

# H-Net Reviews

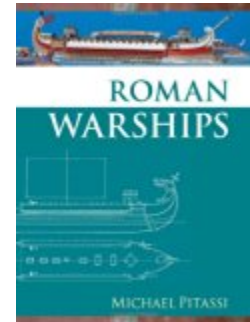
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael Pitassi. *Roman Warships*. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2011. 191 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84383-610-0.

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Michael Pitassi's *Roman Warships* provides a detailed overview of the evolution and development of Roman warships spanning the life cycle of Rome's empire. Through painstaking research of all available artifacts, literature, and iconography, Pitassi pieces together a structural and operational time line of the warships that Rome used to service its vast territories over the centuries.

The book is divided into two main sections which create a clear separation between Pitassi's general structural explanation of the ancient ships in part 1 and the time line of ship types in part 2. Part 1 of the text covers the interpretation of the sources and an explanation of the ship fittings. The very first chapter, titled "Sources," is an apologetic introduction to the extreme challenges facing the author, given the lack of physical wrecks or further detailed evidence that may have perhaps bridged the gap between conjecture and solid facts. The reader is immediately aware that Pitassi will be navigating through contemporary authors' vague descriptions, stylized artwork, frescos, coinage, and disproportioned reliefs and sculptures to find the framework for his overall interpretation of these warships and their functions.

It is clear from Pitassi's available visual evidence that the remains of Pompeii and Herculaneum play an important role in providing key visual models of contemporary warships Rome employed. While stylized at best, and suffering from each artist's interpretation, surviving wall paintings and frescos nevertheless become very important snapshots of the various sized warships of the era. No detail or lack thereof goes unnoticed in these visual representations, and whenever possible, contemporary sources such as Polybius, Livy, Tacitus, and Pliny

are used to strengthen conclusions derived from less than ideal artifacts.

The balance of part 1 goes into great detail to describe the ship fittings, and Pitassi makes every effort to explain each section of a Roman warship in fascinating detail. Whether the reader is a scholar of ancient navies or an undergraduate, this section will shed light on the anatomy of the Roman warship, with form and function explained and illustrated through technical drawings and color plates. Pitassi does not overexplain or linger on areas that need only a short explanation, such as anchors and awnings.

Part 2 dives headlong into the actual time line of the ships themselves. Pitassi begins his account at 394 BC, where the first recorded account of a Roman warship is described. A step-by-step journey through Rome's time line gives the reader a historical context in which vessels are meticulously placed in their time period, based on his research and physical evidence. Drawings and models are referenced in this section to add a further dimension to the overall interpretation of what these Roman vessels may have looked like and why. Functionality is clearly the basis of Pitassi's analysis and formulations of design.

While Pitassi's warship time line deals almost exclusively with maritime functions of each type of vessel during the Roman period, a closer look at Roman military vessels integrated with Rome's overall military operations might have expanded the reader's understanding and awareness of the importance of these ships and the overall naval branch of this ancient superpower. However, one only has to look to Pitassi's previous book, *The Navies of Rome*, for this expanded history.

While the book details warships from every imaginable fitting and dimension, it is void of much in the way of connecting the ships to its crew, in terms of an operational structure on board or social levels on land. On the other hand, the outcome of Pitassi's narrow focus is his ability to successfully communicate the ebb and flow of the evolution of these ships, which run a parallel course with Roman expansion as well as its decline. No detail of any size ship has been left out of consideration during this analysis.

*Roman Warships* is a well-supported, focused source-book which presents the overview, dissection, and chronology of Roman vessels in the service of their military throughout the span of the republican and imperial eras. This is not a purely scientific, deeply technical reference book, but instead has been written in a way that is comprehensible to a range of historians and students alike, with little or no maritime knowledge required. It is an ideal introduction to the overall collective history of the Roman warship.

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