

Army

Citizen Soldiers

The growth of Rome to greatness was not due to chance: every stage in its growth was a prize won by its armies. In the earliest days, when the state was threatened, the citizens were hastily summoned from their farms and assembled on the Campus Martius, the Field of Mars, god of war, in prearranged 'centuries'; these were groups of a hundred men, and even when the group was reduced to around 80 men, probably for tactical reasons, the name 'century' was retained. A man's wealth decided which century he should fight in: the richest citizens naturally served as the cavalry, and the poorest as the lightly armed troops who could not afford full armour as protection. The absence of the men from the land they farmed, when the scene of the war was a few miles away from Rome, did not matter very much when the war might last only a few days, and a battle an afternoon.

When the number of Roman citizens increased it was not necessary for all the citizen body to fight, and selective conscription from those owning land was organized. With the extension of Rome's power, soldiers had to fight far from their homes, and when campaigns might last a whole summer, or even for more than a year, pay was introduced so that men could feed, clothe and arm themselves. A settled army organization arose. There were four legions, each of between 4,000 and 5,000 men divided into companies known as *cohortes*. A force of similar size was conscripted from the 'allies', who over the years took the place of the legionary cavalry and the light-armed troops. In battle the companies were arranged into three lines with spaces between each company. The front lines consisted of young men, still to prove themselves, equipped with javelins and spears (*hastae*), known as *hastati*: the second line of *principes* was formed of older men with superior weapons, and cylindrical shields. In the third line were the *triarii*, veterans of proved courage.

Livy describes the manner in which these lines went into action:

When an army was drawn up in these lines, the first to engage were the *hastati*: if they could not drive off the enemy, they retreated slowly between the gaps in the line of *principes*, who took up the battle with the *hastati* following behind. The *triarii* knelt beneath their standards, with the left leg thrust forward, and with their shield propped on their shoulders; they held their spears slanting upward with the butt end firmly resting on the ground, like a bristling line of defence-works. If the *principes* also were unsuccessful they withdrew steadily to the *triarii*: this is the origin of the expression, when people are in difficulties, 'Now we're down to the *triarii*'.

When the *hastati* and *principes* had retreated through spaces in their line, the *triarii* stood up and immediately closed their ranks, blocking the lanes as it were, and since there were no more

reserves fell on the enemy in one complete mass. The enemy, charging, as they thought, defeated men, were terrified by this as they saw a new army rise up in even greater numbers.

(Livy, VIII, 8)

In time of crisis, in the wars against Hannibal for example, the legions could be rapidly expanded, and even slaves were enrolled in the ranks. Polybius estimates that when Hannibal crossed the Alps the total numbers of Romans and allies able to bear arms were not less than 700,000 footsoldiers, and 70,000 horsemen. All these, of course were never engaged at one time, but there were huge armies: at the battle of Cannae, for instance, Livy estimates that 50,000 were killed, 4,500 were captured and 19,000 escaped, and other historians put the figures considerably higher. But the ease with which Hannibal's much smaller army defeated them, and the enormous casualty figures, indicate that the standard of training in these large, hastily conscripted, forces was pathetically low.

The Legionary Soldier – Marius' Mule

At the end of the next century, a war in Africa, and the threat of an invasion into Italy by half a million wandering Gauls and Germans, showed the need for such a rapid expansion in the size of the army that the ordinary methods of conscription were inadequate. The commander-in-chief, Marius, allowed all citizens, whether they had property or not, to enrol on a permanent basis, making the army their career. All men were issued with the same weapons, and underwent the same rigorous training, so that the distinction between the lines disappeared. The former part-time army of landholders had been replaced by an almost professional army. The Senate approved this new development in the hope of removing the large numbers of unemployed who thronged the city, but in doing so they had doomed the Republic. The propertyless volunteers signed on for 16, later 20, years in the hope of booty, and with the promise of grants of land at the end of their service. Since the Senate failed to devise a regular system of granting land, men due for discharge looked to their generals to provide it, and consequently owed their loyalty to a man and not to the state. Supported by their legions, army commanders like Sulla and Pompey could intervene decisively in government: the last in the line of ambitious generals were Julius Caesar and Augustus, who ended the Republic and founded the Principate.

The reforms of Marius and the extension of the citizenship to all free Italians by 89 BC brought to an end the difference between Roman and allied contingents. The cavalry and light-armed troops, called *auxilia*, were now recruited in the provinces. They were organized into cohorts of 500 or 1,000 men, divided like the legions into centuries of roughly 80 men. The cavalry cohorts were also known as *alae*, wings. The auxiliary infantry had specialized rôles: they were archers, with bows of steel and ivory, slingers firing roundshot with speed and accuracy, or swimmers who guided horses across rivers while holding their weapons clear of the water. The *auxilia* were paid less than legionary soldiers, but at the end of their service they were granted citizenship, which must have seemed reward enough.



The tombstone of Rufus Sita, an auxiliary cavalryman, was found just outside the colonia at Gloucester, in England

When Augustus emerged as sole ruler of the Empire there were over 60 legions under arms. The standing army, whose task from now on was to protect the frontiers of the Empire, was reduced to about 30 legions, each with between 5,000 and 6,000 men. Every legion had a name and number – the four that invaded Britain, for example, were the Second Augusta (The Emperor's Own), the Ninth Hispana (The Spaniards), the Fourteenth Gemina (Gemina, twin, indicates that this legion had been formed from the amalgamation of two others), and the Twentieth Valeria (The Valerians). Their senior officer was a *legatus*. In each legion were 60 centuries of about 80 men, commanded by a centurion: other officers were the *optio*, or second in command, the *signifer* or standard bearer, who was also the treasurer of the men's burial club, and the *tesserarius* who was responsible for the watchword.



Roman centurion's helmet with eagle decoration

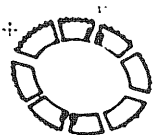
The legionaries were highly trained men. As well as being the foot-soldiers of the line they were skilled engineers, road-makers and bridge-builders, surveyors, carpenters, masons and artillerymen. Many of the great roads and fine new towns in the provinces were planned and built by the men of the legions, as well as the forts and walls that defended the frontiers. In battle the auxiliaries used to fight in front of the legions, and on the flanks, to shield the legionaries, whose skills were so much harder to replace, and many battles were won by the auxiliaries before the legions went into action at all.

The photograph of the model of a legionary soldier from the Grosvenor Museum at Chester, England, shows his large shield and efficient body-armour. The metal strips were probably fitted loosely with thongs on a leather jerkin to allow freedom of movement; a scarf was worn round the neck to prevent the metal chafing it. On the march he carried two javelins: the shaft was of wood, the metal section of soft iron. Only the point, and the socket into which the wood fitted were hardened: the javelin was thrown at a range of about 30 yards, and the soft metal of the shank bent when it landed; if it hit the ground it would bend and be useless to throw back, and if it pierced the shield or armour, it would be difficult to pull out.

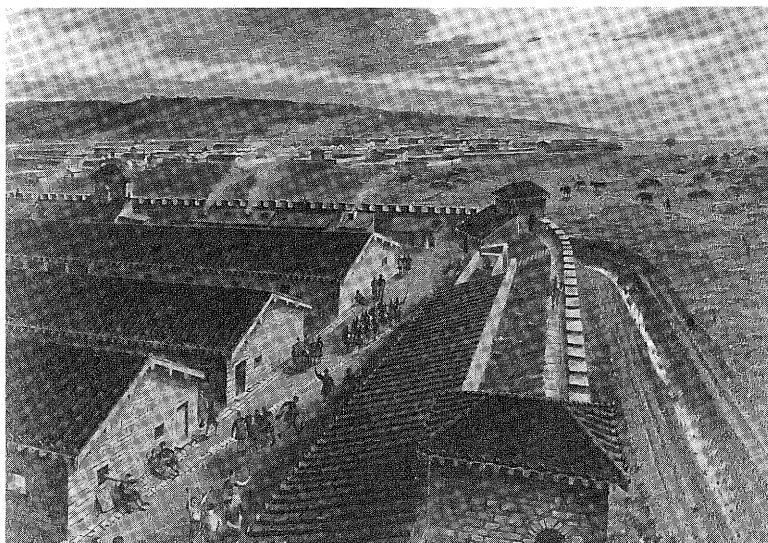
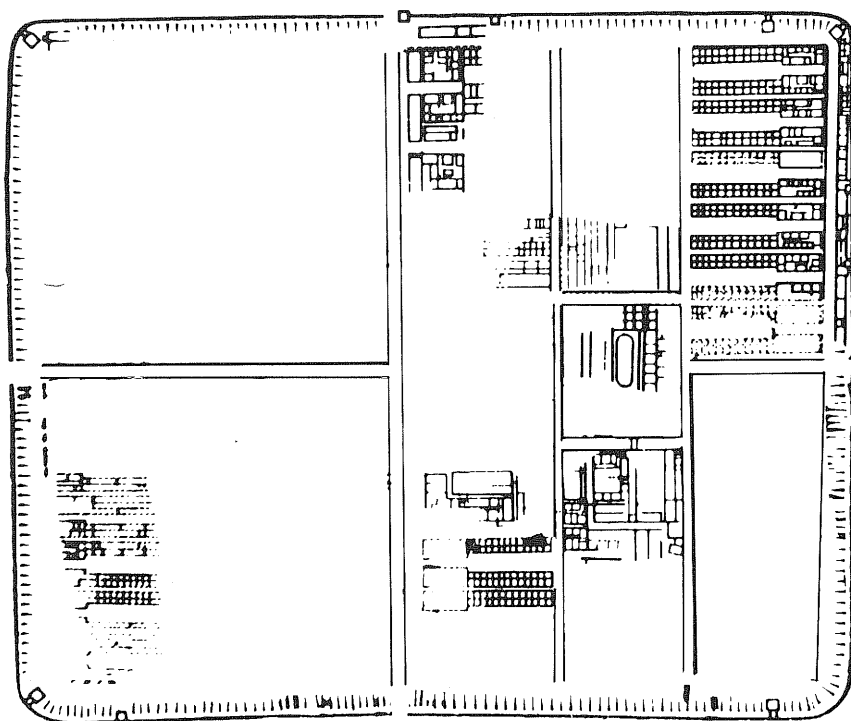
After hurling his javelins, the legionary followed up with his short stabbing sword (*gladius*): he did not waste time slashing, or raise his arm high and so expose his side, but stabbed at the face and stomach of the enemy. The sword was carried on his right side in a wooden or leather sheath, and hanging from the left of his belt was a dagger (*pugio*) or knife. His thick-soled heavy sandals were studded with hobnails: he wore a linen vest, on top of that a woollen tunic, and in cold weather a rough woollen cloak. In difficult country when his gear could not be carried on wagons he had to shoulder not only all his weapons but also rations for a fortnight, trenching tools, a couple of heavy stakes which were used in the camp fortifications and all his cooking pots as well. Little wonder legionaries were called *muli Mariani*, Marius' mules.



A model of a legionary soldier



A plan of the excavated remains of the Caerleon fortress



A reconstruction of the corner of the fortress at Caerleon in southern Wales

Pay and Conditions

In the time of the Empire a legionary signed on for 20, sometimes 25, years. His pay was quite small, and he had to pay for his own food and clothing. He ate simply – corn made into a gruel or porridge, bread, cheese and beans – and drank cheap vinegary wine. Since his food used up a third of his pay we can have some idea of the value of his earnings. His life was tough, and discipline hard. When the German legions mutinied in AD 15, their ringleaders incited them by recalling their sufferings: of course they exaggerated, but an extract from such a speech recorded by Tacitus probably contains a good deal of truth:

Nothing has been done over the years to remove abuses: old men have been serving for 30 or 40 years, their bodies maimed by wounds. Discharge does not mean an end of service; we are kept in the reserve, still under canvas, enduring the same fatigues under another name. And if anyone lives through all these dangers, he is sent to the ends of the earth and given a water-logged marsh or unploughed mountain which they call a 'farm'. It's a hard life with nothing to show for it: body and soul are worth a couple of coins a day, and this has to provide clothes, weapons, tents and the bribes for the sergeant if we want to avoid a beating or non-stop fatigue duty. There's no rest from beatings or wounds: the winter is awful, we spend the summer working: war is dreadful and peace a profitless bore. There'll be no relief till terms of service are fixed: we want a rise in pay, a 16-year contract, with no service in the reserve, and a lump-sum at the end of it, paid in cash on the spot.

(Tacitus, *Annals* II, 16)

Routine

Terms of service *were* gradually improved, but army life was always hard and busy. A Jewish priest, named Josephus, was captured by the Romans during the Jewish rebellion in Israel: in his account of the war, published in AD 75, he includes this admiring account of the victorious army:

They seem to be born with swords in their hands: they never stop training, and their training is as hard as real war. Every day a soldier exercises as keenly as if he were in action. Consequently they don't regard fighting as very difficult, for they are never thrown out of their usual formation, never paralysed with fear or exhausted by hard work.

They never let the enemy catch them unawares. When they invade an enemy's country, they always build a camp before they engage in battle. They don't build it in any random fashion, nor do they work in a muddle or get in each other's way. They level the ground if it is uneven, and mark out a square for the encampment, taking a mass of men and tools along with the army to build it. Inside, it is divided into rows for the tents, and from the outside the perimeter looks like a wall, with towers spaced out at regular intervals. Between the towers they set up various types of artillery, for firing stones or arrows. A gate is made in each side of this surrounding rampart: the baggage animals can get in easily, and the gates are wide enough for the troops to dash out on quick raids in an emergency. Streets divide the camp conveniently into quarters. The officers' quarters are in the middle, and the general's HQ, which is like a small temple, is in the exact centre. What emerges is something very like a city: there is a market place, a craftsmen's section, and offices where the centurions and officers settle disputes among the men. Both the outer wall and the buildings are finished in next to no time, because the workmen are so skilled and numerous. They dig a ditch round outside the wall, if necessary, two metres deep and two metres wide. When they have finished building the wall they go to

their quarters in the tents by companies, in a quiet and orderly manner. All their other fatigue duties are performed by companies in the same disciplined and reliable way, the collection of food, wood and water when they are needed. The time for breakfast and dinner is not left for the men to choose; they all have their meals at the same time. The times for sleeping, getting up or sentry-duty are all signalled by a trumpet-call: in fact nothing is done without the word of command.

At dawn the men report to their centurions, who then go together to salute the tribunes: all the officers then go to the commander-in-chief. He gives them the watchword, according to custom, and the other orders to be conveyed to the other ranks. In battle they maintain the same discipline: they advance, retreat or wheel round by units, as is necessary.

When it is time to break camp the trumpet sounds, and there is instant activity. They take down the tents, and pack everything for departure. The trumpet sounds again, for them to get ready; they quickly pile the baggage on the mules and pack animals, and stand ready waiting, like runners at the starting line. Then they set the camp on fire, so that it cannot be used by the enemy, for they can easily build another one for themselves. The trumpet for departure sounds a third time, to hurry on anyone who is slow, so that no one is left out of the ranks. Then the herald stands on the general's right hand, and calls out three times to ask if they are ready to fight. They shout out three times in reply, 'Yes, ready!', almost without waiting for the herald to ask, and filled with a martial enthusiasm they raise their right hands in the air as they shout. They then march forward quietly in good order, each man keeping his place in the ranks, as he would in battle.

(Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* III, 72-105)

In battle the steadiness of the legions, their discipline and fire-power were devastatingly effective, even against enemy forces far superior in number. On one occasion in Britain, for example, after Boudicca's rebellion a Roman force of perhaps 9,000 men faced a British host of unparalleled size, 'so confident that they had brought their wives to see their victory, placing them on carts pitched round the edge of the battlefield'. The general spoke to encourage his men; when the enemy approached he gave the signal.

At first the legion stood still, not moving a step; then, as the enemy moved closer, they launched their javelins with unerring aim, and charged in wedge formation. The auxiliary charge was as fierce, and the levelled lances of the cavalry broke any vestige of resistance. The rest of the enemy turned tail, but escape was difficult as the ring of carts blocked their path. Our men slaughtered their women as well, and their oxen, pierced with spears, added to the piles of dead.

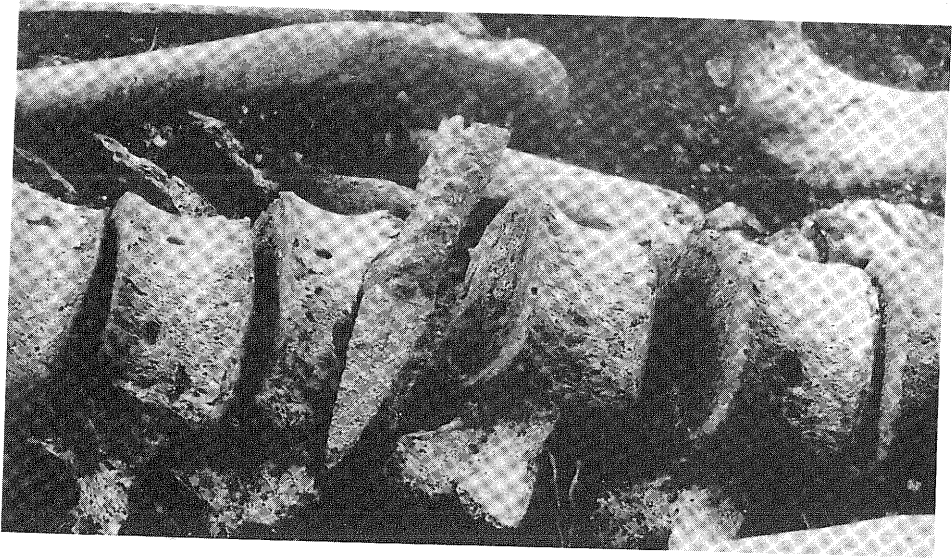
(Tacitus, *Annals* XIV, 37)

Here the courage of the men and their limited hand-weapons had won the day: a later account of the legions in full array with all their equipment explains why they were irresistible:

The legion is victorious because of the number of the soldiers and the types of machines. First of all, it is equipped with hurling machines which no breastplate or shield can withstand. They have a *ballista* mounted on a carriage for every century: each of these has mules and a detail of 11 men for loading and firing. The larger these are, the greater the distance and penetration of the missiles. They are used not only to defend the camps, but firing from behind the heavy armed infantry in the field they provide covering fire. Neither the armoured cavalry of the enemy, nor his infantry with their shields, can hold their ground against their firepower.

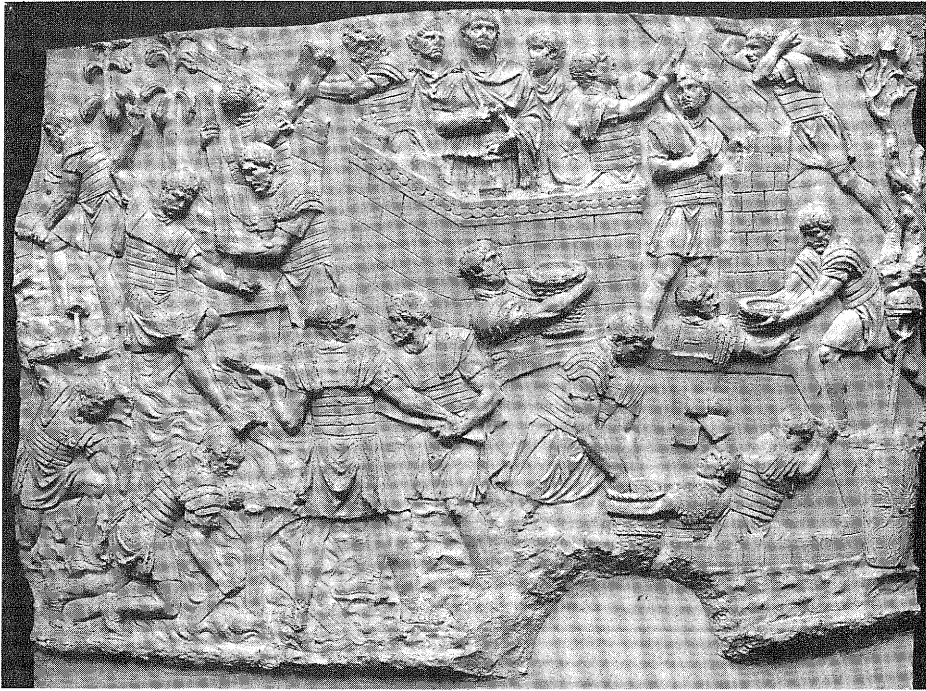
There are usually 55 mounted ballistas like this in every legion. In the same way, each of the ten cohorts has an *onager*, drawn ready-loaded on carriages, so that if there is an attack on the ramparts the camp can be defended with arrows and stones.

(Vegetius, II, xxiii)



A Roman ballista bolt, shot at Maiden Castle in Dorset in England in AD 44, found during excavations lodged in the front of a British defender's spine, after passing right through his body

The system of training, and rigorous army discipline, which guaranteed this efficiency, remained unchanged for many years. But gradually, as provincials were admitted to the legions, the difference between legionaries and auxiliaries disappeared. The emperor Hadrian, in order to encourage the provincials to enter the army, introduced the policy of recruiting the legions from the provinces in which they were stationed: a German who enlisted, for instance, in one of the legions guarding the Rhine could expect to stay there for the rest of his life. The temporary camps, too, were converted into permanent fortresses with both walls and buildings of stone. It might be expected that such a policy would produce slackness, and Hadrian himself spent half his reign touring the provinces to inspect his troops and to ensure a high standard of discipline. But afterwards these high standards did deteriorate: soldiers 'married' local girls – though this was officially forbidden – and were more interested in cultivating their small-holdings, or in trading, than in the rigours of military discipline. In the anarchy of the third century the soldiers were granted continual increases of pay, and all sorts of special privileges, as emperors attempted to buy their loyalty. But as home recruitment continued to decline, barbarians from the wrong side of the imperial frontiers were enrolled into the army in ever larger numbers. Since these mercenaries owed allegiance to the paymaster rather than to any idea of patriotism, their loyalty was always suspect.



Roman soldiers building a wall. This scene comes from the huge relief spiralling round Trajan's column. Such scenes are invaluable evidence for the dress, weapons and activities of the Roman army on campaign at this time

By the time of Constantine the vigorous efficiency of the legions had gone, and the training programmes outlined by Josephus were old-fashioned. Leaving the troops on the frontiers as peasant soldiers, tied to the land, Constantine instituted mobile armies, composed almost entirely of armed cavalry, stationed behind the frontiers, but ready to ride wherever danger threatened. For a hundred years and more they kept the hosts of barbarians at bay, and even when the Roman armies disappeared, as the finances of the Empire collapsed and enormous hordes swept in, Constantine's military organisation, in which the cavalry replaced the infantry as the basic force of the army, persisted for centuries. The huge mounted armies of the Middle Ages stem from this final development of the Roman army.