

Republican Roman Warships
Osprey New Vanguard series No. 225 (2015)
By Raffaele D'Amato; illustrated by Giuseppe Rava
£19.99 / \$17.95

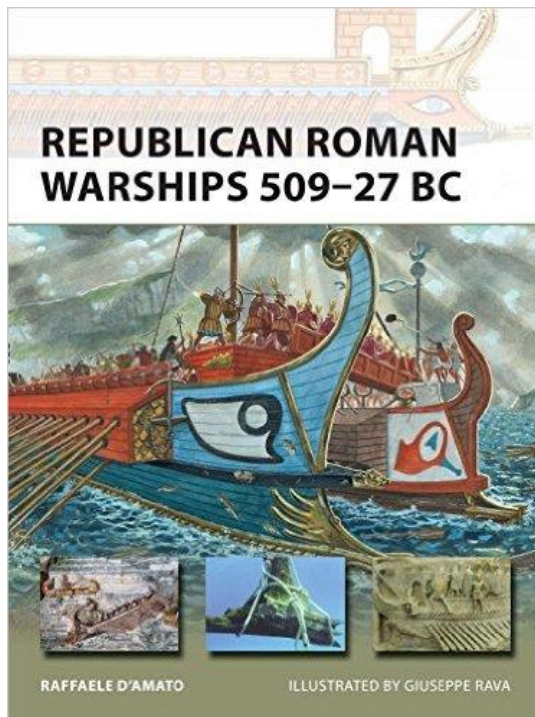
Review by Jonathan Aird

Contents:

Introduction
Historical Background
Roman Ships and Fleets
Decoration and Equipment
Armament and Tactics
Rowing a Roman Warship
Campaigns

A new volume on Roman galleys and shipping is always going to be a welcome thing, and it was good to note that this is the first of a projected series of books covering development throughout the Roman period. This volume follows on naturally from earlier Ospreys covering Ancient Greek warships and a more general book on ships of the ancient world which spanned 2500 years. *Republican Roman Warships* takes a somewhat smaller window of time of around 500 years in order to show the incremental development of the ships used for the Roman Navy from its inception in the times of the Early Roman kings through the Republic and up to the first edge of the Empire. The growth of naval power in this period is traced through such sources as maritime treaties – the inference being that the likes of Carthage would have only deigned to sign such treaties if a significant naval force was at the

disposal of the Romans. The other area that can provide details of ships of this time is depictions in art – and a wide range of examples are shown throughout the text covering fanciful, foreshortened ship depictions, which nonetheless provide some believable details, up to far more realistic depictions which give more substantive clues as to how the ships looked and were built. More recent discoveries of, admittedly merchant, shipwrecks also give clues as to the type of wood that would have been used, manufacture techniques and probable methods of water proofing and so forth – and Raffaele D'Amato makes convincing arguments that such information can be read across to warship construction.



The section on ships and fleets takes a measured passage through type development – from Etruscan-style undecked ships through a long period of triremes copied from Rome's neighbours in the Mediterranean, up to the later

huge quinqueremes. This is backed up with an excellent section on ship colouration ó drawing in part on literature ó and another literary source is used to describe a rowing pattern for the oarsmen to follow. There seems to be some conjecture in this last but it's an interesting hypothesis.

The text is fleshed out with examples of conflicts, and sketch analyses of a number of sea campaigns fought during this period ó there is one slight confusion that I found here where the author talked of campaigns against Venetian shipping ó this is actually a campaign against the Gaulish tribe the Veneti and öships of the Venetiö might have been clearer than öVenetian ships.ö However, careful reading does soon sort out any lingering confusion. The campaign section is a good overall summary ó and does draw out points on numbers and types of ships available and also less tangible data, such as different levels of training. It also makes clear that, at times, the Romans would be building a quite phenomenal number of ships in a very short timescale ó another example of their knack for industrialised processes to feed their ever growing war machine.

There are also, of course, a number of excellent plates throughout the book. Firstly, there are four plates of side drawings of the vessels through the centuries ó and these strikingly draw out the difference in oar arrangements and deck furniture (such as fighting towers and the infamous Crow grappling device). The other full-page plates show: (i) Pompey the Great defeating the Cilician pirates ó with marines storming ashore from beached vessels, (ii) The Siege of Syracuse, an excellent depiction of galleys as carriers of siege towers attacking the walls of the city, (iii) The battle of the Aegates Islands ó with two galleys joined together by a crow, whilst the Romans prepare to board their enemy (this is also reproduced on the cover) and (iv) Caesar's ships in Armorica ó showing an engagement with the high-sided sailing ships of the Veneti, with the use of towers on the Roman galleys to gain the height they needed to engage the enemy. These are very vivid portrayals and really bring the subject to life ó there must be a game in the siege of Syracuse!

This is an excellent and very interesting Osprey, drawing on recent archaeological research and presenting generally convincing arguments as to what types of ships would have existed at various key points in the five centuries covered by the book. I'm really looking forward to the rest of the series covering later Roman warships.