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The Roman Army: Strategy, Tactics, and Innovation

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Western Civilization

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The Roman Army: Strategy, Tactics, and Innovation

The Roman Army is widely regarded as one of the most effective fighting forces in human history, influencing the development of military tactics for generations afterwards. The Roman Empire stretched over 2.75 million square miles at its height, and it was the responsibility of the Roman Army to maintain stability over this enormous expanse of land. It was the Army's tactics and formations, adaptable troop composition, and flexible strategic deployment allowed the Romans to create and maintain such a vast and stable multiethnic empire.

Infantry battles during the Roman era were, in a word, cautious. The primary goal of a soldier was to live through the battle, regardless of the outcome. Thus, unlike the glamorous and stylized depiction of combat depicted in modern cinema, a typical battle was characterized by long stand-offs as the opposing lines appraised each other, punctuated by the exchange of missiles and insults. Occasionally, sporadic clashes broke out, "...as one side or the other surged forward for a brief and localized flurry of hand-to-hand combat. The flurry of combat would end when one side got the worst of the exchange, and its troops would step back to re-impose the 'safety distance' while brandishing their weapons to deter immediate enemy pursuit" (Sabin 14). During these small skirmishes, soldiers fought extremely cautiously, hiding behind their shields, and swinging their swords in short, defensive arcs to limit the extent to which their bodies were exposed: "We may picture a line of men in contact with an enemy unit, with the majority of

soldiers fighting very cautiously, gaining the maximum protection from their shields, watching their opponents, and only occasionally delivering a weaker blow, exposing as little of their right arm and side as possible” (Goldsworthy 222). As evidenced by this wary style of fighting, the majority of soldiers during the Roman era fought to stay alive rather than to defeat the enemy, limiting their own chances of being injured or killed. As a result, the nature of fighting during the Roman era was such that casualties were relatively even for most of the fighting, with the victor often decided by whichever side could best endure the immense physical and psychological strain of fighting.

The Roman Imperial Army was one of the first fighting forces to realize the immense impact of morale and mental strength in determining the outcome of battles, and its tactics reflect this revelation. The Roman Army adopted a multi line formation, with the exact setup of the lines varying with the preference of the commander and the situation at hand:

Caesar most commonly adopted the triplex acies, in which four cohorts were placed in the front rank and three in the second and third, the intervals of each line and the distance in all probability varying with the nature of the ground and the expected maneuvers of the enemy. If, on the other hand, the duplex acies was employed, the ten cohorts of the legion were equally divided between the two lines of battle (Parker 256).

This formation also not only limited the amount of troops exposed to battle at one time, but also allowed the Romans to bring in fresh troops to reinforce the tired front rankers, giving the Roman army much greater psychological endurance: “...the primary purpose of the multiple line system seems to have been to allow fresh troops to replace or reinforce tired ones in the front line itself...it was this advantage of having fresh men fighting tired ones which gave the Romans such an edge over opponents who were in equal or greater overall numbers, but massed in a single

fighting line” (Sabin). The ancient Roman historian Titus Livius Patavinus (Livy) illustrates this point, describing a battle in which the Roman ability to bring in fresh troops proved to be a decisive advantage: “Victory hung in the balance and many perished on both sides, including all the bravest, and the event was not decided until the Roman second line came up with undiminished vigour to relieve their exhausted comrades in the first; and the Etruscans, whose fighting line was supported by no fresh reserves, all fell in front of their standards and around them” (Livy 9.32). Thus, the Roman multi-line formation gave their army a formidable military advantage, allowing them to defeat often much larger forces by outlasting them psychologically through their ability to replace troops. Further contributing to the Roman psychological advantage, the army employed an early precursor of modern “Shock and Awe” tactics: Roman soldiers would unleash a missile barrage to disorient the enemy line before closing to engage in close quarters fighting with swords while the enemy line was still in disarray, where the discipline of the Romans would give them an edge: “Early Imperial legionnaires exploited their professionalism and esprit de corps by winning similar swift victories against less resolute opponents through a coordinated volley of pila followed by a fierce charge” (Sabin 13). Combined with the multi line formation, these tactical innovations were essential towards maintaining the stability of the empire, as they allowed the Romans to maintain order in provinces without having to commit an excessive number of troops to defeat numerically superior foes.

Due to the multiethnic nature of the Roman Empire, the large variety of terrain and enemy tactics faced by the Roman Army was unprecedented. The Roman army faced an immense variety of foes, ranging from tightly packed Macedonian pike phalanxes to undisciplined barbarian hordes, many of whose tactics the Roman legionnaires were not well

adapted to. The standard legionnaire wore heavy armor, including “...the *lorica*, or cuirass, the *galea* or helmet, and the *scutum* or cylindrical shield...” (Parker 250), and was armed with a short, double-edge sword called a *spatha*, and throwing javelins, known as *pilum*. The equipment and training of the Roman legionaries made them ideal for engagements on firm terrain against formation-oriented opponents, such as Macedonian phalanxes: “...the equipment of the legionary meant that he was 'a specialist for one particular type of combat - the set-piece battle with both sides arrayed in textbook formations” (Gilliver 61). However, many battles fought by the Roman Army were against non-formation oriented foes, against whom the legionnaire’s cumbersome curved shield and *lorica*, which had gaps under the armpits, left him at a significant disadvantage. Numerically superior forces with little formation, such as Germanic barbarian tribes, tended to surround Roman formations and attack them from all sides, exploiting the Roman weakness to flank attacks. The Roman solution to this problem was auxiliaries, or indigenous troops who served as supplemental forces to the Roman legionaries. Generally, they were lightly armed and armored, with full body mail and flat shields that protected them better against attacks from the sides and rear, giving the Roman army flexibility and the ability to engage multiple types of opponents successfully. In addition, these auxiliaries also allowed the Roman army to effectively engage opponents on a variety of terrain. The standard Roman legionnaire was well adapted to fighting on firm, flat terrain, but struggled on other ground. For example, Livy tells of a battle in which a Spanish cohort defeated Roman legionaries by engaging them on rocky ground where the more agile Spanish light infantry had the advantage:

These [Spanish] troops were more used to mountains, and better suited to skirmishing amid rocks and crags, and being more agile and more lightly armed, they had no difficulty —thanks to the nature of the fighting —in getting the better of an enemy

[Roman Legionaries] whose heavy armour and stationary tactics were adapted to level ground. Thus the struggle had been far from equal, when they parted and made off for their respective camps. Hardly any of the Spaniards had been hurt, but the Romans had lost a considerable number of their men” (Livy 22.18).

Similarly, in an engagement between German barbarians, and Roman legionaries with their Batavian auxiliaries, the Roman legionaries struggled with the flooded terrain of the battle, whereas the Batavian auxiliaries were much better suited to the terrain:

“Tacitus describes the terrain as 'treacherous with dangerous shallows', and states that this put the Romans at a disadvantage. His contrast of the difficulties of the heavy armed Roman legionaries who were scared of swimming with the tall light armed Batavians and Germans who were familiar with the terrain and used to swimming ...again highlights the unsuitability of the legions for this type of terrain. The Batavians, on the other hand, were admirably suited and trained to it, and had indeed provided the Roman army with auxiliary units famed for crossing fords, opposed and under arms” (Kagan)

The Roman auxiliaries allowed the army to adapt to and fight a variety of foes on a diverse range of terrain. As Gilliver puts it, “Auxiliary troops... were versatile and could be used in a variety of different situations in which they might operate more easily than the heavily armed legionaries...” (Gilliver 62). In addition, auxiliary troops also allowed the Roman army to conduct a variety of maneuvers that the heavily armed legionaries were unsuited to, such as ambushes and raids, where the heavy armor of the legionaries would hinder their attempts at stealth: “[auxiliaries were] useful for carrying out ambushes and could operate successfully with cavalry in this capacity: Dolabella ambushed a Numidian force in the war against Tacfarinas with cavalry and light infantry” (Gilliver 61). The sheer adaptability of the Roman auxiliaries

gave the army the tactical flexibility to respond to any threat on any terrain using a variety of tactics across its vast multiethnic empire.

The strategic deployment of Roman legions also helped the army maintain stability in the empire. Living in a complex world where threats and opportunities were constantly in flux, Roman emperors had had to balance the desire to utilize resources for military operations with the conscription and tax burden such mobilization placed upon their populations (Kagan 334). In other words, because they possessed only a finite amount of resources, Roman emperors were forced to set priorities among threats and goals in a manner that would ensure continued order while still allowing for conquest and expansion. Roman strategic troop deployment allowed emperors to maintain this balance, but the exact deployment differed based on the grand strategy adopted by each emperor. Emperors with more aggressive, expansionist strategies tended to “[maintain] only enough forces in an area to carry out routine missions, intending to move legions to regions as emergencies necessitated” (Kagan 355). This gave the emperor much greater forces with which to carry out campaigns of conquest or to defend against external invaders. At the same time, the emperor could still maintain stability by shuffling troops in a domino effect as legions were brought in from more stable provinces to replace legions taken away to fight external campaigns: “Withdrawal of troops from a province to meet contingencies elsewhere in the empire could destabilize its security. Emperors, therefore, frequently tried to shift units from even further afield to the depleted garrisons in order to maintain a constant presence” (Kagan 356). This flexible deployment strategy gave aggressive emperors great leeway in their operational capacity, while still maintaining stability in the empire. In contrast, more defensive emperors tended to maintain garrisons with sufficient strength to preserve stability and quell unrest. By ensuring that each province had a strong military force capable of

putting down rebellions, this strategy provided maximum stability by eliminating the need to shuffle legions. For example, during the reign of Tiberius, "...local legionary establishments largely handled the challenges they faced...[putting] down local military unrest in Gaul, Thrace, and Judaea" (Kagan 355). Both of these strategies helped the Roman emperor to maintain the security of the empire, while allowing for the flexible deployment of reinforcements to respond to larger external threats or to conduct campaigns of conquest.

Some may argue that the flexibility of Roman strategic troop deployment was a weakness rather than a strength: an incompetent emperor could easily cause massive damage to the empire by making poor deployment decisions. To an extent, this point is valid. During the reign of Emperor Nero, "Nero's massive troop concentrations in the West (while the legions of the East faced the Jewish revolt), partially precipitated the crisis that would end his reign" (Kagan 358). Without the flexibility of the Roman deployment system, Nero would not have been able to make the drastic troop movements that eventually helped lead to his downfall. As Kagan puts it, "Some emperors, therefore, either misjudged the stability of the provinces they were denuding of troops or cared more for their wars of conquest than for maintaining that stability" (Kagan 358). In addition, the Roman system exacerbated the consequences of military defeats and casualties.. This was most aptly demonstrated during the Battle of Noreia, in which Germanic tribes killed 24,000 out of a 30,000-strong Roman force. Because of the fact that many of these legions were transferred from other provinces, the overall stability of the empire was threatened due to the sudden destruction of the local garrisons of so many provinces. However, ultimately, the Roman troop deployment system, under a competent emperor, was one of the biggest innovations of the Roman army, because it allowed the Roman army to maintain control over an enormous multi-

ethnic empire while not requiring an excessive amount of forces. Without this ability, the Roman Empire would not have been able to expand without sacrificing stability.

The Roman Army, with its psychologically-based formations and tactics, adaptable troop composition with the presence of auxiliaries, and flexible strategic troop deployment, served as one of the primary enablers of the Roman Empire. However, the army's tactics and innovations are far more far-reaching, influencing battles throughout history. One such example was Agincourt, where "the English and French hosts, 'divided, at a distance of ten or fifteen feet, by a horizontal fence of waving and stabbing spear shafts, the noise of their clattering like that of a bully-off at hockey magnified several hundred times'" (Sabin 17). Such a scene seems remarkably similar to the standoff phase of Roman infantry engagements. In a more modern setting, their shock and awe tactics have formed an integral part of battle strategy in many modern armies, as seen by the US military's employment of the modernized version of the strategy in the Iraq War, with artillery and air strikes replacing the pila barrage, and the charge consisting of mechanized infantry and tanks instead of sword-wielding infantry. With such far-reaching implications today, it is probably safe to say that the Roman army's tactics revolutionized land warfare.

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