

ANCIENT ROME – Military History

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Romans and the military. The Roman army, a powerful component of the Roman state, one on which perhaps fifty per cent of the national budget was spent, in the early Empire. If the influence of Rome is dominant throughout the ancient ‘civilized world,’ from Parthia to Northumbria, it is largely because the Roman army was omnipresent in that extent of the globe.

The Roman army. What was this Roman army? It was the protective arm of the Roman state, and carried with it both an aggressive/dominative function and a policing capacity; once alien armies were defeated, semi-militarized occupation forces were left to organize the new territory—though on certain occasions compliant or useful foreign areas were given the privilege of organizing and policing themselves. At the peak of its power the army comprised 45 to 120 million members, all men, all citizens; it is estimated that fifty percent of the national budget went into military expenses, in the first two centuries of the Empire. All candidates for the army—in theory anyway—were thoroughly vetted as appropriate for military work. The recruiters worked on basic principles, preferring military candidates who were around 18 years of age, strong and loyal to the state—depending on the time period in question—and fully prepared for teamwork, for severe group spirit was mandatory in the Roman army.

The Army as a Profession. Needless to say, this was a professional army; members signed up for 25 years. Their primary garrison was at Rome, although there were large, often permanent, military stations throughout the Empire. (We speak here chiefly of developments within the Empire, for it was not until the late Republic that the army began to take on its highly organized character—each detail of its provision, movement, and working condition being notoriously well planned from above, down to the hobnail pattern on the soldiers’ boots.)

The army’s fighting tactics. The fighting prowess of the Roman army was famously tied in to the matter of teamwork, and in being thus tied in was also defined as a highly regimented force. When it comes to technical developments, the Roman army changed remarkably little from early Republic to the end of the Empire; steel was not yet available during the Roman military period, so the weapons available to soldiers were made of bronze, or, later in the Empire, of iron—thus were not of higher quality than the weapons of many of their foes.

The Superiority of the Roman Army. In balance for that, though, the Roman soldiery was significantly better trained than most—meaning those ‘barbarian’ forces whose military prowess was gradually growing, along the borders of the Empire. The new Roman recruit would train by fighting against robust wooden stakes—which would represent enemy infantry people—and would fight those mock enemy with wicker work shields and wooden swords. (These mock implements would be significantly lighter than the metal weapons used in actual combat.) The basic marching requirement was to cover 18.5 miles in five hours, that is at a firm marching pace; serious competence in swimming was also expected.

The Omnicompetent Roman Soldier. As this last pairing, of marching strength with swimming, might suggest, the Roman soldier was expected to be pretty omnicompetent on the job, and that in fact is where the surpassing capacity of the Roman army lay. The infantryman carried with him not only his sword (his *gladius*) and his *pila* (his much feared, armor-piercing javelins), but his shovel, for a variety of encampment logistics. The Roman soldier was prepared for a high variety of military engineering skills, ranging from road building—often necessary on the spot in the innumerable remote areas of the Roman Empire—through the construction of siege engines, through the rapid construction of vast encampments.

Logistics and teamwork. The brilliance and severity of the Roman military achievement can be encapsulated in a couple of points. The establishment of long supply chains reached great heights among the Roman armies. These chains—as say between the main Roman garrison in the capitol, and outposts on the Rhenish barbarian frontier—would often cross high mountains in freezing weather, then move to rivers like the Rhine or Donau, across which the Roman navy would move materiel, then there would be a transfer to military caravans which would continue the materiel transport to the north. For such achievements—which seem closely related to the Romans’ monumental

architectural skills—discipline and the fear of punishment were indispensable. The Roman camp was not a boy scout camp, and military training among the Romans has been called, by one eminent military historian, like the training of the American marines, only ‘a lot nastier.’ The Greek historian, Polybius (3rd century B.C.) describes in the following terms the consequences of the cowardice of a cohort:

if ever these same things happen to occur among a large group of men... the officers reject the idea of bludgeoning or slaughtering all the men involved [as is the case with a small group or an individual]. Instead they find a solution for the situation which chooses by a lottery system sometimes five, sometimes eight, sometimes twenty of these men, always calculating the number in this group with reference to the whole unit of offenders so that this group forms one-tenth of all those guilty of cowardice. And these men who are chosen by lot are bludgeoned mercilessly...

Reading

Soldiers and Ghosts: A History of Battle in Classical Antiquity, J.E. Lendon (New Haven, 2005), pp. 163-315. A readable account of how the Romans actually fought.

Discussion questions

What was the role of teamwork in the Roman army? Why was so much emphasis put on teamwork? How were soldiers punished, who refused to participate in the team effort?

Why was the issue of supply lines, and the according logistics, so important to the Roman army? Does their logistical skill tie into other abilities characteristic of the Roman people? You might want to develop your responses in terms of mechanical and architectural skills in ancient Rome.

Why do you think the Roman state delegated to the army the job of organizing new colonies? Was the army good at that? What determined the occasional decision of the Roman government, to allow occupied territories to police and protect themselves?