

Roman Quinquereme

Five rowers" can be translated as "quinquereme". In this type of Roman battleship, the oarsmen sat on three levels. More levels were not possible because otherwise the ships could no longer be steered. In the quinquereme, the rudder was operated by one person in the lowest row and by two persons in each of the two upper rows. The five rowers at three oars arranged one above the other formed a section. There were ships with up to 30 sections on each side of the ship, so that 150 rowers sat on each side. A ship could therefore be moved by up to 300 oarsmen.

The quinquereme was a further development of the Carthaginian trireme ("three-oarsman"). The Romans had adapted it to their needs in the 3rd century BC. At that time, 100 ships of this type belonged to the Roman war fleet. At that time, the Romans did not have much experience with fighting at sea. In the Punic Wars (264-241 BC and 218-201 BC), they therefore used a different method of fighting: Instead of using the battering ram on the bow to capsize the enemy, the Romans first damaged the ships with projectiles and then stormed them over a boarding bridge (corvus). In addition to the corvus, the equipment of the Quinquereme included at least one fighting tower. But this also had a disadvantage: in order to accommodate the new equipment, the ships had to be built larger and wider. They were therefore no longer as fast and mobile. After the Punic Wars, the Corvus disappeared again from the Quinquereme. According to tradition, the ship type itself was still in use until the time of Emperor Nero.

A Roman quinquereme should not be confused with a galley, which was usually rowed by slaves, convicts or prisoners of war. This type of ship only came into being in the Middle Ages, but is often colloquially applied to the ancient models as well. The rowers on a quinquereme were free citizens of the poorest class who were well paid for their work on the ship. Only in an emergency did they use slaves and set them free for the occasion. One possible reason for this was that the free citizens were considered more reliable.