

Military power of the roman army



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One of the most iconic images of the Roman Empire is that of the Roman soldier; a visual representation of the Empire's power and its willingness to exercise it. Curiously, the popular image of the Roman soldier is not entirely accurate, in that the idealized image that most hold is singular and constant in nature, yet the Roman army was anything but, undergoing many changes in equipment and composition throughout the reign of ancient Rome. In fact, few things remained the same as the years went on; save for the Roman army's tradition of discipline and order, the adoption of new tactics and organizational structures was a defining feature of the Roman military, and here lies the source of the Roman army's superiority.[1]The Roman army's power came from its adaptability, which allowed it to react to new challenges presented by opponents, and from its tradition of strict discipline, which resulted in better trained forces with increased tactical and strategic capabilities. The effects of these factors can be seen in the many campaigns in which Rome's forces participated, with the Romans adapting their equipment, tactics, and formations, and adopting those of its enemies, along with their great discipline being important contributors to their success.[2]

In *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*, Montesquieu states that, "the circumstance which contributed most to render the Romans masters of the world was, that having contended successively against all nations, they invariably renounced their own usages as soon as they found better" (20), thus effectively identifying one of the Roman army's primary sources of power.[3]

Unlike many of the armies of the time, the Roman's had no qualms about changing their own practices in order to more effectively combat an enemy, or to even adopt those of other nations that they deemed to be effective. This made it so that the Roman army became not just more experienced with every encounter, but better in any number of practical ways, with changes to their own methods and adoption of enemy tactics and equipment. Ultimately, the Roman's military might was so great because it was composed of the strengths of every nation they had defeated. This virtue of adaptability was seen in some of its earliest examples with Romulus adopting the Sabines' buckler, which was larger and therefore provided more protection than the Argive buckler that he previously used.[4] While to the modern reader this may seem far from a revolutionary idea, it was at the time, and as such conceded an exceptional advantage to the Romans. As remarked by Montesquieu and translated in *A Treatise on the Science of War and Fortification*, "It is remarkable, that the nations vanquished by the Romans never inquired into the causes of their repeated defeats; but persevered in the use of their weapons and institutions to the last moment of their political existence" (O'Connor, 71).[5] Clearly, this doctrine of assimilation and adaptation was fairly unique for its time, and thereby allowed the Roman Legions to continuously evolve, with new tactics, equipment, and training.

An even greater testament to the adaptability of the Romans was that they did not only assimilate or adapt to the innovations of the armies after having defeated them, but would do so throughout a campaign as well, learning from every defeat in order to ultimately take victory back. A good example of

this was upon encountering the elephants of Pyrrhus, where the unfamiliar animals routed the Roman cavalry, “ their horses, before they got near the animals, were terrified and ran away with their riders” (Plutarch, XVII. 3), but the Romans allowed this to happen only once.[6]In response, “ they first supplied the weakness of their cavalry by taking away the bridles from the horses, [...] and afterwards by mixing velites with their cavalry proper” (Montesquieu, 55).[7]

The Roman’s strategy of adaptation and adoption showed clear results on the battlefield time and time again. In this way, many a campaign that seemed lost at first was ultimately reclaimed by them, “ careful to ascertain in what respects their enemy might possess some superiority over them; they immediately took action accordingly” (Montesquieu, 54), and thereby turn the tides in their favour once more.[8]In short, a great factor in the Roman army’s success was its doctrine of constant evolution: if someone was doing something better, do what they are doing. In this way, the Roman army continuously evolved into a force that had the best traits of all powers in the area; as summarized by Josephus: “ If any nation enjoyed any particular advantage [...] they at once availed themselves of the same. They did not neglect to provide themselves with Numidian horses, Cretan archers, Balearic slingmen, and Rhodian ships. In fine, no nation ever prepared for war with so much prudence, or carried it on with so much audacity” (Montesquieu, 56).[9]

The Roman’s exercised another great advantage over their contemporaries: discipline. Many of the armies of their time being composed of non-professional soldiers, and those that did have standing armies had them

composed of barbarians and undisciplined troops. As such, it would often come about that the Romans claimed victory despite being grossly outnumbered, “[Roman] troops always being the better disciplined, it was likely, even in the most unfortunate combats, that they would rally in part, or that the enemy would somewhere be thrown into disorder [and] although overborne in the beginning [...], they finally wrested victory from their hands” (Montesquieu, 54).[10]

This great discipline was of the utmost importance to the Roman army’s success, and so it was instilled from the moment that a man would enlist. They began training at military schools, increasing physical strength, dexterity, and weapons handling, with the most famous of these being the Campus Martius in ancient Rome.[11] All of this contributed to the Roman soldier becoming the best version of himself, which in turn resulted in a greater esprit de corps and pride, and ultimately a greater willingness to fight. This transferred directly to the battlefield, where the Roman forces would rarely break formation despite being presented with an overwhelming enemy, and whose formations were therefore powerful and resilient enough to overcome these same enemies. The discipline that Roman soldiers exhibited came from two factors, one being the risk of punishment, and the other being Roman pride, with each being effective in their own right.

The pride that Roman’s felt in their place in the military was an effective component in maintaining order amongst the troops by being preventative; a Roman soldier did not wish to forsake his duty because of his pride. This could be seen in the rarity of Roman desertions, which resulted from the fact that “ soldiers drawn from the bosom of a people so proud, so haughty, so

confident of dominating other peoples, could little think so far undervaluing themselves as to cease to be Romans" (Montesquieu, 53).[12]This pride went beyond retention and increased morale and combat effectiveness, as this pride allowed a Roman soldier to believe in himself and his brothers in arms all the more.[13]

The other source of Roman military discipline stemmed from the threat of punishment for those who were lacking. This began from the earliest days of a soldier's career; when performance was unsatisfactory they were punished accordingly, and so it became that " corporal punishment to enforce discipline was part of a soldier's way of life" (Saller, 136).[14]Despite corporal punishment becoming the norm for these soldiers, there existed far more severe punishments that served as extreme deterrents for the most extreme cases of a soldier's misconduct, the most famous of these being the decimation of a unit. As described by Polybius:

If the same thing ever happens to large bodies, and if entire maniples desert their posts when exceedingly hard pressed, the officers refrain from inflicting the bastinado or the death penalty on all, but find a solution of the difficulty which is both salutary and terror-striking. The tribune assembles the legion, and brings up those guilty of leaving the ranks, reproaches them sharply, and finally chooses by lots sometimes five, sometimes eight, sometimes twenty of the offenders, so adjusting the number thus chosen that they form as near as possible the tenth part of those guilty of cowardice. Those on whom the lot falls are bastinadoed mercilessly in the manner above described; the rest receive rations of barley instead of wheat and are ordered to encamp outside the camp on an unprotected spot. As therefore

the danger and dread of drawing the fatal lot affects all equally, as it is uncertain on whom it will fall; and as the public disgrace of receiving barley rations falls on all alike, this practice is that best calculated to both inspire fear and to correct the mischief. (Polybius, 38)[15]

This punishment is exemplary of the array of consequences that could befall a soldier who lacked discipline; if one's pride was not motivation enough, then these would be.

Clearly, both methods of encouraging discipline amongst Roman troops were effective, and in turn this discipline was a powerful asset of the Roman army. The Roman army's unmatched discipline on the battlefield proved itself to be a source of strength and a great advantage time and time again. Especially against barbaric forces, even when outnumbered the Romans would hold, and the undisciplined enemy forces would be routed despite their numerical advantage, and they would thereby " finally [wrest] victory from their hands" (Montesquieu, 54).[16]

The Roman Empire's military might was what allowed it to expand and maintain its power and influence, and so the Empire was only as strong as its army. The Roman army's power came from their willingness to adapt and their strict doctrine of discipline, and this is further apparent in how the armies of subsequent eras were eager to adopt these same ideals, and when doing so became far more successful.

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[1]Adrian Goldsworthy, *The Complete Roman Army* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 2003).

[2]Montesquieu and Jehu Baker, *Montesquieu's Considerations on the Causes of the Grandeur and Decadence of the Romans* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1882), 54.

[3]Ibid, 20.

[4]Ibid, 20.

[5]John O'Connor, *A Treatise on the Science of War and Fortification* (New York: J. Seymour, 1817), 71.

[6]Plutarch, "Life of Pyrrhus" (n. d.), XVII. 3.

[7]Montesquieu and Jehu Baker, *Montesquieu's Considerations on the Causes of the Grandeur and Decadence of the Romans* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1882), 55.

[8]Ibid, 54.

[9]Ibid, 56.

[10]Ibid, 54.

[11]Ibid, 49-51.

[12]Ibid, 53.

[13]Ibid, 53-54.

[14]Richard P. Saller, *Patriarchy, Property and Death in the Roman Family* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 136.

[15]Polybius, " Book VI" (n. d.), 38.

[16]Montesquieu and Jehu Baker, *Montesquieu's Considerations on the Causes of the Grandeur and Decadence of the Romans* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1882), 54.