

Greek bireme

A bireme is a warship from antiquity and is one of the first longships used for sea travel. For these ships, the requirements for seaworthiness and stability were particularly high. The term "bireme" comes from Latin and means that the oars on both sides of the ship were arranged in two rows, one above the other. The bireme is therefore also called a "two-man", "two-row" or "diere" after the original Greek name. Such ships are also commonly regarded as "galleys". But galleys did not exist until around 1000 AD, and the notorious galley prisoners would have had no business on an ancient bireme.

Each oar was operated by several oarsmen. A ramming spur was attached to the bow of the ship, which was used to attack enemy ships. To increase the speed of a ramming attack, a larger number of oarsmen was needed. At the same time, there were fewer and fewer heavily armed men on board.

The bireme was one of the first ship types to be built according to fixed rules and proportions. To better protect the rowers, the side of the ship was raised. To accommodate more rowers, the warships were also built longer and longer. To ensure that the ships remained stable, however, they were not allowed to become too long. Thus, the ships were often up to 30-35 metres long and in most cases had 50 oars on each side. For reasons of space, the oars of the upper row were slightly offset from the lower row.

This type of construction was common throughout antiquity, especially among the Phoenicians, Greeks and Romans. Some ships were still built this way in the Middle Ages. The oldest bireme that has been discovered so far dates back to the 7th century BC.