

Chapter I

Introduction

1 The Rise and Fall of the ‘Roman Navy’

In A.D. 269 a horde of Goths ripped up and down the Aegean, spreading havoc among the islands. Goths on the warpath were nothing new: the movement of barbarian peoples that was to tear huge rents in the fabric of the Roman Empire was well under way by this time. What was new was to find them on the sea. After two centuries of easy living, carrying out peacetime maneuvers and ferrying troops, **Rome’s great navy, like so much else in the empire, had gone soft.**¹

Although originally published in 1959, the narrative expounded by Casson of a once great ‘Roman navy’ growing decadent and then disappearing in the 3rd or 4th century continues to have a major influence on modern scholarship.² However, this account has little backing from primary source material. Rather, it has been artificially constructed from a number of factors, including modern connotations of what constitutes a navy, a flawed focus based almost solely on epigraphic material, and an early 20th century historical foundation which viewed the 3rd and 4th centuries as only a period of decline and subsequently not worth studying. This book aims to challenge this understanding by reassessing the history, role, and development of naval forces as well as the ships they employed during the later Roman Empire (3rd–6th centuries). Yet, prior to analysis, it is necessary to first provide an overview of earlier scholarship and the assumptions which have led to the current state of research.

The foundation, and still the only serious English monograph, for the study of Roman imperial naval forces remains that of Starr’s *The Roman Imperial Navy 31 B.C.–A.D. 324*, originally published in 1941.³ In this work, Starr presented a rise and fall nar-

¹ Casson 1991, 213. The second edition has been cited in this work.

² All dates AD unless otherwise stated.

³ Starr 1993. The most recent third edition, virtually identical to earlier versions, has been cited in this work. In recent years, several English monographs have been published which are aimed at

rative beginning with Augustus and ending with Constantine. According to Starr, Augustus founded the “Roman imperial navy” shortly after the Battle of Actium in 31 BC.⁴ This was achieved by creating two flagship praetorian fleets in Italy, one at Misenum near Rome and the other at Ravenna on the Adriatic.⁵ Over the course of the 1st and early 2nd centuries, this naval system was supplemented by additional provincial fleets scattered throughout the Mediterranean.⁶ For example, the *classis Alexandrina* protected the shores of Egypt and the Nile, whereas the *classis Syriaca* monitored the eastern Mediterranean.⁷ Additionally, the great rivers of the northern frontier, the Danube and the Rhine, were given fleets as well as the shores of Britain and the Black Sea (Fig. 1).⁸ In the framework provided by Starr, these fleets are treated as an independent navy which maintained authority over all maritime matters within their respective geographic spheres of operations. This contrasts with the army which held similar power over all military duties on land. For instance, the *classis Germanica* is described as controlling multiple “naval stations” along Germania Inferior, all under the command of a single *praefectus* headquartered at Colonia Agrippina (Cologne).⁹

According to Starr, this naval system functioned well early on but gradually weakened over the centuries. With the Mediterranean acting virtually as a Roman lake, the flagship praetorian units had little practical function, and the whole system was subsequently allowed to decay.¹⁰ Although there is less evidence for the provincial fleets, they too appear to have been afflicted by this decline. This would prove a major error in the middle of the 3rd century when the Empire was beset by numerous invasions on multiple fronts. Although there is some evidence of fleets fighting against the barbarian invaders, these cannot be identified with the earlier navy, proving that it had largely been wiped out.¹¹ Following this 3rd century crisis, Diocletian would restore the power of the Roman military but “did not devote any significant attention to the sea”.¹² As a result, the naval Battle of the Hellespont in 324 can be viewed as the definitive termi-

popular audiences. Most notably, Pitassi (2009; 2011; 2012) has written three books dedicated to Roman naval forces and warships. Although sometimes providing useful insights, these works commonly misinterpret primary sources while also regularly providing facts and figures without reference. Similarly, D’Amato (2009; 2016; 2017) has published three illustrated general overviews covering both the early and late Roman Empire. Unfortunately, these works display a superficial understanding of the topic and are very inconsistent in referencing, even copying entire sentences from earlier authors without citation on multiple occasions.

⁴ Starr 1993, 7–11.

⁵ For Starr’s analysis of the fleets at Misenum and Ravenna, see Starr 1993, 11–105.

⁶ For Starr’s overview of these fleets, see Starr 1993, 106–123.

⁷ For the *classis Alexandrina* and *classis Syriaca*, see Starr 1993, 109–117.

⁸ For Starr’s analysis of these northern fleets, see Starr 1993, 124–166.

⁹ Starr 1993, 147–148.

¹⁰ Starr 1993, 193–194.

¹¹ Starr 1993, 196.

¹² Starr 1989, 79. This quote comes from a later work on Mediterranean sea power which, although written over 40 years later, retained virtually the same conclusions (Starr 1993, 197).