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THE PAWN OF ROME: THE ROMAN INFANTRYMAN

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As a Roman soldier standing in a battle line with friends and comrades, nothing would have been clear. Death, especially if the soldier was near the front of the line, could arrive in a split second by the tip of a javelin or arrow. Thousands of troops marching into positions would kick up dust, obscuring vision. The clamor of troops marching and armor and weapons rattling would be deafening. Yet it is by these very people that the Roman Empire rose to one of the largest and most successful empires in human history. Its widespread success, however, meant that the Romans did not always have the luxury of fighting on familiar terrain. Despite this, the Roman army was well adapted and flexible to the many different environments it operated within. By analyzing Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus’ work, it is clear that the Roman army's meticulous recruitment, physical conditioning, and combat training contributed to the intense flexibility that allowed the Romans to achieve great military success in its conquests against distant foreign enemies.

The history of the Roman army is full of adaptation. During the early stages of Rome, combat among nations “...consisted of heavy infantry in the centre in one or more lines.”¹ The Etruscans fought in phalanxes, which compelled the Romans to adopt similar formations and eventually defeat the Etruscans.² However, the phalanx also had a large weakness: “...chiefly designed for forward movement, [the phalanx] changed fronts awkwardly; its flanks and rear

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were vulnerable, if unprotected.” 3 Once the Romans encountered the Samnites in the hills of southern Italy, they were no longer able to maintain the cohesion of legionary phalanxes on the uneven hills, precipitating a change to the manipular formation with its three lines of maniples in a checkerboard pattern, also famously known as the *triplex acies*. A maniple was a group of 120 *hastati*, 120 *principes*, or 60 *triarii*. *Hastati* were the young, poor, and relatively inexperienced soldiers in the Roman army. They were usually placed at the front of the lines to face the enemy first. *Principes* were more seasoned troops who were in the second line after the *hastati*. They were fairly wealthy and could afford good quality armor. The *triarii* were the elite troops of the Roman army. They were less numerous and placed at the back line to face the enemy last. 4 These troops retained a semblance of the phalanx—some of the *triarii* sometimes carried long spears. The checkerboard pattern gave each maniple enough room to maneuver prior to battle, and allowed the Romans to replace tired front ranks with fresh troops from behind. 5 The space between maniples also allowed them to compress and expand like a spring to avoid large obstacles without breaking the overall army formation.

As the Romans began to expand their empire out of the Italian Peninsula however, they faced a new threat. The Spaniards, who utilized guerilla warfare, mixed quick skirmishes with heavy frontal assaults that exploited the interdependence of maniples under the *triplex acies*. 6

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5 Rawlings, “Army and Battle During the Conquest of Italy,” 55.

Consequently, Romans adapted to the cohort system of organization, where “the previous 3 divisions of the legion into hastati, principes, and triarii were consolidated into an army of uniform age and weaponry.” Under cohort system, the Romans had greater autonomy, as each cohort was more homogenous than a maniple. This new system also served the Romans well against the fast hit-and-run tactics of the Germanic tribes in the marshy terrain of the north. When analyzing the grounds for Rome’s success against distant enemies, many historians attribute Rome’s success to these innovative formations such as the *triplex acies* and later the cohort system. At the core of these formations however, is the Roman infantryman. Without his discipline or flexibility, these formations could not be utilized effectively. Consequently, it is the understanding of the Roman soldier that is more important in analyzing the success of the Roman army abroad; Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus’ work is essential in gaining this understanding. Vegetius was an ancient Roman military expert during the Roman Empire who wrote the famous military treatise *Epitoma Rei Militaris*, also known as *De Re Militari*. Vegetius’ work was so influential that it was widely read by nobles as a military manual during the medieval era. Careful analysis of Vegetius’ *De Re Militari* reveals three essential points in understanding the flexibility and dominance of the Roman infantryman; the first being recruitment.

The forefront of Rome’s famed military success was its careful recruitment of soldiers, which resulted in a more disciplined and capable soldiery. Vegetius states: “for in any conflict it

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is not so much numbers as bravery that pays off.”

Vegetius and Roman military commanders recognized that pure numbers did not necessarily equate to military might. When recruiting, the Romans considered the physical attributes that candidates possessed. Vegetius states recruits should have “…alert eyes, straight neck, broad chest, muscular shoulders, strong arms, long fingers, let him be small in the stomach, slender in the buttocks, and have calves and feet that are not swollen by surplus fat but firm with hard muscle.”

He also reports that ideal recruits should be tall in stature, at minimum 5’10”, although some scholars believe that this requirement would have been unrealistic at the time. Regardless, it is unsurprising that the Roman army attempted to conscript recruits with physical attributes associated with fitness. However, Vegetius clarifies “…if necessity demands, it is right to take account not so much of stature as of strength.” This exemplifies the pragmaticism of Roman recruiters; they were willing to compromise on stature as long as the candidate was strong—a much better characteristic to have in a soldier. Vegetius’ statement is also indicative of the Romans’ acute understanding of battle; massive casualties among weak and undisciplined men could lead to a rout in battle and cause more seasoned troops to panic. Therefore, they had to take actions to ensure careful recruitment of able-bodied candidates to foster the basis of a strong and hardy force.

Besides physical attributes, the Romans also considered geographic and climatic concerns during recruitment, which they believed fostered mental capabilities. Vegetius states

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10 Vegetius, 6.
that “it could never have been doubted that the rural populace is better suited for arms.”\textsuperscript{11} He also directly states that Romans preferred recruits from temperate climates, believing those in colder ones to be stronger but less intelligent, and those from warmer climates to be more intelligent but less physically capable.\textsuperscript{12} Although their belief in recruits of different areas to be superior may have been discriminatory and erroneous, it is clear that their policy was nonetheless indicative of the Roman army’s desire for recruits that were not just physically strong, but also intelligent. This intelligence would facilitate greater discipline and adaptability through understanding of battle formations.

In addition to recruitment, the physical conditioning of recruits was also instrumental for the development of troop flexibility. As the Romans expanded their territory out of the Italian Peninsula they encountered the more varied terrain of Spain, and later the marshy land north of modern day Italy. Consequently, the Romans had to ready their forces to adapt to terrain they were unaccustomed to fighting on. The physical conditioning of new recruits was paramount to the development of discipline and tactical flexibility, especially in the unpredictable terrain further north from the Italian Peninsula.\textsuperscript{13} After recruitment, soldiers were entered into a basic training regimen lasting four months. Initially, recruits learned the most basic of all military movement—the march, or military step. Recruits had to be able to maintain formations and cover a distance of twenty miles in five hours at the standard pace, and cover twenty-four miles in the same time at the fast pace. During some battles, different forces would fall back hundreds of

\textsuperscript{11} Vegetius, 4.

\textsuperscript{12} Vegetius, 3.

yards, rather than short distances characteristic of the crash-and-push style of phalanx combat. Learning to move in a coordinated way also helped keep infantry flexible. Without an infantry unit moving together, troops would not be cohesive no matter how individually disciplined they might be. Consequently, they would not be able to effectively take new orders and adapt in accordance to changes on the battlefield.

The Romans also recognized that they would inevitably face physical impediments such as uneven terrain and rivers while campaigning abroad. Consequently, Roman recruits trained in crossing physical obstacles through swimming and jumping. Vegetius states: “Every recruit without exception should in the summer months learn the art of swimming, for rivers are not always crossed by bridges.”14 He advises that all troops be trained to vault over hurdles and other obstacles of varying heights. Rather than leave finer details like swimming and vaulting up to individuals, the Romans made a conscious effort ensure the ability of their armies to overcome obstacles efficiently. This would minimize risks posed by these obstacles during an actual campaign. By being able to efficiently vault over obstacles during battle, the Romans believed that infantry would be able instill fear and surprise in the enemy. Vegetius reports “…in the actual conflict and clash of arms the soldier coming on by a running jump makes the adversary’s eyes flinch, frightens his mind and plants a blow before the other can properly prepare himself for evasive or offensive action.”15 This is indicative of the Roman army’s awareness of the shock factor of a flexible force and the potential benefits that such flexibility could bring to the battlefield. By thoroughly understanding the physical aspects of conditioning in the Roman

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15 Vegetius, 11.
army, historians can begin to understand how Roman soldiers would be able to maintain discipline in the face of battlefield fatigue and the positive effect this mental resilience would have on combat effectiveness.

After recruitment and conditioning, the next step for a Roman soldier was his combat training. Roman combat training was instrumental in the success of Roman military campaigns abroad. Rather than throw legions of untrained and unprofessional conscripts at the Germanic tribes, the Romans took meticulous care in readying their troops. Roman training allowed troops to fight effectively on the battlefield while maintaining versatility and discipline. From the outset, recruits trained with weighted equipment. “The hurdle and foil of double weight they gave out so that when the recruit took up real, and lighter arms, he fought with more confidence and agility, as being liberated from the heavier weight.”\textsuperscript{16} This training allowed troops to fight more effectively even when exhausted; this was especially important because while some battles would last few minutes, others could last many hours.\textsuperscript{17} Training with unwieldy wooden equipment minimized chaos and clumsiness among fellow troops during battle. Ever the vigilant tacticians, the Romans left nothing to chance in regard to combat training. Even specific fighting doctrine was prescribed; recruits were instructed to stab enemies, instead of slashing. Vegetius describes the benefit of a stab over a slash: “...while a cut is being delivered the right arm and flank are exposed; whereas a stab is inflicted with the body remaining covered, and the enemy is wounded before he realizes it.”\textsuperscript{18} According to Vegetius, this would allow soldiers to better

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  \item \textsuperscript{16} Vegetius, \textit{Epitome}, 13.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Vegetius, \textit{Epitome}, 13.
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protect themselves while attacking, as only the forearm would be exposed when thrusting, as opposed to the whole side when performing a slash. A definite fighting doctrine would also improve discipline and help reduce potential routs by promoting a fighting style that would put soldiers under more protection against danger. Combined with the defensive practicality of the stabbing stroke, Romans would have been able to reduce casualties during battle without compromising their own fighting ability—instrumental in a long military campaign into enemy territory, where reinforcements might be weeks or months away. The Romans also believed a stab to be more lethal than a slash, as “...a stab driven two inches in is fatal; for necessarily whatever goes in penetrates the vitals.”\(^{19}\) A stabbing stroke is also easier to perform while maintaining tight formations, as it requires minimal movement of the arm. Consequently, the Romans could be more surgical and composed than many other armies during battle.

The Romans also trained their recruits in a variety of weapons; in addition to training with the sword and shield, recruits were trained to throw javelins and sling stones. Specialized units of archers were also trained in addition to light skirmisher units. Vegetius claims that “About a third or a quarter of recruits, who prove to have more aptitude, should be trained constantly with...wooden bows and mock arrows”.\(^{20}\) This gave Roman generals more tactical flexibility. In a Roman legion, the majority of troops would have been standard heavy infantry. If the Romans were to fight on terrain unsatisfactory for heavy infantry, or if opponents refused to fight an open battle, a Roman commander could strip some of his infantry of their heavy armor


\(^{20}\) Vegetius, 15.
and reassign them as skirmishers. Even though infantry units were supported by standalone units of archers and skirmishers, it was only during the third century AD that the Romans finally began to develop specialist units of artillery (ballistarii). This shows that Roman armies were flexible enough that they didn’t need to actually develop more specialized ranged capabilities—other than archers—until much later. Through its unit flexibility and defensive fighting doctrine, the combat training provided to recruits was instrumental in minimizing Roman losses and maximizing casualties inflicted on enemy combatants.

When evaluating the Roman military, many historians ascribe innovative formations, such as the manipular and cohort systems, to the overall success of Rome abroad. While these methods undoubtedly played an important role in the might of the Roman Empire, less commonly recognized—and equally, if not more valid—are the soldiers behind these formations and battlefield tactics. These soldiers constitute the core of the Roman army and arguably played a larger role in the success of the Roman army than the formations themselves. Unfortunately, it can be hard to discern the plight of a Roman infantryman due to the lack of specific personal accounts; personal memoirs of battles like those found in modern conflicts are not available, and using literature as a source of analysis can be erroneous due to dramatic effects added by authors. However, historians can begin to gain a greater understanding of Roman soldiers by understanding how they would have been physically prepared and trained in the Roman army, and comparing this in tandem with more available information of the overall battles themselves.

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For example, understanding the surgical and calculated combat doctrine of the Romans also sheds light into the mindset of a typical soldier and how he was expected to react to stimuli on the battlefield. Judging from the emphasis on self-protection and quick strikes ingrained into recruits, it is reasonable to surmise that Roman soldiers would have fought in a relatively reserved and surgical manner, as opposed to a wild, passionate frenzy. Deeper understanding of Roman soldiers on an individual level, rather than on a strategical one, could also supplement existing knowledge of traditional studies of battlefield tactics and military campaigns. For example, John F. Shean’s “Hannibal's Mules: The Logistical Limitations of Hannibal's Army and the Battle of Cannae, 216 B.C.” describes Hannibal's extensive campaign in Italy, focusing mainly on Hannibal’s strategy. With a more nuanced understanding of Roman soldiers’ training and their intended mindset, combined with a narrative from scholarship with a wider scope such as Shean’s work, historians could begin to piece together what Roman troop morale may have been like during the Second Punic War, such as the attitude of Roman soldiers after crushing defeats like the Battle of Cannae.

A future avenue for scholarship could be pursuing a smaller view of the battle, instead of broadening it as current trends seem to be. Traditionally, the scope of research within the field has been categorical and the scope generally encompassed the field of battle and sometimes the larger military campaign surrounding the battle. Recently, the research has begun to broaden to include interdisciplinary influences, such as the Roman treatment of battlefield casualties and

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memorialization.\textsuperscript{24} While this field still needs growth, a more important field would be that of even more specificity—that of an individual soldier. Most primary sources of the Roman army come from ancient historians and personal accounts from generals. Consequently, it is difficult for historians to accurately analyze what average battlefield conditions may have been like for an infantryman. Due to the lack of specific accounts and experiences, a possible alternative would be to pool together research of various scopes. Specific research on influences of Roman infantry combined with broader grand strategy and cultural influences could be able to hypothesize a “personal” account to a relative degree of accuracy. The future may not have been clear for a Roman \textit{hastati} standing in the front ranks of a maniple waiting for the war horn to signal an advance, or a \textit{triarii} waiting in the third line watching his comrades being killed by the enemy, but through careful introspection and scholarship, historians may one day be able to discern what they might have felt and how they would have responded.

Bibliography


