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# NAVAL RAM PORTRAYALS IN ANCIENT GREECE AND ROME

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**Abstract:** The bronze naval ram, an essential instrument of Greek and Roman naval warfare, emerged as a significant cultural artifact, permeating diverse aspects of ancient society. While relatively few archaeological examples of rams survive today, their depiction across a broad array of media underscores their symbolic resonance far beyond their utilitarian role in battle. Drawing on textual, archaeological, and iconographic evidence, this paper explores the enduring significance of the ram in both public and private life from the sixth century BCE to the second century CE in the political, economic, and social structures of ancient Greek and Roman societies. Rams were prominently featured in contexts ranging from monumental architecture and funerary art to trade goods and public spectacles, embodying notions of power, military success, and social prestige. Beyond its association with naval dominance, the ram functioned as a visual and rhetorical device employed by individuals across the social spectrum to articulate identity, authority, and community values, while also engaging with themes of masculinity.

**Keywords:** *Naval Rams, Naval Warfare, Warships, Naval History, Maritime Archaeology.*

## INTRODUCTION

Following the discovery of the ancient bronze naval ram at Athlit, Israel, in 1980, the investigation of rams has gained increased prominence in modern scholarship.<sup>1</sup> This is due to the discovery of several other rams and revisions of ancient literature pertaining to naval warfare in antiquity.<sup>2</sup> The ram, in its boar's head, chisel, and three-bladed forms, as well as subsidiary rams known as *proembolia*, were the predominant weapon of ancient Mediterranean navies used to sink, swamp, or destroy enemy warships for nearly a millennium.<sup>3</sup> In addition to being effective weapons, portrayals of rams were a central part of Greek and Roman daily life and culture. For the Greeks and Romans, the ram, or more precisely, the acquisition, presentation, and depiction of rams, were as significant as the weapon itself. Elites and non-elites in Greek and Roman societies portrayed rams in various forms through different media, such as funerary art, trade goods, fashionable attire, mass entertainment, political rallies, and decorative "everyday" objects, to name a few. In this paper, I explore the diversity at which the Greeks and Romans employed ram imagery and, by extension, indicate how focal the ram was to both cultures through textual, iconographic, and archaeological sources generally spanning from the sixth century BCE to the second century CE. This paper will not cover

<sup>1</sup> CASSON/STEFFY 1991.

<sup>2</sup> ROYAL/TUSA 2020.

<sup>3</sup> For discussion on different ram types, see DECASIEN 2023.

every ram depiction, but rather a representative sample in each of the sections explored below.

## RAMS IN POLITICAL AND VICTORY MONUMENTS AND DISPLAYS

A common trait shared between the political and military classes of both the Greeks and Romans was that they actively demonstrated their naval victories over their enemies in public monuments and displays. As Lorenzo states, “Naval victories, whether Greek or Roman, were symbols of victory and the physical embodiment of prowess in naval warfare.”<sup>4</sup> These naval victory monuments appear in ancient textual sources from the fifth century BCE to the sixth century CE.<sup>5</sup> There are at least 103 monuments identified that honor naval victories in both Greek and Roman societies.<sup>6</sup> This section only discusses a representative sample of the 103 monuments honoring naval victories, which feature rams, prows, partial bows and complete warships. Historical accounts indicate that many of the rams dedicated in these monuments were three-bladed waterline rams, though a small number were probably proto-rams of the pointed or boar’s head variety, in addition to chisel rams.

Pausanias provides a reference to the earliest naval victory monument created by the Megarians for their triumph over the Athenians somewhere near Salamis in 600 BCE. The only information provided by Pausanias is that in the Temple of Olympian Zeus in Megara, a single Athenian bronze trireme ram was dedicated.<sup>7</sup> Lorenzo argues, based on the possible date of the monument, that the ram must have been smooth, cylindrical and came to a single point, like early proto-rams.<sup>8</sup> There is no indication of this style of ram from Pausanias’ account, which was written in the second century CE. However, three-bladed waterline rams are not known to have existed in the seventh century BCE, meaning that if the Megarians indeed dedicated a ram in the Temple of Olympian Zeus, it was likely of the proto-ram type.<sup>9</sup> Herodotus indicates that in 524 BCE a naval victory monument was created that housed multiple boar’s head rams. Herodotus states that the Aeginetans and Cretans engaged the Samians in a naval battle in which the Samians lost all their warships. As a prize for their victory, the Aeginetans severed the boar’s head rams from the captured Samian warships. The Aeginetans then dedicated the boar’s head rams as trophies in the Temple of Athena on Aegina.<sup>10</sup>

During the Greco-Persian War (499–449 BCE) and Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE), there were numerous warships, with their rams included, dedicated in victory monuments.<sup>11</sup> For example, in 479 BCE, three Phoenician

triremes were dedicated following the Greek victories at Artemisium and Salamis. The triremes were the main focus of public display, being dedicated at the sanctuary of Poseidon at Isthmia, the sanctuary of Poseidon at Sounion, and the Temple of Ajax on Salamis. There is no direct mention by Herodotus of the ram types fitted to these triremes; it is possible that, based on their use in battle, each had a ram, perhaps of the chisel ram design.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, according to Thucydides, the Peloponnesians set up a naval trophy as victors at Naupactus in 429 BCE. The Peloponnesians dedicated an entire captured Athenian warship that they consecrated to Poseidon at Achaean Rhion.<sup>13</sup> Based on the date of the dedication and battle, it is possible that the warship dedicated after Naupactus had a three-bladed waterline ram. The Greeks continued to dedicate entire warships well into the Hellenistic period (323–31 BCE), as seen in examples like the sacred trireme of Antigonos Gonatas.<sup>14</sup> Some individual rams might have been used as dedications during the Classical and Hellenistic periods; however, they are only referenced in epigraphic texts. For example, there were several rams dedicated at the Greek island of Delos; though, it is not clear how many rams were dedicated or if they were ever on public display since they were only recorded on inscriptions in inventory lists dating to the third century BCE.<sup>15</sup> There is a Hellenistic inscription found at Istros, perhaps dating to the second century BCE, that describes a ram in a sort of victory monument. The inscription specifies the dedication to the victorious naval commander Hegesagoras, who defeated the invading Mesembrians, a bronze statue sitting on a captured enemy ram.<sup>16</sup>

The Romans were more prolific at dedicating rams in victory monuments than their Greek counterparts.<sup>17</sup> The Romans dedicated rams in public victory monuments both inside and outside of Rome, like the Rostra and Actian Victory Monument respectively.<sup>18</sup> The Rostra was one of the first Roman naval victory monuments to consist of rams. The first rams to be added to the speaker’s platform in the

section on ram dedications, followed by a discussion of ship dedications, though some of these may not have featured rams (59–65).

<sup>12</sup> HDT. 8.121–122; DECASIEN 2023.

<sup>13</sup> THUC. 2.92.5. A similar case occurs in THUC. 2.84.4.

<sup>14</sup> ATH. *DEIP.* 5.209.e; STREUDING 2014, 63–64.

<sup>15</sup> As HAMILTON (2000, 367–380) states, the composition of the inventory lists from Delos makes it difficult to determine how many rams were dedicated on the island and where they were housed. As explained by HAMILTON (2000, 367–380) and CONSTANTAKOPOULOU (2017, 171–228), these inscriptions were large stone slabs publicly displayed in the temples on Delos. The inventories were produced by the Delian *hieropoioi* and recorded on an annual basis the dedications kept in the Delian treasuries. The Temple of Apollo on Delos maintained inventories, totaling around five hundred, covering a span of over two hundred years. However, only 6 of these inventories are complete, and half of those date to a single decade in the third century BCE.

<sup>16</sup> CHAMOUX 2003, 168–170.

<sup>17</sup> In addition to dedicating rams in public naval victory monuments, OSTENBURG (2009, 46) notes that the Romans also used rams in triumphal processions, such as those of Lucullus in 63 BCE (PLUT. *LUC.* 37.3), Pompey in 61 BCE (APP. *MITH.* 116), Octavian in 29 BCE (PROP. 2.1.35), and Vespasian and Titus in 71 CE (JOSEPH. *BJ.* 7.147–148). However, while rams are mentioned in three of these sources, they are not explicitly referenced in JOSEPH. *BJ.* 7.147–148, where only warships are described in the procession.

<sup>18</sup> For further discussion on both ram dedications at the Rostra and Actian Victory Monument, see DECASIEN 2021; OSTENBURG 2009, 46–57; MURRAY/PETSAS 1989, 117–121.

<sup>4</sup> LORENZO 2011, 11.

<sup>5</sup> LORENZO (2011, 11) states the first ancient author to mention naval victory monuments is Herodotus in his *Histories* (HDT.), and the last is John Lydus (sometimes referred to as John the Lydian) in his *de Magistratibus* (LYDUS, *MAG.*).

<sup>6</sup> LORENZO 2011.

<sup>7</sup> PAUS. 1.40.5.

<sup>8</sup> LORENZO 2011, 264.

<sup>9</sup> DECASIEN 2023. Additionally, the warship is likely not a trireme based on the date of the dedication, but rather a pentekonter.

<sup>10</sup> HDT. 3.59.

<sup>11</sup> WESCOAT 2005, 167–168. STREUDING (2014, 50–59) includes a

Roman Forum were dedicated by the consul Gaius Maenius in 338 BCE after the Battle of Antium.<sup>19</sup> Numerous rams were added to the Rostra throughout its existence.<sup>20</sup> Similar to the Rostra, an estimated 33 to 35 large rams were dedicated by Octavian at Nikopolis for his victory over Cleopatra and Antony at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, a *neorion*, a type of dockyard, was created to house at least ten warships from the enemy fleet near the shoreline where the battle occurred.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Octavian sent rams from the battle to be dedicated at the Temple of Divus Iulius in Rome. These rams were smaller than those dedicated at the Actian Victory Monument, likely consisting of three-bladed waterline rams captured from warships classed from triremes to quinqueremes.<sup>23</sup>

A distinctive feature of Roman naval dedications was the use of rostral columns, which were victory columns adorned with the rams of ships, to commemorate naval achievements. There are at least four major Roman rostral columns, including (1) the *columna rostrata Duilia*, (2) *columna rostrata Duilia ante Circum*, (3) *columna rostrata Aemilia*, and (4) *columna rostrata Octaviani*. There were perhaps more rostral columns, but there is contention and contradiction in both ancient textual and archaeological evidence for their existence.<sup>24</sup> The first rostral column to be constructed was for the Roman naval commander Gaius Duilius (1) for his victory over the Carthaginians at the Battle of Mylae in 260 BCE.<sup>25</sup> The column was located somewhere in the Roman Forum and may have been funded by Duilius himself.<sup>26</sup> Servius mentions an additional rostral column for Duilius, called the (2) *columna rostrata Duilia ante Circum*, that may have been placed outside the Circus Maximus in Rome.<sup>27</sup> Similar to the lack of evidence for the second rostral column for Duilius, Livy mentions a rostral column built for the Roman consul Marcus Aemilius Paullus around 255 BCE. According to Livy, the (3) *columna rostrata Aemilia* was erected on the Capitoline Hill; however, it was destroyed by lightning in 172 BCE.<sup>28</sup> Octavian is said to have been granted a rostral column, the (4) *columna rostrata Octaviani*, by the Roman Senate after his victory in the Sicilian Wars (42–36 BCE). Appian, the only source to mention the column, states that it was adorned with the rams from captured enemy ships, and at the bottom of the column there was an inscription that read, “Peace, Long Disturbed, He Re-established on Land and Sea.”<sup>29</sup>

## RAMS IN FUNERARY CONTEXTS

In addition to their dedication in victory monuments, rams can be seen in the architecture of both elite and non-elite

burial monuments and processions, which were probably meant to link the deceased to naval affairs or to convey prestige. According to Diodorus, Alexander dedicated around 240 golden quinquereme prows for Hephaestion’s funeral pyre in 324 BCE.<sup>30</sup> The dedication of 240 prows would entail the dedication of 240 rams that would have been erected upon the foundation course of the funerary pyre, similar to the retaining wall of the Actian Victory Monument. Modern scholars still debate if the funeral pyre and the placement of 240 golden quinquereme prows was realistic, as they are only mentioned in Diodorus’ account and there is a lack of archaeological evidence to support the pyre’s construction.<sup>31</sup> Polybius indicates that during the Roman Republic (likely third century BCE) it was common that when an admired man died, he was placed in a visible spot standing upright next to the Rostra. Those related to the man, more than likely male relatives, gave speeches from atop the Rostra on the virtues and achievements of the deceased.<sup>32</sup> The purpose of standing up the deceased and giving speeches from the Rostra was to connect the dead and living to the Roman state and collective Roman civil achievement through the monument itself, the rams playing a secondary decorative function in the rite.<sup>33</sup>

In terms of archaeological evidence, there are numerous stelae that depict warships with rams; however, the warship or deceased is always more central than the ram’s depiction.<sup>34</sup> During the archaeological excavations around Mutina, a large Augustan-era (27 BCE–14 CE) Roman marble funerary monument depicting a partial warship with a ram was found (Fig. 1).<sup>35</sup> The partial warship representation perhaps implies that the sizable piece of marble was a part of a memorial erected to honor the military achievements of a naval commander who passed away in the area of Mutina, not directly related to the Battle of Mutina in 43 BCE.<sup>36</sup> The ram has a three-bladed design that fans out widely with a thin cowl and the port upper fin surface seems to terminate without connecting to the blades. The blades are highly decorated to look like swords with the addition of a wolf head on the cowl.

<sup>19</sup> LIV. 8.14.12; FLOR. 1.11; MURRAY/PETSAS 1989, 117–121.

<sup>20</sup> MURRAY/PETSAS 1989, 117–121.

<sup>21</sup> MURRAY/PETSAS 1989, 55–56.

<sup>22</sup> STRAB. 7.7.6.

<sup>23</sup> MURRAY/PETSAS (1989, 110–113) discuss the sizes of all “suspended” ram dedications.

<sup>24</sup> LORENZO 2011, 277–280.

<sup>25</sup> PLIN. HN. 34.20–21.

<sup>26</sup> KONDRATIEFF 2004, 1–39.

<sup>27</sup> SERV. AD GEORG. 3.29; LORENZO 2011, 269–270.

<sup>28</sup> LIV. 42.20.1.

<sup>29</sup> APP. B CIV. 5.13.130, translation by author. The inscription is a precursor to the one that adorns the Actian Victory Monument as mentioned in MURRAY/PETSAS 1989, 62–77.

<sup>30</sup> DIOD. 17.115.2.

<sup>31</sup> For more discussion on this debate, see PALAGIA 2000, 167–206; MCKECHNIE 1995, 418–432. PALAGIA (2000, 167–206) mentions that ship decorations were used in a section of Alexander’s funeral cart in Diodorus’ account (DIOD. 18.27.1), which Palagia argues may lend to the legitimacy of Hephaestion’s funeral pyre.

<sup>32</sup> POLYB. 6.53.1–3.

<sup>33</sup> Polybius (POLYB. 6.53.3) describes the mourning as being for the public and not for just the mourners. FLOWER (1996, 131) argues that the funeral speech was “inherently political” because it was delivered from the Rostra.

<sup>34</sup> MURRAY 2012, 56–57; For examples of rams and warships adorned with rams on stelae, particularly in relation to Punic evidence, see ELSNERET 2024, 27–48.

<sup>35</sup> Information on the marble monument can be found on the archaeological website of Mutina (MUTINAROMANA).

<sup>36</sup> There were no naval forces at the Battle of Mutina as it was a land battle.



**Fig. 1.** Augustan-era (27 BCE–14 CE) Roman marble funerary monument depicting a partial warship with a ram, located in the Archaeological Museum of Modena in Modena, Italy (Image courtesy of Deborah Carlson).

Somewhat like the Modena funerary monument, the Capitoline Museum in Rome houses four rostrate altars, which may be associated with funerary rites and offerings to the deceased.<sup>37</sup> The dates of the four Roman altars are unknown, perhaps Augustan period (27 BCE–14 CE), with each one being dredged from the same small harbor at Antium by Pope Innocent XII (Fig. 2).<sup>38</sup> All four altars have a similar configuration with a cylindrical body, a protruding ram at the front, and a decoration. Three of the four altars include an inscription that links them all together.<sup>39</sup> The first altar is referred to as the Altar of Neptune (*ARA NEPTVNI*), as it has a relief of the god standing on it (Fig. 2A). The ram on the column is of the three-bladed design, but lacks a cowl. The fins are well-formed, with the port side being slightly lower than the starboard side, and the middle fin on each side forms a sword. The second altar is referred to as the Altar of Tranquillitas (*ARA TRANQVILLITATIS*), the name reflecting the inscription engraved on the front of the column (Fig. 2B). The ram on the column is almost identical to the ram on the Altar of Neptune, though with a visible cowl. The third altar is referred to as the Altar of the Winds (*ARA VENTORVM*), again, based on its inscription (Fig. 2C). Compared to the other rams, the ram on this column has a lower cowl, different fin designs, and is particularly round at its front, with no squaring where the fins meet the head. This may indicate that a different craftsman carved this rostrate altar. There is a fourth altar that is not on display and has only a trident motif and no inscription, but has a ram like the others.

<sup>37</sup> JONES 1912, 330.

<sup>38</sup> MURRAY 2012, 52. It is worth noting that the rostrate altars were found in the same place, Antium, where the Romans won one of their first naval victories and used the captured warship rams from the battle to create the Rostra in Rome.

<sup>39</sup> JONES (1912, 330) argues that the inscriptions combined match a similar passage in Appian (*APP. B CIV. 5.98*).



**Fig. 2.** Three of the four rostrate altars (perhaps dating to the Augustan period (27 BCE–14 CE)) from the Capitoline Museum in Rome, Italy (Image by author).

There are at least two marble or stone rams associated with funerary monuments in Ostia, Italy, and Cordoba, Spain. Unlike the Modena funerary marble, both the Ostia and Cordoba rams are part of larger funerary monuments. The Ostia ram is a large Roman marble ram found around the Marina Gate and dates to the late first century BCE (Fig. 3). It has been argued that the ram is either associated with Gaius Cartilius Poplicola or Publius Lucilius Gamala based on their association with Roman naval matters.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the ram would have been another naval motif in an impressive funerary monument to either man, not a stand-alone piece. The ram itself is comprised of two marble blocks, with the upper block consisting of the cowl and the lower block being the driving center. Overall, the ram has intricately designed fins, each shaped in the guise of a sword, and the cowl has a lion or wolf head decoration. The ramming head is recessed into the fin cavities to form an axe-head, different from the rostrate altars.



**Fig. 3.** Roman marble ram found at Ostia Antica near the Marina Gate, dating to the late first century BCE (Image by author).

The Cordoba ram is small compared to the ram from Ostia and is perhaps part of a larger warship prow depiction based on its broken back section which abruptly ends (Fig. 4). The limestone prow was found in the portico of a church, as spolia repurposed from the nearby Roman graveyard. According to Vaquerizo, the piece must have belonged to a funerary monument ordered by a Roman or Hispano-Roman,

<sup>40</sup> MURRAY (2012, 61) provides the possible evidence for each man's naval affiliation and date for the monument.

associated with the Roman navy or army, who died near the city in the early first century CE.<sup>41</sup> Just like the prow, the ram is crudely carved, with the central fin designed as a sword. The ramming head is square except at the bottom, where it is uncharacteristically rounded. There is no vertical post at the front of the ram, and the cowl is missing as it leads into a carefully executed *proembolion* in the form of a boar's head.



**Fig. 4.** Stone ship's ram from Cordoba, dating to the early first century CE from the Museo Arqueológico y Etnológico de Córdoba, Spain (Image courtesy of Deborah Carlson).

## RAMS AND RAMMING AS ENTERTAINMENT

Rams were also part of individual and mass entertainment through their use in games and Roman *naumachiae*, or mock naval battles. According to Pausanias, a ram pattern was incorporated into the design of the stadium at Olympia, Greece, specifically the area where the horse races began.<sup>42</sup> Pausanias states, "The starting place is shaped like the prow of a ship, and its prow is directed toward the course. Where the prow meets the porch of Agnaptus, it broadens out, and at the very tip of the ram, a bronze dolphin on a rod is set."<sup>43</sup> The stadium's design did not include an actual ram or warship prow, based on Pausanias' description of the area. As stated by Pausanias, the organizers of every Olympic festival placed an altar made of mudbrick in the center of the hypothetical prow, indicating that there was never an actual ram. The mudbrick altar would be plastered with ash, and a bronze eagle would be placed on the altar. At the appropriate time, the starting fire would burn the mudbrick plaster allowing the eagle to fly up from an attached pole and the dolphin to fall to the ground, indicating the start of the race. Accordingly, horses were released in pairs from both sides of the stoa or ship's outriggers until all the horses were allowed to start at the hypothetical center of the prow.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> VAQUERIZO 1996, 210–211.

<sup>42</sup> PAUS. 6.20.10–13.

<sup>43</sup> PAUS. 6.20.10, translation by author.

<sup>44</sup> PAUS. 6.20.10–13; ROMANO (2016, 324–326) provides an in-depth

In terms of personal entertainment, the Greeks played a board game called *naumachia*, or ship-battle, which should not be confused with Roman *naumachiae*, or mock naval battles. The Greek boardgame *naumachia* shows a familiarity with naval battles and, to an extent, rams and ramming in the popular gaming of the Greeks. According to Nelson, the naval board game was first attested in the seventh century BCE in Anagyros, Greece. The game was played with ten game counters and a die on a board with five parallel lines or a circle of ten spots.<sup>45</sup> Even though the complexities of the game are not fully understood or described in the ancient sources, the goal was essentially to remove all of the opponent's counters before one's own counters were removed. Nelson highlights the nautical terminology used to describe the game, as in Pollux, where the removing of an opponent's counter was akin to "sinking an opponent's warship."<sup>46</sup> Additionally, Nelson contends that the similarity between a real naval conflict and a circular board game called *naumachia* may have originated from the fact that sailing ships typically follow curved courses or from the fact that circular and semi-circular formations and maneuvers were frequently used in naval conflicts, as evidenced by sources dating back to the fifth century BCE.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps by accident or in direct relationship to one another, another Greek ball game known as *anakrousis*, or "hit-up", employs the same word used to describe the naval maneuver of backing water after ramming an opponent's warship.<sup>48</sup>

Unlike the Greeks, the Romans held *naumachiae*, which were mock naval battles conducted in lakes, artificial bodies of water, or amphitheaters filled with water specifically for the event.<sup>49</sup> *Naumachiae* were held in celebration of specific events, like a Roman triumph, which were open and viewable to the public of Rome; however, only the most powerful and wealthy individuals could afford to host a *naumachia*.<sup>50</sup> Typically, *naumachiae* resembled real-life naval combat that were most often based on past military events.<sup>51</sup> The first recorded *naumachia* was held in 46 BCE by Julius Caesar to celebrate his victories in the Gallic (58–50 BCE) and Alexandrian (48–47 BCE) Wars. According to several ancient authors, the mock naval battle took place in a basin that was dug to hold two fleets representing Tyre and Egypt.<sup>52</sup> The two fleets were composed of biremes, triremes, and quadriremes, manned by approximately 4,000 oarsmen and 2,000 soldiers, all of whom were sentenced to death prior to the mock battle. Unfortunately, there is no mention of how

description of the starting place from Pausanias' account.

<sup>45</sup> NELSON 2020, 3–42.

<sup>46</sup> NELSON 2020, 16–18.

<sup>47</sup> NELSON 2020, 8. The circular and semi-circular formations likely relate to the *kyklos*, a Greek naval maneuver.

<sup>48</sup> NELSON 2020, 15; THUC. 7.36.

<sup>49</sup> HENDERSON (2020, 250–251) indicates that the Greeks did have their own type of "*naumachia*", based only on epigraphic evidence, which was different from the Romans in terms of scale and complexity. As HENDERSON (2020, 250) states, "It is not clear whether the contest of ships consisted of a race or a mock sea battle, but at the very least the epebes displayed their naval skills and maneuvering."

<sup>50</sup> GARELLO 2004, 115–124.

<sup>51</sup> For more information on Roman *naumachiae*, see DUNKLE 2014, 390–391; GARELLO 2004, 115–124.

<sup>52</sup> APP. B CIV. 2.102; SUET. IUL. 39.4; CASS. DIO 45.17.8.

Caesar's *naumachia* was conducted or whether rams and ramming were involved.

In a more private and personal sense, Sextus Pompey staged a pseudo-*naumachia* in the straits close to Rhegium in 40 BCE. The pseudo-*naumachia* included a mock battle between small boats that were rowed and crewed by prisoners of war.<sup>53</sup> In 2 BCE, Augustus held a *naumachia* portraying the Battle of Salamis to celebrate the inauguration of the Temple of Mars Ultor in Rome. Augustus claimed in his *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, that the *naumachia* included 30 warships with rams, classified as biremes and triremes, and many smaller vessels, totaling 3,000 combatants in addition to the rowers. Similar to Caesar's *naumachia*, Augustus also had his staging area dug to accommodate his *naumachia* located in the Campus Martius. Augustus mentions that his warships did have rams, likely to distinguish how lavish, historically accurate, and violent his *naumachia* was, compared to his predecessor(s).<sup>54</sup> A few more *naumachiae* were conducted under the Roman emperors Caligula (37–41 CE), Claudius (41–54 CE), Titus (79–81 CE), and Domitian (81–96 CE), with each one varying in terms of ships and men as well as venue. The ancient sources that discuss each mock battle tend to lack any description of how they were conducted, or the tactics involved.<sup>55</sup> It is probable that boarding tactics were primarily used with rams, and ramming being employed at the larger and more extravagant *naumachiae*, like at Augustus' *naumachia*. There is the possibility that since these were mock naval battles, the ramming was also staged so that actual bronze rams were not needed, but the "act" of ramming was conducted.<sup>56</sup>

## RAMS IN COMMERCE AND TRADE

Overall, in economic iconography, the appearance of rams on coins, amphorae, and weights likely signaled a guarantee of secure trade backed by naval power. These items featuring ram depictions were probably used to convey a state or ruler's naval authority, prowess, or recent victories, while also reinforcing their naval persona and indicating the official authentication of trade goods. Rams are generally depicted on these items as part of an entire warship, trophy, monument, partial bow, or as a standalone object. The widespread distribution of coins perhaps contributed to the popularization of the ram as a motif, making it easier for elites and non-elites not directly involved in naval affairs to recognize it as a symbol.<sup>57</sup> For this section, I have selected several diverse coin types that illustrate the variety in which rams were depicted on Greek and Roman coins, as a comprehensive analysis of all such coins would be both impractical and beyond the scope of this paper. The first diagnostic example is a coin minted under the authority of Demetrius I Poliorcetes between 294 and 288 BCE (Fig. 5). This coin type depicts a lone ram,

specifically a three-bladed waterline ram, on its reverse. The ram resembles a typical three-bladed waterline ram found on smaller to mid-size polyremes. It is likely that the ram represents Demetrius' naval achievements through naval warfare. Just like the coin of Demetrius, there is a standalone ram on the reverse of a Roman Republican coin issued under Publius Licinius Crassus sometime between 58 and 53 BCE. The ram features a slanted cowl and an oddly thick middle fin (Fig. 6). Lastly, there is a coin type minted at Nikopolis featuring a ram to celebrate the victory of Octavian over the naval forces of Cleopatra and Antony at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE (Fig. 7). The ram is similar in design and form to those that would have been placed in the sockets at the Actian Victory Monument and the rams engraved in the Arch of Orange.<sup>58</sup>



**Fig. 5.** Reverse of a coin minted under Demetrius I Poliorcetes, featuring a ram, dating between 294 and 288 BCE (Antigonid Coins Online (AGCO), no. 18271794).



**Fig. 6.** Reverse of a coin minted under Publius Licinius Crassus, featuring a ram, dating between 58 and 53 BCE (Fitzwilliam Museum (FM), no. 209538).



**Fig. 7.** Reverse of a coin minted in Nikopolis after the Actian War (31–29 BCE), depicting a ram. Currently on display at the Archaeological Museum of Nikopolis, Greece (Image by author).

Three additional representative coin types, in particular, highlight rams depicted in larger motifs or as part of warship scenes. The first is a coin minted in Crete between 14 and 37 CE during the reign of the Roman emperor Tiberius. The

<sup>53</sup> CASS. DIO 48.19.

<sup>54</sup> AUG. RGDA 23.

<sup>55</sup> GARELLO (2004, 115–124) provides further background, source information, and interpretation for each *naumachia* mentioned.

<sup>56</sup> COLEMAN (1993, 48–74) provides further discussion on the authenticity of Roman *naumachia*.

<sup>57</sup> HILLEN 2023, 74–90. YARROW (2021, 5–25) provides useful sections on why states used coins and their usefulness in disseminating ideas and images to peoples across the Mediterranean.

<sup>58</sup> MURRAY 2012, 55–62.

obverse of the coin features an exaggerated prow and ram with unrealistic proportions, as the ram seems to equal the height and width of the prow itself (Fig. 8). The second coin is one of the more famous coins minted under Demetrius I Poliorcetes between 294 to 293 BCE. The coin features a striding Poseidon holding a trident on the reverse and Nike on the bow of a warship on the obverse (Fig. 9). The warship is highly detailed with a ship's eye, outrigger, full stem, visible wale, *proembolion*, and three-bladed waterline ram. Compared to the Cretan coin, the warship prow and ram on this coin have better proportions and resemble archaeologically attested rams. The last coin example was struck between 76 to 75 BCE in the city of Tyre and features the head of Melqart or Herakles on the obverse and a small prow with a ram in the clutches of an eagle on the reverse (Fig. 10).



**Fig. 8.** Obverse of a coin minted in Crete during the reign of Tiberius (14–37 CE), featuring a prow and ram (American Numismatic Society (ANS), no. 1944.100.40409).



**Fig. 9.** Obverse of a coin featuring a bow and ram, minted during the reign of Demetrius I Poliorcetes, approximately 294–293 BCE (American Numismatic Society (ANS), no. 1960.170.96).



**Fig. 10.** Reverse of a coin minted between 76 and 75 BCE in the city of Tyre, featuring a small prow with a ram in the clutches of an eagle (American Numismatic Society (ANS), no. 1944.100.72818).

In addition to coins, amphorae and weights are two commercial items created in the Hellenistic East that also feature

ram imagery.<sup>59</sup> There are stamps depicting three-bladed waterline rams along with a variety of engraved control marks on amphora handles from Knidos, dating between 200 and 50 BCE.<sup>60</sup> One of the Knidian amphora stamps, as described by Grace, shows a crude warship with only the forward section of the ship being depicted.<sup>61</sup> Another Knidian stamp shows a lone ram with no warship or partial bow present. This ram depiction, similar to the Crassus coin, also has a middle fin that is oddly thick and raised from the other two fins, which may indicate the depictions follow a similar ram design (Fig. 11).<sup>62</sup> Dating to the early second century BCE, a warship's bow with a ram is featured within a frame on a weight recovered from Seleucia Pieria in Turkey. This official Seleucia Pieria weight was intended as a local standard for comparing other weights, as indicated by the inscription "Seleukeion" above the prow. The piece's weight is indicated in the lower inscription as a *tetarton*, or quarter of a mina, which was the standard weight unit used during this period in the Seleucid Empire.<sup>63</sup> Almost identical to the previous weight is another weight found in Jaffa, Israel with a prow and ram depicted weighing a *tetarton*, or a quarter mina.<sup>64</sup>



**Fig. 11.** Ram stamp on a Knidian amphora, dating between 200 and 50 BCE (British Museum (BM), no. 1955,0920.221).

### RAMS IN POLITICAL AND MILITARY ATTIRE

Rams are featured in Greek and Roman political and military attire, appearing on cultural items such as crowns, shields, and other symbols of authority. The earliest depictions of rams in military attire are as shield decorations found on sixth and fifth-century BCE Archaic Greek pottery. These ram depictions are not central to the pottery itself,

<sup>59</sup> CARLSON (2004, 67–81) shows how amphora stamps have been interpreted in terms of being marks of civic control, a guarantee of origin, marks of internal administration, or a combination of all.

<sup>60</sup> GRACE (1934, 199) argues that Knidian amphora stamps were a sort of license and that "the stamp itself, or rather to its die, which was then a license, valid for a limited period, permitting a manufacturer to sell goods in return for a payment to the government which he in turn collected by raising the price of his commodity to cover the amount." For chronological debate concerning Knidian amphorae stamps, see LUND 2018, 63–77; JEFREMOW 1995.

<sup>61</sup> GRACE 1934, 292.

<sup>62</sup> Images of both amphora handle stamps from Knidos with rams depicted can be found in JEFREMOW 1995, 115.

<sup>63</sup> BODEL/TRACY 1997, 10.

<sup>64</sup> TUSF (2018, 495) notes that, in addition to the weight found at Jaffa, several Hellenistic weights decorated with a warship (or the prow of a warship) are known from the Phoenician-Palestinian coast. SAWAYA (2023, 71–118) provides background information and images of the weights mentioned by TUSF (2018, 495), showing that at least one weight (#8) features a full warship with a ram and *proembolion*.

but central to the soldier or figure in the piece. It is probable that these representations of rams are based on actual Greek shield designs. Typically, hoplite shields were either painted with a motif or adorned with an additional beaten bronze design on their fronts. These various designs, ranging from simple geometric shapes to complex animal drawings, were used to signify an aspect, quality, or association of the person wielding the shield.<sup>65</sup>

Ram depictions on shields perhaps suggest that the soldiers or figures represented were either marines or connected in some way to the navy or a certain maritime community. On the body of a sixth-century BCE black-figure hydria from Attica, there is a scene of soldiers leaving for battle. The soldier on the far right has a shield with a warship motif. The warship is depicted with the forward end of the prow and a boar's head ram.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, a black-figure neck-amphora from Attica dating from the same century has a shield with a warship design (Fig. 12).<sup>67</sup> The amphora depicts Athena flanked by Herakles and Hermes, with a prow and boar's head ram painted on Athena's shield. In this case, the ram depiction with Athena likely highlights Athenian naval prowess. Another amphora, similar in design and dating to the same period, depicts soldiers preparing for battle. Two soldiers are fully equipped, whereas the third is partially naked and putting on his greaves. The two fully-equipped soldiers have shields with designs on their fronts, one with a leg and the other with a warship's bow and a boar's head ram. In this case, the leg perhaps indicates the soldier was a good runner, and the warship prow and ram may indicate that the soldier was a marine.<sup>68</sup>



**Fig. 12.** Athenian black-figure neck-amphora with prow and boar's head ram depiction on a shield, dating to the sixth century BCE, housed in the Tampa Museum of Art, USA (Image by author).

<sup>65</sup> For further discussion on shields and shield decorations, see CHASE 1979 and SNODGRASS 1999, 54–56; 64–88. According to SNODGRASS (1999, 55), shield design motifs may also denote the city or region the hoplite hailed from or was fighting for.

<sup>66</sup> The amphora can be found online at the Beazley Archive Pottery Database (BAPD), no. 301896.

<sup>67</sup> The amphora can be found online at the Beazley Archive Pottery Database (BAPD), no. 320274.

<sup>68</sup> The amphora can be found online at the Beazley Archive Pottery Database (BAPD), no. 7272.

In a manner similar to the ram's depiction on Greek shields, the Romans incorporated a ram design into a crown awarded to victors after naval battles, known as the *corona rostrata*. This crown highlighted the honoree's naval achievement and prowess, typically granted to one individual.<sup>69</sup> Pliny states that the first ram crowns were bestowed upon Marcus Agrippa by Octavian after the Sicilian Wars (42–36 BCE) and Marcus Varro by Pompey after the Pirate Wars (around 67 BCE), based on each man's respective naval exploits.<sup>70</sup> On the other hand, Cassius Dio indicates that Agrippa was given the golden crown adorned with rams, an honor that nobody else ever received besides Agrippa.<sup>71</sup> There are no clear textual indications of what exactly the *corona rostrata* looked like, only that it had elements of gold, laurels, and rams.<sup>72</sup>

There are at least four different Roman coin types that show the *corona rostrata*. The first coin type was minted in 13 BCE and shows the head of Augustus wearing an oak wreath on the obverse and head of Agrippa wearing the *corona rostrata* on the reverse. The crown that Agrippa wears has one central ram jutting out from a prow with numerous smaller rams around the head band. Furthermore, the crown also has three towers coming out from the top. Agrippa's victories as both a general and admiral are commemorated by the combined rams and towers (Fig. 13). Another coin type minted between 37 and 41 CE portrays Agrippa on the obverse wearing the *corona rostrata* with Neptune standing on the reverse (Fig. 14). In this portrayal, the *corona rostrata* is shown as a simple crown with one central ram and three more rams on the head band, with the addition of small laurels. The rams are shown coming from the front of partial bows and are not as highly stylized as the coin type minted in 13 BCE.<sup>73</sup>



**Fig. 13.** Reverse of a coin with Agrippa wearing the *corona rostrata*, dating to 13 BCE (British Museum (BM), no. R.9242).

<sup>69</sup> MAXFIELD (1981, 74–76) clarifies the confusion in the ancient sources on the difference between the naval crown variants such as the *corona navalis*, *corona classica*, and *corona rostrata*.

<sup>70</sup> PLIN. *HN*. 16.3.

<sup>71</sup> CASS. DIO 49.14.3.

<sup>72</sup> GELL. *NA* 5.6.18.

<sup>73</sup> According to WOODS (2018, 423 no. 5), this Agrippa coin minted during Caligula's reign (31–41 CE) was intended to draw attention to Caligula's maternal grandfather (Agrippa) and establish a connection between him and Agrippa's naval victories at Naulochus in 36 BCE and Actium in 31 BCE.



**Fig. 14.** Obverse of a coin with Agrippa wearing the *corona rostrata*, dating between 37 and 41 CE (British Museum (BM), no. 1857,0812.15).

Two additional coin types diverge from the original lone “Agrippa” example in representing the *corona rostrata*. The first was minted between 9 and 3 BCE, with the heads of both Agrippa and Augustus on the obverse and a crocodile chained to a palm-shoot on the reverse (Fig. 15). Agrippa is shown wearing the *corona rostrata*; however, unlike previous depictions, there is only one central partial bow with a ram and *proembolion*, with the rest of the crown only consisting of laurels. The second coin type was minted in 21 BCE, with the head of Augustus on the obverse and the *corona rostrata* on the reverse (Fig. 16). On the reverse, there is no person represented wearing the *corona rostrata*, with the entire crown filling the field. On the crown’s head band, six prows are depicted, with three prows on each side, each with a ram and *proembolion*.



**Fig. 15.** Obverse of a coin with Augustus and Agrippa wearing the *corona rostrata*, dating between 9 and 3 BCE (American Numismatic Museum (ANS), no. 1974.26.4959).



**Fig. 16.** Reverse of a coin featuring a lone *corona rostrata*, dating to 21 BCE. (British Museum (BM), no. R.6182).

Hellenistic monarchs had a comparable type of naval-inspired headgear. In two mosaics displaying the Ptolemaic

queen Berenike II Euergetis (258–246 BCE), she is shown wearing a crown in the shape of a warship. Both mosaics were discovered at the ancient city of Thmouis in Egypt and feature a highly decorated female head, one with a square face and the other with a round face (Fig. 17 and Fig. 18).<sup>74</sup> The women in the mosaics are adorned with rows of dolphins and sea serpents, herald’s staffs, and an abundance of horns.<sup>75</sup> Perhaps the most notable is the ship’s prow, which serves as the central part of the crown for both women in the mosaics. Upon closer examination of the prows, there are both three-bladed waterline rams and *proembolia* depicted. The rams in these mosaics likely support the main depiction of Berenike II and, by extension, the Ptolemaic Empire as a military and naval power.



**Fig. 17.** First mosaic found of Berenike II with warship headgear from Thmouis in Egypt, dating to 258 to 246 BCE (Image modified and courtesy of Wikimedia Commons).



**Fig. 18.** Second mosaic found of Berenike II with warship headgear from Thmouis in Egypt, dating to 258 to 246 BCE (Image modified and courtesy of Wikimedia Commons).

### RAMS IN AND AS COMMON ITEMS

The use of ram imagery in Greek and Roman homes, as well as in household objects, illustrates the widespread popularity of the ram among people who, in some cases, may not have had direct involvement in ram production or naval warfare. Nevertheless, the ability to acquire such items may suggest that these individuals were part of the upper classes

<sup>74</sup> OPPEN DE RUITER 2015, 60–64.

<sup>75</sup> OPPEN DE RUITER 2015, 60–64.

or elites within their societies. Many of these objects were designed or depicted as partial bows or warships. Notably, in three instances, two authentic and one satirical, bronze rams and ram iconography were incorporated into home décor. The first example concerns the home of Pompey, which was said to have been decorated with 90 rams captured during the Pirate Wars (67–66 BCE). Plutarch does not specify the types of rams captured or their exact locations within Pompey's residence; however, Cicero states that the rams were positioned in the forecourt (*vestibulo*) near the entrance.<sup>76</sup> This ornate display of 90 rams likely included rams of varying sizes, some potentially smaller than triremes and possibly even non-three-bladed waterline rams.<sup>77</sup> The second example appears in the *Satyricon*, a satirical work written by Gaius Petronius in the late first century CE. In this text, rams are described as part of the entrance to the dining room in the house of Trimalchio, a rich and vulgar former slave.<sup>78</sup> The rams are described as flanking the doorway entrance that included *fascēs* on top of each ram, likely a display mimicking Pompey's forecourt.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, Petronius likely satirizes Pompey by drawing parallels between Trimalchio's ostentatious wealth and lack of taste to Pompey's own, as exemplified by the rams display. The third example is a collection of three wall bosses resembling partial bows, discovered in the House of the Silver Wedding in Pompeii.<sup>80</sup> Two feature a highly stylized three-bladed waterline ram, a partial bow, and a bull-shaped *proembolion* (Fig. 19).<sup>81</sup> The third boss, though identical in shape, differs from the other two in that it depicts a bull forming the entire front of the warship, instead of a three-bladed waterline ram.<sup>82</sup>



**Fig. 19.** One of a pair of bronze bosses from the atrium of the House of the Silver Wedding in Pompeii, Italy, dating to 79 CE. (Image adapted from SOGLIANO 1905, fig. 7).

<sup>76</sup> PLUT. *POMP.* 28; CIC. *PHIL.* 2.28 (68).

<sup>77</sup> MURRAY/PETSAS (1989, 110–113) discuss the sizes of all “suspended” ram dedications including Pompey’s.

<sup>78</sup> PETRON. *SAT.* 30.

<sup>79</sup> PRAG (2006, 538–547) provides further interpretation and possible meaning for the rams used in the doorway found in the *Satyricon*. PRAG (2006, 546) states, “Both the *fascēs* and the *rostra* can readily be construed as further examples of the incongruous, possibly funereal, typically public or monumental, and overweening elements which appear elsewhere in Trimalchio’s life and house.”

<sup>80</sup> SOGLIANO 1905, 255.

<sup>81</sup> PRAG 2006, 542.

<sup>82</sup> SOGLIANO 1905, 256.

Ram imagery was also commonly utilized in household items such as plates and drinking vessels. A Roman plate from Cales in southern Italy, dating to the Roman Republican period, is decorated with numerous warship prows. In total, nine warship prows are on the face of the plate, all sailing around a central circle. Each prow features a box-shaped *proembolion* and a three-bladed waterline ram. The plate most likely depicts a Roman fleet in a line-ahead formation rather than a naval conflict, as evidenced by the arrangement of the vessels and the absence of any direct opposition between them.<sup>83</sup> Regarding drinking vessels, three rhyta in the shape of a warship featuring a ram have been discovered. A rhyton is a conical vessel used for drinking or pouring liquids during religious rituals. The first rhyton is the so-called “Apulian rhyton.” Dating to the late fifth century BCE and said to have been found in Apulia, Italy, this rhyton is shaped like the forward section of a trireme, including all the warship components forward of the outriggers. When viewed in profile, the ram’s three blades are represented by lines. The front side of the ramming head is also marked by two vertical incisions, indicating the vertical post. Additionally, the ram features a thick cowl covering the lower part of the stem. Painted waves suggest that the ram is positioned at or just below the waterline.<sup>84</sup>

Another Apulian rhyton, sometimes referred to as the “Malaguzzi Valeri Vase,” is almost identical to the one mentioned above. Unfortunately, there is no clear date for this rhyton. The design, which resembles the prow of a ship, is embellished on the front in the upper section with two nude rowers wielding white oars that break through the waves. The ram on the rhyton is difficult to discern as the front has been hollowed out; however, two cuts on the sides that lead to the forward section of the rhyton create a three-bladed design for a ram. Based on photos of the object, there is little to no indication of a *proembolion*.<sup>85</sup> Dating to the mid-fourth century BCE, the third rhyton from central Italy has an outrigger with face motifs of rowers, a full prow with four ship’s eyes, and a female figure sitting on the prow’s deck, similar to the Nike of Samothrace. The striking head of the ram has an animal head pattern jutting out from its center and there is no *proembolion* where the top wales intersect. Of the three rams on rhyta, this one is the most detailed with a clearly defined three-bladed waterline ram (Fig. 20).<sup>86</sup> There may have been more of these intricately crafted rhyta than these three archaeological examples. As Ambrosini argues, rhyta in the form of warships were likely used as votive offerings or to celebrate the arrival of a cult of deities at various sites.<sup>87</sup> In his *Deipnosophists*, Athenaeus notes that rhyta shaped like triremes were used by numerous people, including the Athenian comic poet Epinicus, and that these trireme rhyta were intended to be humorous.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>83</sup> The Beazley Archive Pottery Database (BAPD) provides a single reference to the plate under the tag Naples, Museo Nazionale ii (Italy 22, pls 1024).

<sup>84</sup> AMBROSINI 2010, 73–115.

<sup>85</sup> AMBROSINI 2010, 73–115.

<sup>86</sup> AMBROSINI 2010, 73–115.

<sup>87</sup> AMBROSINI 2010, 115.

<sup>88</sup> ATH. *DEIP.* 11.97 [497]; 11.102 [500].



**Fig. 20.** Rhyton in the form of a trireme prow with a three-bladed waterline ram from central Italy, dating to the mid-fourth century BCE (British Museum (BM), no. 1849,0519.4).



**Fig. 21.** Roman waterspout in the shape of a warship prow, dating to the third century BCE (Image courtesy of Dan Diffendale).

Spanning from the third to the first centuries BCE, there are at least three archaeologically attested small Roman terracotta waterspouts that depict a partial bow with a ram.<sup>89</sup> Each piece features a warship-shaped front with a three-bladed ram spout, including a hollow interior that allows water to flow through and out the ram. The first terracotta waterspout dates to the third century BCE and was found in the Sanctuary of Juno Sospita at Lanuvium in Italy (Fig. 21). Besides the ram, the entire object is lopsided and moderately damaged. Overall, the prow consists of a well-formed outrigger and two ship's eyes. The prow had a *proembolion* that is now missing, and the ram's fins are disjointed at the end, but they still provide the essence of the three-bladed design.<sup>90</sup> The second waterspout was discovered in Pompeii and dates to the second century BCE. This waterspout is more damaged than the first; however, pigment is still present on its outrigger and lower hull, showing a reddish hull with black geometric designs along red waves. In addition, faces are painted in the "boxes" of the outrigger. The prow has a *proembolion* in the shape of a lion's head. Unfortunately, most of the ram is broken off, with only the port side driving center being partially preserved with limited detail.<sup>91</sup> Dating to the first century BCE, the last waterspout was found fully intact,

<sup>89</sup> There is possibly a fourth waterspout in the shape of warship with ram, see PINNEY 1924, 241.

<sup>90</sup> Information on this waterspout was provided in personal communication with Daniel P. Diffendale (Postdoctoral Researcher, Archeologia e Culture del Mediterraneo Antico Scuola Superiore Meridionale, Naples, Italy).

<sup>91</sup> Information on this waterspout was provided in personal communication

but has no definitive provenance. Of all the waterspouts, the ram on the third is the best preserved, with the three fins on the ram clearly defined.<sup>92</sup>

## RAMS AS SEXUAL INNUENDOS AND OBJECTS

The ram's symbolic connection to masculinity and sexual power in Greek and Roman societies is evident through a range of artifacts, literature, and visual representations, where it often served as a metaphor for penetrative strength and protection, underscoring its cultural significance as both a weapon and a potent symbol of virility.<sup>93</sup> Across multiple Roman shipwrecks dating from the first to third centuries CE, archaeologists have uncovered a well-preserved wooden statue of Priapus, a terracotta phallus, and a *proembolion* adorned with a crescent moon and phallic motif.<sup>94</sup> Through a combination of archaeological and textual evidence, Neilson argues that the Romans conceived the deity Priapus as a protector and patron of mariners. He states that the *proembolion* was perhaps apotropaic in nature and was used for the symbolic protection of the military vessel.<sup>95</sup> Additionally, another ram-like artifact, known as the Koln casting, was discovered in Germany and features a phallus symbol. Campbell has argued that the artifact is either a *proembolion* or a bronze ornament for a warship.<sup>96</sup> A marble relief found in the Roman settlement of Varvaria, Croatia dating to the first century CE, depicts a ship penetrating a woman, who is sitting back and holding her hand on a column (Fig. 22).<sup>97</sup> This ship is likely a *liburna*, a type of warship used by Octavian's fleet to defeat the combined forces of Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE. *Liburnae* were small, fast, and agile warships used by the Romans to ram other warships as early as the Battle of Naulochus in 36 BCE.<sup>98</sup> In the relief, the ram is rounded to resemble the head of a phallus rather than the typical three-bladed waterline ram.

In ancient sources, particularly Greek comedy and Roman poetry, rams and ramming were typically associated with penetrative acts through clever innuendos and direct metaphors.<sup>99</sup> In Aristophanes' *Birds*, for instance, an elderly man

with Daniel P. Diffendale (Postdoctoral Researcher, Archeologia e Culture del Mediterraneo Antico Scuola Superiore Meridionale, Naples, Italy).

<sup>92</sup> The waterspout is listed in the Getty Museum Collection (GETTY) online database under inventory no. 82.AD.29.

<sup>93</sup> For more on the argument concerning rams as metaphorical phallic objects and ramming as an action of penetration that reflected Roman ideas of masculinity, see DECASIEN 2021.

<sup>94</sup> Neilson (2002, 248–253) records a wooden statue of Priapus from the Planier A shipwreck, a terracotta phallus from the Pisa Ship wreck, and a probable *proembolion* from a wreck in the Rhine; For evidence of and research on a *proembolion*, see ADAMS *et alii* 2013, 60–75.

<sup>95</sup> NEILSON 2002, 248–253.

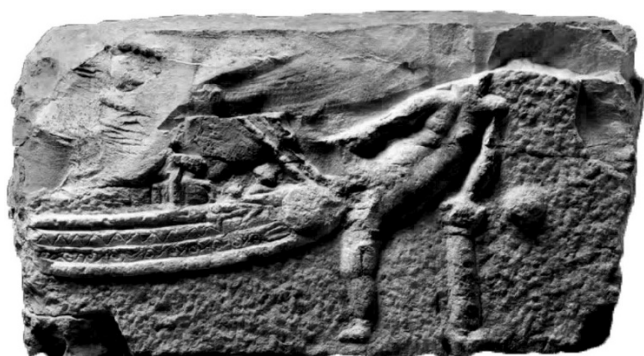
<sup>96</sup> CAMPBELL 2017.

<sup>97</sup> BORŠIĆ/DŽINO/RADIĆ ROSSI 2021, 49–50. Pliny (PLIN. HN. 3.25) mentions the Varvarini in his section on the peoples of Liburnia and Illyricum. The marble relief might be representing a naval battle, possibly Actium.

<sup>98</sup> Octavian is said to have put his flag aboard a *liburna* in APP. B CIV. 5.111.

<sup>99</sup> For Greek and Roman nautical terminology that relates to sexual acts through direct innuendos or metaphors, see SHIPP 1979; ADAMS 1982; HENDERSON 1991. ERICKSON (2002, 601–622) argues that Julius Caesar conceived the account of the naval battles between the Veneti as a contest about *virtus*, or manliness, and that the technologically superior Roman vessels gave them the advantage over Venetic fighting strength.

claims he can get an erection that is superior to three rams.<sup>100</sup> The elderly man is highlighting his ability to achieve a hard erection that can repeat penetrating acts similar to a ship's ram. In Athenaeus' *Deipnosophists*, echoing Aristophanes, he says of drinking at a party, "I shall not permit him to drink Pramnian, not Chian, not Thasian, not Peparethian, nor any other [wine] that will arouse his ram."<sup>101</sup> The ram in this context refers to a man's phallus, with the careful selection of wine intended to prevent potential sexual arousal. In Propertius' *Elegiae*, a collection of Latin love poems, he portrays the Battle of Actium as a confrontation between the masculine, ram-bearing liburnae of Octavian and the effeminate barges of Cleopatra and Antony.<sup>102</sup> When used metaphorically to refer to a womb or vagina, the Latin word *navis* (ship) can occasionally reinforce a sexual dichotomy by positioning the ram, which represents masculine penetration, as the force that penetrates the feminine ship.<sup>103</sup>



**Fig. 22.** Roman warship relief dating to the first century CE from Varvaria-Bribirska Glavica, Croatia. (Image courtesy of Zoran Alajbeg).

## RAMS AS GEOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTIONS

In at least three instances, rams have been used allegorically to describe the geography or topography of a given area. The first case is in Herodotus' description of the land between the rivers Borysthenes and Hypanis in modern-day Ukraine. Herodotus mentions that the two rivers met, forming a marshy area where a section of land protrudes and takes the form of a ram. The ram island was referred to as Hippolaus' promontory and was said to be home to a temple dedicated to Demeter.<sup>104</sup> Similarly, in Strabo's *Geography*, he mentions that the area off the western end of Africa resembled the front of a warship.<sup>105</sup> Specifically, Strabo states that the Greek geographer Artemidorus of Ephesus thought the three western African islands, likely off the coast of Morocco, formed the front of a warship, with two islands as the outriggers and the central island forming the ram. During the Renaissance, the entirety of Tiber Island in Rome was shown

<sup>100</sup> AR. AV. 1254–1256.

<sup>101</sup> ATH. *DEIP.* 1.52, translation by author. Since the passage is supposed to be a fragmented copy by Athenaeus of Aristophanes, it can be assumed the author is not referring to a land battering-ram, but a naval ram as employed by Aristophanes (AR. AV. 1254–1256).

<sup>102</sup> PROP. 3.11.29–46.

<sup>103</sup> MACROB. *SAT.* 2.5.9. Similar relations to ships being equated with female reproductive organs can be found in PLAUT. *MEN.* 2.3 and PLAUT. *RUD.* 2.3.

<sup>104</sup> HDT. 4.53.6.

<sup>105</sup> STRAB. 3.1.4. It is unclear what exact area Strabo is referring to, possibly Cape Spartel in modern-day Morocco.

shaped as a warship in various iconographic depictions, a portrayal that stemmed from Roman times.<sup>106</sup> During the Roman Republic, the island became a central haven for the cult of Asclepius with the establishment of a temple on the island in 291 BCE.<sup>107</sup>

Both Ovid and Valerius Maximus tell the story of a Roman warship making its way up the Tiber from Antium with an effigy of Asclepius. On the warship was the god's numen in the form of a snake placed in an amphora. The snake was said to have been so large and heavy that it weighed down the warship, and as the vessel approached Tiber Island, it slithered out of the amphora onto the island. As a result, the snake, or the god in snake form, chose the island himself for the establishment of his cult place.<sup>108</sup> This myth is significant because Asclepius, the snake, and the warship came to symbolize the island in Roman popular culture. The Romans not only viewed Tiber Island as a warship, but there is evidence that the Romans physically shaped the island into one as well. In coins minted around 83 BCE, Tiber Island is depicted as a temple with a warship's bow jutting out of its side with a visible ram (Fig. 23). Additionally, similar coins minted around 140 CE show Tiber Island with its temple and a warship coming towards it.<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, a sizable marble warship from the Roman era that features Asclepius and a snake on the island still exists, though it is missing its ram.<sup>110</sup> During the reign of Augustus, he is said to have built a travertine revetment on the island in the shape of a warship's stern. He possibly ordered the entire island to be formed as a warship, with a ram included; however, only the remnants of the possible stern and what is believed to be the prow remain.<sup>111</sup>



**Fig. 23.** Drawing of a Roman coin depicting Tiber Island with a warship prow and ram, dating to 83 BCE (Image adapted from RUBIN DER CERVIN 1954, fig. 1).

## CONCLUSION

From the Maritime Museum in London to monuments in Central Park in New York City, representations of rams continue to be seen in public spaces today. Although contemporary audiences may not immediately recognize the various depictions of rams, whether ancient or modern, the ram was an easily identifiable symbol in antiquity, widely dispersed across all aspects of society. In ancient Greece and Rome, the

<sup>106</sup> DUNAR (2012, 62–198) provides an overview of how Tiber Island was depicted as a warship from 1270 to 1929 CE.

<sup>107</sup> LIV. 10.47.7.

<sup>108</sup> OV. *FAST.* 15.694; VAL. *MAX.* 1.8.2.

<sup>109</sup> RUBIN DE CERVIN 1954, 309–311.

<sup>110</sup> MURRAY 2012, 63.

<sup>111</sup> DUNAR 2012, 31–33.

ram played a pivotal role not just in naval warfare, but also in shaping the political, economic, and social structures of these societies. As the preceding sections have shown, rams could be found in many different contexts. In victory monuments, for instance, ram imagery emphasized military and political achievements, serving to honor both individual and state accomplishments. In funerary contexts, the ram may have represented the deceased's occupation or social status. As entertainment, rams became a source of popular diversion, enjoyed through activities like mock naval battles and dice games, accessible to most individuals. The ram's presence also extended into commerce and trade, symbolizing military strength and influencing economic exchanges through their use on items such as coins and stamps. Political and military figures adorned themselves with ram imagery on clothing and crowns, asserting their power while conveying aggression and naval prowess. The ram's symbolic significance even touched on ancient concepts of sex and gender, as the ram was often used in sexual jokes and phallic references, illustrating its association with masculinity. Lastly, the ram's role as a geographical descriptor shows its integration into ancient languages, serving as a visual aid that would have been readily understood by many. While not all ram depictions have been explored in depth, the examples presented here demonstrate the rich symbolism and widespread presence of the ram throughout Greek and Roman societies, suggesting that there is much more research to be done to fully understand its cultural significance.

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