Since Chester Starr’s 1941 book *The Roman Imperial Navy* it has become generally accepted knowledge that “the crew of each warship, regardless of its size, formed one *centuria* under its *centurio* (*classicus*) in the manner of a legionary *centuria.*”¹ Boldly stating his case, Starr solved one of the most problematic peculiarities in the epigraphic habit of Roman naval troops in one great swoop. The problem referred to is the following: in roughly two thirds of the extant inscriptions *milites* of the imperial fleets stated that they belonged to some kind of warship, while the other third indicated that they belonged to a *centuria*. A small number indicated neither and a very few referred to both ship and *centuria*. Starr’s statement was never challenged despite the problems that clearly exist with this theory. In what follows some of those problems will be addressed.

First of all, the consequence of Starr’s theory is that we have to accept the idea that *centuriones classici* commanded a great range of troops: ship’s crews ranged in size from some 50 men for a *liburna* up to 400 in *quinqueremes.*² There are however no indications of different grades of *centurio* in the fleets. Moreover, because Starr squeezes a naval and army hierarchy into one, the trierarchs and navarchs, whether captains or squadron commanders, have to be forced in somewhere. Starr himself never seems to have found a satisfying solution for that problem and its practical results. While the statement quoted above would put the *centurio* in overall command, elsewhere he suggested that the *centurio* ranked below the naval officers. Did they hold command depending on the task at hand as he stated?³

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³ Starr, op. cit. (n. 1), 42–43: “The naval *centurions* at all times ranked beneath the navarchs and trierarchs”, and p. 61: “It would seem more logical that the centurion,
The epigraphic evidence for Starr’s theory can hardly be called extensive. Explicit support for his theory can only be found in a single inscription in which a gubernator referred to a centuria. But it requires on the other hand that at least three inscriptions where both ship and centuria are named be disposed of as pedantry. For those cases and for the inscriptions where troops refer to a centuria followed by a ship’s name or where former centuriones refer to a ship another solution will be proposed further down. In order to provide that, one must first understand the internal structure of the fleets.

The peculiar hierarchy at the lowest levels of Rome’s classes has often led to claims that the rowers, sailors and marines were one amorphous mass: they would all have received military training and basically have been interchangable. It is true that the epigraphical testimonies at first sight seem to leave little room for another conclusion. There is but one inscription in which a sailor is actually described as nauta. In all other cases the rank and file of naval forces is described as classici, gregales and of course as milites. Manipularii (or manipulares) are usually counted among these as well.

By comparison to the extensive specialization found in the legions and auxilia, it is illogical to think that in the classes there would not even have been a differentiation between those looking after the mobility of the ship and those doing the fighting. This is all the more surprising, because it flies in the face of a long-established naval tradition, not just in the Roman, but in the Greek and Hellenistic world as well.

while at sea, should command only the small group of marines and have no other authority, and that during service of the entire crew on land the naval ranks would be generally disregarded and the centurion become chief.”

5 CIL X 3385: D(is) M(anibus) | M(arci) Antoni Apollonii[?] | gubernato[ris] | centur(a) Ar[ri(?). Might it be presumed that centur(a) is written in a much fuller version than the usual sign for centuria?

6 Starr, op. cit. (n. 1), 63 n. 29 mentions CIL VI 3165 and IX 42. The latter may be a misreading (CIL IX p. 652). Other cases have since been published in AE 1939, 227 and AE 1978, 311.

7 M. Reddé, Mare Nostrum (Rome 1986), 523. Starr suggests military training for all (op. cit. [n. 1], 58), but finds no evidence for the group itself and emphasises his centuria = ship’s crew theory. G. Webster, Roman Imperial Army (Oklahoma 1998, 3rd ed.), 166 follows Starr.

8 AE 1900, 185.

9 Starr, op. cit. (n. 1), 59. Kienast disagreed on the basis of AE 1896, 21 alone, but deplored the lack of further evidence to support his contention that manipulares were the decksoldiers of the Roman fleets (Untersuchungen zu den Kriegsflotten der Römischen Kaiserzeit [Bonn 1966], 23 and n. 61).