

Chapter I

Introduction

1 The Rise and Fall of the ‘Roman Navy’

In A.D. 269 a horde of Goths ripped up and down the Aegean, spreading havoc among the islands. Goths on the warpath were nothing new: the movement of barbarian peoples that was to tear huge rents in the fabric of the Roman Empire was well under way by this time. What was new was to find them on the sea. After two centuries of easy living, carrying out peacetime maneuvers and ferrying troops, **Rome’s great navy, like so much else in the empire, had gone soft.**¹

Although originally published in 1959, the narrative expounded by Casson of a once great ‘Roman navy’ growing decadent and then disappearing in the 3rd or 4th century continues to have a major influence on modern scholarship.² However, this account has little backing from primary source material. Rather, it has been artificially constructed from a number of factors, including modern connotations of what constitutes a navy, a flawed focus based almost solely on epigraphic material, and an early 20th century historical foundation which viewed the 3rd and 4th centuries as only a period of decline and subsequently not worth studying. This book aims to challenge this understanding by reassessing the history, role, and development of naval forces as well as the ships they employed during the later Roman Empire (3rd–6th centuries). Yet, prior to analysis, it is necessary to first provide an overview of earlier scholarship and the assumptions which have led to the current state of research.

The foundation, and still the only serious English monograph, for the study of Roman imperial naval forces remains that of Starr’s *The Roman Imperial Navy 31 B.C.–A.D. 324*, originally published in 1941.³ In this work, Starr presented a rise and fall nar-

1 Casson 1991, 213. The second edition has been cited in this work.

2 All dates AD unless otherwise stated.

3 Starr 1993. The most recent third edition, virtually identical to earlier versions, has been cited in this work. In recent years, several English monographs have been published which are aimed at

rative beginning with Augustus and ending with Constantine. According to Starr, Augustus founded the “Roman imperial navy” shortly after the Battle of Actium in 31 BC.⁴ This was achieved by creating two flagship praetorian fleets in Italy, one at Misenum near Rome and the other at Ravenna on the Adriatic.⁵ Over the course of the 1st and early 2nd centuries, this naval system was supplemented by additional provincial fleets scattered throughout the Mediterranean.⁶ For example, the *classis Alexandrina* protected the shores of Egypt and the Nile, whereas the *classis Syriaca* monitored the eastern Mediterranean.⁷ Additionally, the great rivers of the northern frontier, the Danube and the Rhine, were given fleets as well as the shores of Britain and the Black Sea (Fig. 1).⁸ In the framework provided by Starr, these fleets are treated as an independent navy which maintained authority over all maritime matters within their respective geographic spheres of operations. This contrasts with the army which held similar power over all military duties on land. For instance, the *classis Germanica* is described as controlling multiple “naval stations” along Germania Inferior, all under the command of a single *praefectus* headquartered at Colonia Agrippina (Cologne).⁹

According to Starr, this naval system functioned well early on but gradually weakened over the centuries. With the Mediterranean acting virtually as a Roman lake, the flagship praetorian units had little practical function, and the whole system was subsequently allowed to decay.¹⁰ Although there is less evidence for the provincial fleets, they too appear to have been afflicted by this decline. This would prove a major error in the middle of the 3rd century when the Empire was beset by numerous invasions on multiple fronts. Although there is some evidence of fleets fighting against the barbarian invaders, these cannot be identified with the earlier navy, proving that it had largely been wiped out.¹¹ Following this 3rd century crisis, Diocletian would restore the power of the Roman military but “did not devote any significant attention to the sea.”¹² As a result, the naval Battle of the Hellespont in 324 can be viewed as the definitive termi-

popular audiences. Most notably, Pitassi (2009; 2011; 2012) has written three books dedicated to Roman naval forces and warships. Although sometimes providing useful insights, these works commonly misinterpret primary sources while also regularly providing facts and figures without reference. Similarly, D’Amato (2009; 2016; 2017) has published three illustrated general overviews covering both the early and late Roman Empire. Unfortunately, these works display a superficial understanding of the topic and are very inconsistent in referencing, even copying entire sentences from earlier authors without citation on multiple occasions.

4 Starr 1993, 7–11.

5 For Starr’s analysis of the fleets at Misenum and Ravenna, see Starr 1993, 11–105.

6 For Starr’s overview of these fleets, see Starr 1993, 106–123.

7 For the *classis Alexandrina* and *classis Syriaca*, see Starr 1993, 109–117.

8 For Starr’s analysis of these northern fleets, see Starr 1993, 124–166.

9 Starr 1993, 147–148.

10 Starr 1993, 193–194.

11 Starr 1993, 196.

12 Starr 1989, 79. This quote comes from a later work on Mediterranean sea power which, although written over 40 years later, retained virtually the same conclusions (Starr 1993, 197).

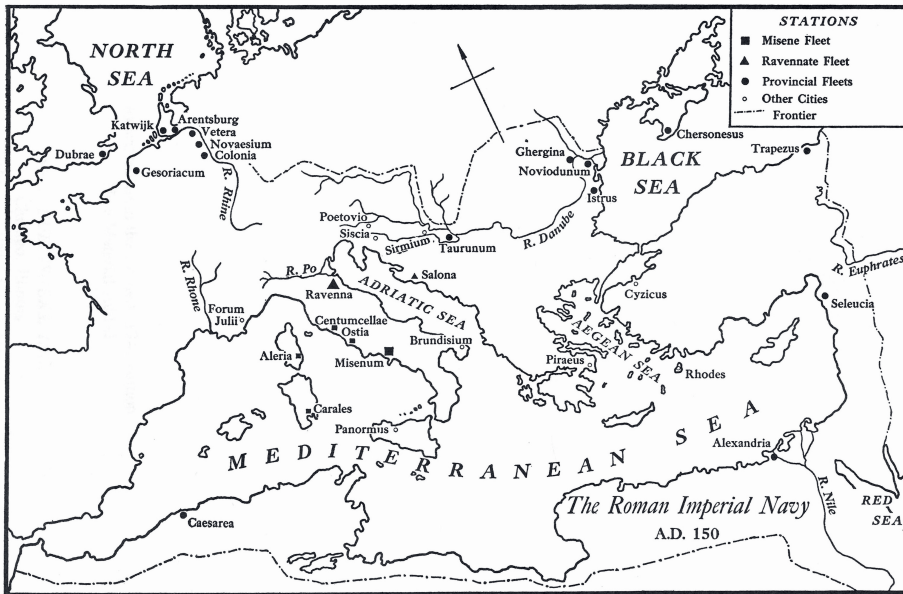


Fig. 1 The early “Roman imperial navy” according to Starr. Image from Starr 1993, iv (Reproduced with permission from Cornell University Press).

nus for the history of the Roman navy. While the existence of some later fleets and naval conflicts are acknowledged, these are no longer part of the “Augustan navy” and not worth discussing.¹³

Since its publication in 1941, Starr’s work has come to be seen as the standard work on the imperial navy, with the majority of scholarship closely following his conclusions.¹⁴ Essentially, this has led to a distinct tendency of naval scholars focusing on the early imperial period, before dismissing the topic after the late 3rd/early 4th century. A prime example of this trend is Casson’s aforementioned 1959 work, *The Ancient Mariners: Seafarers and Sea Fighters of the Mediterranean in Ancient Times*. In this maritime Mediterranean history, Casson devoted a significant amount of attention to the Roman imperial period, relying on Starr throughout. Unsurprisingly, Casson abruptly ended his account in the 3rd century, before summarising the next three centuries in a paragraph.¹⁵ Similarly, Rankov’s 1995 article, *Fleets of the Early Roman Empire*, 31 BC-AD

¹³ Starr 1993, 198.

¹⁴ For example, Rougé (1981, 216), Rummel (2008, 12), and Hopkins (2014, 10) all referred to scholarship’s reliance on Starr.

¹⁵ Casson 1991, 213. This is especially notable as Casson (1991, 143–213) went into great depth in other periods, covering the entirety of Roman naval history from the 3rd century BC.

324, owed much to Starr, following the same timescale and reaching virtually the same conclusions.¹⁶

This trend of outright dismissing later Roman fleets is also observable in the works of early medieval and Byzantine scholars. For example, in Lewis and Runyan's 1985 monograph, *European Naval and Maritime History 300–1500*, the fleets of the later Roman Empire were described briefly as a grim segue between the 'great' navies of the early Roman and early Byzantine periods.¹⁷ These authors even went as far as to claim that it was "a moribund and dead naval system" which existed during the 3rd–early 6th centuries, until Justinian supposedly "established a new eastern Roman or Byzantine navy".¹⁸ A 1995 article by Hocker made similar claims, suggesting that the practice of maintaining standing warships was only reimplemented during the reign of Anastasius and then fully developed under Justinian.¹⁹ In both 2005 and 2015 articles, Zuckerman pushed this date forward even further, arguing that the eastern Empire did not employ standing fleets until the creation of the *Karabisianoï* under Constans II.²⁰ Essentially, it can be said that Roman naval scholars have generally treated the 3rd–early 6th centuries as a period of decline used to conveniently conclude their works. On the other hand, medieval scholars have employed a similar narrative, albeit as a brief introduction, before arguing for an alleged naval restoration at some point in the 6th or 7th century.

Naturally, the arguments from these specialised works have influenced wider scholarly discourse. For example, in a 2002 monograph focused on late Roman warlords, MacGeorge confidently asserted that "all naval historians of the ancient world agree that Roman sea power had been run down to almost nothing by the late fourth century AD, and most pass over the next couple of centuries in a few sentences".²¹ Indeed, it has become commonplace for works dedicated to the late Roman military to largely ignore events at sea. This tendency is well illustrated by Lee's 2007 monograph, *War in Late Antiquity: A Social History*, which specified that "the Roman navy is not discussed here, since it was generally of limited importance during late antiquity".²² However, contrary to these general assumptions, there have been several (primarily non-English) works which have suggested differing viewpoints on late Roman fleets and naval forces.²³ For example, preceding Starr by two years, a 1939 French article by Courtois devoted extensive attention to the later Roman period. While also arguing that the

16 Rankov 1995, 85.

17 Lewis and Runyan 1985, 2–16.

18 Lewis and Runyan 1985, 3, 16.

19 Hocker 1995, 86, 90.

20 Zuckerman 2005, 109–117; 2015, 58–72.

21 MacGeorge 2002, 306.

22 Lee 2007, 212.

23 A rare English exception is that of Moss (1973, 722–728), who argued that continued Roman sea power played a major role in events of the 5th century. However, as noted by MacGeorge (2002, 307–309), this article has had little impact on subsequent scholarship.

fleets of the Mediterranean must have declined through lack of use, Courtois deviated strongly from his contemporary by suggesting that the naval units stationed along the northern frontier were actually strengthened and improved, playing a much greater role in the late military framework than during the Principate.²⁴

In German scholarship, perhaps the most substantial treatment of the subject is that of Kienast's 1966 monograph, *Untersuchungen zu den Kriegsflotten der römischen Kaiserzeit*. Also diverging from Starr, this work extended its account until the end of the 4th century and reached markedly different conclusions. Rather than a decline and abandonment, Kienast argued that the Roman navy was simply reformed as a part of the greater military reorganisation undertaken during the reigns of Diocletian and Constantine, going as far as to claim that this new navy, on both the Mediterranean and the northern frontier, was of an even greater importance than that of the Principate.²⁵ However, the most in-depth, and arguably useful, work on Roman imperial naval forces remains that of Reddé's 1986 French monograph, *Mare Nostrum*. Going beyond both Starr and Kienast, Reddé expanded his analysis well into the 5th and even 6th centuries, resulting in a more comprehensive overview of Roman fleet activity than his predecessors. Rather than an outright collapse, Reddé also suggested that the late navy underwent more of a transformation paralleling that of the army. Contrasting with the few great regional *classes* maintained in the Principate, the late Empire featured many smaller ones scattered throughout the Mediterranean and along the northern frontier. Similar to the late legions, these new *classes* originated from the fragmented remains of their earlier counterparts. While more capable than usually admitted, it was ultimately concluded that this new locally focused system represented an overall decline from the large and mobile fleets of the early Empire.²⁶

Although varied in their conclusions, these authors all share the same approach in that they largely treated the various *classes* of the Roman imperial period as an equivalent to a modern navy.²⁷ For example, since Starr, it has been common to view these units as a distinct entity from their terrestrial counterparts. Therefore, during times of war, the *classes* would be tasked with controlling matters at sea, whereas the legions would hold jurisdiction on land. Although Starr himself was somewhat reserved on these fleets' geographic scope and authority, many of his successors have expanded upon his framework considerably, especially concerning the provincial fleets.²⁸ For example, Starr described the *classis Britannica* as a unit essentially concerned with logis-

24 Courtois 1939.

25 Kienast 1966, 124–157.

26 Reddé 1986, 572–652.

27 This has been an issue throughout the field of Roman military studies. As noted by Alston (1995, 3–4), scholars have generally interpreted the Roman military “using methodologies and assumptions developed to understand modern armies”.

28 Rummel 2008, 22.

tical supply from the continent to Britain across the Channel.²⁹ However, subsequent authors have frequently portrayed the fleet as having naval authority, and regularly operating, along all of Britain's coasts. These interpretations have led to the common view that the *classis Britannica* was a substantial military power with troops stationed in various bases throughout the province.³⁰

Such interpretations have primarily stemmed from the methodology employed in the study of Roman imperial naval forces. Unlike the praetorian fleets in Italy, the provincial *classes* in both the Mediterranean and along the northern frontier almost never appear in literary sources. As a result, scholars have been almost solely dependent on the distribution of archaeological evidence, namely stamped building materials and funerary inscriptions, in their attempts at tracing each unit's history.³¹ Conventionally, it has been common practice to identify the presumed naval bases of each *classis* based on the locations in which these materials have been found.³² For example, inscriptions mentioning the involvement of the *classis Britannica* in the construction of Hadrian's Wall have been used to justify the position of a large and far-ranging British fleet.³³ Similarly, finds associated with the *classis Moesica* at several locations on the lower Danube have been used to argue that this fleet was a substantial force which frequently operated from nearly all the fortresses along the lower Danube basin and western Black Sea.³⁴ Consequently, the eventual disappearance of these materials during the 3rd century has been treated as the major piece of evidence indicating a late naval collapse.

These arguments, based largely on modern preconceptions of how 'navies' are meant to operate, combined with the liberal use of epigraphic material, have created the common notion that the provincial fleets were relatively substantial units, operating over wide geographic areas, and having authority over the maritime/riverine matters in their region. However, more recent scholarship has begun reassessing this evidence by focusing on the primary source material itself. For example, as early as 1988, Saddington observed that the provincial fleets never appear to have been a significant factor in the campaigns of conquest in the 1st and 2nd centuries. Rather, the available

29 Starr 1993, 152–153.

30 Cleere 1977, 16–19; Philp 1981, 115; Salway 1981, 528–530; Allen and Fulford 1999, 164–181; Mattingly 2006, 129. Despite all arguing for a fleet with numerous bases, each author varied considerably as to the extent of operations and actual functions of the fleet.

31 Rummel 2008, 22–26.

32 For example, Starr (1993, 106–166) relied heavily on this method, particularly for the provincial fleets.

33 Mason 2003, 120–128. For two such inscriptions found at Birdoswald, see *RIB* I, 1944, 1945. For another found near Benwell, see *RIB* I, 1340.

34 Bounegru and Zahariade (1996, 10–19), the only authors to have discussed the *classis Moesica* in depth, argued that it operated from bases along the entirety of the lower Danube as well as a third of the Black Sea. Their evidence for such a proposal, however, was based almost solely on inscription and stamped tile discoveries. In fact, many forts assumed as bases provided no evidence at all but were instead identified as such merely due to their location along the river or coast.

source material suggests that the Romans always created large ad hoc fleets during military invasions. As a result, there appears to be a notable discrepancy between the "standing" provincial fleets vs. the ad hoc "invasion" fleets employed during conquest.³⁵ Although brief and not examined in depth, Saddington's observations highlighted a major problem in the traditional interpretation of Roman imperial *classes*. Essentially, if these fleets were the large and dominant forces often assumed, why were they not simply employed as the naval arm during campaigns?

In a 2008 PhD thesis, Rummel took this idea further by systematically reviewing the archaeological evidence from fortresses commonly assumed to have been naval stations associated with the *classes* of the northern frontier (Britain, Rhine and Danube). Significantly, rather than a widespread distribution, the inscriptions and stamped building materials tended to cluster around the perceived headquarters of each fleet, with most locations providing no direct evidence whatsoever. Instead, it appears that most of these sites had previously been identified as naval stations solely due to their coastal or riverine location.³⁶ Furthermore, military *diplomata* are explicit that these *classes* fell under the authority of individual provincial governors. For instance, an example from 107 clearly identifies the *classis Pannonica* as part of the *exercitus Pannoniae Inferioris*, rather than the transprovincial and pseudo-independent force often assumed by scholars.³⁷ This would suggest that these fleets were much smaller and locally confined units than commonly assumed.

However, the comparative weakness of these *classes* does not indicate that Rome lacked naval power along the northern frontier.³⁸ This is because Rummel indicated numerous epigraphic examples which suggest that the legions, and even auxiliary units, maintained warships as part of their organisational structure. For example, an altar erected by a veteran of the *legio VI Victrix* at York records his rank as that of a helmsman (*gubernator*).³⁹ Similarly, the legionary bases at Mainz on the Rhine and Novae on the Danube both produced tiles stamped with images of warships.⁴⁰ Therefore, although the provincial *classes* of the Roman military were likely much smaller than is often suggested, these forces only represented a small portion of the naval power available to the Romans during a campaign. Rather than an organisational distinc-

35 Saddington 1988, 301–304. This idea was also expressed in later works (Saddington 1990, 229; 1991, 399).

36 Rummel 2008, 289–290. For Rummel's complete analysis and catalogue of ancient sites, see Rummel 2008, 28–287.

37 Rummel 2008, 29–31.

38 Rummel 2008, 299–301.

39 Rummel 2008, 244. For the inscription itself, see *RIB* I, 653. For a summary of similar examples elsewhere in the Empire, see Wintjes 2016, 17–18.

40 For the Mainz tiles, see Höckmann 1993, 131; Pferdehirt 1995, 57; Rummel 2008, 199–203. For the Novae tiles, see Sarnowski and Trynkowski 1986, 536–540; Rummel 2008, 105; Sarnowski 2012, 84–86.

tion between navy and army, fleets and naval forces were simply incorporated directly into the general apparatus of the Roman military.⁴¹ Indeed, Rummel's findings are supported by the terminology employed by the members of *classes* themselves. Since Starr, it has been observed that these individuals always described themselves as *milites* instead of *nautae* on funerary inscriptions.⁴² In fact, terms such as *classici*, *classiarii*, and *nautae* were usually employed only when there was a clear need to distinguish between maritime and terrestrial forces.⁴³ Significantly, this was not mere convention but a legal right, as according to Ulpian in the early 3rd century, "*in classibus omnes remiges et nautae milites sunt*".⁴⁴

In a 2016 article, Wintjes reinforced Rummel's conclusions, arguing that it is inherently wrong to interpret the provincial fleets, on both the Mediterranean and the northern frontier, as a Roman navy separate from that of the army. Instead, he recommended viewing the *classes* of the Empire as "army units equipped with boats" which were necessary for their duties.⁴⁵ In the event of a campaign, these units would supplement the naval forces already operated by the legions in combination with large numbers of campaign-specific constructed warships and requisitioned civilian vessels.⁴⁶ Notably, Wintjes suggested that this new understanding of Roman fleets has massive connotations for the study of late Roman naval history. Essentially, if these fleets were never the 'great' entities so often claimed in the Principate, how could they have grown decadent, become neglected, and then fragmented into the many smaller units mentioned in late historical sources like the *Notitia Dignitatum*?⁴⁷ Although a significant observation, Wintjes' work was still focused on the early provincial fleets. As a result, no attempt was made to analyse the discrepancy.

Likewise, the evidence concerning the Italian fleets has also begun to be reassessed in recent years. Unlike the provincial *classes*, it is clear from both archaeological and literary evidence that the praetorian fleets at Misenum and Ravenna were considerable units which regularly operated throughout the Mediterranean. Yet, in a 2014 PhD thesis, Hopkins argued that these units also had little in common with a modern navy. Rather, they were more akin to a "flexible manpower pool" placed under the direct control of the emperor and employed in a broad variety of tasks on both land and sea.⁴⁸ Some of these activities, such as combating pirates and fighting in both civil and foreign wars, were akin to a typical Mediterranean war fleet. However, the majority, such

41 Rummel 2008, 289–301.

42 According to Starr (1993, 58), *classis* members "jealously claimed their lawful title of soldiers".

43 Saddington 2007, 212.

44 *Dig.* 37.13.1.

45 Wintjes 2016, 21.

46 Wintjes 2016, 16–17.

47 Wintjes 2016, 20.

48 Hopkins 2014, 19–20. Saddington (2007, 210) suggested a similar viewpoint, stating that "it is best to regard the Italian fleets as part of the immediate forces available to the emperor".

as supporting the *annona*, transporting important officials, and maintaining communication links between imperial villas, were employed solely for the benefit of the emperor as a way of supporting his imperial authority and role as benefactor of the Roman population.⁴⁹ All of these responsibilities, whether explicitly military or not, were equally regarded as part of a soldier's duty (*militia*).⁵⁰ Although acknowledging the potential ramifications of these findings in the study of later *classes*, Hopkins own analysis concluded at the end of the 2nd century.

From this overview, it is clear that the naval forces employed by the Roman military have traditionally been viewed through the anachronistic lens of modern military organisation and deployment. As a result, naval scholars have tended to treat the *classes* of the Roman Empire in the same vein as that of a modern navy. This assumption has led to an over-exaggeration of the size and importance of provincial fleets, while also ignoring other standing forces which were inherently both terrestrial and naval in character (legions and auxiliary units). This focus on a 'Roman navy' has also led to a narrow understanding of the Italian fleets, while ignoring their role as general agents of the emperor, engaged in numerous combat and non-combat-related activities. This narrow view, along with a largely uninterested historical tradition, has led to the common assessment that the late Roman military was largely devoid of units with naval capability. Although elements of the traditional view have been challenged in recent scholarly works, these too have focused almost solely on the naval forces of the Principate. The fleets and naval forces employed by the later Roman Empire (3rd–6th centuries CE) are in substantial need of reassessment. However, before moving onto a broader analysis, it is first necessary to reanalyse the event which has most often been used to justify the theory of a late naval collapse: the Battle of the Hellespont in 324.

2 The Battle of the Hellespont (324)

2.1 Historical Background and Surviving Source Material

Following a series of civil wars, the tetrarchic system established by Diocletian had largely been dismantled by 314. The Roman Empire was now ruled by two men, Constantine in the West, and Licinius in the East. Over the next decade, these rulers would also clash in two civil wars, separated by a brief respite, with Constantine eventually emerging as sole emperor in 324. Owing to the sheer magnitude and importance of these events, as well as Constantine's status as the first Christian emperor, the conflicts are frequently mentioned in historical sources. However, due to the nature of late liter-

49 Hopkins 2014, 232–293.

50 Hopkins 2014, 76–106.

ary material, often focused on brief imperial biographies or chronicle notices, the actual details of these campaigns are almost always ignored. As such, there is a tendency for ancient writers to combine both wars as if they were a single campaign or to only mention the events of a single conflict while ignoring the other.⁵¹ Regarding the second war in particular, several sources relate that Constantine defeated Licinius in battles on both land and sea, while others only refer to one or more battles fought on land.⁵² Others still, contain little historical information and are instead highly stylised and metaphorical, portraying Constantine as a Christian saviour prevailing over the wickedness of the pagan Licinius.⁵³

Given the limited usefulness of most surviving accounts, there are only two extant sources which provide a continuous and relatively full narrative of both campaigns. The first is that of the 6th century historian Zosimus who, although writing well after the events in question, is generally believed to have sourced his information on 4th century events from the 4th/5th century historian, Eunapius of Sardis.⁵⁴ The second is that of the so-called *Anonymus Valesianus I* (*Anonymus Valesianus*), also known as the *Origo Constantini Imperatoris*, a somewhat mysterious anonymous biography of Constantine which likely dates to the 4th century.⁵⁵ Of these accounts, the narrative provided by Zosimus is longer, more detailed, and provides a more in-depth description of fleet actions in 324. Seemingly due to these reasons, as well as the relative obscurity of the *Anonymus Valesianus*, most modern naval scholars have tended to rely almost solely on Zosimus for their interpretations of the Battle of the Hellespont, with some even neglecting to consult or acknowledge the *Anonymus Valesianus* entirely.⁵⁶ Due to the importance of this account in Roman naval historiography, it is necessary to provide a summary of Zosimus' narrative before reanalysing its contents.

51 For accounts combining the events of both wars, see Eutr. 10.5–6; *Epit. de Caes.* 41.5–7; Oros. 7.28.18–19. For those which omit the first war, see Theoph. AM 5815; Soc. 1.4. Jerome (*Chron.* s.a. 313, 323) only mentioned the Battle of Cibalae during the first war, before referencing Licinius' execution a decade later.

52 Apart from the mentions of victories on land and sea, no further details are given (Eutr. 10.5–6; Oros. 7.28.18–19; Theoph. AM 5815; Soc. 1.4; Soz. 1.6–7). Aurelius Victor (*Caes.* 41.1–9) and Zonaras (13.1) distinguished between two separate conflicts but provided almost no details of either. The *Consularia Constantinopolitana* (s. a. 324.1–2) lists both major land battles at Adrianople and Chrysopolis but does not include a naval battle.

53 *Chron. Pasch.* s.a. 324; Eus. HE 10.9.2–6; V. Const. 2.1–18. In a separate line of propaganda, Jordanes (*Get.* 111) described the civil wars as an example of Gothic loyalty to the Constantinian dynasty. In actuality, the Goths were allied with Licinius (Anon. Val. 5.27).

54 For Zosimus' account of both wars, see Zos. 2.18–28. For a discussion on the original contents of Eunapius' now lost history and Zosimus' use of it, see Blockley 1981, 1–26.

55 For the history of the wars according to the *Anonymus Valesianus*, see Anon. Val. 5.13–29. For a discussion on the various theories regarding dating and potential revisions, see Winkelmann 2003, 15–17. The second half of the text, the *Anonymus Valesianus II*, is an unrelated account describing events of the late 5th and early 6th centuries.

56 Despite the significance ascribed to the battle, neither Rankov (1995, 85), Pitassi (2009, 292–293; 2011, 152; 2012, 16), nor D'Amato (2017, 6–7, 20–21) cited the *Anonymus Valesianus* in their analyses.