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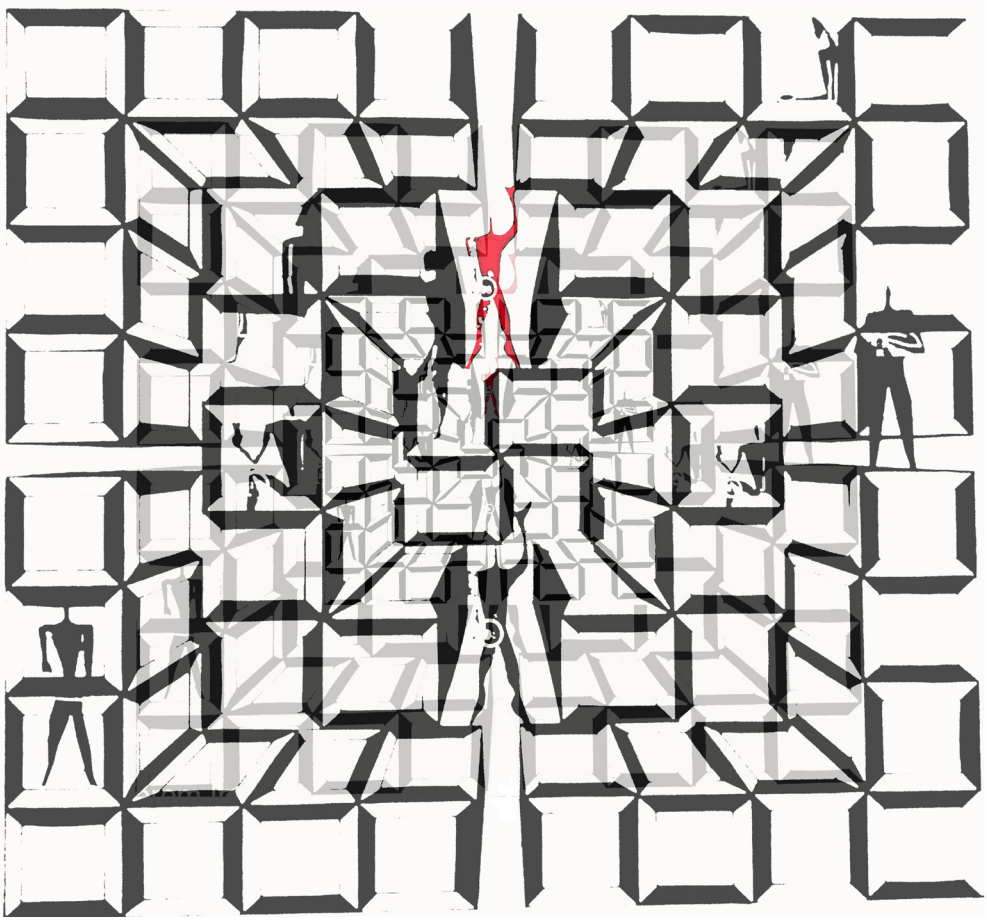
a cura di Giulia Pellegri



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Symbology and myth in ancient ships: the aplustre

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Abstract

The ancient ships had always been equipped with ornaments both in the bow and in the stern, which were generally raised above the other parts of the deck and placed above the point where the helmsman had his seat. The purpose of these ornaments was to flaunt power, but also to intimidate and ward off both evil spirits and enemies. At the bow, in addition to the animal-shaped rostrum, there was a decoration on the top of the bow, the *acrostolium* (ἀκροστόλιον), archetype of what would become the figurehead from the 16th century, and above the rostrum, where bow "sees" the sea, i.e. apotropaic eyes. In the stern, an element emerged in importance, which anticipates the symbol par excellence of ancient ships: the *aplustre* (ἄφλαστον), flanked internally by the *chêniscus* (χηνίσκος) goose-shaped ornament or more generally a bird's head. The ornament we want to deal with in this short note is exactly what decorated the top of the stern like a plume: the aplustre. It is an ornament formed of wooden planks, an extension of the planking, which constituted the highest part of the stern of a ship. The aplustre was a one or more volute plume, otherwise in the shape of an animal with a twisted neck or simply a fan like a bird's tail, a sign of recognition of the ship but also an image of the ship's tutelary deity. The aplustre was the heart and soul of the warship and had to flaunt the strength and power of a navy; he was endowed with magical powers capable of protecting the ship during combat and of being a guide and protection for the helmsman during navigation. The myth of the aplustre as protection (or *tutela*) of the boat means that its destruction - as Lucretius and Cicero wrote - had to be teaching seafarers to admonish them in facing the pitfalls and dangers of navigation with the right respect for Poseidon. Not only that, the importance of this object was such that the aplustre was a sought after spoil of war at the end of a naval battle, for this reason, it was animatedly defended by sailors and furiously coveted by opponents. The strong symbolic value assigned to this constructive-decorative part of the ship also made it a sort of symbol-trophy, which was to be torn from the enemy ship and carried in triumph, otherwise it was exhibited as an emblem of a naval victory. Vice versa, his loss translated into the image of a tragedy for a defeat suffered a lack that had to be filled with a victory at sea to snatch the coveted trophy from the enemy again. The aplustre was, therefore, the representative ornament par excellence of ships, of great symbolic value on which « *fulgent Argoæ stellis* », as Germanicus wrote in the *Aratea phaenomena*.

Abstract

Le imbarcazioni antiche sono sempre state dotate di ornamenti sia a prua sia a poppa, questi ultimi generalmente sopraelevati rispetto alle altre parti del ponte e posti superiormente al punto dove il timoniere aveva il suo sedile. Il fine di questi ornamenti era di ostentare potenza, ma anche intimorire e allontanare sia gli spiriti maligni sia i nemici. A prua oltre al rostro a forma di testa di animale, c'era una decorazione sulla sommità della ruota di prora, l'*acrostolio* (ἀκροστόλιον), archetipo di quella che diventerà dal XVI secolo la polena, e sopra il rostro, dove la ruota di prua "vede" il mare, gli occhi apotropaici. Nella poppa emergeva invece per importanza un elemento, che anticipa il simbolo per eccellenza delle navi antiche: l'*aplustre* (ἄφλαστον), affiancato internamente dal *chenisco* (χηνίσκος) ornamento a forma di oca o più in generale di testa di uccello. L'ornamento di cui vogliamo trattare in questa breve nota è proprio quello che decorava la sommità della ruota di poppa come un pennacchio: l'aplustre. Si tratta di un ornamento formato con assi di legno, prolungamento del fasciame, che costituiva la parte più alta della poppa di una nave. L'aplustre era un pennacchio a una o più volute, altrimenti un animale a collo ritorto o semplicemente un ventaglio come la coda di un uccello, segnale di riconoscimento della nave ma anche immagine della divinità tutelare della nave stessa. L'aplustre rappresentava il cuore e l'anima della nave da guerra e doveva ostentare la forza e la potenza di una marineria; era dotato di poteri magici in grado di proteggere la nave durante il combattimento e di essere guida e protezione per il timoniere durante la navigazione. Il mito dell'aplustre come *tutela* dell'imbarcazione fa sì che la sua distruzione – come scrivono Lucrezio e Cicerone – doveva essere di insegnamento agli uomini di mare per ammonirli nell'affrontare le insidie e i pericoli della navigazione con il giusto rispetto verso Poseidone. Non solo, l'importanza di questo oggetto era tale che l'aplustre era un ricercato bottino di guerra alla fine di uno scontro navale, per questo motivo era animosamente difeso dai marinai e furiosamente ambito dagli avversari. La forte valenza simbolica assegnata a questa parte costruttivo-decorativa della nave ne fece anche una specie di simbolo-trofeo, che doveva essere strappato alla nave nemica, e portato in trionfo, altrimenti esibito come emblema di una vittoria navale. Viceversa, la sua perdita si traduceva nell'immagine di una tragedia per una sconfitta patita, un vuoto che doveva essere colmato con una vittoria in mare per strappare nuovamente l'ambito trofeo al nemico. L'aplustre era dunque l'ornamento rappresentativo per eccellenza della nave, di grande valore simbolico sul quale « *fulgent Argoæ stellis* », come scrisse Giulio Cesare Germanico negli *Aratea phaenomena*.

Introduction

The ancient boats had always been provided with ornaments both on the stern and on the bow. The stern ornaments were generally raised above the other parts of the deck and indicated the place of the ship where the helmsman seat was; on the other hand, those in the bow were intended to flaunt power, as well as to intimidate and send away evil spirits, as well as enemies. Already in the eleventh century BC, the bow and stern of ships were carved and painted both to distinguish one ship from another, and to identify a category of ships: for example, a hawk or a hawk's eye was drawn down on funerary Egyptian boats employed on the Nile River. The ships that date back to the Second Minoan period had a raised stern surmounted by the symbol of a fish. In pre-classical Greece, the bow had a high horn and a large eye and was connected to a sharp prominence above the water (what would later become the rostrum). In the stern was placed a great horn, which will anticipate the symbol par excellence of

ancient ships: the aplustre (ἄφλαστον)[1]. In this way, the stern became as important as the bow: two oars-rudder (πηδάλια), a ladder to land, and at the top the aplustre, flanked internally by the chêniscus (χηνίσκος), a goose-shaped ornament or more generally a bird's head.
It was a form of representation, with signs, symbols and figures painted or carved in the wooden structures of the ship, testifying to some important aspects of a people's reality, aspects ranging from magic to religion, from myth to military power. As well as, for example, the apotropaic eyes (ἀποτρόπαιον) that were meant to ward off evil influence and equally scare the enemy. These eyes were a consequence of Democritus' theory (460 – c. 370 BC), the theory of idols or simulacra (εἴδωλα), according to which atoms detach themselves from objects and hit those who look at them by means of their effluvium. In ancient times, and this tradition has been handed just down to the last century, sailors have always justified the existence of the eyes painted on the boat, believing that without them the boat would not have been in a position to "see" the sea and thus it would not have been able to avoid the obstacles encountered during navigation. In this way, the boat assumed the status of "living being", capable of even following a route on its own or avoiding danger at sea. This feature was increasingly accentuated in ancient ships by the presence of the ears, *hepòtidae*[2] *or anchor hoists, or perhaps the bulkheads closing the row of oars placed at the bow and protruding from the sides, that contained the oarlocks*[3]*. Aeschylus (525 - 456 BC) wrote that warships observed the horizon with eyes wide open, to distinguish the right course to follow*[4]*. The Phaeacians ships, told in the Odyssey of the Homeric tradition, were sailed without a pilot (helmsman), because they were able to understand the thoughts of man and to find by themselves the right route to reach the desired destination*[5]*. The Chinese, Egyptians, Phoenicians, Greeks and Romans followed this custom of decorating the bow of the ships. According to the people of Crete, the eye painted in the bow of the boat was that of the goddess Rhea, on Egyptian ships it was the eye of Osiris or Horus, on the Phoenician and Greek triremes a form of protection from the evil eye, for the Chinese instead it represented the eye of a dragon or that of a phoenix, so much so that in the Eastern tradition the eye of the ship, understood as a living creature, was a fundamental part of the ship itself. The eye was necessary because it allowed the ship to choose for itself the best route to travel. After a long period after the fall of the Roman Empire, in the Middle Ages the apotropaic eye disappeared perhaps entirely, and only in the early twentieth century in the Mediterranean minor navy did it reappear as a symbolic element of the "living" nature of the boat.* Even today on the 'luzzu', a typical traditional Maltese boat used for fishing, apotropaic eyes are drawn in vivid colours[6] and they are part of the local seafaring culture.

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[1] Mollet, J. W. *An Illustrated Dictionary of Words used in Art and Archæology.* London: Sampson, Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1883; p. 19.
[2] In ancient ships equipped with rostrum, the *hepòtidae* (ἐτωτίδες), or anchor hoists (large hoist, placed almost at the extreme bow of the ship and suspended overboard, intended to tie the anchor with the block to the cable of the hoist on the deck), indicate each of the two spikes placed in the bow, on the sides of the rostrum, to concur in the impact together with the rostrum itself. They often took their place when they broke in the collision [Casson, 1971; p. 85-86].
[3] Medas, 2015-2016; p. 14.
[4] Aeschylus wrote in the third episode of the *Suppliants*, giving voice to Danaus « The trimming of its sail, its side-guards, and the prow that with its eyes scans its onward course, obeying—all too well for those to whom it is unfriendly—the guiding rudder at the stern. » from Aeschylus. *Aeschylus, with an English translation by Herbert Weir Smyth, Ph. D. in two volumes*. 2. Suppliant Women. Herbert Weir Smyth, Ph. D. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926.
[5] « For the Phaeacians have no pilots; their vessels have no rudders as those of other nations have, but the ships themselves understand what it is that we are thinking about and want ». See: Butler, Samuel. *Homer. The Odyssey. Rendered into English prose for the use of those who cannot read the original. Based on public domain edition, (revised by Timothy Power and Gregory Nagy)*. London: A. C. Fifield, 1900.
[6] For more details see: Medas, 2010; p. 11-23 and Medas, 2015-2016; p. 12-18.

In the nineteenth century, the 'cubìa' eyes - hawse or area with anchor holes - of the iron vessel were associated by sailors as a form of evolution representative of the apotropaic eyes.

Nautical symbols

A second symbolic aspect of the ancient ships, from the Egyptians and then to follow in the Greek and Roman world, was to decorate the bow and stern of the ships with impressive elements; where, however, on the iconographic point of view there was the prevalence of the symbolic value of the object on the image itself, which was often only an evocative image of the significance recalled. The symbolic value attributed to a part of the ship revealed aspects of reality that could not be described or exhibited in any other form, and the form itself was conventionally used so that the object metaphorically represented a concept or belief to which it alluded. At first, an animal head-shaped rostrum (προτομή or pròtome) was used, or even a decoration on the top of the bow, archetype of what would become the figurehead, the mask, a mythical representation or even allusive to the name of the ship, and subsequently a religious symbol (for example the sculptures of saints), or a national emblem, or animals such as the lion, sea horses, dolphins, or the mythical gryphon or a unicorn; or even female images, such as the goddess Venus, the bride of Poseidon, Amphitrite, or simple mermaids, or even parchment and a swallow's head. The figurehead of the HMS Victory - for example - depicts two cherubs holding up a shield, which bears the motto of the Order of the Garter "Honi soit qui mal y pense". Some of these protomes were intended to terrorize less civilized populations. The Viking ships were equipped with monstrous heads on the top of the bow with the intent to terrify the enemies with the ostentation of dragons or hideous sea monsters. The Carthaginians often used a sculpture of Amun, the Athenians a statue of Athena, and an Athenian ship from 500 BC had a whole rostrum, carved in the shape of a boar's head. The Roman ships, which made the rostrum a combat weapon, carved the very high stern with a golden swan head instead.

The bow decoration was the acrostolium (ἀκροστόλιον or akrostólion), whose literal meaning is high bank[7], and it was the extension of the bow of the Greek ships, usually carved in the shape of an ornament. In the Hellenistic-Roman age, the acrostolium became a large spiral that rose and rotated backwards. This symbol was enriched with ship's names or marks, or even greeting symbols, an archetype in a symbolic sense, as we have already said, of the figurehead. We have a documentation of this object in many ancient coins also because this symbol was used, among others, as a celebratory element of naval victories[8].

[7] The acrostolium was the end of the stólos (στόλος), the extension of the bow; in ships, it is the protruding part of the bow also called a spur. The stólos was projected from the head of the bow, and its end (ἀκροστόλιον) often had the shape of an animal or a helmet. It seems that this ornament was sometimes covered with brass and that it also served as a ram (ἐμβολή) against enemy ships [χαλκήρης στόλος (ram made of bronze or copper)]. « …Then from our side arose in response the mingled clamor of Persian speech, and straightaway the ships dashed together their bronze prows. It was a ship of Hellas [410] that began the charge and chopped off in its entirety the curved stern of a Phoenician boat. » See: Aeschylus. *Aeschylus, with an English translation by Herbert Weir Smyth, Ph. D. in two volumes*. 1. Persians. Herbert Weir Smyth, Ph. D. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926.

[8] Gusseme, 1773; p. 19-20. Gusseme notes that the aplustre is represented in the medals of Gades (Cádiz), Nicópolis of Epirus, Tire and in the commemorative medals of the Roman *gentes* Cassia, Cornelia, Servilia and in many commemorative coins of triumvirs and Roman emperors Pompey, Augustus, Vespasian, Titus, Hadrian and Pertinax.

The aplustre

The ornament we want to deal with in this short note is the one that decorated the top of the stern like a plume[9]: the aplustre (or apluster), from the Greek ἄφλαστον (aphlaston) and from the Latin *ăplustre*[10]. *The aplustre was an ornament made of wooden planks, which constituted the highest part of the stern of a ship*[11]*, in use by the antiquity's navy, even in those of the peoples of the sea, the Egyptians and the Phoenicians, although declined in different forms. So the humanist Johannes Schefferus (1621 - 1679) describes it: « When, however, there are two ends on the ships, one in the bow and one in the stern, these ornaments were twofold. And, in fact, the Greeks had given them distinct names. The one in the bow (it was called) ἀκροςόλια (read ἀκροστόλιον), and the one in the stern ἄφλαςα (read ἄφλαστον) »*[12]*. The shape and dimensions of this appendix were varied, as can be seen from the many representations on coins, bas-reliefs, pictorial and mosaic representations, etc., but without departing from a geometry that is quite common and made of curved lines, thin at the base, which them open upwards and resemble the wing or crest of a bird, the tail of a fish or the stems of a plant folded in the same direction, often similar to a plume with one or more volutes, otherwise, they have the shape of the crest of a twisted-necked animal or simply that of a fan with unfolded feathers, like those of a bird. In Egyptian ships, the aplustre was made of metal, unlike the Greek and Roman ones in which it was built with flexible wooden planks, and fixed, like the rostrum, to the wooden elements and then folded. It was worked to form a lotus flowered or an imitation of the feather of a bird's wing, as early as the 5th century BC*[13].

a) *b)*

Fig. 1 a) Acrostolium and aplustre, from Schefferi Joannis Argentoratentis (Johannes Schefferus). De militia navali veterum Libri quatuor. Ad Historiam Græcam Latinamque vtiles. Ubsaliæ: Excudebat Johannes Janssonius, 1654; p. 156; b) Smith, William (edited by). A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities. New-York: published by Harper & Brothers, 1843; left, p. 58; in the center and on the right, p. 69.

In the construction of the Roman ships, the aplustre was composed of curiously carved and painted boards in various colours. Probably some of the decorations of the aplustre served as a sign of recognition of the ship. Often the plume of feathers was fixed on the neck of a goose or a swan, as

[9] « L'Aplustre avait généralement la forme recourbée, celle d'un panache, par exemple (The aplustre generally had the curved shape, that of a plume, for example). Eustathius [Eustathius of Thessalonica (c. 1110 – 1194)] wrote : Ἄφλαστον δέ φασιν οὐχὶ τὸ ἀκροστόλιον, διαφέρουσι γὰρ αἱ λέξεις, ἀλλὰ κατὰ Δίδυμον, ὥς φησι Παυσανίας, τὸ ἐπὶ πρύμνης ἀνατετάμένον εἰς ὕψος ἐκ κανονίων πλατέων ἐπικεκαμμένων, διήκοντος δὶ αὐτῶν πλατέος κανονίον, ὑπηρεισμένον τούτῳ στυλίσκου ὄπισθεν τοῦ κυβερυήτου. » [Eustathii, 1829; v. 1039, 37; p. 294; quoted from Jal, 1848; Vol. I, p. 212].

[10] *ăplustre* (ἄφλαστον plural ἄφλαστα) or *ăplustrĕ*, plural *ăplustrĭa*, *um* and *ăplustra*, *ōrum*. Priscian (Priscianus Caesariensis, 512 - after 527) wrote: « Aplustre item quamvis faciat ablativum ab hoc aplustri, nominativum tamen pluralem non solum in a, sed etiam in ia terminat: et aplustra enim et aplustria antiqui protulisse inveniuntur » [Prisciano di Cesarea (Priscianus Caesariensis). *Prisciani*, 1819; p. 512].

[11] Smith, 1843; p. 69.

[12] « Quum autem duæ navium sint summitates, proræ scilicet, ac puppis, etiam ornamenta ista duplicia fuere. Ac Græci quidem etiam nominibus distinxere. Proræ quippe ἀκροςόλια, puppis autem ἄφλαςα [aphlaston or aplustre, N.d.T.] nominarunt », Schefferi, 1654; p. 156.

[13] Maspero, (1879); p. 13.

can be seen in some Roman mosaics and bas-reliefs, and to this was attached a ribbon coloured like a festoon, which served to indicate the direction of the wind.

Although simpler and less imaginative or "sacramental" than the bow ornament of ships, the aplustre had an important meaning in ancient times, even if the forms that this symbol assumed show a similarity with the acrostolium, the prolongation of the bow of the ship. In fact, in many ships, the stern was adorned with the image of the ship's tutelary deity (tutela) and represented the heart and soul of the warship. Naval warfare, in fact, played a vital role in human history, as early as the 12th century BC with the birth of the Greek city-states, and precisely the city of Athens owes its dominion in the fifth century BC to the supremacy of its naval force. In fact, many Mediterranean cities prospered and declined depending on their naval power. Carthage, for example, was a powerful ruler in the Mediterranean, from the VIII century to the III century BC, for over 500 years, thanks to its ships and fleets, and then dominated only by the nascent Roman military power in the early second century BC. The Carthaginian honorary ships had a fish tail or volute frieze at the stern, ending with the aplustre, a zoomorphic frieze representing the head of a horse.

The aplustre was, therefore, the main ornament that decorated the upper part of the stern, a naval symbol that had to flaunt the strength and power of a navy. The aplustre, originally an abstract form of a bird, consisted of a precise number of curved axes, arranged in a fan shape, and joined together at the base by an ornament that resembles a circular shield[14]. In the history of the Argonaut's expedition, it is described as a bird, perched on the stern of the Argo ship that offers oracular advice, both to the helmsman and to the sailors[15].

During naval battles, with the sails furled and the mast placed on the deck, the aplustre was the only distinctive symbol of the warship and it was believed to be endowed with magical powers capable of protecting the ship during combats and to be a guide for the helmsman in naval evolutions. The symbology related to naval combat, therefore, made the aplustre a coveted trophy. In this regard, Homer writes in the Iliad: « [235] ... And Zeus, son of Cronos, shows them signs upon the right with his lightnings, and Hector exulting greatly in his might rageth furiously, trusting in Zeus, and recketh not of men nor gods, for mighty madness hath possessed him. [240] His prayer is that with all speed sacred Dawn may appear, for he declareth that he will hew from the ships' sterns the topmost ensigns, and burn the very hulls with consuming fire, and amidst them make havoc of the Achaeans, distraught by reason of the smoke »[16].

And it is still Homer who in the Iliad (XV, 716-725) writes that Hector grabs the aplustre of an enemy ship while inciting his followers to light a fire and burn them: « [715] ... But Hector, when he had grasped the ship by the stern, would not loose his hold, but kept the ensign in his hands, and called to the Trojans: "Bring fire, and therewithal raise ye the war-cry all with one voice; now hath Zeus vouchsafed us a day that is recompense for all— [720] to take the ships that came hither in despite of the gods, and brought us many woes, by reason of the cowardice of the elders, who, when I was eager to fight at the

[14] The shield - perhaps a shield-shaped rosette - was called *aspideion* [ἀσπιδεῖον or ἀσπιδίσκη, *aspidiske*, diminutive from ancient Greek *aspis* (ἀσπίς = shield)] and is almost always seen on the aplustres represented in classical iconography.

[15] Apollonius of Rhodes says that the ends of this appendage to the stern were broken by the collision with the Symplegades islands or also known as the Cyanean Rocks placed at the entrance of the Euxine Sea, while the body of the ship miraculously escaped its passage between those islands. Greek mythology narrates that these islands continually collided with each other, thus constituting a danger for the ships and sailors who sailed in those waters [Pseudo-Apollodorus. *Bibliotheca*. Book I, Ch. 9 § 22; Apollonius Rhodius. *Argonautica*. Book II, 601; Valerius Flaccus. *Argonautica*. Book IV, 658-660].

[16] Homer. *Iliad*. Book IX, 236-243. See: Homer. T*he Iliad with an English Translation by A.T. Murray, Ph.D. in two volumes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, Ltd. 1924.

sterns of the ships, kept me back, and withheld the host. But if Zeus, whose voice is borne afar, then dulled our wits, [725] now of himself he urgeth and giveth command" »[17].

Fig. 2 Naval battle trophies represented by aplustres and rostrums. Detail of a bas-relief of the triumphal arch of Orange, lower attic, north wall, 1st century AD, Orange (France), from: Basch, Lucien. Le musée imaginaire de la marine antique. Athènes: Institut hellénique pour la préservation de la tradition nautique, 1987, p. 426-428

A similar episode is mentioned by Herodotus[18], after the battle of Marathon, in which the Greek historian illustrates the courage of Cynaegirus (6th century BC - 490 BC), brother of the poet Aeschylus, who, after having grasped the aplustre of a ship Persian, he had his hand cut by an axe rather than giving up the precious trophy, and that this event was the cause of his death. The strong symbolic value assigned to this constructive-decorative part of the ship made it a trophy, which must necessarily have been torn from the enemy ship, the emblem of a naval victory that was often reported on the triumphal arches, such as in that of Orange (1st century AD).

The importance of this object was such that the aplustre was sought-after war booty at the end of a naval battle and for this reason, it was animatedly defended by the sailors. Phormio (5th century BC - after 428 BC), son of Asopius (c. 470 - 429/428 BC), an Athenian admiral who during the Peloponnese war led his naval fleet to conquer numerous victories, both in the naval battle of Rhium or Chalcis, which took place in 428 BC, captured 12 aplustres. His victory was celebrated in Athens with a glorious celebratory parade in which the trophies he won were displayed, and flaunted as a tribute to the gods[19] since victory without honour it was unacceptable. There could be no honour without a public ceremony and there could be no outcry without evidence of a trophy[20]. The brave men, who had participated in the battle, showing those sought-after trophies with exultation, preceded the parade.

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[17] Homer. *Iliad*. Book XV, 716-725. See: Homer. *The Iliad with an English Translation by A.T. Murray, Ph.D. in two volumes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, Ltd. 1924.

[18] « … Cynegirus (brother of the poet Aeschylus) son of Euphorion fell there, his hand smitten off by an axe as he laid hold of a ship's poop. » [*Herodotus, with an English translation by A. D. Godley*. Vol. III. London: William Heinemann Ltd; Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1938; p. 269].

[19] Rouse, 1902; p. 99.

[20] Finley, 1956; p. 132.

In case of victory in a naval battle then a trophy was erected on the coast closest to the place of the clash and consecrated to Poseidon[21]. Trophies taken to the enemy, the bronze rostrums of the ships and the aplustres, however, were more often placed in the sanctuaries[22]. This constructive-symbolic element of the warship was therefore always held in high regard by the ship's commanders and crews and respected for that aura of magic that implied and for this reason strenuously defended, as much as the "heart and soul" of the fighters[23].

Lucan (Marcus Annaeus Lucanus, 39 - 65 AD) wrote: « One vessel circled by Phocaean keels / Divides her strength, and on the right and left / On either side with equal war contends; / On whose high poop while Tagus fighting gripped / The stern Phocaean, pierced his back and breast / Two fatal weapons; in the midst the steel / Met, and the blood, uncertain whence to flow, / Stood still, arrested, till with double course / Forth by a sudden gush it drove each dart, / And sent the life abroad through either wound »[24].

The Roman poet continues: « Now every dart was hurled and every spear, / The soldier weaponless; yet their rage found arms: / One hurls an oar; another's brawny arm / Tugs at the twisted stern; or from the seats / The oarsmen driving, swings a bench in air. / The ships are broken for the fight. They seize / The fallen dead and snatch the sword that slew »[25].

The text "La Cista atletica del Museo kircheriano" also states that: « The Argo floats on the sea held motionless parallel to the beach by its anchors: a steep hill that rises before it hides the greater part of its long body and removes the view of the sea itself, whereby the eye sees no discovery of it except the part closest to the stern, the stern itself and the opening. The aplustre was an extension of the stern, which with rising and curving in an arch towards the bow and with the crest or acrostolium that gracefully crowned the top, formed with the bow the ship's beautiful ornament. At half the height of the aplustre, weathervane and forked flames are recommended, which used different colour shades. This practice was constant when the ships were in port and the sails collected, as they waved these for the utmost lightness at each puff, gave some warning of the direction of the winds that dominated. The acrostolium is missing here because there is no field to rise to: instead, better seen in profile than the art and solidity with which the aplustre was internally woven »[26].

The aplustre was, therefore, the symbol of auspicious for the ship par excellence, an ornament which stood motionless on the stern of the ships, behind the helmsman, and which had a large surface facing the sky, was very likely to be shaken by violent and contrary winds, as Rutilius Claudius Namatianus (5th century AD) wrote in De reditu suo (Book I, 513)[27]; placed above the seat on which the helmsman (gubernator) held the rudder and guided the ship, it also served, to a certain extent, to protect it from

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[21] Stroszeck, 2004; p. 313-314.

[22] Thucydides in his Peloponnesian War (Περὶ τοῦ Πελοποννησίου πολέμου) repeatedly mentions the erection of a trophy (τρόπαιον or τροπαῖον) by the winner after a naval and consecrated fight to the god Poseidon. In the trophy, they used to arrange parts of enemy ships such as rostrums and aplustres. Originally they were temporary installations erected near the battlefield, after the Persian Wars they become permanent installations. A trophy made with an aplustre (or a rostrum according to Herodotus) taken from a Persian ship, was held in hand by the little more than six meters high statue of Apollo in Delphi [Herodotus. *Histories*, Book VIII, 121, 2 or *Herodotus, with an English translation by A. D. Godley.* Vol. IV. London: William Heinemann Ltd; Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1930; p. 125], a practice that became usual after naval victories in the Persian Wars [*Pausanias' Description of Greece. Translated into English with Notes and Index by Arthur Richard Shilleto*. Vol II. London: George bell and Sons, 1886; p. 239].

[23] Wachsmann, 2009; p. 189-190.

[24] Lucan. *Pharsalia*. Book III, 583-591. See: M. Annaeus Lucanus. *Pharsalia, translated by Sir Edward Ridley*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1905.

[25] Lucan. *Pharsalia*. Book III, 670-674. See: M. Annaeus Lucanus. Pharsalia, translated by Sir Edward Ridley. London: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1905.

[26] Marchi, 1848; p. 35.

[27] « Inconcussa vehit tranquillus aplustria flatus / mollia securo vela rudente tremunt / The gentle breath of the wind carries the stern-fittings on without vibration. » Rutilius Claudius Namatianus. *De reditu suo.* Book I, 513.

the wind and rain. In the Trajan's Column, on the other hand, you can see a lantern suspended from the aplustre and placed in front of the helmsman [Trajan's Column, scene 79-80]. In the same way, when we read in Virgil « púppibus ét laetí naut(ae) ímposuére corónas »[28], we must assume that the wreaths, dedicated to domestic or marine deities, and considered as symbols of a prosperous journey, attached themselves to the aplustres. To these and similar decorations, expressive of joy and hope, Gregory of Nazianzus (329 - c. 390) seems to allude to a stern flower (ἀνθος πρύμνη)[29] and Apollonius of Rhodes (295 - 215 BC) elevates it to a symbol of great imaginative power in the expression ἀφλάστοιο μετήορος (the aplustre raised in the air)[30].

As a consequence of its position and its beautiful shape, the aplustre was often considered, in absolute terms, the emblem of navigation. The god Neptune, represented on many coins and medals, sometimes holds the aplustre in his right hand. In the famous "Apotheosis of Homer" by Archelaus of Priene (2nd century BC), Hellenistic bas-relief dating back to the 2nd century BC, preserved in the British Museum in London, the woman who plays the Odyssey crouching with Iliad at the foot of Homer's throne exhibits the same emblem referring to travel and the nautical epic of Ulysses[31].

They were, therefore, majestic ornaments, made up of variously worked and painted boards, often surmounted by a rod, a spear or a banner (στυλίς or small stern tree), to which weathervanes or flames (ταινία or band, ribbon) were tied useful to indicate the wind direction. Claude Saumaise (1588 - 1653) imagined the aplustres ornaments placed at the stern to which a straight wood was attached to the top of which feathers and plumes waved[32]. In Greek ships the wind direction was also indicated by the figure of a newt. Avienus (4th century AD) wrote that they were « Puppe refulgentem » (See: Phaenomena Aratea, 757) or « The aplustres, ship ornaments, which, because they were large, more than were necessary for their use, they were also called aplustria »[33].

Festus, with the term aplustres calls both the ornaments of the stern and those of the bow and also confuses the rostrum with the same name[34]. In this regard, we recall that this term was used in the Middle Ages also to define the rudder, as stated in five galleys chartering document to Marseille, drawn up on 13 April 1335[35].

Even Julius Pollux (183 - infra 177-192 BC), Greek grammarian and lexicographer, in his precise description that he makes of the Onomastikón, says that the aphlaston was sometimes crossed by a straight wood called stylus and that it carried a strip of cloth, called fascia (a band)[36]. At the base of the aplustre we also observe an ornament reminiscent of a circular shield: this was called ἀσπιδεῖον or ἀσπιδίσκη[37].

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[28] P. Vergilius Maro. *Georgics*. Book I, 304 and P. Vergilius Maro. *Aeneid*. Book IV, 418.

[29] « Navem euntem in mare laudo, non quae insignibus / Ornamentis, aut puppis floribus coruscat », from Caillau, 1840; *S.P.N. Gregorii Theologi Archiepiscopi Constantinopolitani, Operum*. Pars III. Carmina. Carmen XVII, 5-6; p. 310. See also: Smith, 1843.

[30] Apollonius of Rhodes. *Argonautica*. Book I, 1088-1089.

[31] Collignon, 1897; p. 674-677.

[32] Salmasii, 1689; p. 12.

[33] Ruperti, 1825; footnote 136, p. 152.

[34] Romani & Peracchi, 1826; p. 278. A confirmation that the aplustre was the stern ornament is found in the *Corpus grammaticorum Latinorum veterum*: « Summa pars puppis atque etiam ornamenta, quae semper in summa puppis parte, non in prora, ut plerique veterum scripserunt, collocabantur. Nam quae in prora erant, dicebantur *acrostolia*; *aplustria* autem et *aplustra*, nam utroque modo antiquos protulisse docet Priscianus » [Lindemann, 1832; p. 312].

[35] «... unam bonam et suficientem galeam de centum et sex decim remis bene aptatam, stagnam, calefatatam, spalmatam fornitam et garnitam bene et sufficienter omnibus suis corredis velis amplustris [in the sense of rudder, two on each side of the ship (translator's note)] anthennis arboribus issarciis ancoris remis… », *Convention passée, au nom le Philippe de Valois, entre Paul Giraud de viens et des un envoyé et des armateurs de Marseille et de Nice pour le nolis de cinq galères (1335)*. Vedi: Jal, 1840; p. 326-327.

[36] Julius Pollux, see: Polluce Giulio, 1541. *Liber primus, Caput nonum, de navibus et nauticis nominibus*, p. 34.

[37] See Apollonius of Rhodes. *Argonautica*. Book I, 1088-1089: « Et hanc quidem Dea rursus dimisit: siditque super navis aplustri / Poi

As it will be for the bow in Norse ships, the particular shape that this ornament assumed, which as we have seen had different meanings in ancient ships, is probably associated with the idea of a ship intended as a "living being", equipped with eyes to see the route (at the bow) and of a tail at the stern, like that of a sea monster of which the aplustre represented its tail emerging from the water. We have brief descriptions of the aplustre in Aegean ships, as we can observe its reproduction on seals, while it seems almost completely absent in Mycenaean boats.

The myth of the aplustre, as protection of the ship (tutela), means that its destruction - as Lucretius (Titus Lucretius Carus, 94 - 50 or 55 BC) and Cicero (Marcus Tullius Cicero, 106 - 43 BC) wrote - has to be teaching seafarers in navigating[38] and then it is important to ensure that it is not lost[39]. In a short essay, Cicero cites a scene of shipwreck just mentioned in Aratus (315 - 240 BC) where the sight of the aplustre floating in the sea after a shipwreck must be a warning for sailors to avoid the dangers of the sea both in navigation and in the safe shore of the landing. Cicero wrote: « But to those who do not know the sea it seems that the ships in the port are resting crooked on the waves with broken aplustres »[40].

The iconographic illustration of the aplustre, however, remains relegated to indirect and completely particular sources: seals, especially Greek and Roman coins, engraved stones, bas-reliefs[41], mosaics and has also been represented figuratively on painted vases. We can see the aplustre on most of the rowing ships that appeared in the decoration of the houses of Pompeii[42], which show the vessels decorated with the aplustre and the shield at its base (see the graffiti of the ship "Europa", datable to 1st century AD), and at Herculaneum, and on a large number of commemorative medals. In the Aratea of Cicero, an astronomical treatise describing the constellations - a Latin translation of the Phaenomena written by the Greek poet Aratus (c. 315 - c. 240 BC) -, the constellation Argo is seen represented as a ship with an imposing aplustre aft[43]. In this regard, Germanicus wrote (15 BC - 19 AD): « Where the Dog's tail, whose light is feeble, ends, the stern of the Argo gleams with stars »[44], and « It also cuts the ornamented

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un dio lo mandò lontano, e si levò in volo, e andò a posarsi sopra l'aplustre / Then a god sent him away, and rose in flight, and went to rest on the aplustre », in Apollonii Rhodii. *Argonauticorum*. Libri Quatuor Editio secunda. Oxonii: E Typographeo Clarendoniano, 1779; p. 109) and Book II, 601: « Attamen aplustris absciderunt summas extremitates / tagliarono via la punta degli ornamenti dell'aplustre / they cut away the tip of the aplustre' ornaments » in Apollonii Rhodii. *Argonauticorum*. Libri Quatuor Editio secunda. Oxonii: E Typographeo Clarendoniano, 1779; p. 199); Apollodorus of Athens, Book I C. 9 § 22: « …mentre l'estremità della poppa ornata della nave (ἀφλάστων) era spazzata via / while the adorned stern end of the ship (ἀφλάστων) was swept away. » [Apollodori Atheniensis, 1803; p. 92].

[38] « But, just as, after mighty ship-wrecks piled, / The mighty main is wont to scatter wide / The rowers' banks, the ribs, the yards, the prow, / The masts and swimming oars, so that afar / Along all shores of lands are seen afloat / The carven fragments of the rended poop, / Giving a lesson to mortality / To shun the ambush of the faithless main, … » [Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, Book II, 552-557: Lucretius Carus, Titus. *Of the Nature of Things: A Metrical Translation. By William Ellery Leonard*. London & New York: J.M. Dent & Sons; E. P. Dutton, 1916].

[39] « navibus absumptis fluitantia quærere aplustra / to search for floating stern-ornaments after their ships have been destroyed », Cicerone, 1831; p. 273 [Quoted from: *Ovid, Edited by J. W. Binns*. London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973; p. 100].

[40] Latin text: « *At maris ignaris in portu clauda videntur navigia aplustris fractis obnitier undis* ». See also: « Again, to gazers ignorant of the sea, / Vessels in port seem, as with broken poops » [Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, Book IV, 436-437: Lucretius Carus, Titus. *Of the Nature of Things : A Metrical Translation. By William Ellery Leonard*. London & New York: J.M. Dent & Sons; E. P. Dutton, 1916].

[41] Bas-relief of the ship of Lindos, probable base of the statue of Admiral Agesander of Mikion (Hagésandros Mikionos, late 2nd century BC), made by Pythókritos (2nd century BC) on the Lindos acropolis (Λίνδος) in Rhodes. On Lindos' bas-relief, see Blinkenberg, Chr. e K.-F. Kinch, 1907; p. 21-27.

[42] Jal, 1848; p. 192.

[43] Manuscripts: *Harley MS 647* (c. 820 – XI sec.), f. 9v; *Harley MS 2506* (c. 990 - c.1000), f. 42r; *Cotton MS Tiberius C I* (XI-XII sec.), f. 29r; *Cotton MS Tiberius B V/1* (2nd quarter XI century - 3rd quarter XII century), f. 40v. British Library, London.

[44] « *At qua cauda Canis languenti desinit astro, / fulgent Argoæ stellis aplustria puppis* ». See: Claudius Caesar Germanicus, *Aratea phaenomena*, 1, 343-44: *The Aratea of Germanicus: Text, Commentary and Translation by David Bruce Gain*. Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest LLC, 2016; p. 82.

stern of the sacred Ship »[45], and also « The stern of the ship the Argo and the whole of the Dog arise »[46], and finally Germanicus wrote « But the rear part of the ship the Argo, where the sign is fashioned into a curved stern, still shines »[47]. Lastly Marcus Manilius (1st century BC - 1st century AD) in the didactic poem the Astronomica, underlines: « it cuts the ship of the Greeks through the top of the stern-post »[48].
In the bronze coins of Rhodes the goddess Victoria is often represented above the prow of a ship holding an aplustre, and whose meaning is the exaltation of the naval power of Rhodes on the Aegean Sea[49]. Diodorus Siculus (90 - 27 BC) says[50] that Nicanor of Stageira (4th century BC) entered Piraeus with the fleet decorated with the "Acrostolii della Vittoria" (The acrostolia of Victory), in this case, the ornaments of the bow, trophies torn from enemy ships: « ... it can be said that the Victory showing the Aplustre or the Acrostolium on the coins of Rhodes hints at the deeds of the Rhodes against Demetrius... »[51]. Some relevant examples are those of the coins representing Greek and Roman ships, or ornaments that refer more explicitly to this subject, as it can be seen on the coins of Phaselis, Apollonia in Lycia, Histiaea, Cyzicus, Anchialus. As a characteristic element of the stern of ships, both merchant and war, the aplustre was a symbolic element of almost divine importance; in fact, it is possible to see this symbol in the hands of the god Poseidon in some Tarantine and Byzantine coins. Sometimes Neptune is represented on the medals by holding the aplustre in his right hand. Especially in the Roman coins of the Cassia, Fonteia, and Sulpicia gentes, the aplustre is the real trophy of victory (symbol in the hand of the goddess Victoria in the coins of Himera) and was used to symbolize the maritime power of Rome[52] in all the territories subject to power Roman.
The theme of the naval war was then identified in the aplustre as a trophy symbol of victory but also of defeat[53]. Silius Italicus (25 - 101 AD) wrote in this regard: « the surface is strewn with floating benches and masts, with stern-ornaments with tattered sails, and with hapless sailors spitting out the brine »[54] and also « From there he rained down on the stern-ornaments of the Carthaginian ship fatal fires fed

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[45] « *desecat et sacrae speciosa aplustria puppis* » in Claudius Caesar Germanicus, *Aratea phaenomena*, 1, 484. See: *The Aratea of Germanicus: Text, Commentary and Translation by David Bruce Gain*. Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest LLC, 2016; p. 87.
[46] « *et surgent aplustria puppis* ». See: Claudius Caesar Germanicus, *Aratea phaenomena*, 1, 620: *The Aratea of Germanicus: Text, Commentary and Translation by David Bruce Gain*. Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest LLC, 2016; p. 92.
[47] « . ... *Argoaeque ratis, qua flexile signum / In puppim formatur, adhuc aplustria lucent* » in Claudius Caesar Germanicus, *Aratea phaenomena*, 1, 676-77. See: *The Aratea of Germanicus: Text, Commentary and Translation by David Bruce Gain*. Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest LLC, 2016; p. 94.
[48] « *Argivamque ratem per aplustria summa* ». See: Manilii, M. *Astronomicon*. Liber primus. Londinii: apud Grant Richards, 1803; Book 1, 694, p. 62 / Manilius. *Astronomica, with an English Translation by G.P. Goold.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1977; p. 61.
[49] Diodorus Siculus, see: Diodoro di Sicilia, 1815; Book XX, Chapter XI, p. 257 / *Diodorus of Sicily, with an English Translation by Russel M. Geer*. Vol. X. Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1954; p. 353-377.
[50] See: Diodoro di Sicilia, 1815; Book XVIII, Chapter XV, p. 33 or *Diodorus of Sicily, with an English Translation by Russel M. Geer*. Vol. IX. Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1977; p. 215.
[51] Cavedoni, 1835; p. 200.
[52] Juvenal (40/50 - after 127 AD) mentions it among the decorations of a triumphal arch. Juvenal. *Satirae*, Book X, 133-137: « Bellorum exuviae truncis affixa tropaeis / lorica et fracta de casside buccula pendens / Et curtum temone iugum victaeque triremis / Aplustre et summo tristis captivus in arcu / Humanis maiora bonis credentur. / An ornament from the stern of a conquered ship, a sad captive / On the fortress's heights, these are the things for which a Greek / Or Barbarian, or a Roman commander exerts himself, these are / The things that provide an incentive, for danger and hard work. » [Juvenal. *The Satires*, X, 133-139 (Translated by A. S. Kline)]. In Ruperti [Ruperti, 1825; footnote 136, p. 152] we read: « tabulatum ad decorandam superficiem navis adpositum: alii dicunt rostra navis, ornamentum puppis / placed to decorate the lower part of the ship: commonly called a rostrum, others say it was the stern ornament ». See also: Daremberg, 1877; p. 308-309.
[53] See the bas-reliefs preserved in the Capitoline Museum with naval trophies and aplustres [Stuart Jones, 1912; Vol. 1, p. 258-261, 263-264].
[54] Silius Italicus, *Punica*. Book 10, 323-325 [Buzio, 1765; Tomo XXXV, p. 199]. See: Silius Italicus *Punica with an English Translation by J. D. Duff*. Vol. II. London: William Heinemann Ltd; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961 (reprint); p. 75.

with pitch; and the wind added strength to his missiles »[55]. Finally, in a letter to Trygetius (5th century AD), a Roman politician, Sidonius Apollinaris (c. 430 - 486) wrote: « The oarsmen at the thwarts, the steersmen on the poops, shall tune their chants to sing your praises »[56].

Conclusion

As can be seen from this brief note, the artistic-symbolic formula of the aplustre is exalted above all in the Greco-Roman naval epic. In the aúxēsis (αὔξησις) of symbolic value, the aplustre will assume more and more relevance, to be torn from the opposing ship as a trophy, in imperishable memory of the victory achieved, and shown as a frieze of arms captured to the enemy. The glorification of a naval victory will find its maximum expression with the coins[57], as the aplustre was an object capable of telling the deeds of a hero, a prince, an emperor, a figure alluding to the maritime power conquered by naval force, a symbol that it stood like an imposing marine creature, whose highly symbolic and auspicious fan-like tail was a metaphor for the place where the soul of the ship was believed to be located.

As Timotheus of Miletus (446 - 357 BC) tells in the Persians, the Persian ships hit by the rostrum of the Greek ships, defined as “iron spur”[58], whose allusion is not so much to the material itself as to the solidity of the tip of the spur, sank without their ornaments, stolen as trophies. These are the ornaments to which Aeschylus alludes with the term aplustres[59], one of the two symbols of the Persian ships together with the tutelary god in the bow as Herodotus recalls[60].

In the decoration of the Ara Pacis Augustae (9 BC) in Rome, you can see small palms, which would even seem to recall the aplustre of a Roman trireme in testimony to the victory of Emperor Augustus (63 BC - 14 AD) in the naval battle of Actium (September, 2 31 BC). The aplustre, a proper symbol of the victory of Actium, also appears in the Arch of the Sergi in Pula (whose dating is attributed to the years 25-10 BC).

The symbolic value of the aplustre will remain in the following centuries as a strong reference to the naval epic. In the portrait of Andrea Doria (1466 - 1560) made by Sebastiano del Piombo (1485 - 1547), in particular in the lower frame of the portrait, all the characteristic elements of the maritime power of the Genoese admiral appear: the rostrum, the bow formed as a swan head, the five-armed Roman aplustre. These objects are placed in the frieze of the portrait to testify to its value as a naval leader, referring to the naval victories and military successes of the princeps.

The aplustre, as well as the rostral prow, symbolic-decorative element of the Greco-Roman tradition, will also be combined with religious symbols with the intent to underline the link between religion

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[55] Silius Italicus, *Punica*. Book 14, 421-422 [Buzio, 1765; Tomo XXXVI, p. 37]. See: Silius Italicus *Punica with an English Translation by J. D. Duff*. Vol. II. London: William Heinemann Ltd; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961 (reprint); p. 302.

[56] Sidonius. *The Letters of Sidonius, Translated, with Introduction and Notes, by O.M. Dalton*. Vol. 2. Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1915; Book VIII, Letter XII, p. 167. See also: Apollinaris, 1836; *Lettres*. Livre VIII, Epistola XII; p. 340. Edme-Louis Billardon de Sauvigny (1738 -1812) did not understand this passage, which he thought he had to translate as follows: « Les pilotes en haut des mâts attacheront des flambeaux allumés; les rameurs assis sur leurs bancs chanteront en choeur vos louanges » [Apollinaris, 1787; p. 42]. There are no torches or trees in Sidonius’ letter to Trygetius; the term aplustre never meant a tree or even a torch. The bishop of Clermont tells his friend that he agrees to leave Bazas to come to Bordeaux: « (A bord de la barque avec laquelle tu descendras la Garonne), les matelots sur leurs bancs, les patrons à leurs gouvernails, chanteront tes louanges dans un chant rhythmé (ou dans des vers harmonieusement cadencés). » [Jal, 1848; p. 148-149].

[57] On the symbolism of the aplustre in coins see: Brett, 1938; p. 23-32.

[58] σιδα[ρ]ῷ κράνει, from Strazzulla, 1904; p. 45.

[59] Strazzulla, 1904; p. 17.

[60] See: Herodotus. *Histories*, Book III, 37 and Casson, 1971; p. 95-96.

and the legitimacy of victory[61], or between virtus and pietas[62], *symbol of universal dominion[63] of man over peoples, but also the spiritual guide of the traveller. Anselm Schramb (1658 - 1720) wrote in his Chronicon Mellicense*: « the cleric Ruperto[64] transported the venerable cross from Vienna to Nußdorf in a boat without sailors and led by the aplustre »[65].

This statement is the strongest testimony of the symbolic value of the aplustre, whose value has remained imperishable over the centuries.

Fig. 3 Bas-relief (1st century AD) commemorating the naval battle of Actium, which took place on 31 BC [Colección Duques de Cardona (Córdoba, Andalucía, España)]

[61] Zanker, 1989; p. 88-92.
[62] Hölscher, 1994; p. 194.
[63] Hölscher, 1994; p. 175.
[64] Rupert of Salzburg (c. 660 - 710).
[65] Schramb, 1702; p. 79.

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