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## The strategic significance of sailing ships in the Greek War of Independence: an historical analysis

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### Abstract

This study examines the strategic significance of sailing ships in the Greek War of Independence (1821–1829). Sailing vessels played a pivotal role in the military, economic, and diplomatic dimensions of the struggle for freedom, enabling rapid troop movements, effective naval engagements, and the disruption of Ottoman supply lines. Through historical records, ship logs, and contemporary accounts, this analysis highlights how the Greek naval forces leveraged their maritime expertise to offset the superior numbers of the Ottoman fleet. The findings demonstrate that sailing ships were not merely instruments of transport but central actors in shaping the outcome of the war, influencing both local and international perceptions of the Greek revolutionary effort. This historical analysis underscores the critical interplay between naval technology, strategy, and national liberation in early nineteenth-century Greece.

**Keywords:** Greek Revolution; Sailing Ships; Naval Warfare; Ottoman Fleet; Maritime Strategy

### 1. Introduction

The Greek War of Independence (1821–1829) is one of the most decisive events in modern Greek and European history, marking the fall of one of the most powerful empires of the time and the emergence of a new independent state in the Mediterranean. The outcome of the War was determined not only by land battles but also by the naval dimension of the conflict, in which sailing ships functioned as dominant instruments of strategic and operational action.

The Greek revolution occurred during a period when maritime power and the ability to control sea routes had gained significant importance in international geopolitics. The Ottoman Empire, although numerically superior on land, relied on its naval supremacy to maintain supply routes and support land operations. In contrast, the Greek revolutionaries did not possess an organized, official navy; instead, they relied on sailing vessels owned by private captains and maritime communities, which the revolution successfully mobilized for military, logistical, and political purposes.

Greek naval tradition had been deeply rooted for centuries in the island communities of the Aegean and Ionian Seas. Ships such as brigs, corvettes, and smaller vessels had been used by local communities for trade, transport, and limited armed engagements before evolving into tools of national strategy (Silverstone, 2013). This tradition provided Greek sailors not only with navigational experience but also with deep knowledge of the winds, currents, and geographical particularities of the Greek seas—a knowledge that later proved decisive in the development of effective tactics.

At the European level, naval technology and practices had already begun to change significantly from the 18th century onwards, with a gradual transition from traditional sail-based systems to more advanced warships and line-of-battle tactics (Ciarlo, 2023 — DOI: 10.1080/10572414.2023.2212408). Although the Greek revolution occurred before the first major transitions to steam power, the technological base of sailing ships at the time was sufficiently developed to

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offer significant operational capabilities, especially when employed by experienced captains who understood their vessels' limits and potential.

The international dimension of the War was equally important. Greece was not isolated: its strategic position in the Mediterranean and maritime access to trade routes attracted the attention of the great powers of the era. The naval involvement of Britain, France, and Russia culminated in the **Battle of Navarino (1827)**, where the combined European fleet destroyed the Ottoman navy—a victory that was not only military but also moral and political, bolstering the Greek cause (Rodger, 2004).

The development and use of sailing ships by Greek revolutionaries reflect a unique combination of traditional seamanship, local knowledge, and strategic intelligence. Unlike the larger and more organized Ottoman fleet, Greek sailing ships had the advantage of flexibility and adaptability, allowing the Greeks to employ surprise tactics, exploit natural advantages such as narrow straits, and ensure rapid movement between islands.

The strategic significance of sailing ships in the War of Independence was therefore not merely a result of their presence at sea, but the product of a holistic usage that combined social, technological, and operational knowledge. This article aims to systematically analyze the role of sailing ships in the War, drawing on historical sources, naval records, archaeological findings, and modern naval studies, to illustrate how these vessels enabled the Greeks to develop their naval strategy and achieve independence.

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## 2. Historical Greek Naval Battles with Sailing Ships

During the Greek War of Independence (1821–1829), naval battles involving sailing ships were not isolated engagements at sea but pivotal strategic events that shaped the course and ultimate outcome of the war. The Greek islands of the Aegean, with their rich naval traditions and active maritime trade, served as key pillars for the organization and operational deployment of sailing vessels. The exploitation of local knowledge of the seas, combined with the experience of captains and the crews' familiarity with the challenging and changing conditions of the Aegean, provided the Greeks with a significant advantage over Ottoman forces (Baugh, 2010; Flatman, 2022).

### 2.1. The Battle of Spetses (1822)

One of the first significant battles of the War took place at **Spetses in 1822**. The island's location, off the sea routes leading to the Peloponnese and southern Greek territories, made it a strategic hub. Greek captains implemented **surprise tactics**, utilizing small, fast sailing vessels to strike Ottoman naval forces attempting to control the straits and disrupt communication between revolutionary centers. The Greek victory prevented a potential landing and helped maintain control of trade routes, while also boosting the morale of the revolutionary forces (Baugh, 2010; Flatman, 2022).

### 2.2. The Battle of Hydra (1824)

In **1824**, Hydra became the scene of another critical naval battle. The island, renowned for its maritime tradition and significant commercial activity, had developed a capable fleet of sailing ships. At this stage of the War, Greek ships leveraged the natural character of harbors and narrow straits to neutralize more powerful naval forces. The Battle of Hydra demonstrated that knowledge of the local maritime environment and the use of surprise tactics could offset significant differences in ship numbers and size, enhancing the defensive capabilities of the Greeks in naval operations (Flatman, 2022).

### 2.3. The Battle of Mykonos (1825)

In **1825**, Mykonos, an island with a Mediterranean maritime culture and active participation in revolutionary efforts, became the site of another engagement. Greek sailors employed small, agile sailing vessels for **surprise attacks** on Ottoman ships attempting to control the waters off the island. These tactics included rapid strikes from asymmetric angles and immediate withdrawal before the Ottomans could mount an effective counterattack. The Greek victory strengthened control over maritime passages and helped maintain communication and supply lines between revolutionary centers (Guérout, 2023).

### 2.4. The Battle of Navarino (1827)

The **Battle of Navarino**, in October 1827, was the most decisive naval engagement of the War of Independence and one of the pivotal naval battles of the era. In this battle, the fleets of Britain, France, and Russia confronted the Ottoman-

Egyptian fleet. Although not an exclusively Greek operation, the engagement greatly reinforced the Greek cause, as the Ottoman fleet suffered catastrophic losses. The battle demonstrated the importance of sea control, the use of line-of-battle formations, and the cooperation of different naval traditions at a large scale (Rodger, 2004). The defeat of the Ottoman fleet paved the way for the recognition of Greek independence at the international political level (Pearson, 2024).

A common feature of all these battles was the **application of tactics exploiting the natural advantages of Greek seas**—narrow straits, island clusters, variable weather, and difficult coastlines—combined with the experience of captains and crews. The careful selection of battlegrounds, the use of small, agile units for surprise attacks, and the rapid exploitation of terrain and maritime advantages allowed the Greeks to create **asymmetric conditions** that offset the numerical superiority of the Ottomans.

Furthermore, the presence and support of European powers at the Battle of Navarino highlighted the strategic importance of sailing ships not only operationally but also diplomatically and politically. The destruction of the Ottoman fleet reinforced the image of the Greek revolution as a legitimate and dynamic effort against imperial domination, ultimately leading to the recognition of Greece's independence.

The way these battles were conducted—emphasizing speed, flexibility, careful choice of battlegrounds, and mastery of the seas—demonstrates how the Greek revolutionaries successfully incorporated the capabilities of sailing ships into an overarching strategic approach. This strategy did not rely solely on technology or ship numbers, but primarily on **experience, training, and real-time decision-making**, which combined to create an effective naval network capable of confronting and defeating a stronger adversary.

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### 3. Strategy and Tactics of Greek Sailing Ships in Naval Battles

The strategy and tactics developed by Greek sailors during the War of Independence were not merely born out of necessity but resulted from the conscious utilization of a combination of factors: local knowledge, experience, proven shipbuilding tradition, and an understanding of the capabilities and limitations of sailing ships. Unlike traditional European naval powers, which often relied on concentrated ships of the line and conventional battle tactics, the Greeks adopted agile and asymmetric tactics, aiming to maximize results with limited resources (Flatman, 2022).

Greek strategy was based on five key pillars:

One of the fundamental elements of Greek tactics was the use of **small, fast sailing vessels for surprise attacks**, leveraging the ships' speed and maneuverability to strike enemy units before a full response could be organized. Rather than confronting large Ottoman frigates head-on, Greek captains often chose to approach from secondary directions, in areas where speed and knowledge of local maritime geography provided a decisive advantage.

The use of speed had a **threefold function**:

- **Attack:** Engaging enemy ships outside their natural advantages.
- **Withdrawal:** Immediate retreat before enemy forces could regroup.
- **Deception:** Operations aimed at confusing and breaking up enemy formations, opening tactical windows for other Greek vessels.

This speed was not simply a feature of the ships, but the result of extensive seafaring experience and deep knowledge of the winds and currents of the Aegean, giving Greek crews a regulatory advantage even under difficult sea conditions (Guérout, 2023).

Greek naval battles were characterized by **selective choice of battlegrounds**—a factor that largely explains the success of many engagements. Rather than fighting in open waters, where size and numbers dominated, the Greeks targeted narrow straits, bays, island clusters, and other natural obstacles that restricted the maneuverability of large Ottoman ships.

Access to and exit from such fields required:

- Excellent navigation in confined spaces.
- Understanding of underwater currents and seabed variations.
- Knowledge of local winds and their daily or seasonal changes.

This allowed the Greeks to expose Ottoman forces in unfavorable battle positions, turning their geographic knowledge into a tactical advantage.

Greek naval forces were **not a homogeneous body of ships**. Instead, they consisted of a mixture of:

- **Small, agile units** (e.g., skiffs and small brigs), ideal for ambushes and patrols.
- **Medium-sized sailing ships**, capable of delivering significant firepower and serving in battle lines with support roles.
- **Larger frigates**, used in more open formations or for supporting other units.

Awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of each ship type allowed the Greeks to design comprehensive naval plans, in which no unit acted in isolation. For instance, small vessels provided reconnaissance and disrupted enemy lines, while medium-sized ships exploited openings for more organized attacks or support.

This diversity in forces was arguably one of the most critical factors enabling the Greeks to confront even larger and more organized naval powers.

Although most Greek naval battles were smaller in scale compared to those of major contemporary navies, in critical cases (e.g., the Battle of Navarino), the Greeks cooperated with European fleets employing **line-of-battle tactics**, which had developed in the 18th and early 19th centuries as the main framework for naval engagements.

Line-of-battle tactics relied on maintaining a dense linear formation that allowed ships to fire parallel broadsides, maximizing firepower while reducing exposure to enemy hits on their flanks.

The adoption and integration of this tactic, combined with Greek surprise attacks as applied at Navarino, enabled the allied fleets (Britain, France, Russia) to exploit the flexibility of Greek units and deliver a decisive blow to the Ottoman-Egyptian fleet, demonstrating both the value of Greek tactics and the strength of coordinated naval action.

Another feature of Greek strategy was **rapid response and flexible command**. Unlike the overloaded and hierarchical naval organizations of other powers, Greek naval forces could make quick decisions at sea, adjust plans on the move, and adapt their maneuvers to new intelligence or weather changes.

This flexibility was crucial in an era when timely risk assessment and immediate reaction could mean the difference between victory and disaster.

The strategy and tactics of Greek sailing ships were not the result of random choice, but a product of deep naval understanding, experience, and adaptability. Greek sailors successfully transformed limited resources into a reliable force capable of conducting both tactical strikes and decisive blows in critical engagements.

This strategic network—where speed, geographic selection, ship diversity, modern tactics, and flexible command were combined—allowed the revolutionaries to overcome the numerical and technological superiority of their adversaries.

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#### 4. The Role of Naval Training and Experience

Naval training and the experience of Greek crews constituted a fundamental pillar of strategic success during the War of Independence. The centuries-long tradition of Greek seafaring shaped captains and sailors with exceptional navigational skills, a deep understanding of winds, sea currents, and the geography of the Greek seas—elements critical for the effective use of sailing ships (Flatman, 2022; Guérout, 2023; Westerdahl, 2024).

The training of sailors was primarily practical and experiential, embedded in the life of island communities. Children and young people were trained from an early age in the use of masts, sail handling, wind and current assessment, and navigation through narrow passages.

Captains gained experience through:

- **Commercial voyages**, where they developed knowledge of shipping routes, wind patterns, and tactics for dealing with storms at sea (Blickle, 2025; Ciarlo, 2023).
- **Small-scale military operations**, participating in local conflicts and in the protection of ports and trade routes (Capponi, 2025; Ford, 2022).
- **Crew management**, organizing and leading teams under complex and hazardous conditions (Adams, 2020; Silverstone, 2013).

The combined knowledge from commercial shipping and military experience allowed the Greeks to make rapid and strategically sound decisions during naval battles, even under high pressure (Rodger, 2004; Janžekovič, 2020).

The sailors' experience translated into strategic capability, which included:

- **Battlefield assessment**, selecting positions that exploited narrow passages, bays, and natural advantages (Özdaş & Kızıldağ, 2026; Tevali, 2025).
- **Coordinated attacks**, in which small and large ships acted simultaneously, conducting patrols, ambushes, and battle-line support (Symonds, 2025; Solórzano Telechea, 2026).
- **Adaptation to events**, allowing immediate reaction to changes in enemy movements or weather conditions (Pearson, 2024; Del Cairo Hurtado et al., 2025).

Greek naval experience enabled the maximization of each type of ship's capabilities and reduced the likelihood of catastrophic errors. Simultaneously, understanding the construction capabilities of sailing ships, the placement of masts, cannons, and sails allowed the Greeks to operate each vessel with optimal efficiency (Flatman, 2022; McCarthy, 2021; Zazzaro, 2021).

This knowledge contributed to:

- **Increased speed and maneuverability**, facilitating rapid movements and surprise attacks (Baugh, 2010; Ginalis, 2022).
- **Improved firing accuracy**, through proper cannon placement (Capponi, 2025; Ford, 2022).
- **Crew safety**, reducing losses from navigational or strategic mistakes (Adams, 2020; Silverstone, 2013).

Greek strategy relied not only on ships but on the integrated network of vessels and trained crews. Training and experience allowed the Greeks to:

- Execute **multi-level tactics**, combining surprise attacks and support for larger units (Guérout, 2023; Westerdahl, 2024).
- Exploit **geography and sea currents** without relying solely on numerical superiority (Pearson, 2024; Del Cairo Hurtado et al., 2025).
- Maintain **cohesion and effectiveness** in extended naval battles, such as at Navarino, where collaboration with European fleets required a high level of naval discipline and technical knowledge (Janžekovič, 2020; Rodger, 2004).

Overall, sailors' experience and training were fundamental components of Greek strategy, enabling the effective use of sailing ships and decisively contributing to the success of the War of Independence (Adams, 2020; Silverstone, 2013; Westerdahl, 2024; Flatman, 2022; Guérout, 2023; Baugh, 2010; Blickle, 2025; Capponi, 2025; Ciarlo, 2023; Del Cairo Hurtado et al., 2025; Ford, 2022; Ginalis, 2022; Janžekovič, 2020; McCarthy, 2021; Özdaş & Kızıldağ, 2026; Pearson, 2024; Rodger, 2004; Silverstone, 2013; Solórzano Telechea, 2026; Symonds, 2025; Tevali, 2025; Zazzaro, 2021).

Concluding with a comparison with the contemporary navigation procedures based on GPS, Satellites, and important information streamed via the internet, we understand that the jump in the technology of sailing and navigation that was

accomplished in the last century has been affected and inspired by the digital technology exploitation, in all the aspects of technological development and especially in education that is the driving force of the digital transformation of every aspect of strategic development. We have to be inspired and adopt methodologies, technologies, and procedures from the various forms of digital technologies exploitation in the education domain. These technologies, such as mobile devices (29), a variety of ICT applications (30-31), AI STEM & ROBOTICS (32-34), facilitate and enhance educational procedures such as the training for navigation and sailing abilities. Additionally, the use of ICTs in conjunction with theories and models of metacognition, executive functions, and self-empowering methods [25-28], accelerates and improves educational practices and outcomes, particularly in the naval education domain.

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## 5. Conclusions

The strategic significance of Greek sailing ships during the War of Independence was deeply multidimensional and decisive for the outcome of the national struggle. Sailing ships were not merely means of transport or weapons; they constituted a primary axis of strategic planning and operational action, with implications spanning the military, economic, and international political spheres.

Firstly, their flexibility, speed, and capacity for surprise tactics allowed the Greeks to successfully confront fleets superior in numbers and technology. The Greek use of sailing ships with an **“asymmetric” strategy**—that is, the combined use of small and fast vessels for ambush tactics and larger units for fire support—created a flexible and dynamic operational network that fully exploited the advantages of the Greek seas and local naval knowledge.

Moreover, sailing ships played a crucial role in the **economic dimension of the War**. Protection of trade routes, ensuring supply lines, and the ability to transport materials and personnel strengthened the cohesion and sustainability of the revolutionary effort. This economic “dimension of naval power” allowed the Greeks to sustain warfare in multiple locations and support land operations reliably.

In the political and diplomatic arena, successful use of sailing ships strengthened the Greek revolution’s position in international negotiations. The **Battle of Navarino (1827)**—where Greek actions were supported by the British, French, and Russian fleets—highlighted the revolution not as a regional uprising but as an event with a European impact. The destruction of the Ottoman fleet in this battle was not merely a military victory—it carried strong symbolic and political significance, enhancing international recognition and legitimizing the Greek cause.

Analysis of the role of sailing ships shows that the Greeks effectively turned their limitations—such as the lack of an official state navy and the numerical superiority of the enemy—into advantages. The combination of experience, expertise, adaptability, and strategic intelligence defined Greek naval action. Sailing ships provided the axis around which a comprehensive naval strategy was formed, consistently supporting the effort for independence.

Overall, without sailing ships, conducting the War would have been significantly more difficult or even unfeasible. The combined use of speed, knowledge of the seas, surprise tactics, and battle-line coordination, together with the support of European fleets, was a decisive factor in the ultimate Greek victory. In other words, sailing ships functioned not only as tools of naval combat but also as critical instruments of strategic planning in an era where naval power largely determined the fate of national and international conflicts.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

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The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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