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ROME RULES THE WAVES: A NAVAL STAFF APPRECIATION OF ANCIENT ROME'S MARITIME STRATEGY 300 BCE – 500 CE

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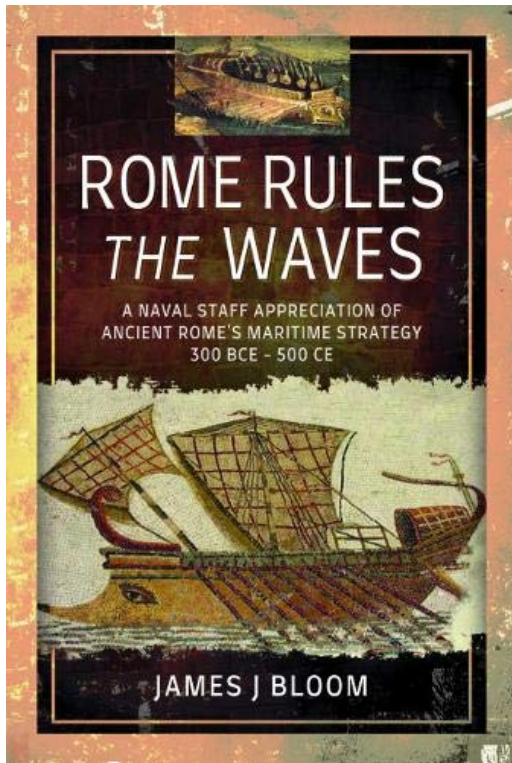
📌 Ancient History, James Bloom, Mediterranean, Seapower, Tyler Robinson

Reviewed by Tyler Robinson

In the decades since he worked as a consultant at the Historical Evaluation Research Organization under the esteemed military historian and theorist Colonel Trevor Dupuy (author of *The Encyclopedia of Military History*), James Bloom has contributed hundreds of shorter works to journals, encyclopedias, and books focused on ancient, maritime, and military history. He was selected to present his 2010 book “The Jewish Revolts Against Rome” for one of the 2012/2013 Military Classics Seminars at Fort Myers.

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Rome Rules the Waves is James Bloom's third book depicting Ancient Roman history through a modern military lens, though the previous two focused more narrowly on the conflicts between the Roman Empire and its Jewish subjects. The marginalized Jewish "Sicarii" Zealots of this theatre are considered the innovators of terrorist tactics, but as Bloom notes in the early chapters of his most recent book, the piratical and maritime



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insurgency dimensions of the Judaeen War have their antecedents in prehistory.

Indeed, while Bloom set out to explore the maritime strategy of Imperial Rome, he decided to expand the focus of the book to include Republican Roman history stretching back to the Punic Wars, as it was these conflicts which first inspired Mahan to develop his theory of seapower and represented Rome's first impetus to become a maritime power. Moreover, the first chapter of the book describes seapower's evolution from the very inception of water-based navigation through the Egyptian establishment of a navy and the alleged "thalassocracies" of Crete and Athens.

Bloom has conducted extensive research in order to provide such a comprehensive history of a neglected topic, as evidenced by an annotated bibliography covering classical sources as well as more recent scholarship, from early 20th century academic dissertations to 21st century scholarship. In order to address the dubious nature of classical accounts and to combat seablindness in contemporary scholarship, Bloom's book functions at times as a historiography. Though Bloom chose to omit footnotes, the book contains a detailed index.

Rome Rules the Waves may serve as an invaluable reference source for students of naval strategy looking to surmount the small sample size

which too often undermines reliable analysis of military matters.

Unfortunately, the breadth of this historical narrative leaves little room for depth of analysis. Bloom has identified the presence of such recognizable phenomenon as gunboat diplomacy, forward operating bases and ports, littoral warfare, and combined operations in the ancient Mediterranean, but does not make any substantial attempt to demonstrate what new insights or new lessons on the nature of seapower may be derived from these cases. Instead, he is content to reiterate the central point of Mahan and Corbett, that seapower may be observed wherever it serves strategic interests, not merely in pitched battles.

This critical role of seapower in maintaining empires is perhaps best demonstrated by the fact that the eastern imperial navies retained control of their territorial waters long after the western imperial navies collapsed, presaging the Byzantine empire's continuation for a millennia after the western empire had fallen, but this is briefly addressed in one of the last chapters, which are a fraction of the length of less pertinent chapters that precede them. A more detailed comparison of how the two halves of the Roman empires diverged would be a particularly promising avenue to build off of Bloom's work.

While comparisons to more contemporary history may be rare in this book, readers are left free to draw their own comparisons and make their own judgements as to the generalizability of these ancient strategic lessons. The maritime challenges faced by the Pax Romana may share a great deal with those faced by the Pax Americana. Though Bloom makes passing note of the great size of the city of Rome, he does not make explicit just how exceptional this is. No other European city would top 1 million residents again until London in the 19th century. The pressure such populations place on supply chains was therefore absent in the intervening 1400 years.

In the aftermath of America's Post-Cold War military struggles, Bloom's acknowledgement that operational success and strategic benefit do not always align should resonate, as should the prevalent role of Fabian tactics and pattern of Imperial forces withdrawing due to domestic pressures before they can prosecute a war to its conclusion. The vital role of cultivating regional alliances in enabling successfully naval campaigns represents another common thread in Bloom's narrative, along with the

role of seapower in disrupting the strategic benefits of an adversary's alliances. This is particularly relevant today, when America's geopolitical rivals are taking pains to exacerbate tensions between the United States and its European allies. Accounts of the Roman Navy's riverine counter-piracy expeditions may also be of particular interest to naval analysts concerned with the hotspot of maritime crime in the Niger Delta.

Still, the oft-decisive roles of adverse weather and unexplored terrain in sinking ancient fleets are unlikely to generalize to modern operations. Furthermore, the struggle to exert command and control over distant naval forces has become less dire with the advent of communications technologies, though the mutinous behavior of Carausius in the 3rd century AD stands out as a uniquely successful coup by counter-piracy forces turned downright piratical, and may be of interest to civil-military researchers.

Given that the bulk of the text recounts history rather than engaging in military analysis, Bloom might have been better served by telling his story in a strictly chronological order, rather than dividing up his discussions of individual conflicts under subheadings that seem to broadly overlap. At times, this repetitiousness serves to confuse rather than elucidate, as the reader is forced to flip through the book to find previous passages if he is to integrate the details from separate passages covering the same events. This issue is compounded by the fact that the series of diagrams and maps included in the frontmatter of the book are left without any reference numbers or in-text citations to indicate what passage they are meant to clarify. Some are not even translated from their original Italian sources, though Bloom himself relied on translation software to read these sources.

Though this book falls short of meaningfully extending Mahan's analysis, as it presents no new lessons from the Pax Romana, it provides an impressively comprehensive overview of ancient maritime history, and serves as an invaluable foundation for any researcher looking to contribute to the same worthy ambition.

Tyler Robinson graduated with an MLitt in International Security Studies from the University of St Andrews in 2018. He has also

contributed reports on emerging technologies and geopolitical threats for OODA LLC.

Rome Rules the Waves: A Naval Staff Appreciation of Ancient

Rome's Maritime Strategy 300 BCE – 500 CE (James J Bloom,

Pen & Sword Military, Barnsley, South Yorkshire, Great Britain, 2019)

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