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## The *corvi* of C. Duilius Once Again A Cultural Approach

### *Introduction*<sup>1</sup>

The problem of the introduction and employment of the boarding bridges known as *corvi* during the first Punic war has been debated at length by modern commentators. According to Polybius, these machines were some sort of pivoting boarding bridges mounted on the prows of the Roman ships of C. Duilius just before the battle of Mylae (260 BC), with which the Romans were able to overcome the technical gap which separated them from the Carthaginians, and ultimately beat them<sup>2</sup>. As is well known, Polybius' reconstruction is the only real description of the 'ravens'; despite being quite detailed, however, it is not entirely clear, and is not without its problems. This of course spurred interest and criticism, and Polybius' text has been the object of thorough investigation. The points discussed include the likelihood of the presence of a hinge (not mentioned by the historian), the way in which the machine was able to turn, the way in which it could be lifted or lowered, the possibility that it could really be able to grapple and securely retain an enemy ship, and the potential issues that its added weight could cause to a Roman ship. While some historians tried to answer these questions and

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<sup>1</sup> In this text, the abbreviations of the names of ancient authors and works follow the use of *Der Neue Pauly*. All English translations are from the *Loeb Classical Library*.

<sup>2</sup> Polybius' description: Pol. 1, 22, 3-11. The historian names the machine κόραξ, 'raven', but most modern authors refer to it as '*corvus*'. Indeed, in the Roman sources, one finds the word *corvus* used to describe some kind of machine (Vitr. 10, 13, 3; Tac. *Hist.* 4, 30; Curt. 4, 2, 12), but never the engine described by Polybius. Vitr. 10, 13, 8 seems to imply that it was commonplace to define in Latin as '*korax*' (transliteration of the Greek term) some sort of boarding bridge, which he unfortunately does not describe.



overcome the difficulties, putting forward models and possible reconstructions<sup>3</sup>, other commentators maintained that Polybius' description is unacceptable, and that the ravens never existed<sup>4</sup>. In this view, the Romans simply used grappling hooks and their usual, simpler boarding bridges, without creating any new and decisive device.

These practical issues will not be dealt with in depth here. I would rather like to discuss some of the cultural implications of Polybius' text. In his treatment of the battle, the historian maintains that the employment of the *corvi* was the main reason for the Roman triumph. According to him, the Romans were not skilled enough on the sea to be a match for the Punic navy, and therefore tried (and managed) to turn a sea fight into a land battle. He repeatedly insists on this point, portraying the Romans as landlubbers, but great land fighters, and the Carthaginians as experienced sailors, but inferior soldiers. His conclusion is that, as soon as Duilius transformed the *naumachia* into a *pezomachia*, Roman victory was pretty much inevitable<sup>5</sup>. His reconstruction, however, presents a number of difficulties. First, despite his attempt to constantly downplay Roman maritime might<sup>6</sup>, modern studies have rightly nuanced the traditional view of Roman naval inferiority, showing that they already had some experience of seafaring and naval battles at the very least<sup>7</sup>. Second, a boarding operation during a military engagement at sea is not equivalent to a land battle, and nothing implies that skilled sea fighters should prove themselves inferior to experienced land

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<sup>3</sup> Notably those proposed by SAINT-DENIS 1946; THIEL 1954, 101-128; WALLINGA 1956, 19-72; LACOMBRADÉ 1971; POZNANSKI 1979, 655-661; LAZENBY 1996, 68-72; WORKMAN-DAVIES 2006. The existence of the *corvi* is also generally accepted in the manuals about Roman warships and naval warfare (e.g. CASSON 1986, 120-123; COATES-MORRISON 1996, 45-46; STEINBY 2007, 87-90) and in general works on the first Punic war (e.g. LAZENBY 1996, 68-72; LE BOHEC 1996, 77-80; GOLDSWORTHY 2000, 106-109), as well as in the commentary on Polybius' text by WALBANK 1957, 77-78.

<sup>4</sup> TARN 1930, 149-150; 12-13; SORDI 1976; ABBAMONTE-DE NARDIS 2016, 180-188; CARRO 2020. All these authors focus on the practical implausibility of the design proposed by Polybius. Only Sordi analysed the matter from a cultural perspective as well.

<sup>5</sup> Pol. 1, 23, 6.

<sup>6</sup> See in particular Pol. 1, 20, 9-16. The historian writes that at the start of the war the Romans did not have any warships at all: wanting to challenge the Carthaginians at sea, they had to copy a Punic ship to build a new fleet. Even to cross from Italy to Sicily they were compelled to borrow ships from the Italiote Greeks. On this presentation, see PÉDECH 1964, 421-422.

<sup>7</sup> LE BOHEC 1996, 75-77 and 2003; CARRO 1998; STEINBY 2007; HARRIS 2017. More anchored to a traditional view which sees the Romans as 'landlubbers' until the Punic wars are LADEWIG 2008 and DART-VERVAET 2011 (the authors attribute, therefore, much importance to Duilius' triumph). For an example of the older view, completely in accord with Polybius' presentation, see SAINT-DENIS 1949, 359-360.



fighters in this respect; indeed, one might rather expect just the opposite<sup>8</sup>. Third, Polybius' presentation of the ravens' importance during the battle of Mylae is quite foggy. The historian states that the Carthaginian ships tried to attack the Roman ones in the stern as well as frontally<sup>9</sup>, and that they came into collision with each other<sup>10</sup>. It is difficult to understand how the raven, which was fixed to a pole on the prow, could fend off attacks in the rear, or prevent a Punic ship ramming from sinking the enemy vessel<sup>11</sup>. Regardless of the view one may choose to adopt about the existence or non-existence of the ravens, it seems quite clear that they cannot have had the importance which Polybius attributes to them, and that the outcome of the battle must have been due, at least in part, to other factors, which Polybius chooses not to emphasize. Indeed, some of the recent works in which the historicity of the *corvus* is accepted tend to downplay its practical relevance<sup>12</sup>.

In this text, therefore, I would like to try to understand the reasons for this unilateral representation, and to explore the cultural significance of the tradition reported by Polybius. Unfortunately, it is impossible to decide whether or not the same approach to the battle of Mylae was adopted by Roman sources as well. Duilius' famous inscription commemorating his own success appears not to mention the *corvi*<sup>13</sup>, although one modern scholar supposed that they must have been mentioned and restored the text accordingly<sup>14</sup>. Livy's text is non-extant, and the relevant *periocha* just reports Duilius' victory, triumph, and honours<sup>15</sup>. Among the sources which generally

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<sup>8</sup> CARRO 2020, 16. While many authors have accepted the Polybian view (e.g. POZNANSKI 1979, 653: «les Romains cherchaient précisément à transformer le combat naval en un combat de fantaisins»), the difference is worth stressing: LE BOHEC 1996, 321: «Il faut cependant renoncer à une idée ancienne et stupide: les légionnaires auraient transporté sur l'élément liquide leur façon de combattre sur l'élément solide».

<sup>9</sup> Pol. 1, 23, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Pol. 1, 23, 6.

<sup>11</sup> WALBANK 1957, 79; CARRO 2020, 7-10. Indeed, Pol. 1, 22, 9 writes that in case two ships found themselves side by side, the Romans would still use the *corvus*, but would board the enemy vessel by jumping on it, which appears to imply that the raven could not provide a passageway from the side of the ship, but only in the front.

<sup>12</sup> See in particular LE BOHEC 1996, 77-80 and STEINBY 2007, 87-90.

<sup>13</sup> CIL I<sup>2</sup>, 25. The fragmentary inscription appears to record only the construction of a fleet against the Carthaginians, the Roman victory, the Punic commander, and the goods captured. On Duilius' column and its inscription, see NIEDERMANN 1954; SORDI 1976, 260-265; CAMPANILE 1977; KONDRATIEFF 2004, 10-21; SCHMUL 2008, 84-87; SCHIPPORIT 2017, 143; ROLLER 2018, 137-138. The dating of the inscription is debated, and it is not universally accepted that it was inscribed at Duilius' times.

<sup>14</sup> KONDRATIEFF 2004, 11. SCHIPPORIT 2017, 142 also argued for an iconographic reference to the *corvi* on the *aes signatum* issued by Duilius.

<sup>15</sup> Liv. *Per.* 17.



follow the Livian tradition, Orosius and Eutropius do not mention any kind of boarding<sup>16</sup>. Florus' text, on the other hand, appears to be on the same lines of that of Polybius: Roman ships were slow and cumbersome, and they managed to overcome the enemies through *ferreae manus machinaeque validae* which allowed the Romans to board the Punic vessels<sup>17</sup>. He also mentions the initial Carthaginian derision and the fact that the battle was transformed into a land fight<sup>18</sup>. Frontinus' account is very similar, and the author relates of the Roman boarding operation *superiecto ponte*<sup>19</sup>. However, nothing implies that these *pontes*, as well as Florus' *ferreae manus* and *machinae validae*, are the same *corvi* which the reader finds in Polybius. The similarities between Florus and Polybius are worth stressing, but it cannot be conclusively argued whether the ravens of the Greek historian were known to these Roman authors as well. To assess the cultural significance of the tradition about the *corvi*, an analysis must be primarily based on Polybius' text.

Before starting, I would like to underline the cultural (as well as historiographical) nature of this analysis. My aim is to understand the reason behind the importance of the *corvus* in Polybius' narrative, and I will try to argue that this is a product of the Roman military self-representation (and representation of their enemies). It goes without saying that trusting the Roman portrait of their own and their enemies' military culture is methodologically dangerous. Indeed, it will be suggested that the Carthaginians probably did not agree with them at all. However, this tradition deserves to be studied, both because of its cultural significance and as an interesting example of Polybius' handling of his sources.

### *A philo-Punic tradition?*

Among the authors who chose to deny the validity of Polybius' depiction, Marta Sordi stands out as one of the most influential, and the only one to have discussed at some length the reasons for the emergence of these 'lies' about the battle, which she imputed to the Carthaginian tradition.

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<sup>16</sup> Oros. 4, 7, 10; Eutr. 2, 20. Both authors list the Punic casualties, without providing any description of the battle itself. About the construction of the ships, Eutropius only points out that they were equipped with beaks (*naves rostratae*), without mentioning any other device.

<sup>17</sup> Flor. *Epit.* 2, 2, 9.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*: *ante certamen multum ad hoste derisae, coactique hostes quasi in solido discernere*. Polybius says that the Carthaginians were perplexed (Pol. 1, 23, 5: ἠπόρουν οἱ Καρχηδόνιοι, ξενιζόμενοι ταῖς τῶν ὀργάνων κατασκευαῖς), and not amused, but the tradition appears to be similar.

<sup>19</sup> Frontin. *Strat.* 2, 3, 24.



According to her view, the Punic admiral Hannibal tried to justify himself by pretending that his fleet had been vanquished through the employment of a new and secret weapon, which allowed the Romans to fight as if they were on land (i.e., in their favourite way). As the Carthaginians knew that they were no match for the Romans in a land battle, their own defeat entailed no dishonour. Hannibal, in short, transformed his naval loss into a land defeat, to make it more 'digestible' to his fellow countrymen: «essere sconfitti dai Romani in una battaglia terrestre non era disonorevole per nessuno»<sup>20</sup>. This invention was not contested by the Carthaginians, and so Hannibal's version was borrowed by the philo-Punic Philinus, whom Polybius cites as one of the two main sources he employed<sup>21</sup>.

Sordi's reconstruction has been passingly accepted by another author who is sceptical about the existence of the ravens<sup>22</sup>, but her proposal appears to present some issues. The first one is about the sources. One should keep in mind that Polybius used, in combination with Philinus, a Roman source, Fabius Pictor<sup>23</sup>. Indeed, some of the details about Duilius' campaign, such as the impressive speed with which the new fleet was built, and the Roman willingness to learn from the enemies and challenge them in their own environment, seem to betray a Roman origin, and similar details can be found in Roman sources<sup>24</sup>. Even allowing for a Punic origin (through Philinus) of the details about the battle, it is improbable, although not impossible, that Polybius could not detect blatant lies through a comparison between Philinus and Fabius<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> SORDI 1976, 265.

<sup>21</sup> Pol. 1, 14. The historian blames both Philinus and Fabius Pictor for their excessive tendency to distort the events to cast a good light on the Carthaginians and the Romans respectively. About Philinus as a source for Polybius, see WALBANK 1945 and PÉDECH 1964, 373-374 and 397-398.

<sup>22</sup> CARRO 2012, 21-22. A similar opinion was already expressed by LA BUA 1966, 58-60, who believed in the existence of the ravens, but supposed that the Carthaginians could emphasize their role to excuse themselves.

<sup>23</sup> Polybius was able to compare the accounts of the two historians (which he does at 1, 13, concerning the initial operations near Messana). The historian claims to be able to recognize the truth in spite of the partisanship of his sources. About the relevance of Fabius and Philinus in Polybius, see AMBAGLIO 2005 and BECK 2013, 132-136.

<sup>24</sup> Flor. *Epit.* 2, 2, 9 relates of the incredible speed of the artisans. The tradition according to which the Romans always learnt from the enemies is very widespread both in Latin and Greek sources (e.g. Pol. 6, 25, 11; Sall. *Catil.* 51, 37-38; Diod. 23, 2, 1; Plin. *Nat.* 7, 81; Athen. 6, 106).

<sup>25</sup> According to BECK 2013, 132-136 Polybius took most of his material for the reconstruction of the battles of the first Punic war from Philinus. One should not, however, underestimate his ability to compare Philinus with Fabius (on the importance of Fabius, see



Sordi's proposal, however, appears to present two other and more important issues. The first problem is that, as already noted, a boarding operation at sea is not equivalent to a land battle at all, despite what Polybius, Florus and Frontinus write<sup>26</sup>. On the contrary, grappling and boarding an enemy ship is one of the fundamental features of a *naval* battle, and as such requires experience and technical abilities<sup>27</sup>. Even accepting the view according to which the Carthaginians were masters of sea operations but unskilled on land, one could legitimately ask why it should be presumed that they were bad soldiers during a boarding operation. In Diodorus' account of the previous wars for Sicily, despite the paucity of details, one sometimes reads that the Carthaginians tried to board and capture the Greek ships<sup>28</sup>. Of course, both the Carthaginians and the Syracusans would also try to sink the enemy vessels<sup>29</sup>, and both tactics could be employed in the same engagement<sup>30</sup>. In any situation, in the *Library*, the Punic soldiers show themselves skilled at and ready for hand-to-hand fighting<sup>31</sup>. Perhaps the best instance of the Punic ability in boarding is the battle near Syracuse between the Greek fleet of Dionysius (led by Leptines) and that of Mago (397 BC). Trusting their own numerical superiority, the Carthaginians encircled the enemy fleet, and then boarded and captured the Greek vessels:

διὸ καὶ τῆς μάχης ἰσχυροτέρας γινομένης, καὶ τῶν κυβερνητῶν ἐκ παραβολῆς τὸν ἀγῶνα συνισταμένων, ὁμοίος ὁ κίνδυνος ταῖς ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς παρατάξεσιν ἐγένετο. οὐ γὰρ ἐκ διαστήματος τοῖς ἐμβόλοις εἰς τὰς τῶν πολεμίων ναῦς ἐνέσειον, ἀλλὰ συμπλεκόμενων τῶν σκαφῶν ἐκ χειρὸς διηγωνίζοντο. τινὲς μὲν ἐπὶ τὰς τῶν ἐναντίων ναῦς ἐπιπηδῶντες ἔπιπτον εἰς τὴν θάλατταν, τινὲς δὲ κρατήσαντες τῆς ἐπιβολῆς ἐν ταῖς τῶν πολεμίων ναυσὶν ἠγωνίζοντο.<sup>32</sup>

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AMBAGLIO 2005, 212-213). WALBANK 1945, 1-5 emphasizes the difficulty of identifying exactly what Polybius took from each of the two historians.

<sup>26</sup> LE BOHEC 1996, 321; CARRO 2020, 16.

<sup>27</sup> Again, CARRO 2020, 16.

<sup>28</sup> Diod. 13, 88, 3-5; 19, 107, 2; 20, 5; 20, 32, 3-5. In the latter case, Diodorus also mentions σιδηρᾶς χειρᾶς, grappling hooks (an equivalent of the Latin term *manus ferreae*). At 19, 103, 4, a ship is sunk, but the crew is captured: perhaps the ship had been boarded. Another possibility is the exchange of missiles (20, 6).

<sup>29</sup> For instance, in Diod. 14, 49, 2 and 20, 16, 6.

<sup>30</sup> Diod. 14, 60. At 13, 88, 3-5, Himilco's plan was to board and capture the Greek ships, but this did not stop him from sinking eight of them.

<sup>31</sup> See for example Diod. 11, 22; 16, 80, 4; 19, 110.

<sup>32</sup> Diod. 14, 60, 3: «Consequently, as the battle grew fiercer, the steersmen laid their ships broadside in the fighting and the struggle came to resemble conflicts on land. For they did not drive upon the opposing ships from a distance in order to ram them, but the vessels were locked together, and the fighting was hand to hand. Some, as they leaped for the



Diodorus appears to say that the Punic soldiers simply jumped onto the Greek ships (ἐπιπηδάω), but the verb is quite generic and, given the fact that harpoons and boarding bridges were known well before this date<sup>33</sup>, their employment is not impossible. Two more points are worth noting. First is the mention of an engagement similar to a land battle (ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς παρόταξις): it appears that the tradition which represented a naval boarding as a land fight did not originate during the first Punic war. Second are the manoeuvres of the steersmen propaedeutic to the boarding itself. It was clearly not enough to jump onto the enemy's bridges, and some degree of naval skill was needed. In any case, the Carthaginians could surely rely, at times at least, on boarding operations, as could probably any other navy of the same era<sup>34</sup>. This in turn makes Polybius' presentation of the battle of Mylae quite puzzling: why should the Punic soldiers be no match against the Romans in case of a boarding? On the contrary, it could even be argued that, if the Carthaginians were so much better than the Romans in naval warfare, as Polybius says, one should reasonably expect them to best the Romans during a boarding as well.

The last point that I would like to make is that, even accepting the equivalence between a boarding and a land battle, it would be rash to assume that the Carthaginians could find a defeat in a land confrontation «not dishonourable»<sup>35</sup>. The main issue that one has to face is that we do not really have any perspective on the Punic military culture other than that of the Romans. These latter constantly represent the Carthaginians as relying only on their own technical abilities and their stratagems, and never on valour or prowess. However, it would be careless to accept such a portrait<sup>36</sup>.

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enemy's ships, fell into the sea, and others, who succeeded in their attempt, continued the struggle on the opponents' ships».

<sup>33</sup> Thuc. 7, 62, 3 relates that the Athenians planned to employ harpoons against the Syracusans during the Peloponnesian war. The Athenians themselves had lost a ship due to a χεῖρ σιδήρεα, a metal grappling hook (4, 25, 4). Diades, the Greek engineer mentioned by Vitruvius as the inventor of a boarding bridge and a raven (similar to the Roman one?) took part to Alexander's expedition in Asia, and his life is therefore to be dated to the fourth century (Vitr. 10, 13, 3; see also Athen. Mech. 5, 13).

<sup>34</sup> CASSON 1986, 120-123 supposed that the Hellenistic evolution from the trireme to the quinquereme was part of a general switch from the preference for ramming to that for boarding. One should note that the complement of marines on a quinquereme was numerically higher than that employed on the classical Greek triremes.

<sup>35</sup> Again, SORDI 1976, 265.

<sup>36</sup> So PRAG 2006, 2-3 and MEDAS 2008. About the anti-Punic Roman prejudices see PRANDI 1979 and PRAG 2006 (in particular 18-19).



In the absence of Punic sources<sup>37</sup>, the next best thing is probably to turn to the Hellenistic world<sup>38</sup>. Greeks and Hellenistic soldiers were also accused by the Romans of being cowards, with far less *virtus* than the average legionary, only able to deceive the enemy<sup>39</sup>, or to fight through words instead of manly courage<sup>40</sup>. However, according to Polybius, Greeks and Macedonians were convinced of their own military superiority, to the point that they chose to attribute Roman victories to good luck<sup>41</sup>. Polybius also records that most people within the Hellenistic world could not believe that the phalanx could be bested by Roman soldiers, and considered their victories incredible (ἄπιστος)<sup>42</sup>. The ‘bad luck’ theory continued to flourish for centuries<sup>43</sup>, and

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<sup>37</sup> One should bear in mind that at least the philo-Punic (and Greek) Philinus surely represented the Carthaginians as very skilled soldiers on land. According to Polybius, the historian altered the outcome of the battle of Messana to portray them in a favourable way (Pol. 1, 15), and throughout his work he struggled to show that οἱ Καρχηδόνιοι πεπρωῶσθαι φρονίμως, καλῶς, ἀνδρωδῶς, οἱ δὲ Ῥωμαῖοι τὰναντία («that the Carthaginians in every case acted wisely, well, and bravely, and the Romans otherwise»: Pol. 1, 14, 3). In view of this, it is quite surprising that LA BUA 1966, 43-44 traces back to Philinus all the passages in which Polybius praises the good order and discipline of the Romans. For some hypotheses about the Punic representation of this conflict, see SZNYCER 2001.

<sup>38</sup> BRIZZI 2001 underlines the similarities (in terms of military culture) between the Carthaginians and the Hellenistic world in the age of Hamilcar and Hannibal.

<sup>39</sup> Among the many examples, Liv. 42, 47, 7 is particularly important, as here Greeks and Carthaginians are put on the same level: *religionis haec Romanae esse, non versutiarum Punicarum neque calliditatis Graecae, apud quos fallere hostem quam vi superare gloriosius fuerit* («these are the acts of Roman scrupulousness, not of Carthaginian artfulness, nor of Greek slyness, since among these peoples it has been more praiseworthy to deceive an enemy than to conquer by force»).

<sup>40</sup> Cato *Orat.* fr. 4 Cugusi: *Antiochus epistolis bellum gerit, calamo et atramento militat*; Liv. 8, 22, 8: *gente lingua magis strenua quam factis*; 31, 44, 9: *Athenienses quidem litteris verbisque, quibus solis valent, bellum adversus Philippum gerebant*. Liv. 31, 34, 3-5 writes that the Macedonians were not even able to bear the sight of the wounds inflicted by the Roman soldiers.

<sup>41</sup> Pol. 18, 28, 5: ἵνα μὴ τύχην λέγοντες μόνον μακαρίζωμεν τοὺς κρατοῦντας ἀλόγως («so that we may not, like foolish men, talk simply of chance and felicitate the victors without giving any reason for it»).

<sup>42</sup> His entire comparison between legion and phalanx (Pol. 18, 28-32) is presented by the author as an answer to Greek incredulity, as the author points out at the end of the digression (32, 13): *περὶ μὲν οὖν τούτων ἀναγκαῖον ἡγησάμην εἶναι τὸ διὰ πλειόνων ποιήσασθαι μνήμην διὰ τὸ καὶ παρ’ αὐτὸν τὸν καιρὸν πολλοὺς τῶν Ἑλλήνων διαλαμβάνειν, ὅτε Μακεδόνες ἠττήθησαν, ἀπίστω τὸ γεγονός εἰκέναι, καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα πολλοὺς διαπορήσειν διὰ τί καὶ πῶς λείπεται τὸ σύνταγμα τῆς φάλαγγος ὑπὸ τοῦ Ῥωμαίων καθοπλισμοῦ* («I thought it necessary to speak on this subject at some length because many Greeks on the actual occasions when the Macedonians suffered defeat considered the event as almost incredible, and many will still continue to wonder why and how the phalanx comes to be conquered by troops armed in the Roman fashion»).





apparently many Greeks chose not to accept the Roman military superiority. According to Livy (probably drawing from Polybius), in his speech before the battle of Cynoscephalae King Philip reassured his own soldiers would always remain superior to the Roman legions<sup>44</sup>. On the whole, it is clear that many Greeks did not share the Roman opinion about Hellenistic military virtue (or its lack); it would be rash to suppose that the Carthaginians' self-presentations in terms of military culture was similar to the portrait of the Carthaginians that we find in the Roman historians. One cannot presume that third-century Carthaginians believed in the superiority of Roman military might on land, especially because they had not fought a battle against them yet. Therefore, I believe that modern readers should not trust the Roman representation of their enemies and accept as a given that this portrait corresponded to their enemies' own self-representation. This appears to be methodologically unsound: the tradition according to which the Romans always won by sheer bravery, while their opponents could only gain the upper hand thanks to their own technique and their stratagems is a piece of Roman propaganda, and must be taken as such.

All in all, I believe that the theory according to which the *corvi* tradition was invented by the Carthaginians to excuse themselves for their defeat should be rejected. They could hardly present themselves as neophytes in boarding operations, and even in a land battle (which a boarding is not) they probably did not feel inferior to the Romans. Nothing implies that they would perceive a defeat in a land confrontation not dishonourable. The reasons for Polybius' emphasis on the role of the ravens should be sought elsewhere.

### *The ravens in the frame of Roman military culture*

As mentioned earlier in this text, there is no clear reference to the *corvi* in Latin literature. Frontinus and Florus<sup>45</sup>, however, present an account very similar to that of Polybius, and these similarities are worth emphasizing. Both of their texts portray Duilius as an innovator<sup>46</sup>, a man able to fight the

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<sup>43</sup> Dion. Hal. *Ant.* 1, 4; Plut. *Mor.* 326 a-b.

<sup>44</sup> Liv. 33, 4, 3: *Macedonum vero phalangem et tunc stetit et loco aequo iustaque pugna semper mansuram invictam* («the Macedonian phalanx, on the other hand, had stood fast even then, and would always stand unconquered when regular battle was joined on level ground»).

<sup>45</sup> Again, Frontin. *Strat.* 2, 3, 24 and Flor. *Epit.* 2, 2, 8-9.

<sup>46</sup> According to Frontinus, the consul *excogitavit* the new machines. Florus writes that the boarding bridges were *iniecti* (and therefore they appear not to have been present earlier)



Carthaginians with a new device. This fact alone seems to suggest that a mention of the *corvus* appeared in their source (Livy, in all likelihood): Duilius could hardly be described as an innovator for his employment of regular grappling hooks and boarding bridges. In both authors, moreover, the ravens are not properly intended as a great technical device, but rather as a way to counter the Punic technical superiority. They underline the inferiority of the Roman fleet, suggesting that it would not have stood a chance against the excellent Punic vessels<sup>47</sup>. Therefore, Duilius invented something that could bring their superiority to naught and allow the Romans to fight 'as if on land', *quasi in solido*. Both authors assume as a given, as does Polybius, that in the event of a boarding (i.e., of a fight *quasi in solido*) the complete superiority would pass from the Carthaginians to the Romans. Frontinus' text is particularly interesting: due to Punic technique, Roman virtue was eluded (*irritamque virtutem militum*); thanks to Duilius' innovation, it could shine once again, and the Carthaginians, now vastly inferior, were massacred (*eos trucidabant*). This tradition is not, it seems, an encomium of Roman technical ability<sup>48</sup>, but rather a praise of Roman *virtus*.

This interpretation is in agreement with the chapter which Roller devoted to the 'firstness' of Duilius<sup>49</sup>. The consul is a 'first', as he is the first one to win a naval engagement and to obtain a naval triumph<sup>50</sup>; on the other hand, he also represents the true Roman tradition, as he wins through a display of typically Roman *virtus*<sup>51</sup>. Roller's general conclusion can be applied to the case of Duilius' machines specifically: the consul is said to be the first to employ *manus ferreae, machinae validae* and a *pons*, but he is also a traditional Roman, as these machines only serve the purpose to let the natural Roman *virtus*, underlined by Frontinus, express itself, and overcome the enemy's technique. As said, the emphasis is not on the technical

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and stresses the derision of the Carthaginians, who, according to the author, had clearly never seen such engines.

<sup>47</sup> According to Florus, the Romans could not even come close to them to ram the ships, such was the disparity in swiftness, which originated from the long experience and practice (*longe illis nauticae artes, detorquere remos et ludificari fuga rostra*). Frontinus writes that the Punic ships could easily outmanoeuvre the Roman heavy vessels (*cum videret graves suas naves mobilitate Punicae classis eludi*).

<sup>48</sup> So, passingly, ABBAMONTE-DE NARDIS 2016, 186-188. See also CARRO 2020, 5-6.

<sup>49</sup> ROLLER 2018, 134-162. See in particular pp. 144-145 for some thoughts about the *corvi* in this context.

<sup>50</sup> ROLLER 2018, 139-143. See also KONDRATIEFF 2004; BIGGS 2017, 359-360; SCHIPPORREIT 2017.

<sup>51</sup> ROLLER 2018, 143-147 makes a useful comparison with the case of sieges: in this case one finds that the Romans 'extended' their traditional *virtus* to encompass a new context. The same was done for naval battles.



development, but on the martial prowess of the Romans. The unusual device only serves to compel the Carthaginians to lose the ability to rely on their technique, and to fight in the field of *virtus*.

This dichotomy between *virtus* and technique (*ars*) applied to naval warfare can be found in other Latin sources. Writing about the battle between the Roman and the Punic fleets near Lilybaeum in 218 BC, for example, Livy maintains that

*ubi in altum eVecti sunt, Romanus conserere pugnam et ex propinquo vires conferre velle; contra eludere Poenus et arte non vi rem gerere naviumque quam virorum aut armorum malle certamen facere*<sup>52</sup>.

The Romans want to fight through their *vis*, while the Carthaginians prefer to rely on *ars*, that is, on their ships and manoeuvres; in the end, the Romans managed to board the enemy's vessels, and won the day. Livy records another naval battle, in 191 BC, against two ships of the Syrian fleet commanded by the Rhodian Polyxenidas<sup>53</sup>. In this case, one single Roman ship was accompanied by two Punic ones as auxiliaries; these two vessels, however, proved themselves to be useless, as they were immediately attacked by the enemies: one of them fled, while the other was boarded and taken. The Roman ship, on the other hand, grappled Polyxenidas' ships, before boarding and capturing them:

*Demittere remos in aquam ab utroque latere remiges stabiliendae navis causa iussit, et in advenientes hostium naves ferreas manus inicere et, ubi pugnam pedestri similem fecissent, meminisse Romanae virtutis nec pro viris ducere regia mancipia. Haud paulo facilius quam ante duae unam, tunc una duas naves expugnavit cepitque*<sup>54</sup>.

When it comes to *virtus*, according to Livy, one of the Roman crews is easily able to overcome two of the Syrians, while the Carthaginians are even worse than the latter. For the rest, all the central points of Polybius' description of the battle of Mylae can be found here: the grappling devices,

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<sup>52</sup> Liv. 21, 50, 1-2. («When they got out to sea, the Romans wanted to join battle and fight at close quarters. The Carthaginians, by contrast, wanted to manoeuvre, to use tactics rather than brute force, and to make it a battle of ships rather than of men and weapons»). In this instance, the Carthaginians feared the Roman boarding also because they were short on men.

<sup>53</sup> Liv. 36, 44-45. The fight considered here was part of a larger battle.

<sup>54</sup> Liv. 36, 44, 8-9 («He [the consul] ordered the rowers on both sides to trail their oars in the water to steady the ship and the men to throw iron grappling-hooks upon the approaching hostile ships, and when they had made the engagement like one on land, he bade them remember Roman valour, and not to consider the king's slaves as men. With greater ease than the two had captured one before, the one ship at this time defeated and captured two»).



the transformation of the *naumachia* into a land battle and the invincible Roman courage.

A very similar account can be found in Caesar: writing about the battle fought in the ocean against the Veneti (56 BC), the author portrays the enemies as superior in terms of naval technique<sup>55</sup>. The Romans, however, were able to sabotage the enemy's sails, and then to grapple their vessels with *copulae*<sup>56</sup>. As in Frontinus and in Livy, through the boarding the Romans ensure that the battle could only be won through *virtus*, and therefore they effectively ensure their own victory: *reliquum erat certamen positum in virtute, qua nostri milites facile superabant*<sup>57</sup>. Once again, one can detect the usual elements: a naval engagement, in which technical ability is more important, is turned into a land battle through harpoons and bridges, and the contest that emerges is centred around *virtus*; the Romans, therefore, easily win.

Sources about Roman boarding operations are scanty. Modern authors tend to suppose that they relied heavily on them, and that they preferred them to ramming<sup>58</sup>. This is probable, although it is difficult to ascertain whether Rome's adversaries shared this preference. At any rate, such tactics were not peculiar to the Romans and were quite widespread in Hellenistic naval warfare. What matters here is the Roman self-representation. During the Republic, they very seldom present themselves as technically advanced, preferring to underline their ability to learn from others<sup>59</sup>. On the other hand, they always are the people of *virtus*, even when they lose<sup>60</sup>. Even in the case of a naval battle, in which experience and technical skill are expected to be

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<sup>55</sup> In this case, the enemy's superiority was due to the fact that their ships were higher and sturdier, better suited to the conditions of the ocean.

<sup>56</sup> Another quite mysterious device: *copula* literally simply means 'bond', although, from *P. Mich.* 8, 407, line 20, it appears that in the early second century AD this word defined a tool which was part of the equipment of the marines.

<sup>57</sup> *Caes. Gall.* 3, 14, 8 («The rest of the conflict was a question of courage, in which our own troops easily had the advantage»). Caesar also points out that he was watching the battle from the coast, which made the soldiers even more daring, in the hope of catching his attention.

<sup>58</sup> TARN 1930, 145-151; CASSON 1986, 120-123 and above all CARRO 2012 and 2020, 21-25.

<sup>59</sup> In the context of the first Punic war, in particular, they apparently told the Carthaginians that in the event of a confrontation at sea they would learn from the Carthaginians the art of naval warfare, and best them in their own element (*Diod.* 23, 1, 2; *Ineditum Vaticanum* 2).

<sup>60</sup> Perhaps the best example is Valerius Maximus' presentation of the battle of Cannae (7, 4, ext.2): as the Carthaginians won through stratagems, and not through valour, Roman *virtus* was deceived, but not conquered: *Quae nunc certissima circumventae virtutis nostrae excusatio est, quoniam decepti magis quam victi sumus* («That is now the surest excuse for our hoodwinked valour, since we were deceived rather than vanquished»).



important, they appear to choose to underline their preference for boarding over manoeuvring and to base the juxtaposition between themselves and their enemies on courage and military prowess. Of course, this insistence on the Roman native *virtus* by Roman sources does not mean that the Romans really were more courageous than their enemies, nor more skilled in land battles (which, again, a boarding operation is not), nor, on the other hand, that relied less than the Carthaginians on technique and stratagems. This self-representation is important because of its cultural implications, rather than as a truthful portrait of the differences between the Romans and the Carthaginians.

Going back to the ravens, the tradition reported by Polybius appears to fit this context very well. While it is highly unlikely, I think, that it goes back to a Punic tradition, it is in accord with the Roman self-representation. The reader finds the Romans unwilling to fight a contest of technical ability. Rather, they devise a plan to fight *quasi in solido* and to win through their own superior *virtus*. Given the authorities that he himself mentions, Polybius' source must be Fabius Pictor<sup>61</sup>. Of course, this does not mean that Polybius uncritically repurposed Fabius' account<sup>62</sup>. If he really compared the accounts of Fabius and Philinus about the battles of the first Punic war, it should be presumed that the battle was really won mainly through boarding operations<sup>63</sup>. Probably, Polybius just took from Fabius the insistence on the superiority of Roman *virtus*. Indeed, in a passage in which he appears to express his personal opinions about the entire war, Polybius himself declares that the Romans and the Italians were, as a rule, more courageous than their Punic enemies<sup>64</sup>. This means that he could be more than ready to accept Fabius' presentation of the battle. The same tradition was probably borrowed by Livy, hence the remarks that can be found in Frontinus and Florus, in accordance with the Polybian account. I think that we should, in short,

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<sup>61</sup> This is what WALBANK 1945, 12-13 thought. The historian, however, argued that this story stemmed from the tragic flavour of Fabius' work, and from his insistence on sensational details.

<sup>62</sup> As already noted, Polybius was well aware of Fabius' tendency to be partial to the Romans, and he was able to compare his account with that of Philinus.

<sup>63</sup> This can also be inferred from the number of the captured and sunk ships recorded by Orosius and Eutropius (thirty-one *captae*, thirteen or fourteen *mersae*; but note that Pol. 1, 23, 10 gives a total of fifty!). Duilius' inscription also mentions *naveis catturate cum sociis*.

<sup>64</sup> Pol. 6, 52, 10: διαφέρουσι μὲν οὖν καὶ φύσει πάντες Ἰταλιῶται Φοινίκων καὶ Λιβύων τῇ τε σωματικῇ ῥώμῃ καὶ ταῖς ψυχικαῖς τόλμαις («Now not only do Italians in general naturally excel Phoenicians and Africans in bodily strength and personal courage...»); see also 1, 64, 6.



consider Polybius' presentation of the battle of Mylae and the importance of the *corvi* in the light of the distinctively Roman self-representation centred around *virtus*, and trace these elements back to the annalistic tradition.

### Conclusion

In this text, I purposely did not take into account the problem of the existence or non-existence of the *corvi*. While such a study would be interesting (although hardly original), a cultural approach appears to be equally important. If the conclusions reached in this paper are accepted, Polybius' presentation, which derives from the Roman tradition, reveals some aspects of Roman military culture and how the Romans chose to represent themselves at war at sea. The central point of this self-portrait, as repeatedly stressed in the preceding paragraphs, is the concept of *virtus*, the real pillar of the Roman war discourse<sup>65</sup>.

It would perhaps be even more interesting to be able to compare this presentation with the Carthaginian one. Polybius could at least read the philo-Punic Philinus; to a modern reader, no such source is available. The closest one can get is a fragment of the historical work by Sosylus, which relates of a naval battle during the Hannibalic war<sup>66</sup>. In the papyrus, the Roman victory seems to be attributed to their Massaliote allies, and thus to Greek technical excellence<sup>67</sup>. It might be that the Carthaginians really considered the Romans to be inexperienced landlubbers; going back to the first Punic war, Diodorus and the *Ineditum Vaticanum* quote the threat of a Carthaginian leader who told the Romans that in the event of a war at sea the Romans would not even dare to wash their hands in the sea<sup>68</sup>. As already pointed out, at any rate, one cannot suppose that they shared the Roman view according to which, although superior in terms of their naval skill, the

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<sup>65</sup> MCDONNELL 2006, 59-71 underlines the importance of *virtus* as military and physical courage (often aggressively charged) in the culture of the middle republic.

<sup>66</sup> P. Würzb. 1 (= FGrHist 176 f 1; for a list of the possible battles to which this text may refer see Roller's commentary in the *New Jacoby*). Note, however, that Sosylus, like Philinus, is a Greek, and not a Carthaginian. Their partiality to the Carthaginians does not assure that in their works the Punic point of view was faithfully preserved.

<sup>67</sup> ZECCHINI 1997, 1062-1063; SCHEPENS 2013, 404-406. The historian writes that the Massaliotes brought about the success of the Romans (ἤρξαν τό τε γὰρ πρῶται καὶ τῆς ὅλης εὐημερίας ἀ[ῖ]τ[ι]α κατέστησαν Ῥωμαίοις). The Massaliotes, according to Sosylus, had been able to study Punic tactics, and through their own skill they managed to defeat the Carthaginians.

<sup>68</sup> Diod. 23, 1, 2; *Ineditum Vaticanum* 2. Once again, however, it is very difficult to tell whether this tradition reflects a real Punic point of view.



Carthaginians lacked the Roman martial virtue. It is also difficult to assess how much these texts reflect the Punic point of view, and one cannot but regret that only the Roman voice has survived.

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### Abstract

Through an analysis of the cultural implications of Polybius' account of the battle of Mylae and of the importance of the Roman *corvus*, this text attempts to show that the origin of this tradition is not Carthaginian, but Roman. The influence of Roman prejudices should not lead modern historians to conceive the Punic military culture as our Latin sources portray it, and there is no hint that the Carthaginians could develop a tradition which presented themselves as skilled sailors but poor fighters, defeated by the Romans in a naval battle 'as if on land'. On the other hand, such a representation fits well with the traditional Roman emphasis on their own native *virtus*, through which they were said to be able to beat the enemy's technique.

Keywords: Battle of Mylae, *corvus*, Punic military culture, Roman military culture, Roman *virtus*

Attraverso un'analisi degli aspetti di rilevanza culturale del testo di Polibio relativo alla battaglia di Milazzo e all'impiego dei corvi romani, questo testo tenta di mostrare come l'origine di questa tradizione vada rintracciata nel mondo romano, e non punico. A dispetto dei pregiudizi romani, non vi sono indizi che facciano pensare che i Cartaginesi potessero accettare una rappresentazione che li vedesse come abili marinai, ma soldati vili e incapaci, sconfitti dai Romani in una battaglia navale combattuta 'quasi come su terra'. Invece questa tradizione si accorda bene con la tradizionale enfasi romana sulla propria *virtus*, che, a loro giudizio, consentiva loro di vincere la tecnica nemica.

Parole chiave: Battaglia di Milazzo, corvo, cultura militare punica, cultura militare romana, *virtus* romana