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## THE HARD TASKS OF KELEUSTĒS IN ANCIENT GREEK TRIREMES

### ABSTRACT

*The rank of keleustēs in ancient Greek triremes is of great interest as it does not appear to be restricted to maintaining the rhythm of rowing through loud commands. Even if the above role represented hard work with many difficulties during naval battles, tasks such as chanting prayers to the Gods before battle or the provision of bread, wine and meat to rowers also came under his authority.*

**KEYWORDS: KELEUSTĒS, COMMANDS, ORDERS, ROWING RHYTHM.**

The term *keleustēs* (κελευστής<sup>1</sup> plur. *keleustai*) derives from the ancient Greek verb *keleuo* «κελεύω», which means bespeak, enjoin, to give the command to rowers to keep the rowing rhythm (Stamatakos 1999, Ioannidou 2014).

The verb *κελεύω* has been found in the Homeric epics in the general sense of bespeak, command (e.g. servants, soldiers, etc.). In the marine

environment we see it as an imperative for various naval operations (such as setting the sails, embarkation of the crew) and not with the meaning of words and phrases recited to achieve a rate of rowing (Hom. Il. 2. 151, Od., 2. 422-423, 9. 560). The term *keleustēs* is subsequent to the Homeric epics. As regards to the first depiction whereby it is clearly distinguished the attitude and position of *keleustēs*, we could say that it comes from an

<sup>1</sup> The ancient term exist today in Hellenic Navy corresponding to Petty Officer.

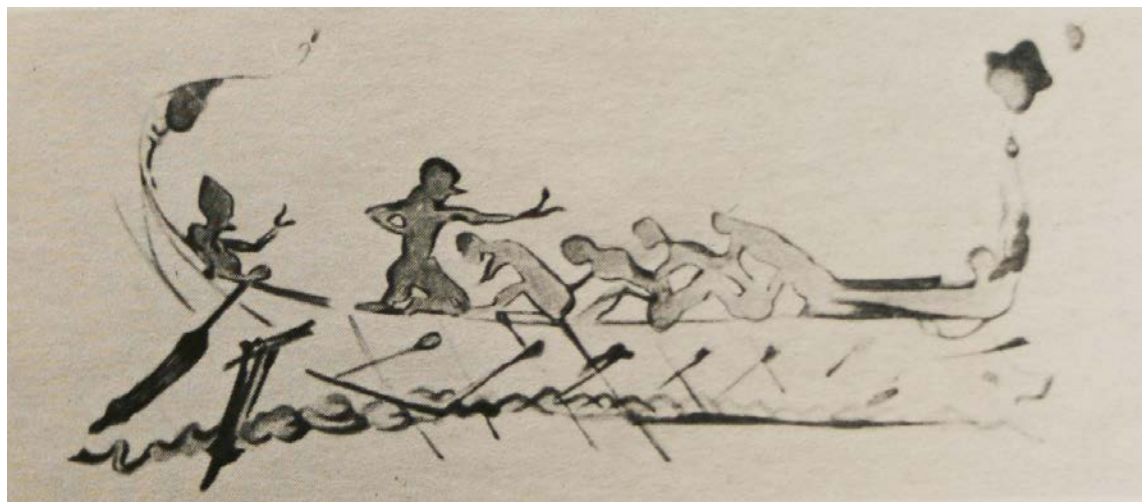


Plate 1. Aryballos of Corinthian style (550 BC). National Archaeological Museum, No. 281.



Plate 2. Bronze model boat with passengers, 6th century B.C., Archaeological Museum of Isthmian, 39 IM 2090.  
Photo: C.E. Ioannidou.

aryballos<sup>2</sup> of the 6<sup>th</sup> BC century (plate 1).

To maintain 170 rowers, a level of oarsmanship was necessary and, among other things, the *keleustēs* had to be a person worthy of respect and had to possess skills to inspire the crew. This was made clear by Xenophon, who separate the capable *keleustēs* from the incapable one. In the first case the voyage would take place in the designated time and relatively pleasantly, as the crew endured their labours willingly and with pride. In the second case the voyage would be undertaken in twice the time with unpleasant feelings, particularly among the *keleustēs* and the crew (Xen. Oec. XXI 3-4).

In ancient texts there is an impression that commands were not limited to simple dictates but were given following a rhythm or were sung like songs (Luc. Catapl. 641-642, 19). This could be achieved if a word or a short phrase followed the same tone and was repeated at a specific time.

<sup>2</sup> A small flask with wide base and narrow neck. It was used to contain perfume or oil. It was elegant and decorated with paintings.

Such commands are well known in Aristophane's *Frogs* (209-269).

Often there was another crew member, the piper (*auletēs* αὐλητής), or *triiravlēs* (τριηραύλης, τριήρης + αὐλέω), who accompanied the *keleustēs* with melodies on his pipe (Ioannidou 2014).

«...αὐλητάς αὐλοῦντας ἄγουσα καὶ κελευστάς κελεύοντα, ὧν (αὐ) ἕκαστος ἀνεκάλει τριήρη μίαν» (Polyaenus, *Strat.* 5.2.5).

[...carrying pipers playing music and keleustai who had given orders, each of which invited a trireme].

Sometimes the position of *keleustēs* could be filled by a person who was already a known artist of his time. For example, the famous actor of Greek tragedies Callippides, rode on the brilliant trireme of Alcibiades, at the time when the Athenian general made the Athenians rulers at Hellespont after the successful Battle of Cyzicus 410 BC, and was returning to Athens. Callippides, with his songs, gave the commands to the oars-

men while the *auletēs* Chrysogonos, who was also a celebrated victor in the piper competition at Delphi, played on a flute the trieric air (Ath.12, 535d, Plut. Alc. 32).

One of the oldest depictions of a piper on a ship comes from a bronze model boat with passengers, from the 6<sup>th</sup> century. B.C., located in the Museum of Isthmia (plate 2).

As is well known, slaves were often used in triremes too. Thucydides (Thuc7.13.2) noted that desertion by a slave serving in the trireme was a possibility and that it was the duty of the slave's master to prevent it. Plenty of names in inscriptions testify that slaves were members of crews on triremes as rowers or as the personal servants of the officers and marines, carrying out duties on the same or on a different trireme to their masters (Graham 1998, 98-102). Among these slaves were also pipers. We have interesting information that Phormio, a slave of Dio of Phrearrii, was a trireme piper, a "triiravlēs" (Dem. De cor. 129-130).

## THE ISSUE OF COMMUNICATION WITHIN THE SHIP

Whether the *keleustēs* had to be "sweet-voiced" or not is not known. Although from the ancient texts it's quite easy to assume that a loud and clear voice would have been a basic requirement.

From the writings of Diodorus Siculus we derive the information that before the battle of Salamis in Cyprus (306 BC), when both warring ships completed their formations, they prayed to the gods through the *keleustai* (Diod. Sic. 20,50,6), while the crew participated by joining its voice to theirs. The words in the ancient text of Diodorus: *καθάπερ ἦν ἔθος* (ie as customary), leads us to the thought that it was common for *keleustai* to chant prayers to the Gods before a battle, it is not known, however, when chronologically this started.

The chant of the *keleustēs* is also praised in a Greek novel of early Christian times, Daphnis and Chloe. Despite the fact that the specific descrip-

tion concerns a fishing vessel and not a warship, Longus describes vividly a scene where the vessel was crossing the sea and the voice of the *keleustēs* singing nautical songs was heard with so much pleasure, while the rest of the crew, like a chorus, sang out in unison to the time of his voice. However, before this romantic description, Longus makes it clear that the weather conditions were very favourable for a crew to hear the *keleustēs* clearly:

«Ἄνεμος μὲν οὐκ ἦν, γαλήνη δὲ ἦν»

[There was no wind but a dead calm] (Longus, Daphnis and Chloe, 3, 21, 2).

In difficult situations the task of *keleustēs* would become harder, as he had to give orders, for example, during a noisy naval battle. The noise created by the impact of the wooden ships, the cries of the wounded, the enemy's commands or the loud insults<sup>3</sup> of warriors would all stifle the commands. This could compromise the ideal picture of the *keleustēs* as he would be forced to issue his orders with screams rather than in a song:

«...καὶ τὸν κτύπον μέγαν ἀπὸ πολλῶν νεῶν ἔσμιπτουσῶν ἔκπληξιν τε ἅμα καὶ ἀποστέρησιν τῆς ἀκοῆς ὧν οἱ κελευσταὶ φθέγγονται παρέχειν. 7.70.7πολλὴ γὰρ δὴ ἡ παρακέλευσις καὶ βοή ἀφ' ἑκατέρων τοῖς κελευσταῖς κατὰ τε τὴν τέχνην καὶ πρὸς τὴν αὐτίκα φιλονικίαν ἐγένετο», (Thuc. 7.70).

[...while the huge din caused by the number of ships crashing together not only spread terror, but made the orders of the boatswains inaudible. The boatswains on either side in the discharge of their duty and in the heat of the conflict shouted incessantly orders and appeals to their men;].

If, in these critical moments, he could not achieve his task then disorder in the fleet would follow as the rowers would be unable to hear or even understand who was giving orders and the ships would be more difficult for the crew to handle (Thuc. 2.84).

On the other hand, in cases where rowing near the enemy was to be done in secret, such as, for

<sup>3</sup> It was customary before or during a battle for combatants to exchange insults, in writing or orally. C.E. Ioannidou, 2017.

example, during the night, the oarsmen turned the oars lightly and the *keleustēs* held the rhythm by tapping stones instead of by using their voice.

«...λίθων τε ψόφῳ τῶν κελευστῶν ἀντὶ φωνῆς χρωμένων καὶ παραγωγῆ τῶν κοπῶν» (Xen. Hell. 5.1, 8-9).

[In place of the usual cry the boatswains timed the rowers by a clink of stones, and silently the oars slid].

.. There are also two interesting accounts of a *keleustēs*' total silence in Arrian's texts:

The first one as a consequence of calm rowing before the battle:

«...τὰ μὲν πρῶτα ἀτρέμα τῆ εἰρεσία ἐπὶ μᾶς νεῶς ἐξέπλεον ἄνευ κελευστῶν τὰς κόπας παραφέροντες. ὡς δὲ ἐπέστρεφον ἤδη ἐπὶ τοὺς Κυπρίους καὶ ἐγγὺς τοῦ καθορᾶσθαι ἦσαν, τότε δὴ ζῶν βοῆ τε πολλῇ καὶ ἐγκελευσμῶ ἐς ἀλλήλους καὶ ἅμα τῆ εἰρεσία ζυγνόντων ἐπεφέροντο».

“At first they rowed out slowly and quietly in single file, moving forward the handles of their oars without any signal from the men who give the time to the rowers; but when they were already tacking against the Cyprians, and were near enough to be seen, then indeed with a loud shout and encouragement to each other, and at the same time with impetuous rowing, they commenced the attack” (Arr. Anab. 2.21).

The second one as a result of a loud environment and of great surprise near the region of the confluence of the rivers Hydaspes and Acesines:

«...ἵνα δὲ ζυμβάλλουσιν οἱ ποταμοὶ οὗτοι, στενότατος εἷς ποταμὸς ἐκ τῶν δυοῖν γίγνεται καὶ τὸ ρεῦμα αὐτῶ ὁζὺ ἐπὶ τῆ στενότητι καὶ δῖναι ἄτοποι ὑποστρέφοντος τοῦ ροῦ, καὶ τὸ ὕδωρ κομαίνεται τε καὶ καχλάζει ἐπὶ μέγα, ὡς καὶ πόρρω ἔτι ὄντων ἐξακούεσθαι τὸν κτύπον τοῦ κύματος. καὶ ἦν μὲν προεξηγγελμένα ταῦτα Ἀλεξάνδρῳ ἐκ τῶν ἐγγωρίων καὶ ἐξ Ἀλεξάνδρου τῆ στρατιᾶ· ὁμοῦ δὲ ἐπειδὴ ἐπέλαζεν αὐτῶ ταῖς ζυμβολαῖς ὁ στρατός, ἐς τοσόνδε ὁ ἀπὸ τοῦ ροῦ κτύπος κατεῖχεν, ὥστε ἐπέστησαν τὰς εἰρεσίας οἱ ναῦται, οὐκ ἐκ παραγγέλματος, ἀλλὰ τῶν τε κελευστῶν ὑπὸ θαύματος ἐκσιωπησάντων καὶ αὐτοὶ μετέωροι

πρὸς τὸν κτύπον γενόμενοι».

“...one very narrow river is formed out of the two; and on account of its narrowness the current is swift. “There are also prodigious eddies in the whirling stream, and the water rises in waves and plashes exceedingly, so that the noise of the swell of waters is distinctly heard by people while they are still far off. These things had previously been reported to Alexander by the natives, and he had told his soldiers; and yet, when his army approached the junction of the rivers, the noise made by the stream produced so great an impression upon them that the sailors stopped rowing, not from any word of command, but because the very *keleustai* who gave the time to the rowers became silent from astonishment and stood aghast at the noise” (Arr. Anab. 6.4).

So, it comes to our attention that in good weather conditions the voice of the *keleustēs* and the sound of the pipe will be more than enough to be heard by all the oarsmen. Could that be true?

When considering the trials carried out in the trireme *Olympias* we can be lead to some conclusions. During the first two years of the trials (1987-1988), the *keleustēs* found it difficult to be heard throughout the ship, even when using a powered megaphone (Coates 1990, 17).

“*The rowing master, acting under the captain, commanded and coached the crew with the help of a hand-held powered megaphone. He chose his position in the ship according to the direction of the wind so as to be as audible as possible to all sections of the oarcrew. Whenever it was thought helpful, the oarcrew chanted ‘O-Op’ to mark the catch and finish of strokes and so to bring the stroke together*” (Coates 1990, 16).

In the following year the communication between the *keleustēs* and oarsmen was restored thanks to a microphone installed with six speakers. Adding a piper was equally important as the high-frequency sound of the flute could be heard throughout the ship. The location of piper was next to the sail, following the indications of the ancient texts, and allowed the *keleustēs* to concentrate

solely on the guidance, while the oarsmen simultaneously followed the rhythm of known melodies (Rankov 2014, 134-135. Christopoulos 1996, 151).

“*The complement of an ancient trireme including a piper auletēs and it is quite possible that this pipe performed much the same function as the bosun’s call in latter day naval ships as a means of broadcasting standardized orders. For much of the time during the second phase of these trials a piper indicated the timing of the stroke (the ‘cadence’), and that helped greatly in keeping the oarcrew pulling together*” (Coates 1990, 17).

Despite all of the above, it was quite difficult to find a way of giving the rhythm only by voice. Even if the position of the *keleustēs* was standing in the middle of the ship, “μέσον δ’ ἐν αὐτοῖς στήσαντες τὸν κελευστήν” (Polyb. 1, 29), the necessity of the auletēs seems imperative as well as the presence of a second keleustēs. However, do we have the presence of a second keleustēs in ancient triremes? According to most ancient inscriptions, as for example IG I3 1032 (List of crews of Athenian triremes ca 410-400BC), there were no more than one *keleustēs* or *auletēs* in each trireme.

Regarding to Olympias trials, techniques for directing the oarsmen without electronic speakers are still being investigated (Rankov 2012, 3). Among others, a simple thought crossed our mind. Did people in ancient and classical times have better hearing than people today? This leaves an unanswered question in such a matter and space for further research.

## OTHER TASKS

*The keleustēs* was the coach of the crew and responsible for their discipline. However, more than that he also had the responsibility for the proper provision of bread, wine and meat to the rowers and he gave orders to the marines (Suda, term *κελευστής*, Arr. Parth. 61). Among other sources, an inscription from Delfi (IG VII-IX) CID 1.7. circa 425 BC) brings to light the above mentioned:

κελευστής ἕκαστος  
των δημοσίουν | ἐρετῶν. σῖ-  
τον παρεχόντων τε ἰ πρό-  
τει μάζαν, κρέα, οἶνον ὁ-  
πόσ[ον] βόλονται, καὶ τᾶ[λ]-  
λα ἀρμόδια·

Last but not least, his important role appears not only in the management of the warship. In a passage from the Xenophon we learn that the *Keleustēs*, with the rest of the *hyperesia* (naval service), are those who give the city its power:

«...καὶ γὰρ οἱ κυβερνήται καὶ οἱ κελευσταὶ καὶ οἱ πεντηκόνταρχοι καὶ οἱ πρωρᾶται καὶ οἱ ναυπηγοί, οὗτοί εἰσιν οἱ τὴν δύναμιν περιτιθέντες τῇ πόλει πολὺ μᾶλλον ἢ οἱ ὀπλίται καὶ οἱ γενναῖοι καὶ οἱ χρηστοί» (Xen. Ath. pol. 1.2. (included auletēs: IG II2, 1951, 94-105, GOS 266-8).

[The steersman, the keleustai, the lieutenant, the look-out-man at the prow, the ship carpenters - these are the people who encompass the city with power far more than her heavy infantry and men of noble birth].

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**REZIME**

**TEŠKI ZADACI KELEUSTĚS-A U GRČKIM TRIJERAMA**

**KLJUČNE REČI: KELEUSTĚS, NAREDBE, RITAM VESLANJA, ANTIČKA GRČKA.**

Položaj *keleustes*-a u antičkim grčkim trijerama budi veliko interesovanje, budući da im nije jedini zadatak bio da održe ritam veslanja davanjem glasnih komandi. Iako im je pomenuta uloga bila teška tokom pomorskih bitaka, zadaci kao što je izgovaranje molitvi bogovima pre bitke ili deljenje hleba, vina i mesa veslačima takođe su bili deo njihove nadležnosti.

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