THE CARTHAGINIAN NAVY: QUESTIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

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This chapter considers both the institutional and operational aspects of the Punic navy, and argues that an appreciation of both is essential for understanding the nature of Carthaginian ‘thalassocracy’. This chapter will discuss the current state of our knowledge in a number of key areas: the Punic naval landscape embodied by its network of harbors and naval bases, the resources of the state, the organisation and structure of fleets, and their modes of operation. Since a navy can also be considered within its traditions and through its approaches to campaigning and fighting, engendered in the experience of the crew and commanders, these will also receive consideration. It will be argued that a holistic investigation of these aspects can expose some elements of Punic naval ideology, and can also contribute to an appreciation of the complexity and sophistication of Punic naval affairs.

Perspectives on Punic Thalassocracy

In 1958, George and Colette Picard likened the city of Carthage to a ship anchored off the African coast. The image was recast by Fernand Braudel in 1969 when he remarked that, “Carthage, on the hill of Byrsa between its two lagoons, was compared by Appian to a ship at anchor.”1 We might forgive Braudel, a medievalist, whose unrevised manuscript remained unpublished until after his death, for confusing an ancient and a modern account. Or perhaps conflating the two descriptions, for Appian did indeed describe the physical layout of the city (App. Pun. 96), although without recourse to metaphor. Nevertheless the analogies of Braudel and the Picards, while topographically evocative, also reveal their fundamental conception of Carthage as a maritime state. The ‘city as ship’ is a motif with a long pedigree: it goes back to Alcaeus, and, in a

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Phoenician context, to Ezekiel. Appian himself employed it; not in his description of the topography of Carthage, but during the final negotiations between the Romans and Carthaginians on the eve of the Third Punic War. The consul, L. Marcius Censorinus, is made to state that he regarded a city by the sea as like a ship tossed by circumstances and vicissitudes (App. Pun. 87). It was safer inland, which is where he suggested or, rather, commanded, that the Carthaginians relocate to. Censorinus was not the only Roman commander to be attributed such a view. Cicero makes Scipio Aemilianus, the eventual destroyer of Carthage, compare inland and coastal settlement, and argue that maritime cities put themselves at risk in several ways (Cic. Rep 2.4.7–8). Enemies could arrive at any time from the sea, traditional customs are transformed by foreign ways and merchandise, trafficking the sea and moving to other lands scatters the population, causing the people to forget how to farm and fight, while the influx of luxuries leads to moral degeneracy. In Scipio's view, contact with the sea brings military, but primarily commercial and cultural dangers, and he cites Carthage as a specific example. He sees only one advantage: a man can get anything from overseas and can export his own produce (2.4.9)—a commerce that, given the thrust of his argument, is made to seem morally problematic. Censorinus also compared naval affairs with merchants' gains: both had the potential for increases, but they could also bring crowds of losses (App. Pun. 87). By implication, the power of Carthage was like a commercial risk.

Our understanding of Punic thalassocracy has been driven by such conceptualisations. The notion that Carthaginian naval power was a commercial thalassocracy was most immoderately put by Arnold Toynbee. He characterised the Carthaginians as parasites drawing a middleman’s profit from trade in the Western Mediterranean. The navy furthered this parasitic existence by supervising a monopolisation of trade through a “wooden wall.” He saw evidence for this in the

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2 Alc. frg. 6, 208a; note also Pl. Resp. 488a–c; Leg. 758a, 945c. Ezekiel 27 (on Tyre).
3 This speech is, perhaps, the cause of Braudel’s slip.
6 Toynbee, Hannibal's Legacy (n. 5), 33, 38. The work was published in 1965 and the ‘wooden wall’ image appears to draw vitality from the contemporary Soviet ‘Iron Curtain.’