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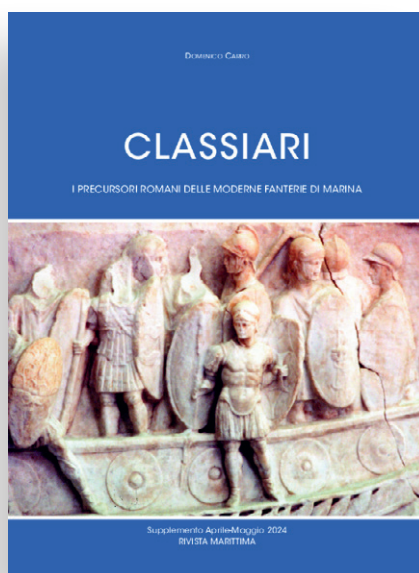
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DOMENICO CARRO,

*Classiarii.**I precursori delle moderne fanterie di marinaC.*

Rivista marittima, Supplemento Aprile-Maggio, 2024



This book forms part of the broad field of studies devoted to Roman military history and has the merit of focusing on an aspect generally overlooked by scholars, namely the infantry of the imperial navy. As the author points out, scholars have shown little interest in this subject, believing that ancient sources did not regard the navy – and the men who served in it – as important and integral elements of Roman rule. This is true from both a military and a political-social perspective. In reality, the author puts forward the opposite argument: ancient sources allow us to reconstruct the importance and role—social and political as well as military—of the *classiarii*, thereby putting into perspective the often negative assessment found in modern studies.

The analysis is divided into ten thematic chapters devoted to the marine infantry of the Imperial period, a period for which sources provide the most information. The first chapter, ‘The Prestige of the Navy’ (Il prestigio della marina), reviews the current state of research and aims to highlight the significance of the text and the new perspective it offers compared to previous studies. The following chapter, ‘The Origins of the *Classiarii*’ (Le origini dei *classiarii*), provides an overview of the fleets of the Republican era, which largely fall outside the chronological scope of this study. These pages nevertheless help to contextualise the evolution of the Roman navy from its earliest recorded instances. They also offer a brief overview of the various types of ships used by the Roman fleet across different periods.

The main discussion of the *classiarii* begins in the third chapter, which is devoted to the foundations and various detachments of the imperial navy. In addition to the famous praetorian fleets of Ravenna and Miseno, the author focuses on the secondary fleets and those operating ‘outside’ the Mediterranean Sea, providing a broad overview of the naval forces and their importance in controlling the various regions of the empire.

The following chapters (four and five) focus more directly on the men of the fleet, addressing various topics such as the hierarchy of personnel (from the highest-ranking officers to the youngest recruits), the geographical and social backgrounds of the soldiers (drawing in particular on useful references to letters written by soldiers to their families back in the provinces), and the requirements for enlistment. These chapters are of interest because they highlight the social background of the soldiers and the legal implications of enlistment, emphasising the differences compared to what we know about enlistment in the army.

Chapter Six ‘Clothing and Equipment’ (Vestiario e armamento) serves as a bridge between the section focusing on social aspects and the purely military one. In this section, in addition to clothing – reconstructed mainly on the basis of reliefs and funerary inscriptions – we examine the armament of individual soldiers, as well as the war machines found on board the ships. Extending the analysis to include war machines helps us understand the various roles played by the *classesarii*, whose training was not limited solely to boarding enemy ships.

The following chapter focuses on the military duties of the *classiarii*, presenting a wide range of situations that might have required the intervention of these men, both at sea and on land. These pages highlight the various areas of

operation, such as coastal defence against piracy, ‘police’ operations to ensure the safety of villas near Cape Miseno, support provided to the army, the transport of military forces by sea, and the escorting of merchant ships, in addition to their obvious use during naval battles. This chapter is complemented by the eighth, which focuses on the ‘collateral functions’ of the *classiarii*: drills and, above all, activities carried out within Rome itself. Of particular interest is the overturning of the common misconception that naval soldiers took part in *naumachiae*, seen as the sole reason for their presence in the city.

The chapter on the constitutional status of the *classiarii* helps us to understand the importance of the fleet’s infantry, particularly in relation to the figure of the emperor by virtue of their ‘praetorian role’, and the extent to which this extended to the protection of high-ranking officials during sea voyages. Here too, we see a difference compared with the legions, which were often more loyal to their general than to the emperor.

Finally, the tenth chapter examines the social status of the *classiarii*. The focus here is not on the men’s social background – a topic already covered earlier – but on their role in Roman society during their years of service and after their discharge, when they were granted the coveted Roman citizenship.

This text has the merit of presenting an interesting overview of a little-explored area of Roman military history, whilst also extending beyond the strictly military sphere.

This study presents an extensive bibliography that provides a well-documented starting point for further analysis of the subject. The same applies to the ancient sources, which have the merit of ranging from literature to epigraphic and papyrological sources, without neglecting the archaeological ones. Nevertheless, the literary texts, had they been dealt with in greater depth, would at times have allowed for a better understanding of certain aspects and could have provided stronger support for the author’s thesis. Similarly, some passages could have been quoted in full and commented on in detail to make the analysis even more robust.

The book features a collection of illustrations of great value. The images not only serve to illustrate the text, but also make it easier to grasp the analysis presented. The author demonstrates a keen interest in this aspect, as evidenced by the fact that many of the photographs were taken by the author himself and that the maps included have often been modified to make the text and images clearer.

The author's fieldwork is therefore evident, as is his knowledge of the places depicted.

One limitation of the work, however, lies in the sometimes anachronistic use of the present-day situation to justify a hypothesis about the functioning of the Roman navy. A broader contextual framework drawn from ancient sources would probably have avoided certain anachronisms, or at the very least allowed certain ideas to be put forward as hypotheses without disregarding what is known about the ancient context.

This limitation does not, however, detract from the author's highly fruitful documentary, literary and archaeological research. This work serves to fill the obvious documentary gap in the otherwise vast body of academic literature on Roman military art. The author deserves credit for highlighting the central role that has long been denied to the imperial navy.

Another point of interest lies in the fact that the analysis has not been confined solely to the military sphere, in line with the latest trends in historiography, which increasingly draw parallels between the military and civilian spheres. This makes it possible to reconstruct the lives and roles of the *classiarii* both inside and outside the barracks, tracing the course of their lives from the moment they enlisted until their discharge and beyond.

An analysis of the various naval bases and the types of military operations in which these men were involved also highlights, on the one hand, the importance they held in their own right, as a distinct force, for the survival of the empire and, on the other, the existing and necessary collaboration between naval and land forces, both at sea and on lakes and rivers.

This overview of the key aspects of the Roman navy also helps to highlight the importance of this type of research and is sparking renewed interest in the subject. It also identifies a number of avenues for further analysis that would benefit from being explored in greater depth through the use of various types of sources and by extending the chronological scope to the Republican and Late Imperial periods



Busto di Pirro re dell'Epiro, Ercolano, da un originale del 290 a.C.
Ora al Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli
(Wikimedia Commons, foto Catalaon)

