

**Zeitschrift:** Schweizerische numismatische Rundschau = Revue suisse de numismatique = Rivista svizzera di numismatica  
**Herausgeber:** Schweizerische Numismatische Gesellschaft  
**Band:** 46 (1967)  
  
**Artikel:** Naval activity in Greek imperial issues  
**Autor:** Starr, Chester G.  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-173836>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 26.07.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# NAVAL ACTIVITY IN GREEK IMPERIAL ISSUES

In a recent monograph Dietmar Kienast has made interesting use of numismatic evidence to throw light on some aspects of the Roman imperial navy. The coin types of a galley or its forepart («prow») which appear on a number of issues from the Propontis and vicinity, in Kienast's interpretation, indicate bases of the *classis Perinthia*; a group of Syrian and Cilician issues bearing the word ΝΑΥΑΡΧΙΣ are, he suggests, to be explained as denoting naval bases also, this time for the *classis Syriaca*<sup>1</sup>.



1 AE

Galley

Cyzicus under Antoninus Pius

SNG von Aulock 4, 1261



3 AE

Legend ΝΑΥΑΡΧΙΣ

Corycus under Valerian

SNG von Aulock 13, 5686



2 AE

River God with Ship

Nicaea under Caracalla

SNG von Aulock 2, 593



As an effort to draw illumination from Greek imperial issues Kienast's work should be commended, for this great mass of contemporary evidence is too often overlooked. Yet one must also regretfully suggest that his approach is faulty in its general principles and that his specific interpretations are often wide off the mark. To support these observations let us look briefly at the relevant material and see what it does show with respect to naval activities in eastern waters during the Early Empire<sup>2</sup>.

The volume of easily available evidence has been much increased in recent years by the publication of relevant fascicules of the Copenhagen, von Aulock, and Fitzwilliam collections; still, these essentially reinforce the picture which one might draw from the British Museum volumes, Imhoof-Blumer, and other earlier sources. The most obvious fact which leaps out as one examines Greek imperial issues is that naval types are not very prominent in this coinage. Even in earlier times Athens, Rhodes, and similar naval states had not advertised in their coinage their power at sea; in the Hellenistic era, however, a number of city-states such as Histiaea, Sinope, Cius or Phaselis commonly used a galley or prow as standard type. In the Empire none of these cities continued to strike galley coins with any regularity<sup>3</sup>, and normally those naval types which do turn up are intermixed with issues of very different character. To take these out of their context is a dangerous procedure.

A second general observation may also be made. When we come upon a tetradrachm of Demetrius Poliorcetes which shows Nike on a ship's prow, we may justly understand the type as a specific, significant comment both on the naval base of his widely scattered realm and also on his victory by sea over Ptolemy I. Greek imperial issues, on the other hand, tend to be a bland chorus of praise for imperial virtues and a celebration of local religious pride. Even a type which may seem historically significant – such as the emperor Caracalla on horseback spearing a foe – is likely to turn up in the mints of a number of cities (and also to be used afterwards). Naval types, in particular, very rarely exhibit clear specific reference<sup>4</sup>; and when galleys or prows do turn up in an area they are likely to be found in the issues of more than one city. Here again the context is an important matter in judging the significance of any one coin.

If we turn now to geographical districts, we may move from west to east and commence with the Gulf of Corinth and the western islands of Greece. Here a Corinthian bronze shows Nero on the obverse and a galley on the reverse with *Adve(ntus) Aug.*<sup>5</sup>. Nicopolis has a *naumachia* scene under Augustus, and then galleys under Aelius Caesar and Elagabalus; one galley type appears at Aegina under Geta; and Corcyra issues a number of such types from Lucilla through Geta<sup>6</sup>.

This area I have deliberately put first; for its material, though limited, illustrates well three different sources for naval types. First, the Neronian issue is clearly linked with a specific event, Nero's famous trip to Greece – though only via the legend, let it be noted. Secondly, the Nicopolis coins refer back to the decisive battle of Actium, but here the paucity of naval types as contrasted with others used at Nicopolis should be observed. Thirdly, the series from Corcyra and Aegina do not seem to have any specific cause; at the most we might consider them provincial reflections of those imperial issues of the Severan period which commemorate journeys by sea<sup>7</sup>.

A second area, of greater interest, is the Propontis and neighboring districts. The *koinon* of Bithynia issued coins under Hadrian which occasionally bear a prow in the exergue on the reverse, beneath the temple; are we to take this as reference to the emperor's trips to Asia Minor<sup>8</sup>? If we look further, we shall find Cyzicus issuing coins with a galley bearing legionary *aquilae* from Antoninus Pius on through Salonina.

Moreover Nicomedia, Chalcedon, Byzantium, Coela (in the Chersonesus), Perinthus, and others strike similar coins less regularly from the time of Antoninus Pius<sup>9</sup>.

The issues of Nicaea, Chalcedon, and Perinthus under Caracalla might be connected with his crossing from Europe to Asia, an occasion in which he was saved during a shipwreck<sup>10</sup>. Similarly the very extensive issues from Cyzicus may reflect the fact that the *classis Pontica* moved its headquarters here in the second century after Christ<sup>11</sup>, but the hypothesis is doubtful. Trapezus, which earlier had been the base of this fleet, did not strike naval types as far as we know; Ephesus, which played an important role as naval base for the Italian fleets in the second century and again in the mid-third century, seems to have used naval emblems only under Geta and Elagabalus. On the other hand Chios, Phocaea, and Smyrna – for none of which naval activity is attested – were quite regular in interspersing galleys or prows in their imperial issues<sup>12</sup>.

In sum, the numismatic evidence from the Propontis and the west coast of Asia Minor does *not* point clearly to any connection between galley types and fleets of war. Moreover, if there were a connection, then logically it would be continuously valid; but Kienast, while listing a number of the above cities as naval bases, does not include Chios, Phocaea, or Smyrna. The weakness in this method of seizing upon naval types in isolation, as proofs of naval activity, shows best in Kienast's citation of the inland cities of Hadrianopolis and Philippopolis as naval bases; while the coinage of the former does have a few galley types, the evidence for Philippopolis consists simply of issues with the river god Hebrus holding a prow in his hand<sup>13</sup>. This motif, which turns up for other inland cities on a river, has no more significance than the appearance of Poseidon, Isis, Aphrodite (Euploia), or other deities with a prow; and most certainly any rigorous application of sound method would establish as little value in the coins of Philippopolis as in that issue of Caesarea in Cappadocia which shows a prow<sup>14</sup>.

In Cilicia and also in Syria there appear, particularly in the mid-third century, a number of issues with the intriguing word NAYAPXIS. These include Side, Corycus, Elaeusa-Sebaste, and Aegeae in Cilicia; further Sidon, Dora, and Tripolis in Syria.

This term has long baffled me, and I still see no simple, compelling explanation for its presence. At Sidon it appears on coins with a galley or prow from Vespasian through Trajan, and does not recur<sup>15</sup>. Here, if anywhere, it might be felt to have some military significance with regard to assistance in supplies or the like; and yet its mode of appearance in the legend Σιδωνος Θεᾶς Ἱερας καὶ Ἀσύλου καὶ Ναυαρχίδος does not really suggest a military aspect. At Dora the term appears on coins of Trajan through Antoninus Pius; at Tripolis, only on a coin of Elagabalus; while at Tyre it turns up in an inscription of A. D. 174 and at Laodicea on a Hadrianic stone<sup>16</sup>. This spotty commemoration is of little help in determining the meaning of the word; but it is to be observed that the *one* city which might have been expected to use the term if it had naval significance – Seleucia Pieria, the base of the *classis Syriaca* and of

detachments from the Italian fleets on occasion – does not employ it at all on a series of coins ranging from Augustus to Severus Alexander <sup>17</sup>.

On the third-century Cilician issues the term occasionally is coupled with galleys, but as often appears with agonistic scenes of prize crowns (which are frequent in this period and district) <sup>18</sup>. The coinage of Corycus is particularly interesting, and perhaps significant. Under Gordian III, Philip, and Gallienus there are issues showing the goddess Thalassa, with crab claws in her hair, rudder, and *apblaston*; and also another female deity with naval attributes whom von Aulock identifies as Aphrodite Euploia or Nauarchis. The cult of Aphrodite Euploia is well known; for the appellation Nauarchis there is, as far as I know, only one epigraphic example <sup>19</sup>. The coins of Corycus with the term ΝΑΥΑΡΧΙΣ include Otacilia Severa with Hermes; Philip with Poseidon, one foot on a prow; Salonina with Hermes; Valerian with Dionysus, standing beside a prize table <sup>20</sup>.

This series from Corycus might suggest that we have to do with a local cult of Aphrodite Nauarchis, perhaps celebrated by games; but the evidence is very thin. Alternatively we might infer that the imperial government was seeking to encourage local naval strength in an area which eventually had to meet Shapur's invasion; yet this too would only be an inference <sup>21</sup>. The one explanation which I find difficult to accept is Kienast's hypothesis, to wit, that the term marks the presence of detachments of the *classis Syriaca* <sup>22</sup>. No evidence suggests that the small provincial fleet had such strength as to permit this splintering of its naval resources; and what Roman commander would so have violated the rules of military common sense <sup>23</sup>?

If we look back over all the Greek imperial issues which may relate to naval activity, it is apparent that they become more frequent with the Severi or, indeed, with Commodus. This fact is probably the result in part of the greater volume of Greek imperial issues beginning with the late second century <sup>24</sup>; series with naval emblems such as those of Smyrna or Chios run back much farther. Yet obviously there must have been reasons why a number of cities incorporated at this time galleys, prows, and so on – along with non-naval types, let it be remembered.

In the case of the rather noticeable outburst of galley types in Bithynia and nearby districts one is inclined to think of the increasing passage of military forces back and forth between the European and Asiatic frontiers of an ever more threatened Empire, which also had its effects on the road patterns of this main thoroughfare <sup>25</sup>; as already noted, the journeys of Marcus Aurelius and Commodus, of Septimius Severus and his sons, and of Gordian III were noted on imperial coinage, the effect of which on local issues must also be considered. But I would suggest that more generally the presence of naval types in coastal towns may indicate a renewed pride of their inhabitants in their geographic and economic position, a mark of that same local patriotism which led to boasts of distinction as *neokoros* or of legendary ties to Hector and other heroes <sup>26</sup>.

In particular, it seems more than doubtful that naval types specifically suggest the presence of naval detachments, as Kienast argues. On this principle we should have to assume that all inland towns which show military standards were army bases!



To seize upon and magnify the relevance of individual coin types which appear pertinent to a historical investigation is an old error in studies of the Greco-Roman world. Coin designers, after all, from the early days of Greece onward had far more often general, rather than specific, concepts in mind when they cut their dies. And in those few cases where reference to an actual event can be detected in Greek imperial issues, the validity of the interpretation – if it rests upon type rather than upon legend – can be established only by a rigorous study of *all* the material, both within one city's issues and also in comparison with the products of neighbouring mints in the same emperor's reign <sup>27</sup>.

## RESUME

Der Verfasser bringt gegenüber der von Dietmar Kienast jüngst in *Antiquitas* I, 13, 91 ff. gegebenen Interpretation nautischer Typen auf griechischen Münzen der römischen Kaiserzeit seinen Vorbehalt an. Es scheint ihm fraglich, daß von nautischen Münzentypen allein schon auf das Vorhandensein von Flotteneinheiten geschlossen werden könne. Dies würde ja bedeuten, daß jede Binnenstadt, auf deren Münzen Feldzeichen erscheinen, ein Heeresstützpunkt wäre! Der Verfasser zeigt, daß Darstellungen aus der Schifffahrt in diesen Münzprägungen keine bedeutende Rolle spielen und daß Schlüsse aus ihrem Vorhandensein nur gezogen werden dürfen, nachdem das gesamte Material einer Stadtprägung sorgfältig untersucht und mit den gleichzeitigen Emissionen benachbarter Münzstätten verglichen worden ist.

Red.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Dietmar Kienast, *Untersuchungen zu den Kriegsflotten der römischen Kaiserzeit* (*Antiquitas* I. 13; Bonn, 1966), pp. 91 ff.

<sup>2</sup> I shall not try to list or comment on every issue bearing a naval type, which would be a very extended undertaking in detail; but the major items of interest will appear below. Descriptions of types are abbreviated to the essentials for the present discussion.

<sup>3</sup> For Phaselis, e. g., naval types appear again only under Gordian (compare SNG Copenhagen 31.126–28 with SNG von Aulock 10.4420–23). Samos occasionally has prows in the Empire (SNG Copenhagen 24.1725 ff., von Aulock 6.2311 ff.).

<sup>4</sup> Among the few clear examples see the coinage of Tarsus under Caracalla, where the legend shows that grain had been imported (SNG von Aulock 13.6005, 6015; BMC Lycaonia etc. 198 ff.; M. Rostovtzeff in *NC*, XX [1900], pp. 96–107); and also the coinage of the Bosphorus under Asander (SNG Copenhagen 18.13 ff.; cf. *IGRR* I. 874, Dio Cassius 54.24.6).

<sup>5</sup> Grose, *McClellan Collection* II, 6190; BMC Corinth 567, 571; Chester G. Starr, *Roman Imperial Navy*, 31 B.C. to A.D. 324 (2d ed.; Cambridge, 1960), p. 201 n. 29.

<sup>6</sup> Aegina: Grose 6061; BMC Attica etc. 241. Corcyra: Grose 5266–68 (Septimius Severus), 5270–71 (Iulia Domna), 5272–73 (Caracalla), 5275 (Plautilla), 5280 (Geta); BMC Thessaly 651 (Lucilla), 662 ff. (Septimius Severus), 678 ff. (Caracalla), 693 (Plautilla), 704 (Geta). Nicopolis: BMC Thessaly 12 (Augustus), 22–23 (Aelius Caesar); Grose 5154 (Elagabalus), 5155 (Iulia Maesa).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. the Neptune coinage of A.D. 209–11 in Mattingly-Sydenham, *Roman Imperial Coinage* IV.1, pp. 120–22 nos. 228, 234, 241, 244; p. 200 n. 801; and the aureus of 202, *adventus Augustor*, in Monnaies et Médailles, Sale 35, no. 85 (Basel, 1967). Earlier trip by Marcus Aurelius and Commodus: Starr, *Roman Imperial Navy*, p. 204 n. 80; Gordian's trip: p. 206 n. 96.

<sup>8</sup> SNG Copenhagen 18.324, 329; von Aulock 1.283, 289, 290; BMC Pontus etc. 13 (Hadrian), 28 ff. (Sabina). Cf. David Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor* I (Princeton, 1950), pp. 612–22; and *Sylloge inscriptionum Graecarum* 3, 838.

<sup>9</sup> Abydos: SNG von Aulock 5.1456 (Commodus). Amastris: BMC Pontus 24, 32 (Marcus Aurelius, Lucius Verus). Anchialus: Imhoof-Blumer, *Die antiken Münzen Nord-Griechenlands* II, 429 (Marcus Aurelius), 488, 498 (Septimius Severus), 538–40 (Caracalla), 561 (Geta). Apamea: BMC Pontus 25 ff. (Marcus Aurelius on). Byzantium: Grose 4250, 4254 ff. (Iulia Soemias on); BMC Thrace etc. 63 (Trajan), 90 (Diadumenianus). Cerasus: Imhoof-Blumer, *Kleinasiatische Münzen* 1 (Commodus). Chalcedon: SNG Copenhagen 18.361 ff.; von Aulock 1.502. Coela: Grose 4142 ff.; SNG Copenhagen 872 ff.; BMC Thrace 2 (Commodus), 8–9 (Philip). Cyzicus: SNG Copenhagen 19.107 ff.; von Aulock 4.1261 ff.; BMC Mysia 176 ff. Nicomedia: SNG Copenhagen 18.565 ff.; von Aulock 3.751 ff.; BMC Pontus 16 ff. (on the coins with ΣΤΟΛΟΣ see Starr, *Roman Imperial Navy*, p. 204 n. 79). Perinthus: E. Schönert, *Die Münzprägung von Perinth* (Berlin, 1965) 393 ff.

<sup>10</sup> So I argued in the *Roman Imperial Navy*, p. 191 with n. 90. See BMC Pontus 74 (Nicaea), 33 (Chalcedon); BMC Thrace 44 and Schönert 570–76 (Perinthus).

<sup>11</sup> Evidence for the move: Starr, *Roman Imperial Navy*, pp. 128–29; denied by Kienast, p. 118.

<sup>12</sup> Ephesus: SNG Copenhagen 22.430, 435; BMC Ionia 291 (Geta), 347 (Philip); Starr, *Roman Imperial Navy*, pp. 115–16, 193. Chios: SNG Copenhagen 24.1641 ff.; von Aulock 6.2281 ff. Phocaea: SNG Copenhagen 23.1054 ff.; von Aulock 6.2142 ff. Smyrna: SNG Copenhagen 24.1248 ff.; von Aulock 6.2118 ff. Cyme: SNG Copenhagen 21.117 ff.

<sup>13</sup> Hadrianopolis: SNG Copenhagen 562 (Commodus); BMC Thrace 2 (Antoninus Pius), 12 (Septimius Severus), 45–46 (Tranquillina). Philoppopolis: BMC Thrace 3 ff. (Antoninus Pius), 25 (Crispina), 43 (Elagabalus); D. Tsontchev, «La navigabilité de l'*Hebrus*-Maritza dans l'antiquité», *Latomus*, XXI (1962), pp. 848–52.

<sup>14</sup> For other examples of the river god with prow, see SNG von Aulock 2.593 (Nicaea, Caracalla); 1.171 (Amastris, Iulia Domna); 3.1037, 1040 (Tios, Valerian and Gallienus). As for the galleys at Hadrianopolis cf. the appearance of galleys at Caesarea Germanice of Bithynia in SNG von Aulock 2.479 (Macrinus); BMC Pontus 2 (Septimius Severus), 7 (Valerian). These Kienast, p. 117, takes as depicting a war harbor. Caesarea in Cappadocia: SNG Copenhagen 34.200 (A.D. 98–99), showing a galley below military standard; almost an allegory of Tacitus, *Annales* 1.9, «legiones provincias classis cuncta inter se conexa».

<sup>15</sup> BMC Phoenicia 193–96 (A.D. 80/1–87/8), 218–23 (A.D. 116/7); SNG Copenhagen 37.246, 252.

<sup>16</sup> Dora: BMC Phoenicia 30–32 (A.D. 111/2), 38–39 (Hadrian), 40, 42 (Antoninus Pius 144/5). But SNG Copenhagen 37.156 has a galley without title. Laodicea: *IG* III 479. Tripolis: BMC Phoenicia 133 (Elagabalus, 219/20); also *IG* III 622. Tyre: *IG* XIV 830; coins bear a galley occasionally (SNG Copenhagen 37.333 ff.).

<sup>17</sup> Head, *Historia Numorum*, p. 783; Starr, *Roman Imperial Navy*, pp. 20, 115, 187–89, 230; Henri Seyrig, «Le Cimetière des marins à Séleucie de Piérie», *Mélanges Syriens offerts à M. René Dussaud* I (Paris, 1939), pp. 451–59.

<sup>18</sup> Aegeae: BMC Lycaonia 39–43 (Valerian); Imhoof-Blumer, *Kleinasiatische Münzen* 17 (Philip, 243/4), 19 (Decius); SNG Copenhagen 33.40 (Valerian); von Aulock 13.5460 (Valerian), 5461

(Gallienus). Elaioussa-Sebaste: Imhoof-Blumer 1 (Crispina), 2 (Clodius Albinus), 3 (Iulia Domna), 4 (Gordian). Side: BMC Lycia 112–14 (Gallienus); SNG von Aulock 11.4858–59 (Salonina). On Corycus, see below.

<sup>19</sup> BMC Lycaonia 14–15, 17, 18; SNG von Aulock 13.5682 ff. Aphrodite: O. Gruppe, *Griechische Mythologie und Religionsgeschichte* II (Munich, 1906), p. 1351; Latyshev, *Inscriptiones Regni Bosphorani* 25.

<sup>20</sup> Imhoof-Blumer 5 (Philip); BMC Lycaonia 19 (Otacilia Severa), 21–23 (Valerian), 26 (Salonina); SNG von Aulock 13.5686–7 (Valerian); Copenhagen 33.123–24 (Valerian). See H. Gaebler, *ZfN* XXXIV (1929), p. 296 no. 75.

<sup>21</sup> See Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor*, I, pp. 705–09; A. Alföldi, *Cambridge Ancient History*, XII, pp. 171–73; Starr, *Roman Imperial Navy*, pp. 194–96. But the earlier coins reported in Imhoof-Blumer militate against such an inference.

<sup>22</sup> Kienast, pp. 90–94, who relies far too heavily on Victor Tourneur, «Les villes amirales de l'orient gréco-romain», *Revue belge de numismatique*, LXIX (1913), pp. 407–24.

<sup>23</sup> See my comments on the tendency to site a naval station wherever a naval inscription appears, *Roman Imperial Navy*, p. 27 n. 21.

<sup>24</sup> Clemens Bosch, «Kleinasiatische Münzen der römischen Kaiserzeit» AA 1931, 422–55; Tom B. Jones, «A Numismatic Riddle: The So Called Greek Imperials», *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, CVII (1963), pp. 308–47.

<sup>25</sup> Starr, *Roman Imperial Navy*, p. 204 n. 79, 205 n. 85 ff.; Erik Gren, *Kleinasien und der Ostbalkan in der wirtschaftlichen Entwicklung der römischen Kaiserzeit* (Upsala, 1941) passim.

<sup>26</sup> E. g., SNG Copenhagen 20.436 (Ilium); 30.692 (Stectorium); 23.902 (Magnesia); SNG von Aulock 9.3905–6 (Otrus). Note too that on Hadrian's coinage Asia bears as attribute a prow and rudder and Bithynia the rudder etc. (*Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum* III, 829 ff., 1639–40, 1800 ff.).

<sup>27</sup> This point was stressed to me in comments, for which I am grateful, by Tom B. Jones; I have considered other, earlier aspects in «The Awakening of the Greek Historical Spirit and Early Greek Coinage», NC forthcoming.