussion till no bugle notes could be heard. Then-! The rowers swept the blue, leaning back on the thwarts, thumping their breastbones with oar-hafts, as soon as beaks collided and crunched opposing beaks, the ships backed water, moving stern-first, and now, the tips of the crescent spread as the prows drew apart.”

“Now the Greeks had light, maneuverable craft that darted in to attack or swooped away in flight, quick to change course with a tight turn, not slow to answer a swing of the tiller; but the Roman ships provided a stable footing, a surface with purchase fighting men liked as well as dry land... any vessel that tried Brutus’ strength stuck fast... grapples and smooth-linked chains caught other boats, or they fouled their own oars... The sea was solid wood... In this naval battle, the sword performs most deeds.”

“Brutus’ victory at sea was the first to add maritime glory to Caesar’s arms.”

THE ARGONAUTICA

- Myth of Jason and the Argonauts, as told by Apollonius c. 3rd Century BCE. Translation: R.C. Seaton.
- The proem:
 - “Beginning with thee, O Phoebus, I will recount the famous deeds of men of old, who... sped well-benched Argo in quest of the golden fleece.”
- The *Argo* departs:
 - “Now when gleaming dawn with bright eyes beheld the lofty peaks of Pelion, and the calm headlands were being drenched as the sea was ruffled by the winds, then Tiphys awoke from sleep; and at once he roused his comrades to go on board and make ready the oars... And the heroes went to the benches one after the other, as they had previously assigned for each to row in his place, and took their seats in due order near their fighting gear... so they to the sound of Orpheus' lyre smote with their oars the rushing sea-water, and the surge broke over the blades; and on this side and on that the dark brine seethed with foam, boiling terribly through the might of the sturdy heroes. And their arms shone in the sun like flame as the ship sped on; and ever their wake gleamed white far behind, like a path seen over a green plain. On that day all the gods looked down from heaven upon the ship and the might of the heroes, half-divine, the bravest of men then sailing the sea; and on the topmost heights the nymphs of Pelion wondered as they beheld the work of Itonian Athena, and the heroes themselves wielding the oars.”

THE ARGONAUTICA

- Heracles breaks his oar:
 - “For all around the windless air smoothed the swirling waves and lulled the sea to rest. And they, trusting in the calm, mightily drove the ship forward; and as she sped through the salt sea, not even the storm-footed steeds of Poseidon would have overtaken her. Nevertheless when the sea was stirred by violent blasts which were just rising from the rivers about evening, forspent with toil, they ceased. But Heracles by the might of his arms pulled the weary rowers along all together, and made the strong-knit timbers of the ship to quiver... Then Heracles, as he ploughed up the furrows of the roughened surge, broke his oar in the middle. And one half he held in both his hands as he fell sideways, the other the sea swept away with its receding wave. And he sat up in silence glaring round; for his hands were unaccustomed to being idle.”
- Epic Simile:
 - “All the windless night and the day they gave unwearying labour to their oars. And even as ploughing oxen toil as they cleave the moist earth, and sweat streams in abundance from flank and neck; and from beneath the yoke their eyes roll askance, while the breath ever rushes from their mouths in hot gasps; and all day long they toil, planting their hoofs deep in the ground; like them the heroes kept dragging their oars through the sea.”

THE ARGONAUTICA

- The Clashing Rocks

- “Now when they reached the narrow strait of the winding passage, hemmed in on both sides by rugged cliffs... they went forward sorely in dread; and now the thud of the crashing rocks ceaselessly struck their ears, and the sea-washed shores resounded, and they, at the bidding of Tiphys, rowed with good will to drive Argo between the rocks, trusting to their strength. And as they rounded a bend they saw the rocks opening for the last time of all. Their spirit melted within them; and Euphemus sent forth the dove to dart forward in flight... And the rocks shore away the end of the dove's tail-feathers; but away she flew unscathed. And the rowers gave a loud cry; and Tiphys himself called to them to row with might and main. For the rocks were again parting asunder. But as they rowed they trembled, until the tide returning drove them back within the rocks... Tiphys was quick to ease the ship as she laboured with the oars... Euphemus strode among all his comrades and cried to them to bend to their oars with all their might; and they with a shout smote the water. And as far as the ship yielded to the rowers, twice as far did she leap back, and the oars were bent like curved bows as the heroes used their strength.”

THE ODYSSEY

- The travels and trials of Odysseus attempting to return home following the Trojan War. Written by “Homer” c. 750 BCE.
Translation: Emily Wilson
- Repeated lines:
 - “So they embarked, sat on their rowing benches, and struck their oar blades in the whitening sea” / “Quickly they sat at their rowing benches, all in order, and struck the gray saltwater with their oars”
- Visit with the Dead:
 - Elpenor’s death and request: “And fix into the tomb the oar I used to row with my companions while I lived.”
 - Prophecy of Tiresias: “You have to go away and take an oar to people with no knowledge of the sea... they never saw a ship’s red prow, nor oars, the wings of boats. When you meet somebody who calls the thing you carry on your back a winnowing fan, then fix that oar in earth and make fine sacrifices to Poseidon.”

THE ODYSSEY



- The Sirens:
 - “Soon our well-built ship neared the island of the Sirens, and suddenly, the wind died down... The men sat at oar and made the water whiten, struck by polished wood... They bound my hands and feet, straight upright at the mast. They sat and hit the sea with oars. We traveled fast, and when we were in earshot of the Sirens, they started singing... I told my men to free me, but they kept rowing on.

VERGIL'S *AENEID*

- Latin epic poem, written between 29-19 BCE under the reign of Augustus. Tells of the wanderings of the Trojan refugee Aeneas, building on the literary legacy of Homer and tying the story of Aeneas to the eventual founding of Rome.
- And perhaps most significantly, contains a scene with almost no literary precedent: A thrilling rowing race, purely for sport.
- Context: in Book V, Aeneas holds funeral games to celebrate his father, paralleling the *Iliad*.
- Translation: Allen Mandelbaum



VERGIL'S *AENEID*

[The prizes are laid out, awaiting the victors] From the central mound, the trumpet blares; the games have now begun.

The first event is entered by four galleys, matched evenly, each heavy-oared and chosen from all the fleet. Mnestheus directs the swift "Shark," Gyas drives the "Chimaera," huge in bulk, a city's size, with triple tiers of oars, rowed by three files of Trojan youths. Sergestus rides on the giant "Centaur." Last, Cloanthus rides sea-green "Scylla."

[Aeneas lays out the race course: he hangs a leafy branch at a rock out at sea, which the crews are to turn around, and then race back to the start]

Then they choose places by lot; above the sterns, the captains gleam in purple, gold; the oarsmen are crowned with poplar leaves, their naked shoulders are glistening, wet with oil.

They man the benches; their arms are tense upon the oars; they wait, expectant, for the start as throbbing fear and eager love for glory drain their high hearts.

VERGIL'S *AENEID*

At last, with the bright trumpet blast, at once they all shoot from their starting places; shouts of sailors beat against the skies, the waters are turned to foam beneath stroking arms. They cleave the furrows with their equal thrusts; the whole sea gapes, torn by the oars, the ships' three-pointed beaks. Not even chariots, when with their racing teams they seize the field and rush out of their starting stalls, are so swift, so headlong; not even charioteers can shake their waving reins above their breakneck horses and bend to beat and lash with so much power. Then the cheers and the applause, the cries and eager calls of followers, fill all the woods; the hemmed-in beach rolls on the echo, and struck hills give back the roar.

[The crews maneuver and approach the midpoint rock. Gyas is ahead, Cloanthus is close – his crew is better, but his ship is bulky – and the other two are jockeying behind them]

Gyas shouts to his pilot, “Why so hard to starboard? Turn; hold close the boulder, let the oar blades scrape along the shoals upon our left; let others keep to the deeper waters! Cloanthus now shaves the left-hand channel, and quickly takes the lead... Gyas spurs on his oarsmen, turns his rudder toward the shore.

As Gyas slowed, the pair behind – Sergestus and Mnestheus – took new heart; they hoped to catch him. Sergestus is the first to gain the channel, beside the rock – but not enough to take a boat-length lead, only a part; the Shark, his rival, overlaps him with her prow.

VERGIL'S *AENEID*

But Mnestheus, pacing midships, spurs his sailors: “Now, now, rise to your oars, comrades of Hector, the ranks I chose in Troy’s last agony; now, now put forth the powers, now the heart you showed in past trials! I do not seek the first prize anymore or try to conquer (Neptune, let those whom you so choose be victors), and yet it would be shameful to be last; my countrymen, at least shun that disgrace!”

They thrust upon their oars, they give it their all; the brazen galley quakes with hefty strokes; the seabed is drawn out from under them; their hurried panting shakes their limbs and parched throats; sweat is streaming everywhere. But chance itself brings them the longed-for victory.

[Sergestus tries to take too tight a line and crashed his boat upon jutting reefs]

Mnestheus, still keener now, and glad with his success, with rapid strokes and calling on the winds, makes for the sloping, shoreward waters, glides straight down the open sea. So the Shark cuts the final stretch of waters in her flight, her first impulse enough to drive her on. Now Mnestheus leaves behind the floundering Sergestus as he calls out in vain for help and learns to race with broken oars. Then Mnestheus passes Gyas who rides the giant-hulked Chimaera; she gives way.

VERGIL'S *AENEID*

And now the goal is near – only Cloanthus is left, and Mnestheus makes for him and, straining with all his power, presses forward. Then indeed the shouting doubles as the chase is urged along by many cheers; the heavens re-echo with the roar. Cloanthus' crewmen now think it is a disgrace to fail to keep the fame and honor they themselves have won, and they would give their very lives for glory; but Mnestheus' men are strengthened by success: they have the power because they feel they have it.

And now perhaps, both prows abreast, the men of Mnestheus would have won the prize had not Cloanthus, stretching seaward with both hands, poured prayers and called upon the gods with vows: "You gods who rules the kingdom of the seas, whose waters I now race upon: to keep the promise that I pledge..." He spoke; and all the company of Nereids beneath the sea heard him, and father Portunus drove on Cloanthus' ship with his great hand. She flies to land faster than south wind or swift arrow; then she rests in that deep harbor.

At this, the son of Anchises, following custom, assembles everyone, then has the herald's loud voice proclaim Cloanthus as the victor; he crowns his temple with green laurel, and has him choose prizes for each crew.

[The rest of the prizes are awarded, and limping on broken oars, Sergestus' ship makes it back to shore.]

FROGS

- After all the drama of epic, finally – a comedy! *Frogs* is a play by the infamous comic playwright Aristophanes, performed in 405 BCE. Translation: David Barrett
- Dionysus travels to the Underworld by boat, accompanied by a chorus of frogs:

Charon: Sit at the oar – Here, what are you doing?

Dionysus: Sitting on the oar, like you said

Charon: I didn't say on the *oar*, fatso! This is where you sit, on the cross-bench.

Dionysus: Like this?

Charon: Yes. Now stretch your arms forward and take hold of the oar.

Dionysus: Like this?

Charon: Don't talk so much. Just push us off!

[Dionysus makes clumsy efforts to get the boat moving]

Dionysus: How do you expect me to move this thing? I'm not the seafaring type.

Charon: It's easy. Come on, you'll soon have the singing to help you.

FROGS

[Chorus of Frogs singing – *Brekekekèx-koàx-koáx* / Βρεκεκεκὲξ κοὰξ κοάξ]

Dionysus: I don't want to row any more

Frogs: koax!

Dionysus: My bottom is getting too sore,

Frogs: koax!

Dionysus: But what do you care?

You're nothing but air,

and your 'koax' is really a bore-”

[More Frogs singing]

Dionysus: What a sweat! I'm all wet! What a bore!

I'm so raw! I'm so sore! And what's more,

there are blisters here – all over my rear –

where I've never had blisters before!

Frogs: Brekekekex, koax, koax!

IN CONCLUSION

Final Notes and Acknowledgements

- Huge thanks to my high school Latin teachers, professors of the Middlebury Classics Department, rowing coaches, Troy, COC
- Links for further viewing and reading, sources, and recording
- Email: erika.sloan@craftsbury.com / erikasloan12@gmail.com
(about this talk, or about webinar series in general)