

FIGUREHEADS ON GREEK AND ROMAN SHIPS

The identifying symbols of ancient ships are features that have been somewhat neglected by students of maritime matters.¹ From the fish standards of early Bronze Age Cycladic vessels to the beasthead terminations of prows of Moselle river boats of the Roman Empire such features intermittently appear throughout the ancient world. In this paper I should like to draw attention to a number of specific examples, the problems they raise, and the information that they provide about this minor but interesting aspect of ship construction in antiquity. Although I can offer only one example (in this case a bull) —on a first century lamp hanger from Pompeii— of its appearance in the position just below the bow of much later and better known figureheads² at least a small number seem to have been intended as in the case of more recent vessels to identify the ship bearing it.

In a sense the animal head rams of archaic Greek ships like the famous kylix by Exekias in Munich and many others like it provide the first examples of a large coherent body of material employing a representational form at the prow of an ancient ship.³ Boars' heads are by far the commonest form that these rams take, no doubt because of the similarity in purpose to the slashing tusks of the real animal; one might nevertheless wonder whether we are not dealing with an artistic convention (at least in the case of the more realistic examples) than with a real piece of documentation: how many impacts would such a ram survive with its iconography intact? It is perhaps not accidental that its appearance is mostly limited to the second half of the sixth century and then only to Attic black figure and early red figure vases. I should mention one curious reappearance of the type much later on in the first century and early second century after Christ: from a monument thought to have been a temple in Rome to the emperor Claudius comes a fountain in the form of a boar's head ram that to my knowledge has never been properly studied or published⁴ while even later in the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian such rams appear on coins of Nikopolis, Augustus' new foundation near the site of his victory at Actium in north-western Greece.⁵ It might be suggested that the last two examples perhaps represent not main rams but *proemboloi*, the secondary upper rams that become increasingly common in the Hellenistic period. At first plain, these minor rams soon take on the form of different animal protomes like the lion's head on the Poplicola relief at Ostia or wolf's head on a funerary plaque in Rome.⁶ In a similar position but structurally useless as a ram as

it has no support is the crocodile prow ornament on the famous Praeneste bireme relief, generally taken as evidence of the ship's association with the fleet of Antony and Cleopatra at Actium.⁷ The Poplicola relief also presents a good example of another type of figure that may appear at the prow of a Roman warship, the head inside the roundel that terminates the stem post. The Athena head there finds parallels in the ship parts commemorating naval victories on triumphal arches at Orange and Poitiers —to which I shall return later— and its earliest comparandum seems to be on a “three dimensional” head of Athena at the prow of a galley on a coin issued by Q. Lutatius Cerco in 109/8 B.C.⁸ A very late example, perhaps deliberately archaizing, may be found on a series of coins from Abydos dated to A.D. 193-236 where a similar head of Athena appears.

I should now like to turn to a number of literary references that clearly indicate the presence of what one might call denominative figureheads. The most striking of these passages appear in the Augustan poets Vergil, Propertius, and Ovid and have hardly been noticed by students of ancient ships. One of the earliest is Propertius' poem commemorating the new Temple of Apollo on the Palatine; the poet recalls the great struggle at Actium and the ships of Octavian's enemies:

*“...as for the prows bearing figures threatening
with Centauric stones
you will find them hollow beams and painted fears.”⁹*

In Book 10 of the *Aeneid* Vergil uses a similar reference in his description of an Etruscan fleet coming to the aid of Aeneas and his allies:

*“...he moves the huge Centaur forward with oars;
that ship stands over the water and lofty
it threatens the waves with an immense stone.”¹⁰*

Other ships in the fleet bear the figures of a tiger, a Triton, an Apollo, and a Mt. Ida (perhaps a personification) with Phrygian lions for the ram. It also seems likely although the poet does not say so explicitly that the ships in the boat race in Book 5 also bear figureheads: they are the Centaur, the Scylla, and the Pristis or sea monster. Such monster prowed ships may have suggested to Ovid the image of the sea monster that attacks Perseus and Andromeda in Book 4 of the *Metamorphoses*:

*“...swift as a diving, tossing, knife-sharp-nosed ship that cuts the waves driven
by the sweat soaked arms of young men, the dragon sailed up.”*

Commentaries on these passages by classicists have passed over their nautical significance and the standard texts on ancient ships have passed most of them over too.¹¹ Several years ago, however, I published two clear illustrations of this type of prow ornament and suggested that they may represent Antony's flagship at Actium.¹² They are handle plates from large double nozzled lamps made in Egypt in Augustan times; found in the Fayoum they were sent to the British Museum in the late 19th century and preserve not only the usual type of plate (possibly made in Egypt rather than in Italy) but also a unique example of a local blue faience copy of an Italian type. In each case —the faience copy is much debased— there is

a centaur at the prow with a rock poised over its head. An even more remarkable example is to be found on a relief of a naval battle in the Medina Coeli collection in Spain, a relief that has received little attention although it has been available to scholars since de Montfaucon's publication of it in the 18th century.¹³ At least six galleys are involved in spirited conflict and one sinks before a ship with a centaur at its prow. Unfortunately the creature's arms are missing but they appear to have been holding up something, perhaps a rock. Both centaur and soldiers are out of scale with the rest of the scene but that is of course often the case. Clinging to the ram of the centaur prowed vessel is a survivor: that ram may have ended in an animal's head as is the case with the ship above it which has in fact a ram's head. There is a ram's head on the *proembolos* of the centaur prowed ship, which might suggest another sort of protome on the main ram. It is unfortunate that so little is known about this relief for if it is genuine (and no one appears to have questioned its authenticity although there are certainly some odd things about it) it may well be a representation of the battle of Actium.

The centaur prowed ships in Vergil and Propertius and on the British Museum lamps thus appear to suggest a well known vessel of the early Augustan age to which the Median Coeli relief may also refer. Another possibly Augustan but more generic sort of figure head is to be found in a group of statues set up as a trophy in the southern French town of St. Bertrand de Comminges, ancient Lugdunum Convenarum. They were found about sixty years ago and although they have been the subject of several studies, notably by Charles Picard, they have never been properly published and indeed some scholars have dated them to the Trajanic period.¹⁴ Picard argues that they were set up under Augustus to commemorate his victory at Actium. The central statue of the group seems to be made up of a Tritoness (first identified as a Siren) on the prow of a ship to which a ram, probably of bronze, was attached separately. Crowning the Tritoness was an eagle on a globe, which perhaps indicates that we are dealing with the iconography of victory rather than with a realistic rendering of an actual ships as Tritons frequently appear as metaphors for Octavian's naval triumphs in the propaganda of the years just after Actium.

A monument mentioned earlier, the great triple arch at Orange, has usually been dated to the Augustan or Tiberian periods although all commentators have admitted anomalies in such an early dating like, for example, the arcuated lintels on the side faces. Indeed Mingazzini in 1968 and Anderson in an unpublished paper given at the annual meeting of the archaeological Institute of America in Toronto in 1984 presented some interesting arguments for dating it to late Antonine or even early Severan times, which incidentally would result in making the trident rams depicted the latest known examples of the type.¹⁵ Of special interest here are the figure heads that appear in place of the stem post on six bow sections. Only two of these now survive in recognizable form and they show a Triton and a sea monster.¹⁶ For the latter there is also a good parallel in a wall painting from Pompey depicting two vessels in a ship shed of some sort —one

seems to be supported on stocks— where a similar monster headed prow is to be found; one recalls the Ovidian image as well as somewhat similar one in Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautika* where Hercules saves a maiden chained to a cliff from a monster of the deep. To return to the date I must say that I do not feel comfortable bringing the arch and thus the trident ram down so late; although it has been usually said to appear no later than Neronian times there are in fact examples on the bronze coinage of Sidon dated to 82/3 A.C. and indeed as late as the coinage of Trajan from Nikopolis one appears although that may be archaizing and referring to the trophies Augustus set up in his great monument at Nikopolis.¹⁷ Similarly the curving stem posts with heads in the roundels that appear among the naval trophies on the arch do not appear elsewhere any later than the first century after Christ. Until students of Roman sculpture and architectural ornament settle the question of date, however, I feel reluctant to cite the *navalia* as evidence for early imperial ship decoration although it does seem to me that they support the earlier date.

A group about which there is no chronological uncertainty appears on coins of Hadrian of the early second century. At least three types of Tritons and an Athena are shown at the prows of galleys, one of which is even under sail.¹⁸ Some of the former face right, some left; some have the arm bent back, some forward. A horn or conch shell is prominent in each case, however. I have my doubts about the stability of the tall thin Athena and indeed the inherently unstable position of a figure head at the prow of a vessel subject to the shocks of ramming probably explains their rarity.

My final examples are the latest (from the third century A.C.) and from merchant vessels, or at least from ships without rams. A remarkable sarchophagus now in the Belvedere Court of the Vatican Museum depicts a harbour scene with various vessels, among them one with a Triton at its prow and another, tantalizingly broken, with what looks like the drapery of a Victory.¹⁹ Examination of the 17th century Dal Pozzo Albani drawings of this piece when it was in better condition, however, reveals that what we probably have here is the trailing edge of a sail being furled but about the Triton there is no doubt. Whether the ships can be treated as documentary representations depends in part on the interpretation of the scene for some scholars have argued that it depicts an actual port (perhaps that of Rome) while others regard it a mythical land of the afterlife with souls sailing to it. Whatever its purpose it does represent one of the last images of a ship's figurehead in antiquity and more than a millenium was to go by before they appeared again.

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Notes

1. For the best discussion but one still with numerous omissions see L. Casson, *Ships and Seamanship in the Ancient World* (Princeton 1971) 344-348; he notes that the term *antiprosopon* may have been used for figureheads.
2. E.H. Williams, "A Ship of Actium on a Roman Lamp", *IJNA* 10 (1981) 23-27, fig. 4.
3. R. Williams and J. Morrison, *Greek Oared Ships* (Cambridge 1968) pl. 13, etc.; for another see H. Williams in W. Moon, *Greek Vase Painting in Midwestern Collections* (Chicago 1979) 62-63; for literary evidence see Plutarch, *Vit. Per.* 26.3 - 3; Herodotus, 3.59.
4. Illustrated in D. Dudley, *Urbs Roma* (London 1967) pl. 48.
5. M. Oikonomidou, *Ἡ νομισματοκοπία τῆς Νικοπόλεως* (Ἀθήνα 1975) pl. 14, no. 42-43 (Trajan); pl. 14-15, no. 3-6 (Hadrian).
6. For Poplicola see Casson, pl. 125.
7. For a convenient illustration see Casson, pl. 130, 132.
8. A. Ben-Eli et al., *Ships and Parts of Ships on Coins* (Haifa 1975) 26, no. 8. M. Crawford, *Roman Republican Coinage* (Cambridge 1974) p. 315, no. 305.
9. Propertius, 4.6 ll.
10. Vergil, *Aeneid*, 10. 209-212.
11. For example, Casson omits them.
12. See note 2 above.
13. B. de Monfaucon, *L'antiquité... expliquée et représentée en figures*, IV. 2 (Paris 1717) pl. 133.
14. For a convenient source of bibliography see the Princeton Encyclopedia of Classical Sites (Princeton 1972) under "Lugdunum Convenarum" especially see C. Picard, "Trophée d'Auguste à Saint-Bernard-de-Comminges", *Mém. de la Société arch. du Midi de la France* 21 (1947) 5-52.
15. The basic study of the arch remains that of R. Amy et al., "L'arc d'Orange", *Gallia Suppl.* 15 (1962).
16. Amy, pl. 55.
17. For Trajan see Oikonomidou (note 5), pl. 14 no. 38-41; for Sidon see Ben-Eli (note 8), p. 64, no. 53.
18. H. Mattingly, *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum* Vol. III (London 1936) pl. 57.20, 58.1.
19. C. Vermeule, "The Dal Pozzo-Albani Drawings of Classical Antiquities in the British Museum", *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 50 (1960) no. 54, fig. 22, p. 48.