

MARITIME STRATEGY IN ACTION - SEA POWER IN ANTIQUITY

Most of what is written on Greek and Roman naval warfare of the Classical period is concerned with technology, personnel and tactics, with little regard for the strategic employment of naval forces. Typical of this is an entry from the *Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare* on naval warfare with the comment that no ancient state ever attempted to deploy naval forces without a land objective; a comment that betrays a lack of understanding of the employment of naval forces: sea power is of course always aimed at influencing events ashore, either directly or indirectly.¹

This is further demonstrated by the comment that 'ancient naval warfare was never about the control of the open ocean' – naval warfare is not generally concerned with control of the open ocean; there is little there. As Geoffrey Till has said, the sea is unique in that it is largely unowned and unownable, that possession of the sea is not generally an object of maritime operations – there has never been a maritime 'front line'. Though this concept can be potentially challenged by the rise in conflicts over maritime boundaries and the subsequent use of navies to patrol sections of open ocean, it is a recent trend and a debatable one. Primarily, naval forces are used to control harbours, landing spots and sea lines of communication. While the latter is a modern term, it is nevertheless readily transferable to the ancient world in the form of trade routes and, given the technology of the time, sailing routes that would allow warships to safely land as required for crew rest.²

Similarly, modern scholars of maritime warfare are generally dismissive of classical naval warfare as worthy of study. An example is James Cable's treatment of Classical naval warfare in his *The Political Influence of Naval Force in History*, where he covers naval warfare before 16th century in a mere four pages. Overlooked is the use of the ancient Greek trireme as a weapon in itself, rather than just a platform for soldiers, as well as Athenian use of sea power for coercive diplomacy; bullying the island city-states of the Ionian region with her navy so that they might join the Delian League. It is clear that although technology, social and environmental pressures and priorities may change, the strategic uses of sea power endure. Though requiring caution, the study of the employment of classical naval forces reveals the longevity of sea power and maritime strategy.³

Naval operations are now commonly divided into three different major roles containing subordinate tasks: military, diplomatic and constabulary. These are of course modern terms used to breakdown modern naval operations, however, in examining warfare from the Classical period we can clearly see these three roles undertaken by naval forces of the Graeco-Roman world. The discussion which follows is not an attempt to project modern concepts onto ancient history. Rather, it is an attempt to show that most of the concepts which underlie maritime operations are essentially unchanged.⁴

Battle at sea is the most examined of all these roles, and battles such as Salamis, Argonousai, Aegospotami, Cape Ecnomus, the Aegates Islands and Actium are all prime examples of large-scale naval battles in the ancient world. An oft overlooked aspect of warfare in the classical world is the potential decisiveness of naval battle during this period – Salamis, Aegospotami, Aegates Islands and Actium were all decisive and war-winning battles – either directly winning the war or setting up the preconditions necessary for victory. In the tradition of Trafalgar, Tsushima and Midway, pitched battle in the classical world was no less an option and no less decisive in deciding the outcome of a major conflict.



Recreated Greek trireme 'Olympias' (Hellenic Navy)

Outside of battle, naval forces were used to great effect to prevent enemy actions. A classical example of what we might call 'sea denial' is the situation which prevailed during the Second Punic War (218-201 BCE). Roman supremacy at sea prevented the Carthaginians from reinforcing Hannibal in Italy by sea, forcing them to take the much longer overland route. By controlling Sicily and Sardinia, the Romans effectively blocked Carthaginian efforts to reach Italy by sea and reinforce a rampaging Hannibal. Hannibal's extraction from Italy and return to Carthage was not only a stroke of great daring and luck, but also a bold display of an amphibious withdrawal, albeit on a very small scale.

From Athens in the fifth century BCE to Germany (twice) and Japan in the 20th century, naval blockade has been an extremely effective way to weaken and aid in the defeat of an enemy. With no navy left to them after the battle of Aegospotami (late 405 BCE) in order to keep their sea lanes open, the Athenians, who had quite adequately survived on imported goods for decades throughout the war, were blockaded and quickly starved into submission by the Spartan fleet in 404 BCE.⁵

The interdiction of enemy shipping is a prime role of navies, a campaign usually referred to as a *guerre de course*. Thucydides described an attempt at such a campaign by the Spartans during the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE). A Spartan commander leading 12 ships

sailed to Cnidus, where half the ships were ordered to guard the harbour and the other half were ordered to set out and seize merchant vessels sailing from Egypt. The Athenians successfully countered the Spartans, capturing the enemy ships and then landing ground forces which raided Cnidus and the surrounding territory. During the opening years of the Second Punic War, Livy reports that a squadron of Carthaginian ships operating off the coast of Ostia seized Roman merchant vessels carrying supplies to Spain. Neither of course is a full blown *guerre de course*, but they are nevertheless demonstrative of a recognition of the value of deliberate attacks on merchant shipping in order to weaken an enemy.⁶

The employment of navies to land troops on enemy territory in order to raid or cause more serious damage to an enemy was a prime use of navies during the Peloponnesian War. The most notable of these is the Athenian operation off of Pylos and Sphacteria in 425 BCE. Landing at Pylos and eventually fortifying the position, the Athenians had a foothold from which they could raid into Spartan territory. The Spartans responded with their own amphibious operation, and soon after a group of Spartans were left stranded on the island of Sphacteria, a situation so serious that Thucydides tells us the Spartans immediately asked for an armistice at Pylos and even for a peace treaty to end the war in order to get their men back. Such was the impact of a relatively small scale amphibious operation conducted far from the centre of the two main antagonists.⁷

Livy describes a campaign in 217 BCE during the Second Punic War in which a Roman naval force in Spain defeated a Carthaginian naval force and then proceeded to raid the coast. Crossing to the island of Ebusus in the Balearic Islands after a failed attempt at taking the main town, they raided and plundered their way across the countryside. Clearly this show of force was enough to demonstrate Roman naval supremacy, as Livy says that envoys from the Balearics sought to make peace with Scipio. Returning to the mainland, Livy then says that over 120 Spanish tribes from north of the Ebro River capitulated to the Romans, handing over hostages. This campaign readily shows what we might call 'coercive diplomacy' at work – Roman naval forces demonstrating that they were able to raid at will along the coast and that all who opposed them were at risk of Rome's retribution.⁸

Of all the operations conducted by navies, perhaps one of the most enduring is the fight against piracy. Diodorus Siculus says that pirate ships made the Adriatic coast completely unsafe for merchant vessels in the mid-fourth century BCE. Many would be familiar with the story of Caesar's capture at the hands of pirates, and of the unprecedented powers granted to the Roman General Pompey in order to eradicate the scourge of piracy from the Mediterranean. Not only was Pompey given command (*imperium*) over the entire Mediterranean for a period of three years, this command included the area up to 400 *stades* (approximately 80km) inland from the coast – a clear recognition that the roots of piracy extended inland, a situation which sounds all too familiar today, especially in places such as Somalia.⁹

When Athens' rival Corinth looked menacingly towards the nearby city-state of Corcyra (modern Corfu), the Athenian decision to aid Corcyra came in the form of a

fleet of warships, ten to begin with and another twenty sent soon after to bolster the Corcyran forces. They were given strict instructions to help defend Corcyra without provoking a war with Corinth which would then result in the breaking of the treaty Athens had with Sparta. Though ultimately unsuccessful, we can see here Athens utilising her naval forces in an attempt to influence political events in a very delicate environment.¹⁰

Greek and Roman naval forces conducted operations across the full spectrum of maritime operations: pitched battles during the Peloponnesian War and the First Punic War (264-241 BCE), as well as campaigns against merchant shipping and blockade. Amphibious landings and raids were conducted from the sea, be it on the coast of the Peloponnese or the shores of Spain and Africa. A strong naval force, then as now, could be a potent diplomatic tool, from aiding allies to outright coercion. Finally, piracy was a constant menace, disrupting trade and causing general havoc – a menace for which naval forces were the only real counter.

In all of these ancient maritime operations can be seen the precursors to the same operations that are conducted by navies today. Operations at sea had a decisive impact on many if not most major wars of the period. The Peloponnesian War was fought in many places other than around Athens and Sparta, with decisive maritime campaigns fought in the Ionian Island region, the Chalcidice Peninsula and as far afield as Sicily – the Sicilian campaign one which severely weakened Athens and strengthened Sparta, changing the overall balance of power. The First Punic War was essentially a series of maritime campaigns fought for the control of Sicily, and control of Sicily during the Second Punic War bolstered Rome's defence against Carthage, blocking direct Carthaginian access to Italy and allowing Rome a direct route into Africa to attack Carthage. Naval warfare in the Graeco-Roman world was, as it is in the modern world, extremely important militarily, politically and socially, and its study should not be so lightly dismissed.

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¹ Philip Sabin and Philip de Souza, 'Battle' in Philip Sabin, Hans van Wees and Michael Whitby (eds), *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare Volume 1: Greece, The Hellenistic World and the Rise of Rome*, Cambridge Histories Online, 2008, p. 434.

² Sabin & de Souza, "Battle", p. 443; Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century* (3rd ed), Routledge, New York, 2013, p. 49.

³ James Cable, *The Political Influence of Naval Force in History*, Macmillan Press: London, 1998, pp. 15-18.

⁴ Royal Australian Navy, *Australian Maritime Doctrine* (2nd ed), Sea Power Centre - Australia, Canberra, 2010, p. 100.

⁵ Xenophon, *Hellenica*, 2.2.

⁶ Everett L Wheeler and Barry Strauss, 'Battle' in Sabin van Wees & Whitby, *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare Volume 1: Greece, The Hellenistic World and the Rise of Rome*, p. 228; Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 8.35; Livy, *The History of Rome from its Foundation*, 22.11.

⁷ Thuc. 4.14; Thuc. 4.15.

⁸ Livy 22.20.

⁹ Diodorus Siculus, *Diodorus of Siculus in Twelve Volumes*, 16.5.3; Seutonius, *Deified Julius*, 4; Plutarch, *Life of Pompey* 25.1-26.4; See Clive Schofield and Robin Warner, 'Scuppering Somali Piracy: Global Responses and Paths to Justice', in Andrew Forbes (ed), *Australia's Response to Piracy: A Legal Perspective*, Papers in Australian Maritime Affairs no 31, Sea Power Centre - Australia, Canberra, 2011, pp. 45-73.

¹⁰ Thuc. 1.31-55.

