

The manpower of the Roman fleets

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The fleets are often neglected in consideration of the military forces of the Roman empire — indeed, some estimates of military strength have ignored them completely.¹ Even more egregious is their omission in discussions of the rôle of the army in disseminating Roman citizenship, since the soldiers serving in the fleets benefitted from the same system of regular grants as did auxiliaries. When the fleets are included in inventories of the military, most scholars reckon them at either 30,000 or 40,000 men. In so doing, they are relying explicitly or implicitly on the work of C. G. Starr or M. Reddé, respectively. There has been no discussion of the discrepancy between them. Moreover, those who rely on Reddé tend to overlook the fact that he himself implied a strength of more than 50,000 men. This paper aims to draw attention to the significance of the large divergence between the two estimates and to offer a new one that takes better account of the uncertainties involved. It reviews the evidence adduced by Starr and Reddé but also draws on newer data from the archaeology of fleet bases and military diplomas. I conclude that the combined strength of the fleets was probably *c.*25,000 men, somewhat smaller than Starr suggested. Yet it is just as important to recognise that the margin of error remains large.

Unlike many other ancient navies (including those of the Republic), the Roman fleets of the Principate do not seem to have drawn sharp distinctions between sailors, rowers and marines. All alike were referred to interchangeably as *classici*, *milites* and *gregales*, were represented as soldiers on their tombstones, and seem to have been trained and equipped as soldiers.² They were regarded — and regarded themselves — as an integral part of the army. They are conventionally divided into two categories, the “Italian” and the “provincial” fleets. The former are the *classis Misenensis* and *classis Ravennas*, both styled “praetorian” from the Flavian period and based at Misenum and Ravenna, respectively. Nonetheless, these “Italian” fleets operated outside Italy and even had detachments based at other Mediterranean ports.³ They were supplemented by a number of other autonomous fleets in the English Channel, Black Sea and E Mediterranean, and on the Rhine and

* Abbreviations used:

Konen 2000 = H. C. Konen, *Classis Germanica: Die römische Rheinflotte im 1.-3. Jahrhundert n.Chr.* (St.-Katharinen 2000).

Reddé 1986 = M. Reddé, *Mare nostrum: les infrastructures, le dispositif et l'histoire de la marine militaire sous l'Empire romain* (Rome 1986).

Starr 1941 = C. G. Starr, *The Roman imperial navy 31 B.C.–A.D. 32* (Ithaca, NY 1941).

RMD = M. M. Roxan and P. Holder, *Roman military diplomas* (5 vols.; London 1978-2003).

RGZM = B. Pferdehirt, *Römische Militärdiplome und Entlassungsurkunden in der Sammlung des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseum* (Mainz 2004).

1 See, e.g., R. MacMullen, “How big was the Roman imperial army?” *Klio* 62 (1980) 451-60; id., “The Roman emperors’ army costs,” *Latomus* 43 (1984) 571-80.

2 Reddé 1986, 522-25; D. B. Saddington, “Classes: the evolution of the Roman imperial fleets,” in P. Erdkamp (ed.), *A companion to the Roman army* (Oxford 2007) 212-13. For attempts to reconstruct some distinctions beneath the apparent uniformity, see J. Oorthuijs, “Marines and mariners in the Roman imperial fleets,” in L. de Blois and E. Lo Cascio (edd.), *The impact of the Roman army (200 B.C.–A.D. 476): economic, social, political, religious and cultural aspects* (Leiden 2007) 168-80; Konen 2000, 22-23.

3 Starr 1941, 11-26.