

*Decebal NEDU*

## **THE BEGINNINGS OF THE ROMAN FLEET, 509-264 B.C.**

By the starting years of the First Punic War, the accounts of the ancient literary tradition about Rome's involvement in maritime affairs are scarce and lack the necessary clarity. The first two Roman-Carthaginian treaties from 509 and 348 B.C. mention navigation bans for the Roman ships; however it is very likely for the two agreements to refer to the trading vessels. The year 311 B.C. records the official foundation of the Roman naval force by the establishment of a double naval magistracy, *duumviri navales*. This bright start has not led to a remarkable development of the Roman fleet. A squadron of 20 ships sent by the Romans in the Ionian Sea was destroyed by the Tarentine fleet in 282 B.C. In 278 B.C., through the provisions of the fourth Roman-Carthaginian treaty, it was set that Rome was to receive naval aid from its contrahent from the North Africa Coast. Entered into within the context of the war against Tarentum and the king Pyrrhus of Epirus, this agreement is a proof of the low development of the Roman military navy at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. and during the first decades of the following century.

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Before the battle of Actium in 31 B.C., Plutarch states that the legionaries had asked Antony to engage in the fight with Octavianus on the land, addressing the following words to him: "Antony, leave the Egyptians and the Phoenicians fight on sea but give us the land that we use to stay, die or defeat the enemy on"<sup>1</sup>. Anthony's choice to support the battle on sea turned out to be fatal, both for his fate and for that of the Roman Republic.

We have no certitude that these memorable words are real, but they reflect a reality that has kept on existing for centuries in the Romans' mentality. The Roman soldiers have never really loved the sea, and the most honorable service possible for the citizen was performed within the country's legions.

This attitude reflects also in the level of the information kept in the ancient literary tradition on the Roman maritime activities. For the Rome's Italic expansion stage, the written records are scarce, scattered at Polybius,

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<sup>1</sup> Plutarch, *Antonius* 64.3, in *Plutarch's Lives*, Loeb Classical Library 1959.

Diodorus, Dionysius, Livy, Cassius Dio, Orosius or Zonaras. They were all written centuries after the recorded events had occurred. This lays before the modern researcher a literary tradition that is blunted, inaccurate or contaminated through wrong information channels. Therefore, no suggested modern reconstruction can be expected to be more than a hypothesis.

The first data on the Roman vessels come from the Greek author Polybius. He preserved, in the pages of his *Histories*, the text of a first Roman-Carthaginian treaty that he dates in 509 B.C., the year when the republican regime began. The linguistic arguments plead for this chronological location as Polybius laments the very archaic Latin used in the agreement's text, a detail that makes us believe that the Greek author has found the treaty somewhere in the Roman archives<sup>2</sup>. According to Polybius, the naval clauses of the treaty were written as follows: "The Romans and their allies not to sail beyond the Fair Promontory unless forced by storm or by enemies; it is forbidden to anyone carried beyond it by force to by or carry away anything beyond what is required for the repair of the ship or for sacrifice and he must depart within five days. Men coming to trade may conclude no business except in the presence of a herald or town-clerck, and the price of whatever is sold in the presence of such shall be secured to the vendor by state, if the sale takes place in Libya or Sardinia. If any Roman come to the Carthaginian province in Sicily, he shall enjoy equal rights with others"<sup>3</sup>. In this wording, the agreement makes us think that the Carthaginian State has been the one that has imposed the navigation limits and conditions, a field he had a secular background in. In all probability, the clauses pertain to the Roman trading vessels and to those of Rome's allies, without referring to military actions. The Roman navy's weak development or maybe even its inexistence stems from them but, at the same time, the terms of the agreement from 509 B.C. represent the first record of the Roman or Latin traders in the commercial activities from the Occidental Mediterranean Sea<sup>4</sup>. From another perspective, it is very interesting that the Roman State has publicly undertaken to protect and regulate their activities, reality which points out a certain mutually favourable connection between the public authority and those that were directing their boats to various areas of the Mediterranean Sea. Considering the fact that no clear distinction has ever been made in antiquity between piracy and trade, it may be inferred that the treaty also insured certain areas of interest for Carthage against theft and violence-based actions. In another train of thoughts, it appears that the Roman or Latin

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<sup>2</sup> Polybius, *The Histories*, 3.22.3-4, Loeb Classical Library 1979.

<sup>3</sup> Polybius, 3.22.4-11.

<sup>4</sup> B. Scardigli, *I trattati romano-cartaginesi*, Pisa 1991, p. 63-66.

navigators were not strangers to this type of activity, and the Roman Republic has tacitly encouraged or tolerated it due to the obtained economic advantages.

More than 100 years have passed after 509 B.C. before a Roman maritime activity was mentioned again. We may blame this precarious situation on the opacity of the literary tradition that was not interested in Rome's naval evolution. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. events that have captured the ancient authors' interest due to their dramatic character and meaning to the Roman power expansion have occurred in the Central Italy area. By the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., Latium had undergone a real siege under the pressure from the Aequi and Volsci who were trying to penetrate the fertile field areas. The North border conflicts with the Etruscans added to this threat. Rome probably had to neglect the fleet and concentrate its efforts against the continental enemies due to the course of events.

In 394 B.C., the literary sources mention a vessel under Roman flag sailing towards Delphi in a religious mission. It carried a part of the capture from the conquest of the Etruscan city Veii that was to be given as tribute to God Appolo. Probably weakly equipped and with an inexperienced crew, the ship was captured by the pirates in the strait of Messina and taken to the Lipare Isles. The sacred mission of the Roman delegation has represented the rescue of the prisoners from the pirates. Learning about the vessel's destination, the pirates set it free and even provided its protection in the voyage to Delphi<sup>5</sup>.

Another short record of the Romans' shy voyages on sea is reported around 378 B.C.. In Diodorus' *Historical Library* a Rome's tentative to found a colony in Sardinia is mentioned for this year<sup>6</sup>. The fact that no mention is made in the following period on this transmarine colony makes us suppose that the 378 B.C. operation failed.

The years 349-348 B.C. record dramatic events for the Roman Republic's history and marks new diplomatic contacts. The great threat was outlined in Latium who faced a Gallic invasion. At the same time, in 349 B.C. the danger also threatened the coast of the Latin region. Livy records the hostile evolution of a Greek fleet along the Latium's coast and makes us believe that it was not just a simply pirates' act<sup>7</sup>. The fleet is very likely to

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<sup>5</sup> Diodorus of Sicily, *Library of History*, 14.93.3-4, Loeb Classical Library 1980; Titus Livius, *Ab Urbe Condita*, 5.25.7, 5.25.10, 5.28.2-4 Loeb Classical Library 1963; Plutarch, *Camillus* 8; Appian, *Roman History, Ital.* 8.1, Loeb Classical Library 1982.

<sup>6</sup> Diodorus 15.27.4; cf. R. Mitchell, *Roman-Carthaginian Treaties: 306 and 279/278 B.C.*, *Historia* 20 (1971) p. 640; B. Scardigli, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

<sup>7</sup> Livy 7.25.3-4, 7.25.12-13, 7.26.10-11, 7.26.13-15.

have belonged to the former tyrant Dionysius the Young, banished from Syracuse in 356 B.C. In all probability, he was asked to intervene in the affairs of Central Italy by the Latin communities that prepared the revolt against Rome<sup>8</sup>. Rome was unable to counter this attack on sea and concentrated on organizing a terrestrial forces device meant to prevent the disembarkation of the Greek troops on the Latin shore.

Aware that Rome could not cope with such a serious naval confrontation, the Roman Senate tried to reintroduce the Carthaginian State in the diplomatic and political equation of the years 349-348 B.C.. Diodorus, Livy and Orosius mention an agreement between Rome and Carthage for the year 348 B.C.<sup>9</sup>, which may be synchronized with the second Roman-Carthaginian treaty from the series of those recorded by Polybius<sup>10</sup>. It is possible that the negotiations have started one year before and maybe Rome, under the pressure of the Dionysius the Young's fleet, wished for an actual military alliance. After the Greek squadron has left the Latin waters, the military clauses made no meaning any longer and there had been reached a diplomatic formula that did not involve the mutual support of the contrahents. The text of the treaty and thus the naval clauses has also been preserved in the *Histories* of Polybius: "The Romans shall not maraud or trade or found a city on the farther side of Fair Promontory, Mastia, and Tarseum. ... No Roman shall trade or found a city in Sardinia and Libya nor remain in a Sardinian or Libyan post longer than is required for taking in provisions or repairing his ship. If he be driven there by stress of weather, he shall depart within five days. In the Carthaginian province of Sicily and at Carthage he may do and sell anything that is permitted to a citizen"<sup>11</sup>. This time the wordings "the Romans shall not maraud" and "the Romans shall not trade" precisely indicate the enforcement of the treaty for the trading vessels and those that were pirating the waters of the Mediterranean but had their operations bases in Rome or in the Latin harbours<sup>12</sup>. However, once again,

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<sup>8</sup> M. Sordi, *I rapporti romano-ceriti e l'origine della civitas sine suffragio*, Rome 1960, p. 153-165; A. Alföldi, *Early Rome and the Latins*, Michigan 1968, p. 345-346, 407; E. Ferenczy, *Zur Vorgeschichte des zweiten römisch-punischen Vertrags*, ActaAntHung 16 (1968), p. 210; W. Huss, *Geschichte der Karthager*, München 1985, p. 154-155.

<sup>9</sup> Diodorus 16.69.1; Livy 7.27.2; Orosius, *Le storie contro i pagani* 3.7.1, Fondazione Lorenzo Valla 1976.

<sup>10</sup> Polybius 3.24.1-13.

<sup>11</sup> Polybius 3.24.3-13.

<sup>12</sup> W. Harris, *Roman Warfare in the Economic and Social Context of the Fourth Century B.C.*, in W. Eder (ed.), *Staat und Staatlichkeit in der frühen römischen Republik*, Stuttgart 1990, p. 500-501; B. Scardigli, *op. cit.*, p. 105-108.

there is no regulation for the Roman navy, which leaves us to assume that this was in an insignificant state of development or was simply not organized.

The importance of the fleet probably began to be perceived at Rome only in the last decades of the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. The examples from the past were warnings that deserved to be taken into consideration, and the expansion of the Roman influence towards the South showed the need of the navy, at least for an easier insurance of the communications<sup>13</sup>. In 338 B.C., after the submission of Antium, the warships of this community were transported in Rome<sup>14</sup>. In all probability, around them the Senate intended to pull round the Roman fleet. This evolution may be signaled quite clearly at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. From this development's perspective, the moment 311 B.C. may be considered the official year of birth of the Roman fleet. By means of a plebiscite a double naval magistracy has been instituted, *duumviri navales*, and the holders of the position were assigned to repair, maintain and lead the existent ships in Rome<sup>15</sup>.

Certainly, the incipient Roman fleet was mainly organised as a means of communication with the troops that were operating in Campania in case of danger to the terrestrial roads<sup>16</sup>. The other objectives cannot either be excluded from our reconstruction. Only one year after the official institution, if we are to take into account a controversial testimony of Theophrastus, the Roman vessels have come into action. The Greek author mentions a Roman fleet made up of 25 ships that tried to settle a colony in Corsica<sup>17</sup>. The event is not exactly dated, but we may assume that it took place sometime during the year 310 B.C., being a part of the maneuvers carried out in the Etruscan War begun in 311 B.C.<sup>18</sup>.

The presence of the Roman vessels in the Campanian waters is attested for the year 310 B.C., in a combined operation. The crews debarked on the shore, but they were rejected by the troops sent from Nuceria<sup>19</sup>.

These records depict the picture of a navy in an incipient stage, without remarkable successes in its vents on sea. However, it is important that Rome had at its disposal 25 vessels at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C., if

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<sup>13</sup> F. Adcock, *The Roman Art of War under the Republic*, London 1940, p. 33.

<sup>14</sup> Livy 8.14.8.

<sup>15</sup> Livy 9.30.4.

<sup>16</sup> J. Beloch, *Römische Geschichte bis zum Beginn der punischen Kriege*, Berlin 1926, p. 409; J. Thiel, *A History of Roman Sea-Power before the Second Punic War*, Amsterdam 1954, p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*, 5.8.2, Loeb Classical Library 1961.

<sup>18</sup> D. Nedu, *Rome, Agathocles and the Etruscan War, 311-308 B.C.*, in C. Găzdac, C. Gaiu (ed.), *Fontes Historiae. Studia in honorem Demetrii Protase*, Cluj-Napoca 2006, p. 762-763.

<sup>19</sup> Livy 9.38.2-3, Diodorus 19.65.7.

we are to consider the fact that Rhodes, a state with great maritime skills, kept on water, during peace time, a fleet of 30 ships in order to prevent the piratical actions<sup>20</sup>.

Even the queen of the West Mediterranean, Carthage, kept an eye on Rome's first attempts to explore the way of the sea. In 306 B.C. the third Roman-Carthaginian treaty reserved Italy as an area exclusively of Roman interest, while Sicily became a territory subjected to the Carthaginian influence<sup>21</sup>. Together with the mapping of the areas of interest, the agreement also established the neutral regime of Corsica<sup>22</sup>. This treaty answered to the new force relations from the area of the Occidental Mediterranean Sea, as Rome had become, at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C., the greatest force in the Italic Peninsula. At the same time, though, we also have to perceive it as Carthage's preventive reaction when faced with the beginning of Rome's maritime adventure<sup>23</sup>.

Another political act from the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. shows connections with the incipient development of the Roman fleet. In 302 B.C., against some tensed relations, Rome and Tarentum arranged their scopes of interest in the Italic Peninsula. By means of the so called "Lacinian Treaty" Rome probably obtained the recognition of its allies in Apulia and the Sallentine region, but was forced in return not to navigate beyond the Lacinium Promontory, in Magna Graecia's waters, where Tarentum had great interests<sup>24</sup>. The Lacinian clause proves the existence of the Roman navy, the fact that it stirred worries at Tarentum, but the pact's interpretation must be done with precaution. Not nearly does it show Rome's transformation into a great naval power at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C..

The continuation of the Second Samnitic War until 304 B.C., then the outbreak of the third war with the League from Samnium in 290 B.C., forced Rome to concentrate again its resources in the land war area. The promising beginning of 311 B.C. did not bring about, in these conditions, the path to a consistent and accelerated naval development.

In 282 B.C. a Roman fleet of 10 ships sailed to the Ionian Sea, probably to support the operations engaged by the legions in the region of the Greek city Thurii<sup>25</sup>. The attempt became a disaster for the Republic's naval

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<sup>20</sup> C. Starr, *The Influence of Sea Power on Ancient History*, Oxford 1989, p. 54.

<sup>21</sup> Polybius 3.26.1-7; Livy 9.43.26.

<sup>22</sup> Servius *Ad. Aen.* 4.628.

<sup>23</sup> E. Staveley, *The Political Aims of Ap. Claudius Caecus*, *Historia* 8 (1959), p. 422-423; R. Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p. 638-641; B. Scardigli, *op. cit.*, p. 144

<sup>24</sup> Appian, *Samn.* 7.1.

<sup>25</sup> J. Thiel, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

forces. The Roman squadron was attacked by the Tarentine fleet, a vessel was destroyed and four more others were captured<sup>26</sup>. It is difficult to say whether the ships were badly built, or the crews untrained or the command was uninspired, as long as the sources describe the incident in a lapidary manner. What surely follows is the fact that Rome was losing its first attested naval battle in its history and its fleet was unable to face the Greeks who had a solid and vast experience in the field of maritime warfare.

The fourth Roman-Carthaginian treaty, signed in 278 B.C., in the context of the occidental expedition of king Pyrrhus, clearly shows that Rome was aware of its own naval weakness and also realised that the military actions in Magna Graecia needed the support of a strong fleet. The naval terms of the new agreement concluded with the African State, as kept by Polybius, represent the expression of what was said above: "No matter which require help, the Carthaginians are to provide ships for transport and hostilities, but each part shall provide the pay for its own men. The Carthaginians, if necessary, shall come to the help of the Romans by sea too, but no one shall compel the crews to land against their will"<sup>27</sup>. Rome needed the Carthaginian fleet with a view to block Pyrrhus' communications with Balkan Greece and to be able to make an efficient siege on Tarentum, on land as well as on sea<sup>28</sup>.

The Romans inability on sea was shortly after demonstrated in another incident that unfolded in the South extremity of Italy. While the Roman legions were attacking Tarentum, in 272 B.C., a Carthaginian fleet appeared in the harbour of the city<sup>29</sup>. Although the intervention clearly represented a violation of the treaty from 306 B.C., Rome was unable to react. The most natural answer, in such a situation, would have been sending a fleet to the Tarentine harbour. However, the literary sources do not mention the participation of any Roman squadron in the incidents around the Greek city, and the explanations for this absence may be but two: either the Romans feared that their fleet would have the same fate as it did in 282 B.C., if it came to another forced action, or their naval forces were too few and too weakly endowed to be able to put their hope in them.

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<sup>26</sup> Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *The Roman Antiquities*, 19.4, Loeb Classical Library 1948; Livy *per*.12; Florus, *Epitome of Roman History*, 1.13.3-5, Loeb Classical Library 1960; Appian, *Samm.* 7.1; Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 9.39.4, Loeb Classical Library 1954; Orosius 4.1.1; Zonaras, *Epitome*, 8.2, Loeb Classical Library 1954.

<sup>27</sup> Polybius 3.25.4-5.

<sup>28</sup> Th. Mommsen, *Istoria romană* I, Bucharest 1987, p. 237.

<sup>29</sup> Livy *per*.14, 21.10.8; Cassius Dio 11.43.1; Orosius 4.3.1-2; Zonaras 8.6, 8.8.

The incident however made the relations between Rome and Carthage even more tensed and it is very likely that of this moment the Senate had in mind the possibility of a conflict with the African State within the next period<sup>30</sup>. The readying of the next war also intended the reorganisation of naval forces from the Italic harbours, because one could assume that the fleet would play an important role in a Roman-Carthaginian conflict. In 267 B.C., Rome considered it necessary to have an exact evidence of the ships that it could have at its disposal in case of crisis. Four *quaestores classici* were instituted, that year, with the headquarters in Ostia, Caes and Ariminum, with the mission to supervise the way in which the allies honoured their naval obligations provided in the treaties made with the Roman Republic<sup>31</sup>.

Apart from the efforts to organise its own maritime forces, Rome depended on the naval support of the Italic allies. In this system the Greek cities certainly played the most important role. The first treaty signed with a Greek city from Italy was the one concluded with Naples, in 326 B.C.<sup>32</sup>. We do not know the clauses of the agreement, but one can assume that, in exchange of their autonomy, Naples undertook to supply Rome with warships when it was required<sup>33</sup>. The treaties that sanctioned the institution of the Roman control in Magna Graecia, concluded with Thurii, Locri, Croton, Heraklea, Tarentum or Rhegium included some naval terms<sup>34</sup>. We deduce this reality from the participation of Greek ships in the Roman military activities from the following periods. In 264 B.C., when the Roman troops landed in Sicily, Naples, Velia, Locri and Tarentum supplied vessels<sup>35</sup>. Paestum, Velia and Rhegium contributed with 12 ships in 210 B.C.<sup>36</sup>. In 195 B.C., the Greek allies participated with 5 vessels in the Roman war efforts<sup>37</sup>. In 191 B.C., the Greek forces participating in Rome's naval operations are recorded with a number of 24 vessels<sup>38</sup>. Around 171 B.C. we have from Livy a more exact record of the Greek naval contributions: Rhegium supplied one ship, Locri two, and Thurii engaged with 4<sup>39</sup>.

<sup>30</sup> W. Harris, *War and Imperialism in Republican Rome, 327-70 B.C.*, Oxford 1979, p. 184.

<sup>31</sup> Livy *per.* 15; cf. J. Thiel, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

<sup>32</sup> Livy 8.26.6-7.

<sup>33</sup> G. de Sanctis, *Storia dei Romani* II<sup>2</sup> – *La conquista del primato in Italia*, Torino 1960, p. 285-286.

<sup>34</sup> cf. K. Lomas, *Rome and the Western Greeks 350 BC – 200 AD. Conquest and Acculturation in Southern Italy*, London 1993, p. 56-57.

<sup>35</sup> Polybius 1.20.13-14.

<sup>36</sup> Livy 26.39.5.

<sup>37</sup> Livy 34.8.4.

<sup>38</sup> Livy 36.42.1-2.

<sup>39</sup> Livy 48.42.6.



Although the deficiencies of the literary tradition raise problems of interpretation and appreciation, the general lines of the Roman naval policy until the outbreak of the First Punic War can essentially be traced. The fleet was placed on a secondary level, if we are to compare it to the attention given to land forces. The Romans were aware of the dangers that could appear from the sea, as it happened, for instance in 349 B.C., but the solution to counter attack them was also a terrestrial one. After the Latin War from 340-338 B.C., Rome established, alongside the colonies with a Latin status, citizens colonies, *coloniae civium Romanorum*. Before the end of the Second Punic War, *coloniae civium Romanorum* were established especially on the coast, which won them the name of *coloniae maritimae*. In the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C., such a settlement was established at Ostia, at the mouth of the Tiber<sup>40</sup>. In 338 B.C., the maritime colony from Antium was founded<sup>41</sup>. These two settlements were established in order to protect the coastal line which bordered *ager Romanus*, and thus not to need to maintain a fleet on water. In 329 B.C., the Roman colony from Tarracina was settled<sup>42</sup> and in 295 B.C. the pair of Roman colonies Miturnae – Sinuessa was established<sup>43</sup>. Their mission was to protect the Latin coast and to ensure communication with the dependant cities from the North of Campania. The inland route to Campania, which followed *via Latina*, on the course of the rivers Trevis and Liris, was risky due to the presence of the Samnites. The coastal route, *via Appia*, had to be protected from the sea, and the maritime colonies could fulfil this mission. Between 289-283 B.C., in the North-East area of Italy, Rome founded the colony with Roman status from Sena Gallica, that had to protect the Adriatic coasts of the peninsula against the raids of the Illyrians and against the attacks coming from the cisalpine region<sup>44</sup>. The maritime colony of Castrum Novum was established exactly in 264 B.C., the year of the outbreak of the First Punic War<sup>45</sup>.

Normally such a settlement had a small number of people, of only 300 citizens. The Roman authorities did not afford the separation of a too large number of people from the civic corps of the city, because the colonists became exempt from service in the legion by a *sacrosancta vacatio militiae*. From a different perspective, the spread of the Roman citizens in different areas would have made impossible a centralized administration, specific to

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<sup>40</sup> E. Salmon, *Roman Colonization under the Republic*, New York 1970, p. 177-178, n. 108.

<sup>41</sup> Livy 8.14.8.

<sup>42</sup> Livy 8.21.11.

<sup>43</sup> Livy 10.21.8.

<sup>44</sup> Polybius 2.19.13; Livy *per.* 21.

<sup>45</sup> Livy *per.* 11; cf. Salmon, *op. cit.*, p. 70-79.

the institutions of a city-state. These small settlements were probably never too attractive to the Roman citizens. The colonists sent to the coast were not allowed to miss from the settlement for more than 30 days. They had to be alert all the time, to prevent the raids coming from the sea and to stop the building of pier heads on the shore<sup>46</sup>.

This policy, initiated to secure the sea from the coast, could be operative in case of small raids. A maritime war considerably diminished however the role of the colonies from the shore and imposed the building of a fleet capable to wage naval battles and to secure maritime routes. The establishment of the maritime colonies proved efficient as long as Rome's policy was maintained within the limits of the Italic peninsula. When this barrier was crossed and when the operations in Sicily began, the absence of the war fleet was fully felt in Rome. Pushed by needs, the Romans launched to sea in 260 B.C. the first important fleet in their history. It also brought to Rome its first naval success in the battle of Mylae. However 250 years had to pass, full of hesitations and failures, until the Romans, in a moment of crisis and under the pressure of events, fully realised the importance of the navy. For a state with Mediterranean ambitions, the fleet had to become a first level priority.

## **Galați**

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<sup>46</sup> J. Thiel, *op. cit.*, p. 12; E. Salmon, *op. cit.*, p. 72-77.