

## INTRODUCTION: SOURCES AND METHODS

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The story of Rome is a story of warfare. It is through war that a small and insignificant town in central Italy rose into one of the greatest empires that ever existed. It was war that maintained the Roman Empire's power and its institutions over hundreds of years. Although there were many factors involved in its decline, the collapse of the western part of the empire ultimately occurred through war. Although ancient war was very different from that of modern times, there are elements of Roman warfare that are just as relevant today as they were two thousand years ago.

By “warfare” we mean not only the fighting of wars, but also those institutions, such as the army, that made fighting possible. While there were certainly changes, warfare remained remarkably stable over the course of antiquity. On the other hand, the definition of “Roman” changed dramatically over the more than thousand years covered by this book. The word begins by describing the inhabitants of a small town in central Italy and ends by referring to virtually every person who lived in southern and western Europe, western Asia, and northern Africa. It is important to note that the Roman population was ethnically mixed from its very beginning. Although mainly Latin speakers, there were also Oscans, Etruscans, Greeks, and quite possibly Phoenicians in early Rome. Throughout its history, Rome's openness in granting citizenship

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to other peoples was an important factor in its success. Although proud of their traditions, the Romans also freely borrowed foreign customs, especially where fighting was concerned.

Rome's geographic position was a key factor in its rise, something already noted by the historian Livy in the first century BCE. The Tiber, one of the few navigable rivers in central Italy, formed an early east-west highway. Rome arose next to a ford where a north-south trade route could cross the river. Western Italy had fertile volcanic soil, which, along with abundant rainfall, meant that the western coast of Italy had one of the largest population densities in the ancient world. Thus Rome, once it developed a way to exploit this manpower for military purposes, could field substantial armies and navies. Italy also had access to significant mineral deposits, especially the rich iron deposits on the nearby island of Elba. This led to an early industry in the forging of weapons and armor. Geographic factors, however, did not predetermine Rome's empire. This book introduces the complex social, cultural, and political elements in Roman militarism. We will only be able to scratch the surface, though, and historians continue to explore and debate the reasons for Roman military success.

Whatever its causes, one can hardly exaggerate Roman military might. By the third century before the Common Era (BCE) the Romans controlled or dominated the lands around the western half of the Mediterranean Sea and, by 100 BCE, its eastern half as well. At its height, the Roman Empire directly ruled western and southern Europe, northern Africa and the Middle East, an area of 2.3 million square miles (5.9 million square kilometers), larger than the size of the continental United States. By the traditional date of the "Fall of the Roman Empire," 476 CE, the western part of the empire had collapsed into independent German kingdoms. The eastern half, however, survived for another thousand years. We refer to this surviving state as the Byzantine Empire, but its inhabitants called themselves Romans, and their state, the Roman Empire.

We learn about warfare from much the same sources as those that inform us of other aspects of ancient Rome. These include the Latin

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writings of historians such as Sallust (ca. 86–35 BCE), Caesar (100–44 BCE), Livy (59 BCE–17 CE), Tacitus (ca. 55–ca. 120 CE), and Ammianus Marcellinus (ca. 330–395 CE). This is due to the fact that one of the main themes of Roman historical writing was war, and each of these authors describes the Roman army and its battles, as well as the political causes and results of these wars. Our sources are not only in Latin. As the poet Horace famously put it, Rome, having captured Greece, was captured by it. By the second century BCE, Greek had become a second language to educated Romans, and Rome and its institutions an important theme for Greek writers. Two of the best descriptions of Roman military institutions are written in Greek by Polybius (ca. 200–118 BCE) and Flavius Josephus (37–ca. 100 CE). Other Greek sources for Roman warfare are the writings of Dionysius of Halicarnassus (ca. 60–ca. 5 BCE), Plutarch (ca. 50–ca. 120 CE), Dio Cassius (ca. 155–ca. 230 CE), Appian (ca. 95–165 CE), and Zosimus (ca. 460–ca. 530).

History was a literary genre in antiquity, and when writing about war, or any topic, ancient historians followed certain conventions and themes, called *topoi*. In their writings Roman historians, for example, would usually include valuable information, such as the names of units and commanders, and the size of military forces. On the other hand, matters of equal or more interest to modern historians, such as the way in which individuals fought or how armies were supplied, are rarely mentioned. It is true that ancient historians sometimes distorted, and even invented, events in order to improve the impact of their story. Therefore students of Roman warfare should always read the sources carefully and critically. Nevertheless, they should remember that “literary” is not necessarily the same as “fictional.” Even highly rhetorical writing can give us important historical information.

Unfortunately, though not surprisingly, only a very few military handbooks and technical manuals were of enough interest to medieval copyists to have survived the centuries. What we have includes a collection of military tricks or stratagems by Frontinus (ca. 40–103 CE), a book on tactics and a sort of guidebook for fighting against the Alans

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(a steppe people) by Arrian (ca. 86–160 CE), a manual on building a camp by Pseudo-Hyginus (dating from the second or third century CE), and a very important but enigmatic Late Roman book on the army by Flavius Vegetius, written in the late fourth or early fifth century.

Since warfare and the army were such significant parts of Roman society, it is not surprising to find many military references in various different genres of literature, both poetry and prose. The writings of Plautus (ca. 254–184 BCE), Virgil (70–19 BCE), Lucan (39–65 CE), Silius Italicus (ca. 26–ca. 101 CE) and Juvenal (late first to early second century CE) give us valuable information on the Roman military.

The Latin or Greek books we read, whether in the original or in translation, virtually all come to us through what is called “manuscript transmission.” This means that each book was painstakingly copied and recopied over the centuries, until it was finally edited and printed starting in the fifteenth century. Of course, many mistakes, omissions, and other corruptions naturally occur in texts when they are copied so many times. During the Renaissance, the science of philology was developed to correct ancient texts. This process continues today and is vital to our understanding of the ancient past, including warfare.

In addition to the manuscript tradition, we learn much about Roman warfare through so-called documentary sources, such as inscriptions, papyri, ostraka, and wooden tablets. Both the study of inscriptions, called epigraphy, and that of papyri, called papyrology, are highly informative. Roman soldiers, especially officers, had the habit of putting up inscribed tombstones with a great deal of detail about their careers, including the units in which they served, the ranks they attained, and occasionally the wars in which they fought. Scholars have learned much about the army in this way. In addition, there are hundreds of other Latin and Greek inscriptions erected by individuals, units, cities, and states that describe victories, building activities, laws, treaties, and so forth. All these help us to understand the Roman army and ancient warfare.

Papyri, made from the pith (the stem center) of the papyrus plant, was used much like modern paper. Most surviving ones are mostly written in Greek, although there are also some Latin ones. Papyri survive

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mainly in Egypt, but also in Israel, Jordan, and Syria. We have found unit rosters, pay records, letters, and other documents that detail the day-to-day life of soldiers. Ostraka (writing on broken pieces of pottery) and writing on wooden slips were used as we do note paper today, and are also valuable. For example, hundreds of military ostraka have been found at Bu Njem, a fort in North Africa, and more and more wooden slips are being discovered at the auxiliary camp at Vindolanda in northern England. There are also a few dozen metal *diplomata*, or discharge documents, that give us much information about auxiliary units.

Archaeology also is of great help in understanding Roman warfare. Dozens of military camps and forts have been excavated, providing information about daily life, equipment, and weapons. In rare cases, we even discover the remains of battles, mainly sieges such as Numantia and Masada. Recently, the battlefield at Teutoburger Forest (9 CE) has been discovered and scientifically studied. Together with the descriptions given by Tacitus and Cassius Dio, and some inscriptions, archaeology helps us paint a picture of the course of this important battle. An increasingly important way of understanding the Roman army is through the reconstruction of their equipment. Reenactors have discovered, for example, the proper method for using the *furca* as a pack and the workings of the Roman cavalry saddle.

Of course, we have no videos or photographs of ancient battles, but war was an important theme in ancient art. There are pictures of soldiers and their equipment in stone reliefs, frescoes, painted pottery, and illustrated manuscripts, as well as statues and figurines with military themes. Although we are grateful for what we have, we must remember that ancient paintings and sculpture were highly stylized. There is much debate about the accuracy of even very realistic-looking images, such as those seen on Trajan's famous column in Rome. As a result, there is much uncertainty about the reconstruction of ancient equipment and the course of battles, particularly over the Romans' use of missile weapons and cavalry.

Another difficulty facing the military historian is the fact that the number and quality of our sources differ greatly for various time periods.

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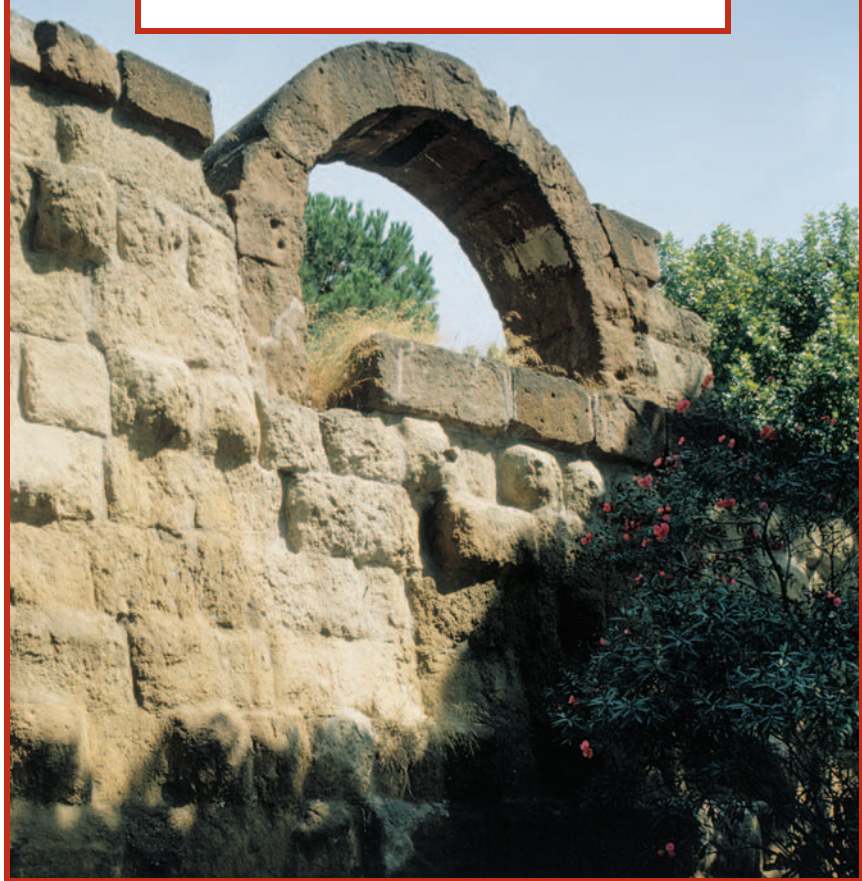
With few exceptions our earliest reliable sources, both written and pictorial, date to after the second century BCE. There is a “golden age” of evidence for the army, in the first centuries BCE and CE, subsequent to which sources again become scarce, until they virtually end in the fifth century. There are regional differences as well. We have hundreds of military documents from Egypt, for example, and now some from Britain, but virtually none from elsewhere.

Overall, what is important is that we combine our sources and analyze them critically to gain an overall picture of Roman warfare. Although this is a difficult task for historians, those interested in the subject have benefited from the work of generations of dedicated and talented military historians. The task of refining and correcting this picture will continue and there is much for future military historians to discover and understand about Roman warfare.

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CHAPTER 1

THE WARS OF EARLY  
ROME (BEGINNINGS  
TO 343 BCE)





There are numerous stories about Rome's beginnings, and dividing fact from fiction is a difficult chore. This is as true of warfare as it is of other aspects of society. We frankly have few reliable details of Roman warfare in this early period, and there is an intense debate among historians about what little we do know. Modern archaeology is revealing more of early Rome, but there is a limit to what excavated finds can tell us. Nevertheless, we can say something about how early Romans fought. The original Romans inhabited villages along the Tiber River, perched on hills surrounding a marsh. Livy gives the date of the founding of Rome as the equivalent of 753 BCE. This may be too early: most historians think several Latin villages merged into a town sometime around 650. Recent discoveries, however, may push Rome's beginning back into the eighth century. Its inhabitants were mainly Latins, sharing their language, customs, and a myth of common origin with their neighbors in Latium (now the province of Lazio in central Italy). All the adult men fought in wartime. Indeed, the Latin word for "people," *populus*, originally meant "army."

At this time, most Roman weapons were still made of bronze, with only a few iron ones. A wealthy aristocrat might have had an iron sword, as well as a conical iron helmet. An unusual feature of some early Roman helmets was a tall tiara-like plate running from one temple to the other, making the warrior look taller. Better-off warriors also wore leather armor, perhaps with a square metal disk, or pectoral, to protect the chest, and a round or oval shield. The wealthiest drove two-horsed chariots. In contrast, most Roman warriors, the commoners, would have gone into battle with little or no armor and perhaps just a spear as a weapon. Rome's ruler was called the *rex*, which meant "king," though at the time this "kingdom" had no more than ten thousand inhabitants. "Chief" or "warlord" might possibly be a better translation, as Rome's earliest "wars" probably were little more than cattle raids. Livy relates exciting, but fictional, stories of the exploits of heroic rulers like Romulus and



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Ancus Marcius. Although these are legends, not history, the office of king likely did originate as a war chief and, the most important function of the *rex* was leading the Romans into battle. The *rex* had what the Romans called *imperium*, the power to command (*imperare*).

Royal Rome raised its army from the city's three tribes (*tribus*, from the Latin for "thirds"). According to Livy, each tribe contributed a thousand men, neatly subdivided into ten centuries (*centuriae*) of one hundred men and commanded by a military tribune (*tribunus militum*). Rome's aristocrats, called patricians (*patricii*) were supposed to have contributed three hundred cavalry under a cavalry tribune (*tribunus celerum*). Livy's numbers are notional – there is no reason to think that the tribes contributed equally, but his total of three thousand is probably approximately correct for this period. Rome's early cavalry may not have been solely aristocratic. The use of chariots had certainly been abandoned by this time, and horses were probably not very important in war; the "cavalry" may have ridden into battle and dismounted to fight on foot. In all likelihood, patricians fought other patricians in one-on-one battles, while common soldiers skirmished among themselves.

Livy's reference to centuries in the royal army is anachronistic: the clan, or *gens*, was the tribe's military subdivision. The names of certain clans (*gentes*) like the Iulii (or Julii), Aemilii, Corneli, and Fabii abound all through early Roman military history. The leading patricians led their clan followers into battle. As late as the early fifth century, we hear of the Fabian clan fighting as a group. At the Battle of the Cremera River, traditionally dated to 477 BCE, virtually the entire *gens Fabia* was said to have been wiped out. The Senate (*senatus*) grew up as a council of the most powerful clan leaders, who served both as subcommanders and advisers to the king.

Trumpets would announce the beginning of a military campaign, which generally started with the onset of spring in March (*Martius*, the month of Mars, god of war). After a victory, the king led a celebratory parade through the city for which the Romans borrowed an Etruscan word: the triumph. Indeed, it is likely that the Romans derived much of

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their early military culture from their more advanced neighbors to the north, the Etruscans, and from the Greeks to the south.

War was an integral part of Roman life and religion, as indeed it must have been for most cultures in the period. Special priests called *fetiales* carried out rituals to ensure that Rome's gods would grant the city victory. Some have suggested that this shows that early Rome was peacefully inclined toward its neighbors. It is true that there was not much expansion during this period: Fidenae, with whom Rome fought for more than a hundred years, lay only five miles (8 km) upstream. It may be that Rome's militarism, like that of Sparta, developed long after its founding, but this is unclear.

Livy writes that King Servius Tullius (traditionally 578–535 BCE) first divided citizens into wealth classes for military purposes. Some scholars think this reform actually occurred in the fifth century, after the establishment of the Republic, but a date in the mid-sixth century seems more likely. Whenever it happened, this “Servian Reform” was simply the adoption by Rome of Greek-style hoplite warfare. Under this military system, every adult male in a city-state seventeen years or older was required to buy weapons and armor if he had sufficient property to do so. A census was held every five years to determine who would fight. Those with enough wealth to serve as infantry were called *assidui*, literally “those present (at the muster of the army).” The wealthiest were *equites* or horsemen (also called equestrians). Those who were too poor to buy weapons were the “proletarians,” who could offer only children (*proles*) to the state. The hoplite system allowed a city-state to raise a large military force relative to its population. The army was essentially self-arming, without the need for a bureaucracy to buy and distribute weapons. In addition, those who derived the greatest benefit from the city-state, its wealthier citizens, were personally responsible for its defense.

Since the army was now drafted, or levied, from among the eligible male citizens, the Latin word for levy, *legio*, became the term for the army as a whole. This is where we get our word “legion.” A later Roman tradition suggests that Servius' hoplite-style army had six