

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-093577 - War and Society in Early Rome: From Warlords to Generals

Jeremy Armstrong

Excerpt

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## Introduction

There is a very good reason why books on the subject of early Rome always start out with rather lengthy and detailed introductions and methodologies: the problematic nature of the sources for early Rome, coupled with an increasingly diverse range of approaches to them, means that there has yet to be established even a vague, generally agreed upon, overarching historical structure for the period. Indeed, over the past century and more, the field has effectively become something of a “free-for-all,” with violently divergent models of the early city, based on various approaches to and analyses of the evidence, being presented with matching enthusiasm and conviction.<sup>1</sup> In recent years these have ranged from Andrea Carandini’s optimistic *Rome: Day One*, to T. J. Cornell’s more skeptical *Beginnings of Rome* (a volume which, twenty years after its initial publication, arguably still represents the dominant Anglophone work in the field), to Christopher Smith’s *The Roman Clan*, Peter Wiseman’s *Remus* and *The Myths of Rome*, and ultimately the more critical (and perhaps somewhat pessimistic) voices of Kurt Raafaub and others. Despite being based on roughly the same collection of sources and evidence (the incrementally increasing archaeological record for the period being the only real difference), and the eminence and acumen of the scholars involved, each of these works presents a strikingly different view of the early city and its development. As a result, when it comes to early Roman history, one cannot take a particular starting point as a “given” – for instance, that the city was founded in 753, or even what the word “city” means in an archaic central Italian context – as this must always be established to a certain extent.

At the core of this uncertainty around early Roman history there are, naturally, some fundamental questions about the nature and reliability of the evidence (particularly the literature), but also some very important questions about the society which it relates to. Most notably, it is still

<sup>1</sup> See Cornell 2005 and Raafaub 2005b for examples and discussion.

entirely uncertain whether Rome should be seen as a highly developed and cohesive community even as late as the fifth and sixth centuries, and if so whether one is able to push this developed model back into the seventh and eighth centuries.<sup>2</sup> In addition, questions concerning early Rome's internal structure (for instance, who were the early "patricians" and "plebeians" and when did these divisions emerge) have been hot button topics for years, not to mention serious questions about when Rome developed various social, political, and religious institutions.<sup>3</sup>

In the absence of an established alternative model, early Roman society has traditionally been described (and most often by those not directly concerned with the period itself) employing the same vocabulary and conventions used by Rome's late republican historians, who envisioned a society defined by the same basic principles as their own and plagued by the same issues. As a result, it has been internal divisions, such as the patrician–plebeian dichotomy, and late republican problems, such as land distribution, which have typically taken center stage in interpretations of an early Roman community that is often assumed to have exhibited a high degree of overall social and political cohesion from a very early point.<sup>4</sup> This approach assumes that Rome, from its foundation until the late Republic, was a reasonably stable and discrete socio-political entity, albeit one made up of a number of constituent groups or factions, and that many (if not all) of the city's social, political, and military developments during the course of the Republic can be explained by the changing balance of power which existed between these groups. Powers were redistributed and relationships changed, but the characters rarely did – and neither did the overall composition and character of Rome. According to this model, Rome was, in many ways, eternal.

Despite the predominance of this paradigm, in which the vast majority of both ancient authors (and surprising number of modern scholars) seem to have believed, there has always been some debate over the details as the resultant model for early Roman society is far from consistent and not entirely supported by either the archaeology or the literary sources. For

<sup>2</sup> Some scholars have even suggested that the very idea of a distinct Roman identity before the third century could be a "mirage." See, for instance, Gildenhard 2003: 112.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Raaflaub 2005a.

<sup>4</sup> These divisions are most prominent in discussions of the early Republic and are much less evident in the evidence for the regal period, as the development of the plebs as "a state within the state" had arguably not yet occurred – this is usually dated to the secession of 494. As a result, the dichotomous nature of Roman society is nowhere near as clear during the earliest periods, although given the very different nature of the record – far more mythic and anecdotal, and lacking the rigid annalistic structure – the reasons for this could be partly historiographical.

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instance, a more nuanced view of the patrician–plebeian dichotomy was advanced back in the early twentieth century AD by Münzer, as scholars struggled to explain various inconsistencies in the literary record, and this topic has been the subject of increasingly intense study in recent years, particularly as it relates the middle and late Republic.<sup>5</sup> Added to this has been work like Harriet Flower's *Roman Republics*, which has challenged the monolithic conception of Rome during the republican period, and an increasing body of archaeological evidence hinting that many aspects of Roman society may have changed more significantly than previously thought. A perhaps unintended consequence of this work has been the reexamination of a wide range of evidence which seems to go against the traditional model of early Roman society, which is implied (or sometimes explicitly presented) in the literature. This includes references to events and behavior which do not fit with the expected norms or cast of characters (most notably for this volume, powerful “warlords” occupying a liminal zone in archaic Roman society),<sup>6</sup> social and political reforms which make little sense in their reported contexts (particularly offices like the problematic consular tribunes), and increasingly a body of archaeological evidence which hints that early Rome may not have exhibited the same physical features that Livy and Dionysius suggest (full circuit walls during the Regal period, etc.). In many cases, and particularly with regard to the literary material, scholars have been aware of this evidence for centuries, although its importance had often been discounted and examples were explained away as errors or literary devices simply because they went against the overt and accepted model. But with the recent challenges to the static and stable conception of Roman society during regal and republican periods, this material is increasingly being viewed in a new light.

<sup>5</sup> Münzer 1999. Hölkeskamp, in particular, has forever altered the way we view the aristocracy and indeed “class” in the Roman Republic. See particularly Hölkeskamp 1987 and 2010.

<sup>6</sup> The term “warlord” is not an unproblematic one, and a range of different definitions exist (see Giustozzi 2005, Vinci 2007, and Wijnendaele 2016, among others, for discussion). This study will generally adopt the definition espoused by Vinci, who argued a warlord was “the leader of an armed group that uses military power and economic exploitation to maintain fiefdoms which are autonomous and independent from the state and society” (Vinci 2007: 328). Further, following Wijnendaele, it will suggest that the “fiefdoms” in question do not need to refer to actual territory, but that the term can be used to denote authority more generally, and that members do not need to be born into the group, but can be recruited via a range of methods – most notably patronage. Finally, and again following Wijnendaele, it is worth noting that these “warlords” represent a slightly different, although sometimes overlapping, category from simple “clan leaders” as they existed and functioned outside of the state as discrete socio-political elements. A clan leader could become a warlord, but this was not necessarily or always the case (for instance, if a leader chose to function and exert his power within the confines of the state structure). Conversely, a warlord could revert to being a clan leader or simple citizen if he chose to function within the state structures.

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Perhaps the most important aspect of this reinterpretation has been the recent rise to prominence of the archaic Roman *gentes*, or clans, in scholarship and the question of how these groups fit within early Roman society. The ancient sources clearly saw them existing, as they did in the late Republic, as a core part of the Roman elite – a vital part of Roman society and indeed the primary focus of Rome’s historical tradition. Rome’s *gentes* were, in many ways, Rome itself – or at least the part which mattered. However, careful and critical readings of the literature, coupled with analyses of the growing archaeological record, have suggested that things were not quite as clear cut and that the fundamental nature of Roman society, and particularly the relationship between the *gentes* and the urban community, may have changed quite dramatically from the sixth century down to the late fourth and third centuries, when contemporary histories began to appear. The problem which scholars face delving into these issues, however, is how to deal with the contradictory nature of the evidence – with the overt narrative and traditional model on the one hand, suggesting that Rome’s *gentes* were always a core part of Roman society, and a collection of evidence on the other hand that suggests a more complex picture, but which also represents at best a counter-narrative which is only occasionally visible in the literary narrative (and seemingly appearing by accident) and supported indirectly by the archaeology.

The present volume will attempt to shed some additional light on these issues by avoiding the usual prescriptive (and largely anachronistic) divisions and labels used by late republican historians to frame their histories, and instead focusing on behavior, and in particular behavior associated with warfare, in order to analyze early Roman society. Looking at behavior and broad social characteristics to help explain early Roman society is not an entirely new approach, and indeed it is increasingly becoming the norm for this and other problematic/prehistoric periods (and of course it must be noted that, despite the many sources relating to it, early Rome is a prehistoric period).<sup>7</sup> The key issue is what type of behavior to look at. Ritual and religion, because of their (at least perceived) conservative and sometimes archaizing tendencies, or architecture and building practices, because of the available archaeological evidence, both represent obvious possibilities, but when attempting to explore and explain the core divisions of Roman society a slightly different “lens” is arguably needed. For this sort of task, recent work in the fields of sociology and psychology has

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, MacMullen 2011 and Drogula 2015.

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increasingly demonstrated that warfare may be the most useful indicator, as social groupings and societal norms may ultimately be what dictate the nature of warfare within a given society.<sup>8</sup> While the exact source of individual human aggression is still debated among scientists and social anthropologists, it is evident that human violence is almost always regulated by social rules and constructs.<sup>9</sup> It is only in rare cases, where individuals either ignore or are unable to recognize these societal constructs, often due to mental illness or lack of societal influence in their formative years, that they engage in violence outside of societal norms.<sup>10</sup> This social control of aggression is taken to another level when aggression is associated with groups. While individual human aggression is usually *governed* by social norms, group aggression seems to be in many ways *created* by a specific set of social rules.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the very formation of self-conscious societies and internal social groupings is often based on the social creation and use of aggression, typically demonstrated by the production of “in-group” and “out-group” biases.<sup>12</sup> As a result, the study of warfare-based divisions within a population can be an extremely useful way to gain insights into existing social divisions, particularly in societies which have yet to develop professional armed forces. Further, as the functions of and motivations for warfare within a society can be associated with particular cross-cultural political principles, warfare also represents a useful lens through which the political organization of a society can be viewed.<sup>13</sup>

Focusing on warfare also has benefits which are specifically relevant to early Rome. Although it is by no means unambiguous, Rome’s military record is arguably the most concrete and stable aspect of the historical record for the enigmatic early period. Remembered in festivals and family histories, commemorated by public constructions, and attested to in treaties, Rome’s wars seem to have formed the skeleton which later

<sup>8</sup> See Keeley 1997: 8–22 for a detailed summary of this hypothesis and its evidence.

<sup>9</sup> This debate has dominated the social sciences for over fifty years. Some scholars, predominantly in the physical sciences, maintain that human aggression and warfare have their roots in our genetic material, and were acquired by humans millennia ago as an evolutionary adaptation (see Shaw 1989). This theory was very popular in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s, as the birth of genetics as a field seemed to offer the clue to all human behavior (see Manning 1989). However, by the late 1980s this theory was largely debunked by social scientists, who argued for a social basis to warfare. This theory, first put forward by Margaret Mead in her seminal 1940 article “War is Only an Invention – Not a Biological Necessity” (Mead 1940:402–405), is now the dominant theory for *group* violence, whereas the genetic theory still has its proponents when it comes to *individual* violence. The exact connection between group violence and individual violence has yet to be established.

<sup>10</sup> Keeley 1997: 3–25.

<sup>11</sup> See Chagnon’s study of Yanomamo warfare for a more detailed discussion of group-created aggression (Chagnon 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Murphy 1957: 1018–1035.    <sup>13</sup> Bodley 2008: 242–243.

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historians then “fleshed out” with their elaborate narratives.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, while Rome’s early wars – and particularly the wars of the early Republic – are perhaps not the “largely undisputed markers” in the city’s early chronology they are sometimes argued to be, they do seem to offer a relatively stable and consistent series of events which are supported by a range of different sources and evidence types.<sup>15</sup> In other words, if we are going to put our faith in any aspect of the literary tradition for early Rome (a suggestion which many might baulk at in the first instance), warfare is arguably the safest. Add to this that various aspects of warfare are also visible in the archaeological record for archaic central Italy – in the form of military equipment finds, iconographic representations, and fortifications – and warfare increasingly emerges as one of the more viable avenues for study.

The present study will argue that when early Roman society is viewed in terms of the community’s military activity, and specifically the groups involved, the character of the conflicts, and the aims and goals accomplished, the resultant picture is one which, like the traditional narrative, is still defined by a series of dualities. However, the new dualities, although sometimes overlapping, do have significant differences from those envisaged by late republican historians. Most notably, the social and political struggle which dominated the sixth and fifth centuries BC in Rome, which is commonly interpreted as a struggle between the plebeians and patricians, can be better described as an interaction between two distinct groups associated with Rome’s settled urban population on the one hand and the region’s more mobile gentilicial elite on the other. During the course of the fifth century, although they seem to have maintained aspects of their previously existing identities, these two groups slowly fused into an increasingly cohesive society during the second half of the century and the beginning of the fourth, forming the basis of Rome’s republican society, and the Roman army of the Republic, as we understand it today.<sup>16</sup> As this

<sup>14</sup> Oakley 2004: 22.

<sup>15</sup> Flower 2010: 37. The wars of Rome’s regal period, largely because of the structural approach adopted for this period in the surviving sources (i.e. dividing the period up by reigns, instead of using an annalistic structure, and focusing on anecdotes), are obviously much more problematic. But while they might not serve as clear chronological markers, the wars recorded for this period can arguably still be viewed as discrete and plausibly historical memories given their evident importance in Roman society in a range of contexts, as will be discussed.

<sup>16</sup> This fusion has been clearly identified at the elite level during the past 100 years (Hölkeskamp 1987; Münzer 1999), but represents much more than a simple integration of aristocracies. It is the unification of completely separate entities which together formed a unified and cohesive Roman society.

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duality slowly dissipated in the fourth century, at least at the elite level, the region witnessed the advent and subsequent transformation of new “Roman” and “Latin” identities, which seem to have increasingly existed in opposition to one another during this period. These emergent identities formed the basis of a second duality, which also fused together after significant struggles, to form Rome’s nascent Latin empire in 338.

The end result of this reinterpretation is a revised model for the development of Roman society where many of the conflicts and struggles which were traditionally seen as internal become external – or at least liminal – and part of a larger process of identity creation for Rome. Instead of the Struggle of the Orders representing an internal conflict between two factions within the city of Rome itself – a conflict which bears a striking, and in many ways unsurprising, similarity to Rome’s late republican politics – it becomes a story of incorporation, integration, and compromise, as various entities slowly merge with each other and the burgeoning city state. And interestingly, although it may not have been as useful for historians looking to explain Rome’s political upheaval during the tumultuous years at the end of the Republic and the start of the Empire, it is clear that this alternative version would have still resonated with Rome’s historians – and particularly those with a genuine interest in the earlier periods. Claudius’ speech, recorded on the Tablet of Lyon, clearly demonstrates that incorporation was a powerful, although often ignored, subtext within Roman history, as does everything we know about Cato the Elder’s history of Rome and Italy. The same process of incorporation and integration can also be seen in Rome’s late fourth century conflicts, where the Latins and eventually other Italian peoples were slowly brought into Rome’s socio-political sphere. Through it all, the narrative of integration – with both its ups and downs – is clearly visible.

From a military point of view, the revised model also helps to explain quite a few problematic aspects of both the archaeological evidence and the literary narrative. The increasing disjunction between the archaeological evidence for warfare in central Italy and the traditional model for Roman warfare and Roman society, derived from the explicit literary narrative, has now become impossible to ignore. With the archaeological evidence increasingly pointing toward a vibrant community, but one which seems to have featured a less cohesive gentilicial aristocracy in the sixth and fifth centuries BC than usually thought, along with a *gens*-based domination of warfare in the region of Latium more generally, a model which presents a strong and stable civic militia in Rome during this period is arguably untenable – at least without some serious “tinkering.” Additionally,



many aspects of the literary narrative for Roman warfare and Rome's military development are either contradictory or stand out as highly unlikely given both our understanding of early societies in general, and Roman and Latin society in particular. As a result, the model of military development which featured stability and continuity as the norm, interspersed with the occasional massive change, can instead become a much richer and logical narrative of constant change and evolution driven by Rome's changing relationship with a variety of different entities. Specifically, the evidence increasingly supports a narrative of gradual unification, as central Italy's powerful warlike clans gradually integrated with both each other and the urban center of Rome – although the process was neither clean nor quick.

The various changes that occurred in Rome (and Latium more generally) during the regal and early republican periods were therefore undoubtedly the result of a wide range of very complex factors, many of which are likely to be forever beyond the grasp of modern scholarship due to the inherent problems with the sources for the period. Nevertheless, viewing Roman society through this particular paradigm based on behavior, and specifically warfare, may help to explain certain previously problematic aspects of early Roman development. The present volume will therefore argue for a broad reinterpretation of early Rome where the interaction between particular elements in Roman and Latin society (namely “mobile, extra-mural *gentes*” versus “settled/urban population” and later “Roman” versus “Latin”) is explored as possible explanations for change in various aspects of early Roman society and warfare. The study will also present reinterpretations of more specific points within the paradigm of the larger dualisms and dichotomies, demonstrating how significant their impact was on the internal workings of early Roman society.

### The study of early Roman warfare

The character and development of the early Roman army have long been objects of fascination for scholars, both ancient and modern. This is due in large part to the very prominent role which Rome's military forces have traditionally played in interpretations of the early history of the city, with Rome's growing power in Italy being principally the result of military conquest, and with the formation of many of Rome's early social and political institutions being linked to large-scale military reforms.<sup>17</sup> What

<sup>17</sup> See Cornell 1988 for discussion.



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may be referred to here as the “traditional model” has commonly been used to describe Rome’s earliest armed forces and their evolution during the early regal period and early Republic. Dating to at least the first century, if not earlier, the traditional model laid out a sequence of development which saw Rome’s transition from a tribal army to a hoplite phalanx in the sixth century, and the emergence of the manipular legion in the fourth century. This sequence can be found in a relatively complete, albeit undetailed, form in texts like the first century *Ineditum Vaticanum*, but the version which is most often employed is largely derived from a series of small, in-depth asides which exist within the larger narratives of late republican historians such as Livy and Dionysius.<sup>18</sup> Despite the relatively late date of most of the extant examples, it is evident that various individual aspects of the traditional model clearly had origins much earlier than the first century, as there is a wide range of evidence supporting their existence in the second and third centuries, and possibly even the late fourth century.<sup>19</sup> This model, chiefly based on an implied parallel between Roman and Greek military development, presented a clear and coherent model for the evolution of warfare in early Rome which has consequently formed at least the starting point of almost every subsequent study of the early Roman army.<sup>20</sup>

As with many other facets of early Roman history, despite the traditional model’s internal consistency and its dominance in both the ancient sources and modern works on the subject, a tension has always existed between the passages which expound it and both the rest of the literary evidence and, more recently, the archaeological record, with the two sets of sources often presenting a contradictory image of Roman warfare, particularly for the earliest periods. This tension has been increased in recent years, as obvious anachronisms within the traditional model, coupled with modern methods of source criticism, have served to raise further doubts.<sup>21</sup> Attacks have come

<sup>18</sup> See for instance Goldsworthy 2003.

<sup>19</sup> Most notably, in addition to second century sources like Polybius, there was the long tradition of historiography, which is still visible in the works of later historians like Livy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus, which implied that the origins of various aspects of this system lay in much earlier periods. For instance, the comparison between the Roman army and the army of Alexander presented in Livy (Liv.8.8, see Chapter 3) suggested an origin in the late fourth or early third century.

<sup>20</sup> Thankfully this model has undergone some revision in recent years, largely because of advances in our understanding of early Greek warfare, although the explicit testimony of the literary sources is still generally taken as essentially correct in concept, if not in detail. See, for example, Rich 2007:15–20.

<sup>21</sup> Rawson illustrated the stress on the traditional model in no uncertain terms back in the 1970s, noting the unreliability of the literary tradition and its agreement with the growing archaeological

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from a variety of different angles, with one of the most prominent being the dissolution of the assumed Greek conceptual foundation to early Roman society. As van der Vliet noted, although ancient historians, following in the footsteps of the ancients, are accustomed to seeing strong parallels between early Rome and the early Greek *poleis*, with both often assumed to have represented the same kind of “city state,”<sup>22</sup> this is increasingly seen as being incorrect.<sup>23</sup> Apparent similarities between the two cultures are now recognized as being often the result of historiographical conventions, which casts ever more doubt over the obviously Greek-influenced model of early Roman warfare.<sup>24</sup>

Recent works in other areas of ancient warfare have also served to cast doubt over the acceptance of such ancient literary models in general, arguing that even at best they represent rationalizations of what were in actuality very complex systems.<sup>25</sup> Most notably, Hans van Wees’ seminal 2004 work, *Greek Warfare: Myths and Realities*, exploded many of the theories upon which the modern conception of ancient Greek warfare was founded by criticizing just such a model:

... current models of the development of Greek warfare are based on an unduly selective and somewhat naïve reading of the limited and unreliable ancient evidence. ... the model relies on positing change on the basis of claims made by later sources about how things used to be, while in parts also positing continuity and projecting elements of classical Greek warfare back into the archaic age. This is hardly satisfactory ... more generally, the problem with the study of Greek warfare of any period is that so many ancient authors tell us about military ideals ... [and] if there is one common failing in modern work on the subject, it is that it underestimates how wide the gap between ideal and reality could be.<sup>26</sup>

This rebuke could easily be applied to the many models of early Roman warfare, and indeed many of the points criticized by van Wees, with regard to scholarship on Greek warfare, are even more pertinent to models of early Rome, particularly when discussing the evidence, anachronisms, and the use of military ideals.

record on only the most basic of issues, and concluding that “any exact history of [military] developments is probably quite unattainable. . .” (Rawson 1971: 13). See Drogula 2015: 8–130 for more recent discussion.

<sup>22</sup> For instance, see the recent work on early state development by Eckstein (2006).

<sup>23</sup> Vliet 1990: 255. <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*: 255.

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, d’Agostino’s work on Etruscan warfare (d’Agostino 1990).

<sup>26</sup> van Wees 2004: 1–2.