

Military strategist and conflict

Government, Army



Roman versus Medieval Armies

Comparing Roman and Medieval Anglo-Saxon armies posit certain novel challenges due to evolutionary changes in military techniques and strategy and the huge time gap of around two thousand years that separated them. For the purpose of study here, we will take into account the military strategy and style deployed by Roman armies of 200 BC, at a time when they constituted most overwhelming military force in the contemporary world and compare them with strategy, styles, techniques used by 13th century Medieval armies of England, France and Saxony.

The Roman military strategies of warfare were based on traditions and experience that ran since more than 500 years, evolved through countless campaigns and wars. Their beginning was humble, in form of a local armed tribe set to protect its geographical entity. However, over next centuries they acquired as they acquired skills and experience, they molded themselves in a massive invincible army that was reputed even among its enemies for its technical superiority and tenacity.

Army layout: Roman army presented a fully hierarchical structure, like a modern day military, composed of various units and sub-units. Legions marked the largest and fundamental mass units of army with their strength totaling around 6000 men. Each legion was divided in cohorts that were further subdivided in smaller units of maniples and centuries that comprised 100 soldiers on average. The legions stationed at front contained exclusively heavy infantry, comprising best and most skilled soldiers of the army. On any campaign the army moved through its legions and each of them were

responsible for marching, encampment, logistics, and vigilance according to set standards of the army.

Warfare strategy: Romans used numerous innovative and unique models within the scope of their traditional model of conducting warfare in triple lines. Hastati formed the first rank, placed closest to enemy lines, principes formed second line and triarii was the last rank that was typically kept as specialist reserved force. The army structure at battlefields was remarkably ordered, with frontline and rear units regularly placed in a way so as to leave no gap in the ranks. The three line system of Roman army provided it crucial maneuvering space, gave it depth and allowed it to bear initial losses to overcome them in later phase of battle.

Warfare tactics: The actual combat involved hand to hand battles, shock battles and use of war machinery that threw arrows, stones and fireballs as missiles to enemy army lines. Usually the attack was initiated by Roman war machines where they barraged opposing army with arrows, spears, and heavy stones. Subsequent to this, heavy infantry was first unit to enter main battle foray and engaged opposition soldiers through hand to hand combat. As fighting units were progressively injured and worn out, they withdrew back into the cushion of three tier structure and they were replaced by fresh units to continue battle. Cavalry was largely used for ornamental warfare, were limited in number and did not take extensive partake in warfare.

Logistics: Supplying the army with food and other needs was a major challenge for Roman generals, specially on their long campaigns and given the fact that food production and methods of supplies were very nominal in

ancient times. Therefore Roman troops carried most of equipment, including their lodging, clothing on animal carts. Their efficient network meanwhile ensured continued supplies of food and fuel to keep army moving.

Compared to ancient Roman military system, the medieval warfare presents significant contrasts, especially in terms of military deployment, strategy and battle tactics. Use of gunpowder and missile technology identified the greatest departure from conventional and largely manual methods of conducting war. The rise of pillage warfare, where armies of one state looted and pillaged other states for purpose of supplies led rise to fortification and siege warfare

Army Layout: Medieval army layout deployed long range heavy and light canons in the front line, supported by archers and heavy cavalry that formed main mass of army. Cavalry formed the main fighting force of the army, that comprised men mounted on horses, ready to give charge to enemy flanks. Knights, mounted soldiers with special military training formed an important part of cavalry ranks.

Warfare Tactics: Medieval warfare tactics employed extensive use of canons and, towards later age, use of guns to start the first volley of assault. This was followed by charge of cavalry units. Use of horses had given lightening striking potentials to European armies and they used this advantage to launch rapid waves of attacks. In the medieval warfare, role of infantry had been relatively marginalized and their prime purpose was to act as support units at times of large scale siege and inundation of enemy fortification

Battle of Cannae

Battle of Cannae is considered one of most important ancient military events that is still widely studied and taught in military schools. The battle was part of second Punic war, and it was fought under Carthaginian Hannibal against the might of Roman Empire in 216 century BC. The Roman army was numerically much more superior and had better terrain than army of Hannibal and had enough time to prepare for the oncoming battle. Yet, Hannibal successfully overwhelmed the opposition and handed one of most comprehensive defeat to Roman army in its heydays.

The combined Roman and Carthaginian forces combating in battle exceeded 1, 40, 000: Romans at near 850000, and Carthaginian forces totaling 55000. On the day of battle, Roman generals arranged their army in traditional three rank structure, with infantry placed in center and cavalry placed at side flanks to provide cover. The arrangement displayed traditional Roman affinity for depth, and they planned to use their deployment to cut through center of Hannibal's forces. However, the fact that Roman generals had opted for depth, rather than width meant that both armies same frontal appearance, negating the visual aspect of Roman numerical strength. The armies of Hannibal were also at apparent disadvantage with Aufidus River cutting off their chances of Retreat.

The entire strategy of Roman generals was based on their previous experience of skirmishes and combats with Hannibal, whom they knew to be a resourceful, and cunning tactician. Hannibal was also ware of weaknesses of his army and the fact that both armies were meeting in open battlefield

did not provide him to plan for any possible ambush or surprise maneuver. But Hannibal was also well aware of strengths and weaknesses of his different units and he deployed them strategically at flanks to make their best use.

The Roman army moved forward en masse while Hannibal extended his army in line formation providing greater flexibility and inner movement within army flanks. Hannibal used his superior cavalry to defeat and push behind inferior Roman cavalry and then outflank them to attack Roman rear. The pincer movement created panic in Roman flanks and their front lines started to fall on back lines where Carthaginian cavaliers eliminated them. This caused the rear lines to push towards center, creating massive confusion among Roman soldiers.

The combined Roman push towards their own center allowed created a situation where they got extremely densely packed, not even leaving them sufficient time to reform, regroup or maneuver their weapons. Meanwhile Carthaginian army had completely encircled Roman forces, and started cutting them down to virtually last man. The battle is still recounted as one with highest number of casualties in a single day.

A number of factors contributed to victory of Hannibal, including his superior analysis of situation and his clever use of cavalry and infantry. Hannibal converted the disadvantage of having a river at back to advantage in pushing ahead his forces with full knowledge that Romans could not at least outflank his infantry. Meanwhile, Roman army could retreat through only its left flank, its other retreating chances cut off by Mountains at one side and

River at other. Ultimately Romans were left with no chance to escape and Hannibal accomplished one of the greatest military feat in history.

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