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a cura di  
MARCO BETTALLI ED ELENA FRANCHI



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# Marcellus at Nola and the employment of the ‘long spears of the naval soldiers’: trying to make sense of Plutarch, *Marcellus*, 12.2

by GABRIELE BRUSA

**ABSTRACT.** According to Plutarch’s *Life of Marcellus*, in 215 BC Marcellus won a battle against Hannibal at Nola, by distributing among his soldiers the ‘long spears of the sea-fighters’ (δόρατα τῶν ναυμάχων μεγάλα). This tactical device is otherwise unheard of in Roman history, and it is quite puzzling. This paper attempts to make sense of Plutarch’s text. First, the references to ‘naval spears’ (δόρατα ναύμαχα, or simply ναύμαχα) in the Greek world are considered, to provide some useful context. The next aim is to look at the reality of Roman sea fights, to see whether some instances of naval fighting with long spears can be detected in the Roman middle-republican world as well. Some passages lead to think that this was indeed the case, and that at least some of the Roman fleets might have been equipped with particularly long spears (*hastae longae* in Livy’s words) to this end. Going back to Marcellus at Nola, this paper argues that these were the weapons he employed, and that his plan was to array his soldiers in a phalanx and to outmatch the Punic phalanx using longer spears. In conclusion, this case study is briefly discussed as a confirmation of Wheeler’s theory according to which the Roman army, throughout its history, could be deployed in a ‘phalangitic’ formation.

**KEYWORDS:** MARCELLUS, NOLA, SEA FIGHTS, LONG SPEARS, PHALANX

## *Introduction*

**I**n 215 BC, the proconsul M. Claudius Marcellus was sent with one legion to Nola, to defend it from the forces of Hannibal, before being sent to Sicily, where he would become famous for the capture of Syracuse<sup>1</sup>. This was the second time that Claudius was tasked with the defence of the Campanian city,

<sup>1</sup> According to Liv. 23.32.2 Marcellus, elected consul for 215, had to resign due to a bad omen, and he was sent to Campania *pro consule*.

but, while Hannibal's attempt during the previous year did not result in a large battle<sup>2</sup>, this time the Roman and Punic forces fought. This battle is described, though not in much detail, by Livy and Plutarch, who agree on the main lines of the military confrontation, but whose texts present some discrepancies, nonetheless<sup>3</sup>. Plutarch's text is particularly interesting, as it contains a rather obscure detail about a tactical device employed by Marcellus:

διαδοὺς δόρατα τῶν ναυμάχων μεγάλα τοῖς πεζοῖς, καὶ διδάξας πόρρωθεν συντηροῦσι παίειν τοὺς Καρχηδονίους, ἀκοντιστὰς μὲν οὐκ ὄντας αἰχμαῖς δὲ χρωμένους ἐκ χειρὸς βραχείαις. διὸ καὶ δοκοῦσι τότε δεῖξαι τὰ νῶτα Ῥωμαίοις ὅσοι συνέβαλον καὶ φυγὴν ἀπροφάσιστον φυγεῖν.<sup>4</sup>

He had distributed long spears used in naval combats among his infantry, and taught them to watch their opportunity and smite the Carthaginians at long range; these were not javelineers, but used short spears in hand to hand fighting. This seems to have been the reason why at that time all the Carthaginians who were engaged turned their backs upon the Romans and took to unhesitating flight.

This passage raises some questions: what exactly were the spears of the sea-fighters? Why did Marcellus decide to abandon, at least temporarily, the normal Roman tactics based on the *pilum* and sword? Why didn't he simply use the spears of the *triarii*, the rear-most rank of a Roman *triplex acies*, which, according to Polybius, carried thrusting spears instead of *pila*<sup>5</sup>? How were these weapons normally (that is, in a sea fight) used? Unfortunately, Livy's account of the battle does not help to shed light on these questions: in his text, the reference to these spears is entirely missing.

Modern authors have not devoted much attention to this passage. To my knowledge, only three authors commented on it in passing. General works on the

2 Liv. 23.16 just relates some sallies from Nola, which compelled Hannibal to retreat; the historian himself expresses some doubts about some other versions, which reported the killing of 2,800 enemies.

3 Apart from the absence in Livy of the naval spears, Plutarch records just one battle, while Livy gives accounts of two different fights, the first of which was interrupted by a storm. Livy also inserts two speeches, one for each commander. According to Plutarch, Marcellus initially refused an engagement, while in Livy both parts are *avidī certaminis*. The two authors agree on the outcome of the battle, on the number of fallen men and on the desertion that this defeat gave rise to in the Hannibalic army. Livy's text is at Liv. 23.44.3-46.7.

4 Plut. *Marc.* 12.2-3. All the translations quoted in this text are from the *Loeb Classical Library*.

5 Polyb. 6.23.14.



Hannibalic war either vaguely relate Hannibal's and Marcellus' confrontations in Campania<sup>6</sup>, or take into consideration the relevant battle itself, even citing Plutarch's account alongside that of Livy, but do not comment on the employment of the spears<sup>7</sup>. Plutarch's comment about these spears has been analysed twice in relation to the sources of the *Life of Marcellus*: since this reference is not found in Livy, De Sanctis argued that Plutarch took it from another source, likely Polybius or Cornelius Nepos, and inserted it into an otherwise Livian account<sup>8</sup>. Klotz, instead, thought that Plutarch took all the details about the battle from Livy's source, Valerius Antias, and that Livy omitted the detail about the naval spears<sup>9</sup>. Clark, in his

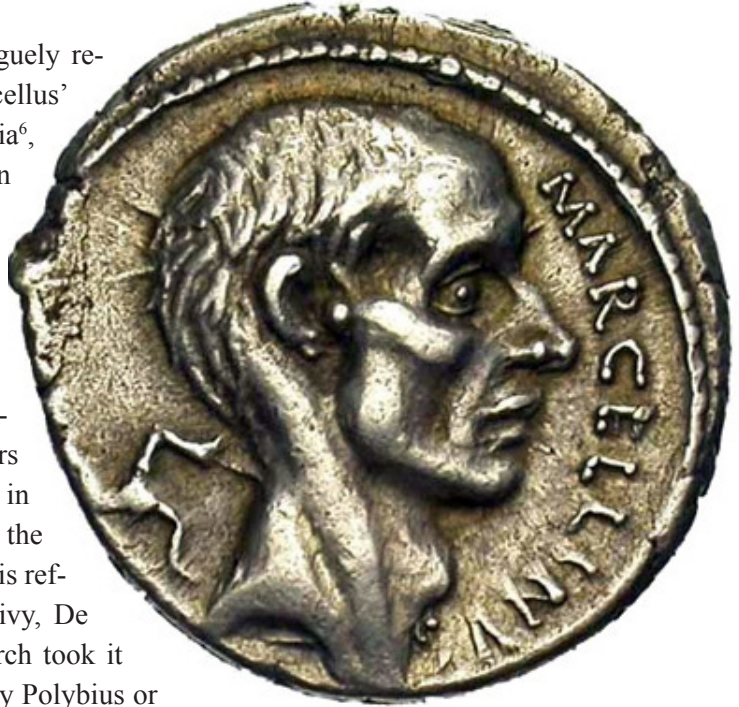


Fig. 1. Silver Denarius issued in 50 CE by Publius Cornelius Lentulus Marcellinus in honour of the consul M. Claudius Marcellus for his campaign in Sicily (represented in the obverse by the triskele). Upload to wikimedia commons by Yuri Che.

6 Yann LE BOHEC, *Histoire militaire des guerres puniques, 264-246 avant J.-C.*, Éditions du Rocher, Monaco, 1996, p. 208; Nigel BAGNALL, *The Punic wars: Rome, Carthage, and the struggle for the Mediterranean*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 2005, pp. 236-237 and 241-242; Giovanni BRIZZI, *Scipione e Annibale: la guerra per salvare Roma*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2007, pp. 82-85.

7 John F. LAZENBY, *Hannibal's war: a military history of the second Punic war*, Aris and Phillips, Warminster, 1978, pp. 96-97; Michael P. FRONDA, «Hannibal: tactics, strategy, and geostrategy», in Dexter Hoyos (Ed.), *A companion to the Punic wars*, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden, 2011, pp. 242-259 (p.248).

8 Gaetano DE SANCTIS, *Storia dei Romani*, vol. 3<sup>2</sup>.2, La Nuova Italia, Firenze, 1964, pp. 320-321: «questo particolare non sembra invenzione d'annalisti [...] e deve ritenersi che Plutarco [...] lo abbia desunto sia da Cornelio sia da Polibio».

9 Alfred KLOTZ, «Die Quellen der plutarchischen Lebenbeschreibung des Marcellus», *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 83 (1934), pp.289-318 (pp. 302-303: «Da [...] dies unmöglich eine Ausschmückung Plutarchs sein kann, dem eine solche kriegerische Phan-

commentary to the *Life of Marcellus*, quotes these two views, without commenting. He then briefly goes on to inquire about the provenance of these spears<sup>10</sup> – a detail about which some hypotheses will be put forward later in this text.

Apart from these three brief mentions, which do not deal with the reasons for Marcellus' choice, Claudius' tactical device has gone largely unnoticed. In modern works about Roman military equipment, these 'long spears' receive almost no mention at all, mainly because of the lack of archaeological evidence<sup>11</sup>. Despite the scantiness of the sources about the employment of 'naval spears', it is worth trying to inquire what they were, how they were used, and why Marcellus decided to have his own soldiers armed with them in a land battle.

### *Δόρατα ναύμαχα*

Plutarch is not the only author to refer to spears specifically intended for use at sea. However, the evidence, which is not abundant, comes mainly from the Greek world. The most important passages come from the *Iliad*, specifically from book 15, where the Achaeans find themselves compelled to defend their ships from the Trojans' attack. To do so, they fight directly from the decks, with very long spears, which Homer defines simply as 'ναύμαχα', adding that these were huge spears, whose shafts were composed of two parts glued and riveted together<sup>12</sup>:

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tasie fehlte, so hat er nicht aus Livius geschöpft, sondern aus Antias").

10 Edward D. CLARK, *A historical commentary on Plutarch's Marcellus*, Unpublished PhD thesis, University of British Columbia, 1991, pp. 169-170.

11 About this lack of material evidence, see below. One should also note that modern scholarship has had the tendency to focus on the reconstruction of imperial weapons, rather than of the republican panoply. Even in works that do focus on the Republic, thrusting spears receive little attention compared to weapons such as swords and javelins. On Roman republican spears, see Otto FIEBIGER, «Hasta (2)», *RE* XIV.2 (1912), pp. 2503-2507; Paul COUISSIN, *Les armes romaines: essai sur les origines et l'évolution des armes individuelles du légionnaire romain*, Librairie ancienne Honoré Champion Editeur, Paris, 1926, p. 213; Mike C. BISHOP and Jon C. N. COULSTON, *Roman military equipment: from the Punic wars to the fall of Rome*, Batsford, London, 1993, pp. 52-53 (cf. p. 192, on the production of the spear shafts); Michel FEUGÈRE, *Les armes des Romains: de la république à l'antiquité tardive*, Editions Errance, Paris, 1993, pp. 169-171; Lionel PERNET, «Spear», in Yann Le Bohec (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of the Roman army*, vol. 3, Wiley Blackwell, Chichester, 2015, pp. 911-915; Ian A. MARTIN, *Origin of Roman infantry equipment: innovation and Celtic influence*, Unpublished PhD thesis, University of North Texas, 2019, pp. 164-168. Among these authors, Couissin is the only one to discuss some *hastae longae*: see below. Pernet mentions Plutarch's passage, without commenting on the spears of the sea-fighters.

12 On the construction of these weapons, see Richard JANKO, *The Iliad: a commentary, vol-*



οἱ δ' ἀπὸ νηῶν ὕψι μελαινάων ἐπιβάντες  
μακροῖσι ξυστοῖσι, τά ρά σφ' ἐπὶ νηυσὶν ἔκειτο  
ναύμαχα κολλήεντα, κατὰ στόμα εἰμένα χαλκῶ.<sup>13</sup>

But the Achaeans high up on the decks of their black ships to which they had climbed, fought therefrom with long pikes that lay at hand for them upon the ships for sea-fighting – jointed pikes, shod at the tip with bronze.

This depiction of the ‘naval pikes’ is echoed by another reference later in the same book, where such a weapon is wielded by Aias<sup>14</sup>. In both cases, these spears are used to repel assailants from land, but Homer seems to imply that they were normally used in proper sea-fights, even though he does not add any details. These Homeric passages influenced in some way the subsequent tradition. A whole wealth of scholia and lexica comment on the word ‘ναύμαχα’, explaining its meaning<sup>15</sup>. Dio Chrysostom borrows the Homeric image of the Achaeans smiting their opponents on the beach from their ships with naval spears, depicting Neoptolemus killing an Amazon in this way<sup>16</sup>. Nonnus of Panopolis writes of the same weapons during a sea battle in his *Dionysiaca*, where he also quotes Homer’s words about the construction of the long pikes<sup>17</sup>; it is worth noting that in this case the spears are employed in a proper sea fight, and not against foes on land.

*ume IV: books 13-16*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 301-302.

13 Hom. *Il.* 15.387-389.

14 Hom. *Il.* 15.676-678: ἀλλ' ὁ γε νηῶν ἴκρι' ἐπόχετο μακρὰ βιβάσθων, / νόμα δὲ ξυστόν μέγα ναύμαχον ἐν παλάμῃσι / κολλητὸν βλήτροισι δυοκαιεκοσίπηχυν [But he kept faring with long strides up and down the decks of the ships, and he wielded in his hands a long pike for sea-fighting, a pike jointed with rings, of a length of two and twenty cubits].

15 Among scholia and commentaries, see both the *Scholia in Homerum vetera* and *recentiora*, Aelius Herodianus (*Il. Pros.*), Tzetzes' *Homeric Allegories*, Eusthatus' commentary to the *Iliad*: all of them comment on the two Homeric passages. Among the lexica, see those of Photius and Hesychius, Julius Pollux's *Onomasticon*, the *Etymologicum Magnum*, the *Lexica Segueriana* 6, the *Suda* and the anonymous *Συναγωγή λέξεων χρησίμων*, all of them *sub voce* ‘ναύμαχα’. All of these works only specify that these spears were intended for use at sea, with two recurring phrases: μακρὰ δόρατα πρὸς ναυμαχίαν ἐπιτήδεια and μακρὰ δόρατα, ὥστε ἀπὸ τῶν νεῶν μάχεσθαι.

16 Dio Chrys. 11.117. According to Dio's version, in his Trojan discourse, during the second invasion of the Troad an Amazon tried to assault the Achaeans' ships, but was killed by Neoptolemus with a naval pike (ναυμάχῳ δόρατι).

17 Nonn. 39.84. In a speech, Dionysius exhorts his men to fight with naval spears, which he describes, borrowing a Homeric verse, as ναύμαχα κολλήεντα, περὶ στόμα εἰμένα χαλκῶ. At 36.446, in another speech, the δόρυ ναύμαχον becomes a metaphor to describe a sea battle in general.

These references are literary in nature, and do not necessarily prove that the reality of Homeric naval battles still applied to the age of Dio or Nonnus. The *Iliad*'s text appears to prove that archaic Greece saw the employment of a long spear which was specifically intended for sea battles<sup>18</sup>, but the lexica and commentaries do not imply that such a weapon was still in use in classical or Hellenistic Greece. There is, however, evidence of soldiers fighting with spears from the deck of ships in this period. Most warships in classical Greece carried soldiers, and this is especially evident in the Peloponnesian War. Thucydides thought that the Athenians were particularly skilled at manoeuvres, while the Peloponnesians tended to rely on the embarked soldiers, and most modern authors tend to agree<sup>19</sup>. Even the Athenian triremes, however, were equipped with ten *epibatai*, naval hoplites, who carried a spear, alongside a sword, and (probably) some kind of missiles<sup>20</sup>, and fought on the ships with these weapons<sup>21</sup>. Probably the best account of their fighting style (about which the sources do not provide much detail<sup>22</sup>) comes from Diodorus Siculus' account of the battle of Abydos (411 BC):

18 JANKO, cit., p. 270 (more sceptical is Dorothea GRAY, «Seewesen», in Hans G. Buchholz (Ed.), *Archaeologia Homerica: die Denkmäler und das frügeschichtliche Epos*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1990, pp. G131-G133); see also Thomas BIGGS, «Naval battles in Greek and Roman epic», in Simone Finkmann and Christiane Reitz (Eds.), *Structures of epic poetry*, vol. 2, De Gruyter, Berlin-Boston, 2019, pp. 320-321, on the Aristhonotos krater as an instance of a 'Homeric' sea fight.

19 See in particular Thuc. 1.50. Among modern authors, see for example Lionel CASSON, *Ships and seamanship in the ancient world*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1971, pp. 92-93; Barry STRAUSS, «Battle, B: Naval battles and sieges», in Philip Sabin, Hans van Wees and Michael Whitby (Eds.), *The Cambridge history of Greek and Roman warfare*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 233-247 (pp. 230-232); Matteo ZACCARINI, «Thucydides' narrative on naval warfare: *epibatai*, military thinking, ideology», in Geoff Lee, Helene Whittaker and Graham Wrightson (Eds.), *Ancient warfare: introducing current research*, vol. 1, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle, 2015, pp. 210-228.

20 On the armament and fighting style of the *epibatai*, see Louis RAWLINGS, «Alternative agonies: hoplite martial and combat experiences beyond the phalanx», in Hans van Wees (Ed.), *War and violence in ancient Greece*, Classical Press of Wales, Swansea, 2000, pp. 233-259 (pp. 236-237); ZACCARINI, cit., and above all Tristan HERZOGENRATH-AMELUNG, «Naval hoplites: social status and combat reality of classical Greek *epibatai*», *Historia* 66 (2017), pp. 45-64 (pp. 46-47 and 57-59). Spears are not listed in the lists of equipment for the triremes (CASSON, cit., pp. 265-266, nt.3): each *epibates* was probably expected to bring his own, as was the case for the regular hoplites.

21 To cite but one instance, Plutarch mentions two Athenians who fought on a ship at Salamis, and with their spears managed to prevent Ariamenes from boarding their own vessel (Plut. *Them.* 14.3).

22 For other instances, see HERZOGENRATH-AMELUNG, cit.; cf. STRAUSS, cit., pp. 231-232.



Fig. 2 : The map shows Marcellus' movements against Hannibal in the region around Nola between 216 and 215 BC. Livy, our main source, does not explain how Marcellus arrived at Casilinum (he was stationed in the area of Teanum Sidicinum earlier in 216). However, he surely started his campaign in Campania from this town. In 216, he marched along the Volturnus, crossed it near Caiatia, and headed to Nola, where he fought his first, smaller battle against Hannibal. After the battle, as Hannibal raided Campania, Marcellus encamped on the hills above Suessula (in an encampment defined by Livy "castra Claudiana"), where he remained until early 215, when Fabius Maximus sent him to fight Hannibal near Nola once again. (Elaboration by the Author of the map in Barrington's Atlas of the Greek and Roman world (n. 44).

οὐ μὴν οὐδ' οἱ τοῖς καταστροφάσιν ἐπιβεβηκότες ἄπρακτον εἶχον τὴν φιλοτιμίαν, ἀλλ' οἱ μὲν ἐκ πολλοῦ διαστήματος ἐφεσθηκότες ἐτόξευον κατὰ τὸ συνεχές, καὶ ταχὺ ὁ τόπος ἦν βελῶν πλήρης; οἱ δ' αἰεὶ προσιόντες ἐγγυτέρω τὰς λόγχας ἠκόνηζον, οἱ μὲν ἐπὶ τοὺς ἀμυνομένους ἐπιβάτας, οἱ δ' ἐπ' αὐτοὺς βαλεῖν φιλοτιμούμενοι τοὺς κυβερνήτας; ὁπότε δὲ συνερείσειαν αἱ ναῦς, τοῖς τε δόρασιν ἠγωνίζοντο καὶ κατὰ τὰς προσαγωγὰς εἰς τὰς τῶν πολεμίων τριήρεις μεθαλλόμενοι τοῖς ξίφεσιν ἀλλήλους ἠμύνοντο.<sup>23</sup>

23 Diod. 13.46.1.

Nor did the men whose position was on the decks fail to maintain the zeal which brooked no failure; but some, while still at a considerable distance from the enemy, kept up a stream of arrows, and soon the space was full of missiles, while others, each time that they drew near, would hurl their javelins, some doing their best to strike the defending marines and others the enemy pilots themselves; and whenever the ships would come close together, they would not only fight with their spears but at the moment of contact would also leap over the enemy's triremes and carry on the contest with their swords.

Diodorus' account is quite precise<sup>24</sup>, and offers some precious insight into the fighting style of the marines at sea. While some (in all likelihood, the *toxotai*, the archers who constituted together with the *epibatai* the complement of marines on a trireme) shot arrows, the other soldiers could employ three different combat styles, depending on the distance between the triremes: they could either hurl javelins or, when the ships drew close, try to pierce the enemies with their spears, and eventually jump onto the enemy's deck and fight with their swords. This is a very interesting reference to the employment of spears (along with other weapons) in hand-to-hand fighting from one ship to another. In Diodorus' text, as well as in the other references to the *epibatai*, nothing implies that their spears were different to the normal hoplite spears, although one might suppose that the naval soldiers could benefit from longer shafts, which would allow them to reach the enemies more easily. However, Plato testifies to the possibility of experimenting with different kinds of long-range melee weapons on the ships. In his *Laches*, one of the characters, the experienced soldier Laches, ridicules a man named Stesilaus, an instructor in tactics, who went to sea with a *δορυδρέπανον*, a sort of halberd made up of a scythe mounted on a spear<sup>25</sup>. This man tried to strike the enemies (while his comrades likely used spears) with this weapon, but it got entangled into the enemy's rigging, and he was unable to recover it, much to every-

24 According to the commentary of Delfino AMBAGLIO, *Diodoro Siculo, Biblioteca Storica, libro XIII: commento storico*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano, 2008, p. 79, the abundance of details is due to Diodorus' reliance on a war bulletin: "continua la descrizione della battaglia con ricchezza di particolari certamente desumibile in origine da qualche bollettino di guerra". Ultimately, Diodorus' dependence on Ephorus is probable (AMBAGLIO, cit., pp. x-xi and 77-79), but it is likely that Ephorus himself took the details from another source (the *Hellenica Oxyrhynchia?*), which in turn employed an Athenian war bulletin. The description of the battle is more detailed than – and different from – the one found in Xenophon (*Hell.* 1.1.4-7).

25 Plato *Lach.* 183c-184a.

one's derision. It is unclear what end Stesilaus had in mind for this weapon<sup>26</sup>. At any rate, Plato implies that it was customary for the men on two enemy ships to try and hit each other as the vessels were passing by each other, and that weapons different from a regular spear could be used to this end. A passage in Herodotus about Egyptian marines attests to the existence, still at the time of Xerxes' expedition, of peculiar δόρατά ναύμαχα<sup>27</sup>. As Herodotus does not describe them, it is unclear whether they were similar to Homer's ναύμαχα, and the author doesn't ever mention them as part of the panoply of the Greeks, although it is not impossible that some were used.

Overall, the scanty evidence allows to trace a picture of Greek naval battles in which spears could play an important role, and in which long pikes specifically intended for use at sea could be employed, although the evidence for the continuous existence of such weapons is lacking. This picture might prove helpful, as a reference for comparison, to understand the general context of Plutarch's statement about the employment of long spears by Marcellus' troops. The texts considered here show how spears could be useful in the event of a naval battle, and attest to the development of peculiar long pikes for these battles at least in some cases in the Greek world. On the other hand, one has to keep in mind that the evidence discussed in this section does not relate to Roman warfare. A more precise contextualisation and attempted explanation of Plutarch's comment must obviously be primarily based on evidence pertaining to the Roman world. It is therefore now time to return to this latter, to investigate the differences and similarities to this Greek picture, and to assess whether the employment of 'naval pikes' is detectable in Roman warfare as well.

26 Adam SCHWARTZ, *Reinstating the hoplite: arms, armour and phalanx fighting in archaic and classical Greece*, Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart, 2007, pp. 230-232 supposes that this weapon might have been meant to bridge the gap between long thrusting spears and slashing weapons; interestingly, Strabo (4.4.1) uses the word δορυδρέπανον to define the hooks employed by Caesar against the Veneti (see below), while according to Polybius (21.27.4) it was used during sieges.

27 Herod. 7.89.3. These Egyptians formed part of the naval contingents raised by Xerxes for his invasion of Greece. Alongside the naval spears, they carried concave shields, big axes, and long swords.



### *The fighting style of the marines of the Roman republican fleets*

For our sources, it was commonplace to assume that Roman soldiers, even when fighting at sea, were more courageous than the foreigners, and especially than the Carthaginians, who could, in turn, be better sailors<sup>28</sup>. Another cliché, closely related to this one, is the idea according to which the Punic fleets tried to win their battles by manoeuvring, while the Romans tended to rely more heavily on their marines, fighting ‘as if on land’<sup>29</sup>. It is undeniable that boarding operations were an important part of Roman naval battles<sup>30</sup>, although one should be careful to trace a clear-cut distinction between Romans and Carthaginians in this regard<sup>31</sup>. Melee fighting on the enemy’s decks, as well as before and during the boarding operation, was very important, as was the exchange of missiles: the overall scheme is the same as the one which Diodorus depicts for the battle of Abydos. While the exchange of arrows and javelins is not particularly relevant here<sup>32</sup>, some passages concerning hand to hand fighting deserve to be highlighted.

Unfortunately, the sources provide extremely scanty details. In many cases, they just emphasise the *virtus Romana*, which points to some kind of melee (sometimes explicitly mentioned), but does not tell much about its characteristics<sup>33</sup>. It is quite easy to find references to boardings, but, once again, these are

28 Polyb. 6.52.8-10 (who clearly adopts a Roman point of view); Diod. 23.2.

29 See Liv. 21.50.1-2: *ubi in altum evecti sunt, Romanus conserere pugnam et ex propinquo vires conferre velle; contra eludere Poenus et arte non vi rem gerere naviumque quam virorum aut armorum malle certamen facere* [“Once at sea, the Romans wanted to join battle and match their strength against the enemies at close quarters. The Phoenicians, on the contrary, preferred to manoeuvre; to conduct the affair by strategy, not by force, and to make it a contest rather of ships than of men or arms”].

30 John S. MORRISON, *Greek and Roman oared warships, 399-30 BC*, Oxbow, Oxford, 1996, pp. 49-50; Philip DE SOUZA, «Battle, B: Naval battles and sieges», in Philip Sabin, Hans van Wees and Michael Whitby (Eds.), *The Cambridge history of Greek and Roman warfare*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 434-460 (pp. 434-441); Domenico CARRO «*Transilire armati in hostium navem: il corvo di Polibio e l’arrembaggio romano, la più redditizia delle azioni tattiche in mare aperto*», *Nuova Antologia Militare* 1 (2020), pp. 3-28.

31 For the previous wars between the Carthaginians and the Syracusans in Sicily, Diodorus mentions some instances of Punic boarding operations in battle (Diod. 13, 88, 3-5; 19, 107, 2; 20, 5; 20, 32, 3-5 and above all 14.60.3).

32 Missile weapons are quite frequently mentioned (for instance, Polyb. 10.12.1; Liv. 28.30.9; 30.10; Caes. *Gall.* 4.25.1; App. *Pun.* 25); and this is a recurrent theme also in the epic descriptions of naval battles (BIGGS, cit., 327-346).

33 See for instance Liv. 36.44 and 37.30, where the commanders remind their men of the su-





Fig. 3. In this relief of the late I century C. E., the infantrymen appear armed with spear and shield, but it's impossible to tell whether the spear is a simple hasta or a true boarding pike. The relief was discovered in Palestrina in 1765 by Winckelmann, who held the marble tablet as part of a donation to the Sanctuary of Fortuna Primigenia. Modern research, according to the latest studies, assumes that the relief was actually part of a tomb built by a citizen of Praeneste, who probably sailed in Octavian's fleet at Actium in 31 BC. Photo Rabax63, 2018. CC SA 4.0 International (Wikimedia Commons).

almost always very fleeting. Sometimes, one can safely infer that there was some kind of exchange of blows from one ship to another. Soldiers attempting to leap onto an enemy vessel, or employing boarding bridges, could be quite vulnerable: Polybius describes a kind of *testudo* that the legionaries employed while crossing their boarding bridges during the battle of Mylae<sup>34</sup>. For his battle against the Ve-

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priority of the Roman *virtus*; Caesar (and the author of the *Bellum Alexandrinum*) emphasise this aspect of the naval battles (e.g., *Caes. Gall.* 3.14; *Bell. Alex.* 46): this is particularly evident for the battle against the Veneti, as argued by Brice ERICKSON, «Falling masts, rising masters: the ethnography of virtue in Caesar's account of the Veneti», *American Journal of Philology* 123 (2002), pp. 601-622).

<sup>34</sup> Polyb. 1.22.9-10. The description refers to the peculiar boarding bridges known as *corvi*,

neti at sea (56 BC), Caesar relates that his soldiers were able to grapple the Gauls' ships, much taller than the Romans' own, and then could scale them<sup>35</sup>. The fight is compared to a siege, and it is easy to imagine the defenders' resistance to the boarding. In some cases, Caesar mentions hand to hand fighting in connection with boarding<sup>36</sup>, without providing details. Going back to Polybius, who stresses the importance of a skilled force of marines<sup>37</sup>, despite the lack of details, some cases of boarding can be detected<sup>38</sup>. As in Caesar, in some of these instances some kind of fighting before the boarding should be presumed. A fight between the soldiers from opposing ships is mentioned for the battle of Chios (201 BC), during which the Macedonian marines defended themselves (presumably with their spears) from the assaults of the Rhodians. The Rhodians, on their part, were afraid of ramming the Macedonian ships, as the soldiers of King Philip were valiant and ready to strike the enemies as soon as they got close enough: indeed, Polybius says that they continued to fight, from their ships, even while they were sinking<sup>39</sup>. This battle did not involve Roman units; its description, however, bears some resemblance to that of the battle of Cape Ecnomus (256 BC). In this instance, some of the Carthaginian ships were afraid of coming into close quarters with the Romans, as they feared they might be grappled and attacked<sup>40</sup>.

Polybius implies that it was normally customary to get close to the enemies, either to ram them or to attack them. In this context, it is interesting to turn to Livy. During the naval battle of Lilybaeum (218 BC), according to the historian,

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whose existence is contested (for two opposing views, see the most recent contributions by Christa STEINBY, *The Roman republican navy: from the sixth century to 167 BC*, Societas Scientiarum Fennica, Helsinki, 2007, pp. 87-104 and CARRO, cit., who refute their existence, and Claudio VACANTI, *Guerra per la Sicilia e guerra della Sicilia: il ruolo delle città siciliane nel primo conflitto romano-punico*, Jovene, Napoli, 2012, pp. 70-75, who accepts it, with previous literature), but is not relevant here: it is safe to assume that this arrangement proved useful on any kind of large boarding bridge.

35 Caes. *Gall.* 3.14-15. To grapple the ships, the Romans had had to cut the enemy's riggings with long scythes, which Caesar compares to those employed during sieges (*falces muralles*). On Caesar's narrative, see ERICKSON, cit., pp. 611-613.

36 Caes. *Civ.* 1.57-58; 2.6; cf. *Bell. Alex.* 10-11; 16.

37 Polyb. 1.61.

38 E.g., Polyb. 1.23 (the famous battle near Mylae); 1.47.8; 1.51; 2.10.3-4.

39 Polyb. 16.4.13. The account of this battle is quite precise. For a discussion on Polybius' sources, see Frank W. WALBANK, *A historical commentary on Polybius*, vol. 2, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1967, pp. 503-504.

40 Polyb. 1.28.11.12.

the Carthaginians were inferior to the Romans in terms of their marines. Therefore, *sicuti conserta navis esset, haudquaquam par numerus armatorum ex ea pugnabat*<sup>41</sup>. Livy represents the struggle between the Romans, who grappled their enemies, and the Carthaginians, who fought from their own ship (*ex ea*), presumably to prevent a boarding, or just to defend themselves from the Romans.

The passages quoted lead one to think that fights between the marines of two opposing fleets, during the middle to late republic, were important in the event of a sea battle, either in the context of a boarding, or just in the attempt to kill or injure the opposing marines without boarding. As already remarked, however, the sources do not provide many details, and they appear to take the tactics and fighting style of the marines for granted. So far, none of the quoted texts provides a reference to the employment of spears. A few other texts, however, prove a little more telling.

The first one is Livy's account of the battle fought between the Roman fleet, commanded by D. Quinctius, and the Tarentine one, at the orders of Democrates (210 BC), and in particular of the confrontation between Quinctius' own ship and that of the Tarentine Nico Percon<sup>42</sup>:

*Itaque ex utraque parte signo dato cum rostris concurrissent neque retro navem inhiherent nec dirimi ab se hostem paterentur; quam quis indeptus navem erat ferrea iniecta manu, ita conserebant ex propinquo pugnam ut non missilibus tantum, sed gladiis etiam prope conlato pede gereretur res. Prorae inter se iunctae haerebant, puppes alieno remigio circumagebantur: Ita in arto stipatae erant naves ut vix ullum telum in mari vanum intercideret; frontibus velut pedestris acies urgebant, perviaeque naves pugnantibus erant. [...] Hic Quinctium simul pugnantem hortantemque suos incautum hasta transfigit. Ille ut praeceps cum armis procidit ante proram, victor Tarentinus in turbatam duce amisso navem inpigre transgressus...*<sup>43</sup>

Accordingly after the signal had been given on both sides, and they had encountered each other with their beaks and did not reverse their motion with oars nor allow the enemy to cast loose from them, a commander closing in on a ship would throw grappling-irons on it, and they engaged in a battle at such close quarters that they fought not only with missiles, but also with swords, almost man to man. The bows in contact would not de-

41 Liv. 21.50.3: "when a ship was grappled, the men at arms in her were greatly outnumbered by their enemies".

42 On the battle of Tarentum, see Luca BELTRAMINI, *Commento al libro XXVI di Tito Livio*, ETS, Pisa, 2020, pp. 377-384.

43 Liv. 26.39.12-17.

tach themselves, the sterns were swung about by the efforts of the enemy's oarsmen. So closely massed together were the ships that hardly a missile fell without effect between them into the sea. Forming each a front, like a battle-line on land, they tried to push each other back, and the ships were a highway for the combatants. [...] As Quinctius was fighting and at the same time encouraging his men, Nico ran him through with a spear while off his guard. When Quinctius with his weapons fell forward over the bow, the victorious Tarentine boldly crossed over on to the ship thrown into confusion by the loss of its commander.

This text is probably the best description of the operations of the Roman (and Greek) marines during a sea battle in the middle republic. The ships close in on each other, and they might be either grappled or held in place by the rowers. While the vessels are still distant, the crews shower missiles upon each other, and the exchange of projectiles goes on for the whole duration of the battle. As the ships become interlocked, the marines start to fight at close quarters, forming a sort of battle line on their decks, with their swords and (at least in the case of Nico) spears. If they are able to dispatch their opponents, they might leap onto the enemy's deck, and try to capture the ship. Livy's description shows very well, for once, how a boarding operation could be preceded by infantry combat among the marines from the ships. It is reasonable to think that spears could prove particularly useful, as they could enable the soldiers to stab each other from further afield<sup>44</sup>. Once on the enemy's ship, they could probably use their swords, as Diodorus says<sup>45</sup>. One must note, however, that in this passage the employment of a spear is explicitly mentioned only for Nico, that is, for a Greek soldier.

A specific mention of the employment of spears in a sea battle can possibly be detected in Silius Italicus' description of a fight near Syracuse (212 BC)<sup>46</sup>. The poet mentions a blow dealt by Laronius to Polyphemus (a Greek admiral who was trying to steer his ship away from those of the Romans) with a spear (*hasta*). However, the poetic nature of this text makes it hardly decisive: indeed, Silius even calls javelins and throwing spears *hastae*.

A passage from Plutarch's *Life of Antony* is more revealing. According to the biographer, the battle of Actium (31 BC) was very similar to a land battle, or to a siege:

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44 MORRISON, cit., 286.

45 Again, Diod. 13.46.1.

46 Sil. 14.534.

ἦν οὖν πεζομαχία προσφερῆς ὁ ἀγών: τὸ δὲ ἀληθέστερον εἰπεῖν, τειχομαχία. τρεῖς γὰρ ἅμα καὶ τέσσαρες περὶ μίαν τῶν Ἀντωνίου συνείχοντο, γέρροις καὶ δόρασι καὶ κοντοῖς χρωμένων καὶ πυροβόλοις: οἱ δὲ Ἀντωνίου καὶ καταπέλταις ἀπὸ ξυλίνων πυργῶν ἔβαλλον.<sup>47</sup>

The struggle was therefore like a land battle; or, to speak more truly, like the storming of a walled town. For three or four of Caesar's vessels were engaged at the same time about one of Antony's, and the crews fought with wicker shields and spears and punting-poles and fiery missiles; the soldiers of Antony also shot with catapults from wooden towers.

Here the reader finds, as already in Caesar, the comparison between a sea battle and a siege. The reason is that the soldiers tried to hit each other from their decks with missiles and spears. This time, spears are mentioned (δόρυ, κοντός), together with arrows and catapult projectiles. Cassius Dio describes the weapons employed in a similar way (δόρατα μακρά)<sup>48</sup>. Of course, their testimony does not allow to presume that spears were part of the normal equipment of the Roman marines, nor that they were already in use at the time of the second Punic war. One last text, however, helps to shed some light on this problem.

In 205 BC, Scipio, the future Africanus, was allowed to accept voluntary contributions from the allies to build and equip a fleet to hold Sicily, and then to invade Africa. The list of these contributions provided by Livy is very detailed<sup>49</sup>; Arretium was particularly generous: among the other things, they promised

*tria milia scutorum, galeas totidem, pila gaesa hastas longas, milium quinquaginta summam pari cuiusque generis numero expleturos, secures rura falces alveolos molas, quantum in quadraginta longas naves opus esset.*<sup>50</sup>

three thousand shields, an equal number of helmets; and that they would furnish a total of fifty thousand javelins, short spears and lances, with an equal proportion of each type; also axes, shovels, sickles, baskets and hand-mills, as many as were needed for forty war-ships.

47 Plut. *Ant.* 66.2.

48 Dio Cass. 50.34.7. The historian refers to a later phase of the battle. On the battle of Actium, see Carsten H. LANGE, «The battle of Actium: a reconsideration», *Classical Quarterly* 61 (2011), pp. 608-623, with cited literature.

49 It is impossible, unfortunately, to tell what Livy's source was. Some authors supposed that these 'voluntary contributions' were in reality sanctions imposed on the Etruscans for their filo-Punic stance (see the *status quaestionis* in Paul JAL, Tite-Live, *Histoire Romaine, tome XVIII: livre XXVIII*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 1995, pp. 138-139, nt. 15). In this case, one might suppose that these data originally came from some sort of official document.

50 Liv. 28.45.16-17; cf. MORRISON, cit., 354.



It is important to focus on the kind of weapons the Romans needed for their ships. Besides defensive armament (shields and helmets), marines were expected to have *pila*, *gaesa* and *hastae longae*. *Pila* and *gaesa* are missile weapons<sup>51</sup>: as seen, it is quite common to hear of javelins, throwing spears, and projectiles in general in the event of a sea battle. The long spears (*hastae longae*), on the other hand, are thrusting pikes<sup>52</sup>, presumably similar to the ones Plutarch mentions at Actium. Here a reader has the clearest mention of the employment of thrusting spears during naval battles of the middle republic. Once again, it would perhaps be rash to assume that these weapons were always present on Roman ships. After all, Livy mentions them in the context of the fitting of just one fleet, and the evidence is, as always, very scanty.

These texts, however, provide useful hints. Unfortunately, these hints are not definitively corroborated by the archaeological and iconographic evidence. While the employment of spears on Roman warships is both archaeologically and iconographically attested<sup>53</sup>, weapon finds from Roman shipwrecks have been relatively scanty (at least in terms of melee weapons), and they do not allow modern historians to grasp a coherent picture of the reality of Roman sea-fighting during the Republic. Moreover, while some traces of wood are preserved, especially in the spearhead sockets, the remains do not allow to reconstruct the length of the shafts of the spears<sup>54</sup>. Indeed, in modern-day manuals about Roman weapons, there is almost no mention of the long spears Plutarch writes about<sup>55</sup>. In terms of iconography, on the same lines, clear representations of *naumachiae* from the republican

51 The *gaesum* appears to have been a type of javelin, used as a missile (Liv. 8.8.5 distinguishes it from the *hasta*, the thrusting spear; cf. Caes. *Gall.* 3.4.1). According to Servius (*Aen.* 7.664) it was originally a Gallic weapon.

52 Livy describes, for instance, the Macedonian *sarisae* as long *hastae* (Liv. 31.9.10; 32.17.13; 33.8.13; 36.18.7; 37.42.4; 44.41.7). This was also the name of the shorter thrusting spears of the *triararii* (Liv. 8.8.10). On the Roman thrusting spears, see again the authors mentioned above (nt. 11).

53 From an archaeological point of view, see Dhillon R. TISDALE, *A Catalog of Armament from ancient Mediterranean shipwrecks, 1<sup>4</sup><sup>th</sup> - 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BCE*, Unpublished Master of Science thesis, University of Texas, 2021, pp. 101, 108 and 131. As for iconography, the catalogue in MORRISON, cit., is invaluable. See in particular pp. 243-245, where the presence of thrusting spears in the iconography of the sea-battles against the Carthaginians is highlighted.

54 TISDALE, cit., pp. 149-150, with further bibliography.

55 See again the authors cited above (nt. 11). A notable exception is COUISSIN, cit., p. 213: see below.



times are too few. Regrettably, the main body of the evidence for the employment of peculiar sea-pikes by the Roman marines comes from our literary sources.

The texts presented, in short, allow to state the importance of melee combat among the marines of the Roman fleets and those of their enemies. They also suggest that, in some cases at least, these fights involved long spears. Livy's passage appears to imply that these were part of the normal equipment of the naval soldiers; although this cannot be proved conclusively, the conclusions reached seem to make sense of one of the questions raised about Marcellus' tactical device at Nola: the 'long spears of the naval soldiers' employed by his legionaries were, in all likelihood, exactly these weapons.

### *Who were the naval soldiers?*

Plutarch's reference raises another question, one less relevant to the issues considered here, but still worth exploring: who were the 'naval soldiers' who used the long spears? Were they regular legionaries stationed on the ships, or were there some units of marines? While in the imperial fleets the *classici milites* were surely separated from the legionaries<sup>56</sup>, this is much less certain for the third or second century BC.

This issue is very difficult to address, as the sources are often quite imprecise in the terminology they employ to define legionaries and naval soldiers. For example, Polybius sometimes distinguishes the 'naval forces' from the 'land soldiers', also implying that the former comprised marines as well<sup>57</sup>. However, he also refers to legionaries who were being transported by ship, and were meant to disembark and fight on land, as a *στράτευμα τῆς ναυτικῆς δυνάμεως*<sup>58</sup>. The ma-

56 See Jasper OORTHUIJS, «Marines and mariners in the Roman imperial fleets», in Lukas De Blois and Elio Lo Cascio (Eds.), *The impact of the Roman army (200 BC – AD 476)*, Brill, Leiden-Boston, 2007, pp. 169-180. The author convincingly stresses the distinction between the naval soldiers and the rowers and sailors. See also p. 171, nt. 10, with some interesting comments on the creation of proper *legiones classicae* in the second half of the first century BC.

57 For the second Punic war, see Polyb. 3.76; 8.3.1-2. Regarding the first Punic war, see, for instance, Polyb. 1.21.4 and 1.23.1, where the *πεζικά στρατόπεδα* are distinguished from the *ναυτική δύναμις*, which comprised the marines who fought in the battle of Mylae.

58 Polyb. 1.26.4-7.

rines were surely a distinct group from the rowers<sup>59</sup>, but even in this case ancient authors sometimes confuse the two groups<sup>60</sup>.

The reader sometimes discovers that, during the second Punic war, groups of soldiers, or even entire legions, were raised specifically for service in the navy. This is particularly apparent in a Livian passage which refers to the period immediately after the defeat of Cannae. Marcellus, who was in command of a fleet, sent back to Rome as a defence force 1,500 soldiers, *quos in classem scriptos habebat*. At the same time, he sent a *legio classica* (the *legio tertia*, according to Livy) to Teanum Sidicinum<sup>61</sup>. This passage is very interesting, for several reasons. First, as noted, it leads one to think that a legion could be raised as a *legio classica*, a legion of marines. Second, it shows that, despite the original naval character of the force, it could be re-employed as a normal infantry legion: Marcellus left his fleet near Ostia, and the soldiers were sent to Teanum on land duty. Third, the mention of this unit as a numbered legion seems to imply that it had been raised in a normal way, and that it was no different from the other standard ones, apart from the fact that it was originally meant to serve on naval duty. On the one hand, then, the reader finds that the Romans could enlist soldiers as marines; on the other, one learns that these marines were probably interchangeable with the regular legionaries.

This picture appears to be confirmed by the – admittedly limited – remaining evidence. In some other cases, as said, soldiers seem to have been recruited specifically for the fleets<sup>62</sup>. Sometimes, this is not entirely evident, but the consistent mentioning of one legion or group of soldiers as attached to a fleet suggests that these soldiers had been enlisted as marines, as well<sup>63</sup>. This is not surprising: from

59 *Contra* Alfredo VALVO, «I *socii navales* e l’affermarsi di Roma come potenza marittima», in Francisco de Oliveira, Pascal Thiery and Raquel Vilaça (Eds.), *Mar greco-latino*, Imprensa de Universidade de Coimbra, Coimbra, 2006, pp. 179-192 (pp. 185-188) and CARRO, cit., pp. 20-21. Valvo notes that Livy 9.38.2-3 says that the *socii navales* disembarked and raided the land. However, it was not impossible for rowers to be armed and re-assigned to military duty on land (Cato *Or. Fr.* 48Cug.; Liv. 9.38.2; 26.17.2; 27.17.2; 34.29.5; 37.16.11), and in other instances Livy makes clear that the *socii navales* and the marines were two different categories (Liv. 21.61.2; 23.1.2 and again, above all, 37.16.11).

60 Liv. 26.48.6, for instance, calls a marine a *socius navalis*, only to return to the term *classici milites* a little later.

61 Liv. 22.57.8.

62 Liv. 22.11.9; 30.27.8-9. *Classici milites* are also mentioned at Liv. 21.61.2.

63 Liv. 23.21.2; 24.44.5; 26.1.12; 27.8.15-16; 27.22; 30.41.

Livy's text, it is clear that, during the second Punic war, soldiers were levied whenever there was need of them. In the event of the fitting of a new fleet, it is only to be expected that a complement of soldiers was recruited to man it. This, however, does not mean that these soldiers were a separate group from the other legionaries. Another passage proves telling on the matter. In 203 BC, a new fleet of 40 ships was built for the defence of the coasts of Sicily. Another 40 ships were manned for Sardinia, and again 40 had to patrol the coasts of Italy<sup>64</sup>. The marines for these ships were found in different ways. For the first fleet, M. Pomponius obtained 3,000 new recruits, probably from a new *dilectus*<sup>65</sup>. For the second, led by Cn. Octavius, the praetor P. Cornelius Lentulus was required to provide 2,000 men from his land forces in Sardinia itself<sup>66</sup>. For the third, the consuls were instructed by the senators to carry out another *dilectus*, recruiting 3,000 new soldiers<sup>67</sup>. Clearly, then, the marines could be either recruited *ex novo* or be provided through the reassignment of land soldiers<sup>68</sup>.

Indeed, the sources imply that the two categories of land soldiers and marines were highly interchangeable and not very different from each other<sup>69</sup>. Soldiers could be enlisted to fight on land, and then be transferred to the fleet (as in the case of Octavius and Lentulus), or *vice versa* (as in the case of Marcellus). On the other hand, naval soldiers could disembark to fight together with the other legionaries<sup>70</sup>, while land soldiers appear to have been often employed as marines<sup>71</sup>. In some cases, the sources point out that the best of them were selected to serve

64 Liv. 30.2.1-6.

65 Liv. 30.2.1: *tria milia militum sunt scripta*; 3.2.3: *M. Pomponius [...] novos milites ex Italia advectos in naves imposuit*.

66 Liv. 30.2.4: *Lentulus praetor duo milia militum dare in naves iussus*.

67 Liv. 30.2.6: *tria milia militum in eam classem ex decreto patrum consules scripserunt*.

68 Two instances of such a reassignment include the fleet in Sicily at the beginning of the war (Liv. 21, 49, 8-9: the praetor manned his ships with soldiers from the garrisons) and a new fleet created in 215, manned with soldiers from Varro's army (Liv. 23.38.7-9).

69 The only instance in which the differences are highlighted is the siege of new Carthage. Soldiers from the fleet took part in the siege, and a marine, Sex. Digitius, quarrelled with a legionary, Q. Tiberilius, over the honour of receiving the mural crown. According to Livy (26.48.5-13) this quarrel degenerated into a fight between all the naval soldiers and all the legionaries (*stare hinc legionarios milites, hinc classicos*). In this case, some degree of *esprit de corps* should be assumed by the two groups.

70 For example, Scipio's marines took part in the siege of New Carthage (Liv. 26.48). Cf. Polyb. 3.76 and, for the first Punic war, Polyb. 1.41.4.

71 The clearest case is a naval battle fought by Scipio in Africa: Liv. 30.10.

as marines for a specific battle<sup>72</sup>.

This extreme interchangeability leads one to think that, in actual fact, there were not two separate groups of soldiers. It is probable that the Romans simply recruited as many soldiers as they needed, and then split them between the land armies and the fleets. Indeed, at the beginning of a year, Livy often mentions the total amount of ships and soldiers, without any distinction among the latter<sup>73</sup>. The same Roman citizens who were liable for military service on land could be recruited for the navy<sup>74</sup>, and a soldier could be transferred from land to naval duty, or *vice versa*, and could fight on land or at sea depending on the circumstances. All of these soldiers were, in all likelihood, simply legionaries: as noted, Marcellus' *classarii* at Ostia were simply men from the third legion. The only slight difference might be that Roman colonists could be recruited as marines, but were exempt from land service<sup>75</sup>. As for Latin and Italian allies, they were bound to provide crews and marines together with their ships<sup>76</sup>.

This does not necessarily mean that, when they took up service on the ships, Roman legionaries were armed in exactly the same way as their colleagues. While it should be assumed that their panoply was overall quite similar, it is pos-

72 Liv. 22.19.4; Polyb. 3.95.5; for the first Punic war, see Polyb. 1.51.3 and 1.61.3.

73 See above all Liv. 21.17.2, at the beginning of the war; cf. Liv. 22.37.13; 24.11.5-6.

74 According to Thiel, a passage in which Polybius writes that the *capite censi* were not liable for military service, but were employed εις την ναυτικὴν χρειαὴν (Polyb. 6.19.3) entails that the *proletarii* served as marines, and not as legionaries (Johannes H. THIEL, *Studies on the history of Roman sea-power in republican times*, North-Holland Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1946, pp. 12; 184-185; 189-190; 196; 277). As Frank W. WALBANK, *A historical commentary on Polybius*, vol. 1, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1957, p. 698 notes, however, 'the more natural interpretation is of service in the crew'. One should note that in the only other instance in which Polybius writes of a ναυτικὴ χρεια (Polyb. 6.52.9), he refers to rowing.

75 Liv. 27.38.3-5 says that in 207 BC the *maritimi coloni* refused to provide *milites*, as they maintained that they had an exemption. The same happened in 191 BC (36.3.5-6); in this case, the senate *decrevit vacationem rei navalis eis colonis non esse*. Livy lists Ostia, Alsium, Antium, Anxur, Minturnae, Sinuessa, and Sena in the first case, Ostia, Fregenae, Castrum Novum, Pyrgi, Antium, Terracina, Minturnae, and Sinuessa in the second. It is probable, however, that the Roman colonists were employed, in the second case, as rowers rather than as marines. On the military importance of these maritime Roman colonies, see Saskia T. ROSELAAR, «*Assidui* or *proletarii*? Property in Roman citizen colonies and the *vacatio militiae*», *Mnemosyne* 62 (2009), pp. 609-623, with further bibliography.

76 Virgilio ILARI, *Gli Italici nelle strutture militari romane*, Giuffrè, Milano, 1974, pp. 105-114. See in particular Cic. *Verr.* 2.5.60.

sible that commanders armed their soldiers in a slightly differing manner when they were fighting a naval battle. According to Livy, Scipio Africanus trained his legionaries and marines in two different ways<sup>77</sup>, which implies that they were meant to be able to fight with different techniques, and perhaps with different weapons. One of these differences may have been, as suggested by Plutarch and Livy, the employment of peculiarly long spears. This brings us back to the matter of Marcellus' battle at Nola: where could he have sourced these long spears from? Marcellus was not, after all, in charge of a naval unit. He had commanded a fleet, however, during the previous year, near Ostia. As mentioned, he had sent the marines partly to Teanum Sidicinum, on land duty, and partly to Rome, as a garrison<sup>78</sup>. Clark, therefore, supposed that they might have left their maritime weapons at Nola<sup>79</sup>. This is possible, although it might also be that some long spears were already present in Nola; after all, the long spears for Scipio's fleet in 205 BC were provided by Arretium, which was hardly a maritime city.

### *Making sense of Marcellus' tactical device*

If the conclusions reached in the previous pages are correct, Roman naval soldiers could be equipped with long spears, the δόρατα τῶν ναυμάχων μέγαρα of which Plutarch speaks. There is no reason to refute his statement about the fact that Marcellus distributed these to the legionaries at Nola. What meaning, then, should one attribute to this decision?

According to Plutarch, Marcellus wanted to allow his own soldiers to pierce their enemies from afar, as they did not employ either javelins or long stabbing spears. This is, however, a weird statement, as Plutarch elsewhere agrees with Polybius (and with Livy) about the superiority of the Roman short stabbing weapons over the long thrusting spears of the Macedonians. It is well-known that Polybius, in the famous passage in which he investigated the advantages and disadvantages of the phalanx and legion, maintained that their short swords allowed the Romans to be more agile, and therefore to have the upper hand over the Mace-

77 Liv. 26.51.3-8. The legionaries trained on land, while rowers and marines were engaged in a mock-naval battle (cf. Polyb. 10.20). Something very similar is mentioned by Liv. 29.22.2 for the same Scipio's troops in Sicily.

78 Liv. 22.57.8.

79 CLARK, cit., pp. 169-170.

donians in any case, except in a head-to-head charge of the two formations<sup>80</sup>. Livy repeats these concepts without altering them (as Polybius, he concedes the superiority of the phalanx only in a straight charge)<sup>81</sup>. Plutarch follows on the same lines, in his descriptions of the Roman battles in the East<sup>82</sup>. Moreover, the biographer's source in the passage about Marcellus was probably Polybius himself: the remark is not found in Livy, and it is known that Polybius was interested in the strengths and weaknesses of different weapons in relationship to each other<sup>83</sup>. Indeed, in the *Histories* one can read a passage which is partially similar to Plutarch's comment: according to Polybius, in 223 BC, against the north Italian Gauls, C. Flaminius distributed to his first line of *hastati* the spears of the *triarii*<sup>84</sup>. Polybius commends this decision<sup>85</sup>, which was meant to check the first charge of the Gauls, whom, once arrested, could then be hit with the swords.

What, then, about Marcellus? Why does Plutarch (and maybe Polybius as well) think his decision to have been a wise one? As mentioned, Polybius con-

80 The famous excursus is at Polyb. 18.28-32. It has been quite extensively discussed: for a good interpretation, see Giovanni BRIZZI, «Ancora sul confronto tra legione e falange: qualche ulteriore considerazione», in S. Bianchetti *et al.* (Eds.), *Poikilma: studi in onore di Michele R. Cataudella in occasione del 60° compleanno*, Agorà, La Spezia, 2001, pp. 189-200. About the alleged superiority of Roman flexibility, see in particular 18.32.10-11. About the uselessness of a phalanx in any situation different from a frontal charge, see 18.31.2. About the discussions between the ancient supporters of the phalanx and those of the legion, see Gabriele BRUSA, «Macedonum phalangem et tunc stetisse et [...] semper mansuram invictam: la querelle culturale militare tra legione e falange dall'epoca della conquista romana al secondo secolo d.C.», in Isabella Bossolino and Chiara Zanchi (Eds.), *Decennalia dei Cantieri d'Autunno*, Pavia University Press, Pavia, 2023, pp. 203-214.

81 Livy repeats these Polybian concepts while discussing, as Polybius does, the advantages and disadvantages of the legion and phalanx (9.19.8-9). Writing about the battle of Pydna, he concedes that the Romans would have lost a frontal engagement (44.41.9).

82 Plut. *Flam.* 8 (on Cynoscephalae); *Aem.* 20 (on Pydna).

83 The entire comparison between legion and phalanx is centred on the armament. The Roman weapons are contrasted favourably with those of the Gauls as well (Polyb. 2.27.7-8; 2.33.1-4). However, even if Polybius was employed by Plutarch as a source in the passage about Marcellus, one has to think that the historian represented the outcome of the battle of Nola in a different way than Plutarch. According to the biographer himself, Polybius maintained that Marcellus never truly defeated Hannibal (Plut. *Comp. Pel. Marc.* 1.4-5).

84 Polyb. 2.33.4-6.

85 Although he attributes it not to Flaminius, but to his tribunes. On this bias against Flaminius in Polybius' account, see Rachel F. VISHNIA, «A case of "bad press"? Gaius Flaminius in ancient historiography», *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 181 (2012), pp. 27-45 (pp. 27-32), with further bibliography.





Fig. 4. A Punic gilded bronze cuirass from Ksour Essaf, 3rd-2nd century BCE. (Bardo National Museum, Tunisia) This image was first published on Flickr. Original image by Alexander van Loon. Uploaded by Mark Cartwright, published on 06 June 2016. The copyright holder has published this content under the following license: Creative Commons Attribution. This license lets others distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon your work, even commercially, as long as they credit you for the original creation. When republishing on the web a hyperlink back to the original content source URL must be included. Please note that content linked from this page may have different licensing terms.

sidered the employment of long thrusting spears to be useful only in the case of a direct frontal charge, either by a Macedonian phalanx, or against the Gauls. As Plutarch appears to agree with him, two possibilities spring to mind in order to justify Marcellus' peculiar decision (and its appreciation by Plutarch). The first one is that, for some reason, the Carthaginians, more agile with their shorter weapons, could not outflank the Roman 'phalanx'. While Plutarch mentions only one battle, indeed, Livy divides the fight into two confrontations; the first one was just a sort of sallying forth from an entrance<sup>86</sup>. It might be that, protected by the walls, the Romans chose to try to repel the Carthaginians with a vigorous charge. This interpretation is complicated by the fact that Plutarch's account appears to refer to Livy's second battle<sup>87</sup>, which, according to the historian from Padua, was regularly fought on a plain and was hotly contested<sup>88</sup>.

The other possibility is that the Carthaginians were fighting in a sort of phalanx, or at least that Plutarch (and Polybius) considered their formation to be a phalanx. In this case, Marcellus might have wanted to render it ineffective by deploying his own soldiers in a phalanx with longer spears, making the enemies unable to stab the Romans. This would explain Plutarch's praise: the battle would be a simple crush between two phalanxes, and the Roman one could have the upper hand thanks to the longer reach of its weapons. Indeed, Plutarch does not say that the Carthaginians were not lancers, but only that they fought with short spears (αἰχμαῖς), clearly shorter than those of the Romans<sup>89</sup>. Two considerations might support this interpretation. The first is that Polybius thought of the Punic soldiers as phalangites: in his comparison between legion and phalanx, he cites Hannibal's victories as a possible way to postulate the phalanx' superiority to the legion<sup>90</sup>. This is not a conclusive consideration, however, as the Polybian origin

86 Liv. 23.44.4.

87 In Plutarch, Marcellus attacked when he saw that the Carthaginians had dispersed to forage; this is the context of the second Livian battle. The number of the dead provided by the two authors is the same, as well.

88 Liv. 23.44.7: *sunt omnia campi circa Nolam*; 23.45.1: *proelium erat anceps; summa vi et duces hortabantur et milites pugnabant*.

89 LE BOHEC, cit., p. 195 compares their weapons to those of the Greek hoplites.

90 Polyb. 18.28.6.9. The author says that Hannibal then chose to arm his soldiers with Roman weapons (and does not consider the fact that some of his soldiers, like the Spaniards, were already equipped in a similar way to the Romans: Fernando QUESADA SANZ «Not so different: individual fighting techniques and small unit tactics of Roman and Iberian armies

of Plutarch's pass is probable, but not demonstrable. The second has to do with one of the questions raised in the introduction: why didn't Marcellus just use the spears of the *triarii*?

It is unclear when, exactly, the *triarii* swapped their spears for the *pila* already used by the *hastati* and *principes*. By the time of Caesar, there was almost certainly no difference in armament between the three lines<sup>91</sup>; Polybius and Livy, on the other hand, write that in the early and middle republic they carried thrusting spears<sup>92</sup>. Polybius' statement is the most important, as the author refers it to the period of the battle of Cannae<sup>93</sup>, which was fought in 216 BC, the year before Marcellus' battle at Nola. It is very unlikely that some sort of reform had been carried out between the two battles, and at any rate, had Polybius known of such a reform, he would probably have mentioned it<sup>94</sup>. There is no reason to believe, therefore, that Marcellus' *triarii* did not carry spears. These spears, however, were probably shorter than those of the Macedonians<sup>95</sup>, as they were wielded with just one hand<sup>96</sup>. They were probably comparable to those of the earlier Greek hoplites<sup>97</sup>, and maybe to the Carthaginians' αἰχμή mentioned by Plutarch. The 'long spears of the naval soldiers' mentioned by Livy and Plutarch, on the other hand, were, in all likelihood, longer than these<sup>98</sup>. Both authors define them as 'long', and in Livy this term, referred to a spear, describes the long Macedonian sarissa<sup>99</sup>.

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within the framework of warfare in the Hellenistic age», *Pallas* 70 (2006), pp. 245-263), but considers the Carthaginians, in origin, as phalangites.

91 Caesar never mentions any difference between the *triarii* (or *pili*, as they were now called: *Caes. Gall.* 3.5.2; 5.35.6; 6.38.1; *Civ.* 1.13.4; 1.46.5; 3.91.1) and the *hastati* and *principes*. In his works, there are no references to the *hastae*.

92 *Liv.* 8.8.10; *Polyb.* 6.23.14.

93 *Polyb.* 6.2 and 6.11.2.

94 In his account of his Roman army, where he states that the *triarii* employed spears, Polybius shows himself aware of change over time: he mentions the improvements made by the Romans to the cavalry spears (6.25.3-11) and the evolution in the recruitment of cavalrymen (6.19.9).

95 Livy, as mentioned, describes the spears of the Macedonians as extremely long; longer, that is, than those of the Romans. Once again, see the authors mentioned above (nt. 11).

96 Polybius (6.23.14) implies that they carried a shield which was identical to the oblong shield of the *principes* and *triarii*: it was thus impossible to wield the spear with two hands.

97 On these spears, see SCHWARTZ, cit., pp. 81-83.

98 Contra COUSSION, cit. 213, who thinks that the *hastae longae* mentioned by Livy are the same weapons as the *hastae* wielded by the *triarii*.

99 See above, nt. 52.

Moreover, as said, if the long spears of the sea fighters were the same as the ones employed by the *triarrii*, Marcellus' decision to specifically employ the former would make no sense. If they really were longer, on the other hand, Marcellus may have intended to gain an advantage over the Carthaginian phalanx by using longer spears, which enabled his soldiers to stab the enemies while preventing the Carthaginians from doing so.

Of course, one should refrain from reducing the whole battle to this simplistic account. It is hard to believe that the Romans won the battle just because of the length of their weapons, and one has to bear in mind that Plutarch's description of the battle is very short and imprecise, and that he is just trying to cast his Roman hero in a positive light. One might ask, for example, why it should be assumed that the Carthaginians could only charge the Romans frontally (and therefore find themselves at a disadvantage), and not, for example, try to outflank them. While Plutarch and Polybius describe the Macedonian phalanx as a very static formation, modern scholarship has convincingly, although not unanimously, shown that a formation armed with the earlier hoplite spear and shield could be quite flexible<sup>100</sup>. Marcellus' decision can hardly be considered the only, or the main reason for his victory. If Polybius really was Plutarch's source, it is a shame that his text is lost.

### Conclusion

As far as Plutarch's description goes, the reconstruction proposed here appears to be the best way to make sense not only of Marcellus' peculiar tactical device, but also of Plutarch's appreciation<sup>101</sup>. Claudius' intention was probably to prevent a Punic charge, and to allow his own soldiers, in their turn, to charge the

100 Among the most important and most recent contributions on this matter, see Hans VAN WEES, *Greek warfare: myths and realities*, Duckworth, London, 2004; Peter M. KRENTZ «Hoplite hell: how hoplites fought», in Donald Kagan, Gregory F. Viggiano (Eds.), *Men of bronze: hoplite warfare in ancient Greece*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2013, pp. 134-156; Roel KONIJNENDIJK, *Classical Greek tactics: a cultural history*, Brill, Leiden-Boston, 2018; and Marco BETTALLI, «L'oplita nella storia greca», in Marco Bettalli and Giovanni Brizzi (Eds.), *Guerre ed eserciti nell'antichità*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2019, pp. 31-51.

101 CLARK, cit., p. 170 supposes that Marcellus' decision might have been due to the scarcity of regular weapons; in this case, however, one could hardly understand Plutarch's appreciation of his tactical decision.

Carthaginians effectively. Maybe, as did Flaminius' soldiers in 223 against the Insubres, the Romans ditched their spears after the first charge to switch to their swords (but did they manage to keep their shields together with their spears in the initial charge?); maybe, just a section of his army was equipped in such a way. It could also be that Plutarch misunderstood his source completely. Assuming that he didn't, however, I hope to have shed some light on this obscure and little studied tactical arrangement at Nola.

If this is correct, it is interesting to see that the Romans were able to adjust their tactics, and in particular to adopt a 'phalangitic' formation. In an important article, Wheeler focused exactly on this, showing that the Romans were often able to adapt their organisation to the situations they faced and, at times, to arrange their formations into phalanxes<sup>102</sup>. Tactical flexibility was an important value to the Roman armies. Plutarch's comment about the battle of Nola, as well as Flaminius' organisation in Gaul, appear to confirm Wheeler's reconstruction, and to testify to the fact that, in the middle Republic, a phalangitic formation was one of the tactical possibilities that a general could resort to; although, probably, not one that was very frequently employed.

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102 Everett L. WHEELER, «The legion as phalanx», *Chiron* 9 (1979), pp.303-318 (pp.303-309). The author attempts to prove that Arrian's array against the Alans was not an unprecedented organisation, and lists some instances in which the Romans adopted a phalangitic formation before the II century AD. The author, however, does not focus either on Flaminius' disposition, or on Marcellus' battle at Nola.



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So called Missorium of Kerch, 4th century Found: Bosporan Necropolis, vault on the Gordikov estate. Near Kerch, the Crypt in the North-Eastern Slope of Mount Mithridates, 1891 This silver dish was a diplomatic gift from the Byzantine Emperor to a representative of the Bosporan government. In this fine example of the early Byzantine art traditional Classical themes are combined with a new artistic style. The vessel shows a composition typical of Roman coins: the Emperor on horseback is piercing the enemy with a spear. The rider was usually accompanied by one or several warriors and Nike crowning the winner. In contrast to the Classical composition showing the final scene of a battle, here we see the scene of triumph: Emperor Constantius II sits on a horse, triumphantly raising his spear. To emphasize the Emperor's highest rank and divine power, the artist used special pictorial devices including, for example, the distortion of proportions. The images were produced by a chisel. Part of the ornamentation is nielloed. The outer surface is gilded and a loop is soldered onto it. Hermitage Museum. Saint Petersburg. CC BY-SA 4.0 (Wikimedia Commons).

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