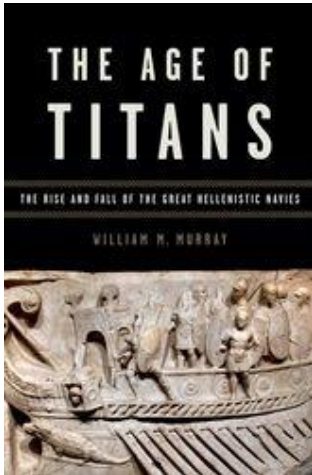


'The Age of Titans' By William Murray

Review by Rob Morgan

The Rise and Fall of the Great Hellenistic Navies is the appropriate subtitle for this splendid work of 350+ pages, it's well illustrated, well mapped for wargaming.

The book covers the last centuries BC, and specifically the development of warships *much* larger than the Trireme; those 'Polyremes,' as they tend to call them in modern works. The Trireme was sometimes known as the '3,' and others, sometimes confusingly named to any newcomer to ancient war at sea, like the 'Tetreres' and 'Dekeres,' (or '4s' and '10s,') and bigger. They could be very large vessels indeed.



Ptolemy II was a powerful and rich monarch, and he possessed 4,000 warships in all, and some big ones. Including seventeen '5s,' five '6s,' as well as '11s,' '13s' and, incredibly, one '20' and two '30s,' which must have been cataphract, or decked-in, warships. Most naval historians seem to agree that the move to big ships was away from the old (and well known among wargamers) Athenian-style tight manoeuvring, speed, agility and quick use of the ram, to the more basic 'grapple and board' favoured by Rome later on. With bigger decks, there was more stability, more space for marines and for artillery. These often became sea-fights between floating fortresses.

The book covers the period between the end of the Peloponnesian War and Antony's defeat at Actium, which was the last appearance of the big Hellenistic warships, picked off and burned by Octavian's faster, lighter galleys.

This is a good book. Murray deals effectively with the problem of ship 'classes,' important to the historical scholar, but far less trouble to the naval wargamer.

The two powerful states of Carthage and Syracuse developed '4s' and '5s,' at the turn of the 4th Century BC, when warships were used to ram frontally and in fast turns, but also used in naval sieges, to attack or defend cities and harbours. Old Triremes, sometimes bigger ships, were used to ram defensive sea-walls and did on occasion cause collapse. Murray next considers frontal ramming as a battle tactic, a very useful contribution as far as any wargamer's concerned, then the introduction of the '4s' and '5s.' The author also gives a good account, again not essential for wargamers, of the design and construction of the ram.

The third chapter is titled 'The Development of Naval Siege Warfare.' Syracuse (414-413 BC) is the campaign where he begins, and this is potentially an Ancient wargame campaign of massive complexity and interest -- not a chapter to be missed. Now, I've not seen it wargamed as a campaign, but it cries out for this treatment!

Murray continues with other well-known sieges, of Byzantium (340 BC), and Alexander's elaborate attack on Tyre, of course. The author provides a substantial table of siege operations with details of forces, afloat and ashore, which is more than useful to any Ancient enthusiast. He ends this chapter with an account of the Siege of Rhodes (305 BC), which was another epic of naval conflict.

Then the book deals with Philo the Byzantine, a scholar who set out the precise means of attack and of defence for a Hellenistic city -- from the sea. Philo also dealt with naval weapons, shore defence systems and command structures and procedures. Murray provides, from Philo, comments on how to besiege, blockade and break into a city. Excellent reading, and he even sets out the method of pursuing a fleeing or defeated foe at sea. The book moves on to the story of Big Ships, Boarding and Catapults another intriguing area, though I felt that one or two of his points on catapults (sic) are better put in other works, such as Admiral Rodgers over sixty years ago. It reads well though.

Murray tackles those huge vessels, double-hull warships, like the 20s and 30s -- there was even a 40 around in the reign of Ptolemy IV. These were immense, and Ptolemy's leviathan is said to have been 420 feet long and to have a crew of 7,000, including 2,000 marines. A very interesting chapter, but the ships, though massive, were vulnerable and slow. Murray concludes with the swan song of the heavy, oared warship, vessels which vanished after Actium and were never built again. His account of Chios in 201BC and the battles of the Syrian War between Rome and Antiochus III has substantial table-top value. Then, he continues with the Roman naval sieges at Utica, Syracuse and New Carthage, ending with a short but sound account and reconsideration of the slow land campaign and decisive sea Battle of Actium in 31 BC, quite possibly the only naval battle lost by the actions of a female commander, Cleopatra VII.

The conclusion to the book is brief. As Murray suggests, the huge Hellenistic warship, largely siege oriented, was created and sustained not for war at sea in the way of the Athenians, nor of later centuries, but like the elephant and the chariot, it was a feature of war, for very specific reasons. The Romans did away with the big ships because they didn't need them for display or for war. They marched on their feet and conquered by land. The appendices in this book, the many footnotes, the Glossary and the Bibliography are all very good.

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In wargames on the table, the larger, oared warships of antiquity have all too often been either overlooked in favour of the fast Athenian Triremes; or even used wrongly, as though they were simply bigger versions of the Trireme design.

Mind you, there are still plenty of models available, and over the years, quality has improved. At this point, of course, I must point out that there are in all probability a number of US manufacturers of wargames scale model warships of Antiquity I've never heard of, and hopefully if this is the case then someone will add an appropriate note to this contribution.

The widely available 1/600th Triton range has a Quinquereme (5) and a Quadrireme (4), both useful enough for most encounters; while Navwarø 1/1200th range has ðAnthonyø Battleshipö (?), a Hellenistic 16-bank and 7s and 5s. These are old but attractive models.

Small offerings in both cases, but if you go to the Xyston 1/600th range, then the high quality, and more expensive metal models are almost all youød need. No 20 or 30 perhaps, but a double-hulled siege vessel with a hefty tower and artillery, one of the finest models of a warship of Antiquity Iøve encountered. Xystonø model list is of immense variety and has such superb detail itø hard to criticise them. They also manufacture a small range of excellent 1/600th bolt shooters that have use on other ships -- right up to the medieval period.

If you are intent on a vast battle, then the range of Outpost, tiny in 1/3600th, is the one to look at. In this scale, what you can actually see is what you get! A wide range of galley models is included here, which sell at around £3-£4 for packs of 25. Small but good value, and some are convertible to later eraø vessels too. A friend of mine turned some of the Outpost models in to a Viking fleet, with ease.

Rod Langtonø lovely 1/1200ths are again expensive but worth taking a look at. Thereø a siege vessel, a 10, 8 and the range runs down to a 4. He also provides models, unusually, with no oarbanks as an option. The 1/300th Langtonø are truly collectors items. Iøve never, but others might have, seen them used on a wargames table. Rodø web site actually includes a very useful colour guide to painting the ships.

A very good battle scenario with well detailed 1/2400th scale big Hellenistic warships can be created by using the inexpensive Tumbling Dice range, which again has neat and attractive, sea-based models, no siege vessel though, sad to say.

Recently, I heard of a 6mm range called Roman Seas. On their website, they look delightful, and will take most of the 6mm Ancient figure ranges as crew and marines, though being pre-painted card made they may not suit everyoneø taste. I think these are probably a ðlandlubberøö add-on option, and Iød replace the unattractive card oar banks with thin wire, and add a few more details, perhaps.

Donø forget that most of these ranges also include a merchant vessel or two, and in siege warfare at sea, the merchantman was very frequently the floating artillery platform used in the front line.

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