

The Roman Army

The Roman Army started as a hoplite army. It was composed of citizens that were affluent enough to pay for the equipment of a heavy infantryman. The recruiting base of the Roman Army was the Roman citizen farmers who formed the basis of the Roman political establishment. This imposed certain severe limitations to the operational capability of the Roman Army because the farmers composing it could only be away for several weeks at a time before they had to return to their fields. Therefore, the warfare cycle was tied inextricably to the pace of the agricultural year.

Warfare during the period was a rather low-intensity affair. Conflicts were judged in one single clash between the opposing forces. The phalanx was the predominant tactical formation and the hoplite was its structural element.

The Roman Army was not typical of the era however. The Hellenistic states around Rome had long ago come to rely on professionals to man their armies. The Roman Army continued to rely for a considerable amount of time on the principle of a citizen militia without great difficulty for as long as campaigns had to be fought on Italian soil against the familiar rivals of the Italian peninsula. As the power and reach of Rome increased, the Roman Army came under pressure to satisfy the demands of campaigns fought far away from Rome on unfamiliar soil against unfamiliar enemies. This is what finally broke the link between the warfare cycle and the agricultural year.

The Romans modified their recruiting system creating what in fact was a conscript army. From the beginning of the 4th century, Roman soldiers were paid an annual salary. Although this was not enough to make the army a career, the intimate link between the agricultural year and warfare was broken. Now, the soldiers were serving until they were discharged. Law in Rome required citizens to serve for sixteen campaigns and this was rarely reached in the era before the Punic Wars. Rome was in almost constant warfare but the system proved effective in the sense that it provided the army with the manpower it needed without imposing a heavy burden on society. The Roman Army in a sense personified the State and it was the sacred duty of a Roman citizen to serve the State. The Roman citizen willingly subjected himself to the harsh discipline of the Roman Army feeling that he was fulfilling his sacred duty to the State. The devotion of the Roman citizen to the State was what permitted the Roman Army to develop a military structure that was more complex than that of any other city-state, more effective and in greater numbers.

This system however suffered from a serious disadvantage that is common to all conscript armies in history. A conscript army by definition is called to life to face threats resulting from a specific situation or to fulfill a specific mission. Once the threat disappeared or the mission fulfilled, the army was disbanded and its soldiers returned to their previous lives as farmers. The combat experience acquired by these soldiers was lost and the Roman commanders had to start from the beginning with making the new recruits combat worthy. Although each new army included soldiers with combat experience, it was not easy to create a combat-ready force because of the extensive training needed to mold the new soldiers into one unified entity.

The conscription system reached its limit and was abandoned as Rome expanded and the demands for military service became too heavy for the Roman farmers forming the recruiting base of the Roman Army in its initial phases.

Polybius is a very good source that provides considerable information for the organization, tactics and nature of the Roman Army.

The Legion

Originally, the word legio meant a levy and it referred to the entire force raised for a specific purpose. This is basically the initial development phase of the Roman Army in its crude, simple form. As the number of citizens available for military service increased, the military structure of the Roman Army had to develop in order to provide a more complex organization that could cope with the difficulties of effectively controlling, directing and deploying large numbers of men.

By the 3rd century, the legion was the main large unit of the Roman Army and consisted of five elements.

The main element of the legion consisted of three lines of heavy infantry. These men had the same basic property qualification and were divided according to age and experience.

The first line consisted of the youngest men who were known as the hastati. The second line consisted of older men in the prime of life according to the Roman perception (in their late twenties and early thirties); they were known as the principes. The third line consisted of the older and more experienced men who were known as the triarii. The number of the triarii never changed.

Each of the three lines of heavy infantry was divided into ten maniples. The maniples of the hastati and principes consisted of 120 men and in cases where legions were reinforced, of 160 men. The maniples of the triarii always consisted of 60 men.

Citizens, who did not fulfill the property qualification or were not old enough to join the hastati, served as light infantrymen called velites. The velites normally numbered 1200 to support the heavy infantry of the legion but they were increased when the legion was reinforced.

The fifth element of the legion was the cavalry; the numbers of which never changed like the triarii. There were always 300 cavalymen divided into ten turmae of 30.

Tactics, weaponry and organization of the legion

The main element of the legion was the heavy infantry that normally bore the greatest pressure of the fighting. It was the most powerful element of the legion because the well-trained and disciplined men of the hastati, principes and triarii formed a powerful tactical formation that could face and defeat almost anything any contemporary nation could have thrown against the Roman Army.

The heavy infantry used defensive and offensive equipment. The defensive equipment was common for all three lines of the heavy infantry formation. A semi-cylindrical shield, the scutum, provided the first protection to the infantryman. Information shows that it was rather heavy and it was held by a horizontal handgrip behind its center. It was constructed of multiple layers of plywood covered with calf's skin and around its edges it was protected with bronze or iron. The legionary also wore a bronze helmet, bronze leg and body armor. According to Polybius, a crest topped the legionary's bronze helmet on which sat two black and one purple feather.

The offensive equipment used by the legion was mainly for close quarter fighting. The legionary's main weapon was the gladius with a length of about 50-60cm and a triangular point designed to puncture armor. This weapon was used in the final stages of a battle when the legion finally achieved contact with the enemy. The legionaries formed a solid line behind their shields and they pushed their way forward stabbing at the enemy with their swords. This weapon was probably first introduced after the First Punic War and it remained the standard offensive weapon of the Roman Army until the 3rd century AD.

Another weapon for which the Roman legions were known and feared was the pilum, the famous Roman heavy javelin. The date of introduction and the origins of the pilum are quite unclear. The pilum consisted of two parts: a wooden part of about 1.2m and a narrow iron part of 60-70cm. The weight of the pilum was concentrated on its wooden part giving it the momentum to penetrate the armor of an enemy soldier and strike the body. The pilum broke on impact making impossible for the enemy to recover it and use it against the Romans. Another advantage was the fact that even if the enemy soldier avoided injury, the pilum all too often penetrated his shield, forcing the enemy to fight unprotected. The hastati and the principes were armed with the pilum.

The triarii retained the old hoplite thrusting spear.

The other element of the legion the velites were poorer citizens who were not old enough or rich enough to belong to the heavy infantry. This reflected in their weaponry and by consequence, on their tactics. A circular shield of about 40cm in diameter protected them and they were armed with a gladius and a bundle of light spears. They wore a helmet that they often covered with animal skins. Their role was to support the heavy infantry or the cavalry and they were fighting in open order.

The cavalry was the other element of the legion that always remained stable. The cavalry always consisted of 300 horsemen divided in 10 turmae of 30 horsemen. They were armed with a sword (longer than the gladius), spear and they wore armor and carried a round shield. The Roman cavalry was using unique equipment until they adopted Greek-style equipment as Polybius reports. The cavalry recruited among the wealthiest citizens of the Roman State, including the top eighteen centuries of the Comitia Centuriata, the voting assembly. The members of the top eighteen centuries were considered equo publico, which means that the State was responsible for providing them with a replacement should their horse be killed at war. The cavalry was where most of the future politicians who were to rule Rome served out the ten campaigns prescribed under the law in order to be eligible for political office.

During deployment at war, the legion was supported by allies who were organized in an ala with 900 cavalry and about the same number of infantry as the legion. Their tactics and equipment were essentially similar to that of the legion. Individual Latin colonies were providing a body (in relation to their size) of infantry and a turmae of cavalry.

The elite of the allied troops was grouped into the extraordinarii and they always camped near the general's tent being at his immediate disposal. They had the heavy task of heading the column during an advance or of guarding the rear.

Command structure

The main tactical organizational unit of the Roman Army was the maniple. The maniples were divided in two centuries commanded by a centurion. It must be stressed here that the main tactical unit was the maniple and that the centuries did not fight independently. The centurion of the right-hand century was senior and led the maniple. The centurion was chosen from men who were proven to be stable and experienced rather than simply brave and bold. Centurions were required to lead from the front and by example. They were also required to fulfill several administrative functions and had therefore to be literate.

The second in command within the century was the optio who stood at the rear and helped to keep the formation rigid and the men in line. The signifer carried the standard and the tesserarius supervised the posting of night sentries.

The legion was commanded by six elected military tribunes who exercised command in pairs of two at a time. Three prefects who were Roman citizens commanded the ala.

This command mechanism was subjected to the commander who normally was the consul of the year in which military operations were taking place. When both consuls were operating together, they held command on alternate days. This system was not ideal and it created many problems, especially when the two consuls had opposite views of the situation. Writers have often attributed many Roman defeats to this system but the reality must be that it is rather difficult to determine to which degree this system of command was the cause of defeats on the field.

Discipline, rewards and punishment

The Roman Army was one of the most disciplined in this period. Discipline was tight and sometimes harsh but due to the willingness of the Roman citizen to subject himself to such rigorous conditions, the Roman Army managed to evolve along the lines of an extremely strong and solid organization.

The high number of officers in the Roman Army made it easier to effectively control and deploy troops on the field. This also had a profound impact on how the Roman Army operated in battle. Centurions were required to remain with their troops, to lead in front and by example. They had to be resourceful, intelligent and brave. It was

normal to promote men who were gifted leaders of men rather than simply brave individuals.

To the Roman soldier it was clear that a certain standard of behavior was expected from him. The Army made it clear that it was ready to punish but also to reward. Great emphasis was placed on personal bravery that was rewarded by a complex system of decorations and rewards. Decorations were worn with pride and commanded great respect. Great parades were held at the end of great battles where the brave deeds of bold individuals were publicly read out and admired by the totality of the Army.

On the other hand, punishment was harsh and public. Units that had fled before an enemy without resistance were decimated, in other words one in ten members chosen by lots, was beaten to death. The remainder were publicly singled out and humiliated in front of the rest of the Army. They were issued barley instead of wheat, they were forced to camp outside of the camp a Roman Army constructed every night and they had to eat their meals standing up instead of the reclining position usual with the Romans. To be singled out for punishment was an immense disgrace for any Roman citizen and reflected on the social status and position of the individual.

Perhaps one of the most obvious manifestations of the discipline of the Roman Army was the marching camp constructed every night. It was always built according to the same pattern and had four gates and two main roads at an angle of 90 degrees. All the duties were strictly allocated to specific units and individuals and tightly controlled. Every unit was allocated a specific spot within the camp space where it was pitching its tents every night. It was a very rare occurrence for a Roman Army to spend the night without constructing a camp.

Operational capability

Through most of its history the Roman Republic normally fielded four legions. When a threat had to be faced, the number of legions deployed increased according to the danger posed by the specific threat. The standard size of a Roman Army was two legions with two alae under the command of a consul. Each legion was given a numerical designation; one consul normally commanded the First and Third legions and the other the Second and Fourth. The legions were renumbered each time and therefore no esprit de corps was formed.

During the Punic Wars it became common to allocate a military command to a praetor. Usually, the praetor was allocated one legion and one ala and was in charge of smaller operations. The consuls were in charge of the more important operations.

During this period, the Roman Army was most effective on the level of the consular army of two legions and two alae. This was a force that totally consisted of some 20,000 men with sufficient cavalry and a clear command structure.