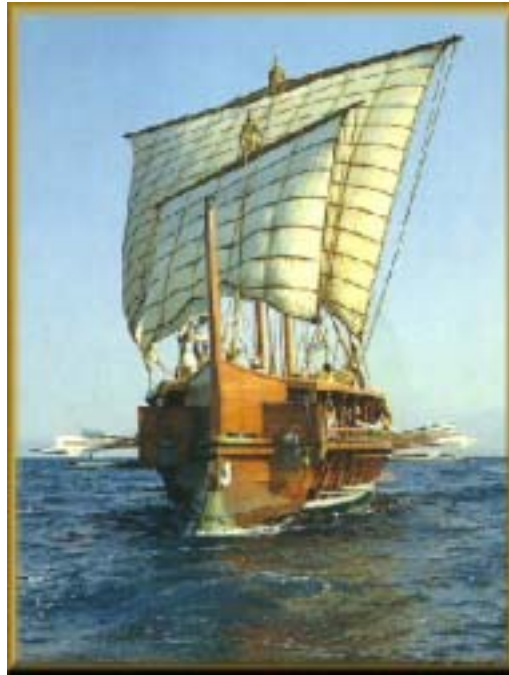


# Ancient Ships of the Mediterranean

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## **Introduction**

There have been great discoveries of ancient artifacts in the past; however, there have not been many ancient ship related findings in the Mediterranean Sea until the past few years. Probably the most significant finding in recent years was by the explorer Bob Ballard. Ballard and his crew recently came upon five ships from the time of the Roman Empire. These ancient ships have given us much new knowledge about the ancient Mediterranean peoples, their way of life, their trade, and their ships.

This research paper is intended to cover the most influential Mediterranean boats from the time of the early Egyptians to the height of the Roman Empire, the time they were used, and the civilizations that used them. The civilizations that made the biggest impact on the Ancient world of Mediterranean boating were the Egyptians, Phoenicians, Greeks, and Romans. The ships of these civilizations, as well as the time of their existence, will be covered in the paragraphs that follow.

Today, the Mediterranean Sea is a bustling trade and fishing center. It wasn't very different long ago. Even before the time of Greece, the Mediterranean was being sailed and explored. The Egyptians and Phoenicians were some of the earliest people to travel on the sea.

Since the Egyptians lived on the Nile, they built and used small reed boats as early as about 2500 BC. By the time of the Old Kingdom (2649-2150 BC), the Egyptians were using more advanced wooden boats for Nile and Mediterranean travels. The Phoenicians, who came later, had trading colonies possibly as early as 1000 BC, which

were used as ship ports for trade. Greece became a powerful naval power at around the same time as the Phoenicians, probably around 800 BC, and Rome gained naval strength in around 250 BC.

### **Locations of Ancient Naval Powers on the Mediterranean**

The many different Mediterranean trading posts and harbors were located all around the Mediterranean. However, the different large civilizations were primarily located at certain points along the coast.

The Egyptians were civilized along the Nile. The Egyptians could have launched their ships from any port along the Nile and sailed into the Mediterranean, but the largest cities were located at the Northeast corner of Egypt.

The Phoenicians were spread out over a large area of land, but their most famous city was Carthage. Carthage was located on the South West part of the Mediterranean coast, and was a strong trade center until its fall to the Romans.

Greece was located on the North shore of the Mediterranean, and their largest naval cities were primarily on the Southern end of the Grecian peninsula.

The Romans were originally located in Italy, but as the Empire grew, they had large trade centers all over the Mediterranean.

### **Ships of the Ancient Mediterranean**

The ships of the Mediterranean varied depending on their use. The Egyptians had small boats for exploration; the Phoenicians had ships for trade, as well as some of the

first galleys for battle. The Greeks and Romans improved on earlier battleships and developed powerful naval fleets.

Egypt's first boats for sea travel were very small and had no hold for the crew. They had a stow-able mast, and had oars on the surface. Improvements over these boats were evident in their later ships. They were bigger, had larger cargo holds, and were much sturdier. They had larger sails, but still kept the crew on the deck to row when needed. Other Egyptian ships were the Nile barges. These ships had no way of propelling themselves, and had to be towed by smaller boats with oarsmen. They were used to carry obelisks and other heavy loads. The Egyptians had galleys for battle, which had as many as 50 oars, and attacked with archers and rams.

The Phoenicians built much more advanced ships than the Egyptians did. They invented the bireme, a large battleship with two levels of oars under the deck. The bireme carried warriors and archers for use in ship to ship and ship to land battles. The Phoenicians also had effective trade ships that went from their established trade centers such as Carthage to other places on the Mediterranean. Their trade was their primary source of wealth, and Carthage, subsequently, was not a poor city.

Greece was one of the greatest naval powers in Mediterranean history. They made effective use of the Phoenician bireme. The bireme was an 80-foot long battleship with two levels of rowers. They were used until the invention of the trireme. The trireme was a huge battleship with three levels of oars. It had a strong ramming beam at the front, which was used to cripple enemy ships. They were capable of reaching speeds of almost 10 miles per hour, under rowing power. They did not have sails, but were entirely

powered by men who rowed under the deck. The sailors and archers were on the deck to navigate and, when in battle, to board enemy ships or light them on fire with burning arrows. The trireme was about 120 feet long, and had a total of 170 rowers. The trireme was responsible for the naval victories at the Battle of Salamis, as well as in the Peloponnesian War. Before the bireme, however, the Greeks had smaller ships to fight their sea battles. The unireme was their first war galley. It was small and graceful, and had a single row of oars. It also lacked much of a deck, and fought by ramming. Even before the unireme, however, the Greeks used a penteconter for exploration and transportation. It had 50 oars and was fast and lightweight. The Greeks remained a great naval power until their fall to the Macedonians and Romans.

The Romans, after becoming a powerful empire, needed ships to gain control of trade, as well as to prevent naval invasions. At first, they borrowed the design of the trireme from the Greeks, and the quinquereme, a large oar-powered battleship with probably five men on each oar, from the Phoenicians. However, they eventually began to make their own designs. They began using a galley with a gangplank that allowed their warriors to board the enemy ship after it was crippled by ramming. Their later ships stopped using this, and instead had strong rams and turrets for archers. Types of guns and spear type missiles were added later. All these ships were very large, however, and Rome looked for a smaller battleship to use for escorts to trade vessels. They began using the liburnian, a small battleship with two levels of oars, which later became a prominent battleship used by the Romans. The Romans also utilized trade to their advantage, giving their citizens access to the products of other countries around the

Mediterranean. Ships greatly aided in Rome's power. Without them, Carthage would have been a much more formidable enemy, their overall wealth would have been lowered, and travel would have been a much more difficult task, preventing the growth of the Christian Church from have been so far reaching.

The ships of the Mediterranean improved greatly over the years. Having started off with small sail boats that were used mainly for transportation, then growing into oar driven battleships that attacked primarily by ramming the enemy, and eventually advancing into huge craft with many levels of oars that utilized boarding tactics, missiles, and primitive guns. Trade was used effectively as an important asset to the wealth of the countries. Ships also played an important role in making transportation easier and faster, and also aided in the growth of the Church.

### **Approximate Dates of the Ancient Mediterranean Naval Powers**

While the exact dates of ship inventions are not known, we can get a good idea of approximately when the different countries used their ships.

The Egyptians, some of the earliest boat-makers, began building and using boats as early as 3000 BC. They used their ships mostly for transportation on the Nile, and some trade and exploration on the Mediterranean, but did not primarily use them for battle as many later civilizations did, though they did have small galleys. The Egyptians were never a great naval power, but they were one of the first countries to use boats regularly.

The Phoenicians were some of the first people to begin commonly using boats for

warfare, but they used them even more for trade. They started using ships for trade in around 1000 BC, and their powerful and wealthy trade centers along the South West shore of the Mediterranean gained control of trade routes until Rome took over. Carthage was one of their greatest trade centers and was a very wealthy city until it too fell to the Romans in 146 BC.

The Greeks were very powerful in naval warfare. With the trireme as their primary battleship in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, the Greeks had a strong fleet of battleships not to be reckoned with. After Greece fell to the Macedonians in 338 BC, the Romans eventually began using their ships.

The Romans' earliest ships were mostly designs borrowed from the Greeks and Phoenicians. Rome used the trireme and quinquereme as the primary battleships in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. Rome became the dominant sea power after the first Punic War in 241 BC. After the Romans began inventing their own ships in later times, the liburnians were used well by Octavian's fleet commander, Agrippa, in the battle of Actium in 31 BC.

### **Conclusion**

More is being learned about the ancient peoples of the Mediterranean, thanks to the findings and explorations of crews such as Mr. Ballard's. The uncovering of these ancient boats is a significant milestone in the research of the early Mediterranean civilizations. In Ballard's own words: "I think we're just discovering the pyramids of the deep". This may be very true, as the ships Ballard has found are some of the first ancient ships to have ever seen light again since their original sinking. How many more boats are

lying on the sea floor just waiting for us to find is a question that only time and further exploration will answer.

The ships of the Mediterranean have obviously advanced in a rapid manner. With the Romans and Greeks improving on previous ship designs, and then improving on their own improvements, the technology rarely deteriorated, but instead greatly advanced. Starting with the Egyptians, moving on the Phoenicians, and then being utilized effectively for war by the Greeks and Romans, ships started being used on the Mediterranean in very early times. The civilizations also utilized them well, leading to wealth due to trade, power due to naval strength, and expedient transportation due to fast and reliable shipping routes.

Without the use of boats and naval fleets in Mediterranean history, the outcomes of certain wars could have been drastically different. The entire Peloponnesian War relied heavily upon naval finesse. Not only wars would have been affected, though. If fishing boats had not been used, the people of the sea would have had lost a huge occupation, as well as would have had a much harder time finding food. Still, had ships not been used for trade, the Roman Empire would have suffered from much less income, and Carthage might have never existed as the great city that we know it was. Finally, if boats were not used for transportation, Paul would have had a much harder time preaching the Christian message to the Western civilizations, and the growth of the Church would have been severely hampered. Thus, boats have proven to be an invaluable asset to ancient civilizations, and continue to be to modern countries.



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