

The Athenian Sea Power in the Classical Period

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The domination of Athens during the Classical Period relied mostly on its control of the sea. Though, Athens was not initially a maritime city. However, in the beginning of the fifth century BCE, the Persian threat pushed Athens to look seawards. Thus, it opened the glorious path which led Athens to become a maritime power. With its mighty fleet, Athens could rule over a maritime Empire.

The Athenian navy relied mostly on a specific ship, the trieres, which was moved by oarsmen. How did the trieres look like? Because no shipwreck of a Greek trieres has been found yet, scholars have long discussed technical questions about her reconstruction. In the past centuries, they could only rely on a few written sources, especially the inscriptions from Piraeus, or iconographical evidence. However, in the 1980s, the construction of the replica of an Athenian trieres, called the *Olympias*, gave the opportunity to reinvestigate many technical issues. Beside these warships, the Athenian fleet included many auxiliary ships, such as the horse-carriers. The impressive built by Athens also required numerous infrastructures, such as arsenals and shipsheds.

The development of the Athenian navy implied significant social and political issues. Indeed, the oarsmen played an important role in the political life of the democratic regime. Nevertheless, the growing pressure over the other cities of the Empire, which resulted from the maritime policy of Athens, led to a defeat in 404 BCE. Despite this defeat and the collapse of its Empire, Athens could rebuild a maritime league in the first half of the fourth century.

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