

Roman merchant shipping

In the heyday of the Roman Empire, Roman ships dominated the Mediterranean, often referred to as the "mare nostrum". In addition to the war fleet, which was larger than any other in Europe, many large merchant ships sailed to bring in goods for the growing capital city of Rome. Wall paintings, reliefs and mosaics from Roman times give a good impression of the appearance of these ships. But it is only the wreck finds in the Mediterranean that allow a more accurate reconstruction of the different types of ships.

Ocean-going cargo ships that could carry up to 1200 tonnes sailed from Rome in all directions to the coasts of Africa, Asia Minor and the western Mediterranean. From there they brought in grain, oil, silk and spices. Wine came from France, and carved stone coffins for noble Romans were imported from Athens. One of the most important trade routes was between Ostia and Alexandria in Egypt. Large quantities of grain were regularly imported from there. At that time, the goods were usually transported in clay amphorae. An average cargo ship carried about 10,000 amphorae. The ships usually had two masts, one in the middle and a front mast in the bow. The rectangular sails made of linen cloth hung from the cross mast. The smaller foresail was called the artemon. At the top of the main mast there was often a triangular sail called a marsail. Wreck finds revealed that the hull was usually made of pine, cypress or cedar wood. Oak was used for the frames. Tenons and dowels were made of swamp oak. All larger merchant ships had two rudders on port and starboard. The stern ornament was often a curved goose head, and the sternpost was often enclosed by a stern gallery. Each ship carried several anchors. Anchor poles made of wood and lead as well as iron were common.

The cargo was stored below deck. There were also the crew's quarters and the galley. The deckhouse in the ship's stern housed the captain and first-class passengers, for passenger ships in the true sense did not exist. Passengers were only taken on board as additional cargo if there was room. In the deckhouse there was often also an altar niche as a place of sacrifice to the gods of protection and the sea.

A voyage across the Mediterranean was a life-threatening affair at that time. Out of about four ships, only three reached their destination. From the Roman port of Puteoli to Alexandria (1000 nautical miles = 1852 km), the fastest journey took about nine days, but it usually took two to three weeks. With unfavourable winds, the journey could also take 30-70 days. From November to March, merchant shipping came to a complete standstill. There were two main courses: one led past Cyprus, along the coast of Asia Minor to Rhodes. Malta and Syracuse were frequently visited to replenish water and provisions. Another course led along the African coast. How were the ships able to determine and maintain their course without a compass? There were probably charts with longitude and latitude on board. In addition, the sailors knew the course of the sun and the starry night sky very well. Special instruments were used to take bearings on the stars. The height of the celestial body above the horizon indicated the latitude, the position of the ship. Near the coast, lighthouses helped with orientation.