Introduction

In the mid-160s, the satirist Lucian produced a short treatise on how to write history.[1] In the introduction, he explains that he was prompted to address this subject by the way in which the recent Roman campaign against Parthia had spawned a spate of historical writing: 'Everybody has become a Thucydides or a Herodotus or a Xenophon, and apparently the old saying "War is the father of all things" [Heracleitus *fr.* 53] has been proved true, judging by the number of historians it has produced at one go' (*Hist. conscr.* 2). Although Lucian proceeds to deliver an amusing but devastating critique of these efforts, his work serves as a reminder that writing about war was deeply embedded in Roman culture, partly reflecting the enduring influence of Herodotus and Thucydides on classical historiography, but even more so the familiarity of military conflict in the Roman world and its close relationship with power. All this makes warfare a key theme of fundamental importance in Roman history. It also means that it is a very large subject, requiring difficult choices as to approach and coverage, especially for a volume in this series. The approach adopted here is thematic, and for that reason this Introduction aims to provide contextual orientation on a number of fronts. After explaining the book's parameters, a concise narrative overview of major wars in Roman history is provided, followed by an outline of the organisational evolution of Roman military forces and finally an introduction to the most important ancient sources and evidence for warfare in the Roman world.

1 Rules of Engagement

'Warfare in the Roman world' may seem like a self-explanatory title, so it is important to unpack the implications of the key terms as they are understood in this volume. First, 'warfare' obviously includes different forms of

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[1] For discussion of the work, see Jones 1986: 59–67.

ancient military conflict – battles, sieges, raiding and the like – but it also extends to consideration of the institutions that made war possible and the agents of conflict – armies, officers and soldiers. Second, this volume treats 'the Roman world' as more than a geographical expression: it is taken here as encompassing its social, political and economic life. A major criticism of military studies as a field within Roman history has been its 'virtual "ghettoization"'[2] – that is, its marginalisation from broader scholarly debates and developments – and one of the underlying aims of this book is to continue efforts to integrate Roman military history into mainstream study of the Roman world by placing Roman warfare in its wider social, political and economic context.[3] Above all, this means thinking about the impact of warfare on a number of fronts beyond the immediately military. Finally, the term 'Roman' demands particular comment – a term less easy to define than one might perhaps think. Its chronological dimension is the most straightforward. In the context of antiquity, it can be defined as the period from the emergence of a settlement at Rome probably sometime in the eighth century BC until Late Antiquity, usually regarded as ending with the disruption of the Islamic invasions in the early seventh century.[4] Its geographical dimension changed significantly over time as Roman power gradually expanded (primarily through warfare, of course) to encompass the Italian peninsula, then the western Mediterranean, then the whole Mediterranean and much of its hinterland, before contracting over the course of Late Antiquity (Map 1).

The expansion of Roman territorial power over time, in turn, had fundamental implications for the meaning of Roman identity, which proved to be a very flexible identifier. As increasing numbers of inhabitants of the Italian peninsula and then the wider Mediterranean were incorporated into Rome's territorial empire, the term 'Roman' came to refer not just to the inhabitants of the city of Rome but, formally, to those living elsewhere who gained the privilege of Roman citizenship, and informally, increasingly to all inhabitants of the empire – a situation eventually confirmed by the extension of Roman citizenship to virtually all free inhabitants in the early third century. Matters were further complicated during Late Antiquity as individuals of barbarian origin found employment in the Roman military, in some cases gaining prominent positions of

[2] James 2002: 2.
[3] Ideally, this would include extended consideration of major neighbouring states and peoples, but constraints of space have limited the scope for this in this volume.
[4] All dates are AD unless otherwise indicated or unclear from context.

command. It is therefore important to bear in mind that the term
'Roman', when used with reference to people, meant different things at
different times and in different places – and also that a person self-
identifying as 'Roman' might at the same time also self-identify as a
Samnite, Gaul, Athenian or Frank.[5] Nor, equally importantly, was the
ability to speak Latin always a requirement for being a 'Roman'. While it
would have been expected during the earlier centuries of Roman history,
and being able to communicate in Latin strengthened such a claim and
brought many practical advantages, the great majority of inhabitants of the
Roman empire at its fullest extent had a different first language (e.g.,
Greek, Celtic, Punic, to name only the most widely spoken) and may
only have ever acquired a smattering of Latin – though significantly, the
Roman armed forces were an important context in which knowledge of
Latin was promoted.[6]

Having defined the chronological range of Roman history as starting
with the emergence of a settlement at Rome probably in the eighth
century, it is important to add that, as implied by the word 'probably',
reliable historical sources for the early centuries of Roman history are very
limited – and so this book takes the mid-fourth century BC as its
chronological starting parameter, both because sources are better and
because this was when Roman territorial expansion began in earnest. This
means that its coverage involves three broad periods of Roman history –
the Republic (or more strictly the middle and late Republic), the Princi-
pate, and Late Antiquity. As is so often the case, this periodisation is
defined primarily with reference to politics. The political character of the
Republic has been the subject of intense debate in recent scholarship,
focusing on where the balance lay between the influence of democratic
elements and the senatorial elite, but whatever one's views on that ques-
tion, the Republic's institutions were intended to guard against one-man
rule, and it therefore stands in clear contrast to the autocratic regime which
the first emperor Augustus established in the final decades of the first
century BC. However, mindful of the anti-monarchical traditions of the
Republic and the fate of his adoptive father Julius Caesar, Augustus
referred to himself as *princeps* – leading citizen – and so one common

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5 Consider, e.g., the late Roman epitaph from Aquincum on the Danube which begins with the claim
  Francus ego civis Romanus miles in armis ('I [am] a Frankish citizen [and] a Roman soldier in arms')
  (*ILS* 2814).
6 For helpful discussions of Roman identity, see (among others) Brennan 1998b: 191–3, Woolf 2012:
  ch. 14, Mattingly 2014, James 2014, Dench 2018; for Late Antiquity, Greatrex 2000, Mathisen
  2006, Conant 2012: 1–9.

designation for the regime which he established and which enjoyed stability until the early third century is the Principate.[7] Late Antiquity refers to the period from the mid-third century, when the Roman state was in serious danger of fragmenting, to the early seventh century, when the Islamic invasions reshaped the Roman state in significant ways – with the loss of the western half of the empire during the fifth century a further fundamental development during that period. The recovery of the empire from the third-century crisis owed much to the emergence of a new type of emperor. In contrast to Augustus and his successors during the Principate, who were almost all drawn from the senatorial elite, these were men from military backgrounds (and therefore lower in social status) who undertook major reorganisation of significant aspects of the Roman state, most obviously an expanded military establishment and bureaucracy.

Although these broad divisions of Roman history are traditionally demarcated with reference to major political changes, it is relevant to the focus of this book that they also map onto significant changes in military organisation. More detail about the evolution of Roman military forces will be provided below, but at the risk of oversimplifying developments, the headline features are as follows. The core of the Republic's armed forces was a citizen militia in which individuals were liable to sixteen years of service overall, but could normally expect discharge after six years continuous service, whereas Augustus established a standing army, with individuals typically serving continuously for a minimum of twenty years (from AD 5). This fundamental change to the basis of military service continued into Late Antiquity, but – unsurprisingly, given their military backgrounds – emperors in the early fourth century introduced major organisational changes to the armed forces which meant that important features of the military in Late Antiquity looked very different from the military of the Principate.

The thematic approach adopted here starts with two chapters whose focus is the relationship between warfare and ideas. Chapter 1 begins by considering Roman attitudes to war and peace, before turning to the related subject of the Roman ideology of victory and responses to its counterpoint of defeat, while Chapter 2 examines the Roman ideology of military service and its changing relationship to citizenship and property ownership, and then discusses the Roman ideal of courage. In Chapter 3,

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[7] This term is used here in preference to 'Early Empire' because of the ambiguity of the word 'empire', which can refer to both a territorial entity, such as the Republic acquired, and a political system in which supreme power resides with an emperor.

the focus shifts to the more practical issues of manpower and money – recruitment and the demographic impact of mobilisation, and how the Roman state financed war-making and the material benefits which it brought the state. In Chapter 4 issues relating to the theme of authority and allegiances are discussed, with consideration of generalship in theory and practice, the incidence and causes of military mutiny and the dilemmas of civil war. Chapter 5 focuses on the military as an institution in the context of Roman society and questions of identity, examining soldiers as a community, their relations with wider society, and the religious dimension of military life. Chapter 6's theme of communication and culture is pursued in a number of directions – the role of warfare in cultural interchange at the level of weaponry and tactics, the cultural impact of the military's presence in the Roman world, and the question of literacy in the armed forces and its implications. The final chapter focuses on the experience of warfare from a number of different perspectives – that of soldiers in the context of set-piece battles, with particular reference to debate about the 'face of battle', and that of non-combatants in a range of contexts, above all siege warfare, but also raiding and protracted wars. In considering these different subjects, the discussion aims to give balanced consideration to developments in the Republic, Principate and Late Antiquity, with a view to highlighting significant continuities and changes in the impact of warfare across the trajectory of Roman history.

2   Warfare in Roman History: A Strategic Overview

Warfare was a significant feature throughout the history of the Roman world and the purpose of this section is to provide an overview of its incidence across the relevant centuries, especially for orientation of readers who may be less familiar with the detail of Roman history.[8]

The Republic

The Republic was broadly a period of territorial expansion through war, though the rate of expansion was by no means uniform. In the early Republic, Rome controlled only its immediate hinterland in central Italy, as it contested dominance of the region with other Latin communities. By

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[8] For narrative overviews with a military focus (to the late fifth century), see Mackay 2007 and Roth 2009, and for Late Antiquity to the seventh century, Elton 2018.

the mid-fourth century BC Rome had established its pre-eminence in western central Italy, and next confronted Samnites and associated Italic groups who controlled the regions further south in the peninsula. Through a series of protracted wars against these very determined opponents, Rome established itself as the dominant state across central Italy, on the basis of which it began to exert its influence further south and northwards, gradually extending its network of subordinate allies. The Greek colony of Tarentum in the south resisted the spread of Roman influence by forming an alliance with Pyrrhus, the ruler of Epirus in the western Balkans, who brought his forces across to Italy in 280 BC. He achieved some successes against the Romans, but was eventually forced to withdraw from the peninsula, so that by the 260s Rome controlled the whole of the Italian peninsula south of the Po valley, thereby making it a major power in the western Mediterranean.[9]

It is perhaps unsurprising that this soon led to confrontation with the other major power in the western Mediterranean, Carthage. Originally a Phoenician settlement on the northern coast of Africa, Carthage had by the early third century developed its influence in north Africa, Spain and Sicily. In 264 Rome intervened in Sicily and initiated the first of three wars with Carthage, which involved a heavy investment of human and material resources and which marked another major step in the expansion of Roman power (the so-called Punic Wars, after the Latin name *Poeni* for the Phoenician Carthaginians). The first war with Carthage was fought predominantly at sea, a medium where one would have expected Carthage, as a seaborne power, to have the upper hand. However, Rome proved adept at developing its naval capabilities, and although the war dragged on for more than two decades, with both sides suffering setbacks, Rome eventually inflicted a decisive naval defeat on Carthage off Sicily in 241, which forced Carthage to agree to stiff peace terms. Carthaginian resentment fuelled a desire to reassert its influence, which found an outlet in Spain until the able general Hannibal led a land invasion of Italy in 218. A string of early victories, culminating in the crushing Roman defeat at Cannae in 216, looked like it might achieve Hannibal's aim of undermining the loyalties of Rome's Italian allies and forcing Rome to negotiate, but although some allies defected, the majority did not, and Rome's superior manpower resources eventually won the day, with an even more

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[9] Cornell 1995: chs. 12, 14.

stringent peace imposed on Carthage in 201. The third and final war in the early 140s was a one-sided coda.[10]

By 200 BC, then, the Roman state had sustained a century and a half of almost continuous war, mostly against very resolute enemies in the form of the Samnites and the Carthaginians, and the final defeat of Hannibal left Rome as the dominant power in the western Mediterranean. During the second century BC, the pattern of warfare fluctuated. On the one hand, there were some regions that required regular lower-intensity campaigning to establish or re-assert Roman control, notably in Spain and in northern Italy where Celtic and Ligurian tribes had long been a serious threat.[11] On the other hand, there were occasional wars, each lasting just a few years, above all against the Hellenistic kingdoms of Macedon and the Seleucids in the eastern Mediterranean – successor states which emerged from the empire of Alexander the Great at the end of the fourth century BC. Although the rulers of these states controlled significant resources and had well-organised military forces, they nonetheless proved unable to match the Romans when it came to war. Rome embarked on a campaign against Macedon as early as 200 BC because Macedon's ruler, Philip V, had previously allied himself with Hannibal, and the Romans now sought revenge. Roman forces defeated Philip in the Balkans in the early 190s, above all at the battle of Cynoscephalae (197), before taking on the Seleucid ruler Antiochus III in Greece and Anatolia, where Roman military power was again demonstrated in a number of decisive battles, notably at Magnesia (190). Further conflict with Macedon in the late 170s resulted in a decisive Roman victory at Pydna in 168 and the end of the Macedonian kingdom. Although Rome did not immediately take territorial control of Macedon and Greece, and although Roman control of Seleucid Syria and Ptolemaic Egypt was not imposed until the mid to late first century BC, there was no doubting that by the mid-second century it had become the dominant power in the eastern Mediterranean, whose wishes local rulers and states sought to follow.[12] The late second century saw Rome waging war in north Africa and then confronting fresh challenges from Celtic tribes in southern Gaul, as well as Germanic tribes, with Roman forces experiencing some major defeats before eventually prevailing.[13]

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[10] Hoyos 2011, Rosenstein 2012a: 53–70, 119–75, 233–7. For Cannae, see Daly 2002.
[11] Spain: Richardson 1986; Italy: Rosenstein 2012a: 176–9.   [12] Rosenstein 2012a: chs. 5–6.
[13] Steel 2013: 26–31.

Although there were further periodic bouts of warfare during the first century BC which extended Roman territory and influence, above all through the eastern campaigns of Pompey in the 60s and the Gallic campaigns of Julius Caesar in the 50s, the first century BC was one in which civil war also loomed large for the first time in Roman history, ensuring that apart from the 90s there was significant conflict in every decade to the end of the Republic. The first episode of civil war involved the revolt of Rome's Italian allies in 91 BC, aggrieved that they contributed so much to Roman military success yet received, in their view, too little reward – above all denial of the privileges of Roman citizenship. Rome eventually resolved this conflict through a combination of military action and concessions, but not before the so-called Social War (the war against Rome's allies or *socii*)[14] spilled over into conflict between two of Rome's leading generals, Marius and Sulla, and their supporters, during the 80s BC. Sulla was victorious, although there was further civil war in Spain when the Roman general Sertorius revolted against the Sullan regime. A further, even more wide-ranging round of civil war between politically ambitious generals was initiated in 49 BC when Julius Caesar invaded Italy with the legions from his Gallic campaigns, taking on the forces loyal to the senate and commanded by Pompey. The ensuing conflict, from which Caesar emerged victorious in 45 BC, ranged across the Mediterranean world, with campaigns in Spain, north Africa, and the Balkans.[15] Caesar's murder in 44 BC triggered a new round of civil war, initially between Caesar's supporters and his assassins (resolved in favour of the former at the battle of Philippi in 42 BC – although with further aftershocks arising from Sextus Pompey's control of Sicily until 36 BC) and then between Caesar's supporters themselves, above all his lieutenant Mark Antony and his young heir Octavian. The latter was eventually triumphant at the battle of Actium in 31 BC, four years later adopting the name Augustus and establishing himself as the unchallenged ruler of the Roman world.[16]

The Principate

Given the almost constant warfare in which Augustus had been engaged during the first decade and a half of his adult life (44–30 BC), it would have been understandable if he had opted for a more relaxed existence once he had secured supreme power in the Roman world. However, Augustus and his generals are credited with adding more territory to the Roman state

[14] Dart 2014.   [15] Steel 2013: chs. 4, 6.   [16] Osgood 2006, Richardson 2012: chs. 2–3.

than anyone before or after, including Egypt, northwest Spain, the Alps and much of the Balkans – and it seems that he also had ambitions to expand beyond the Rhine into Germany. This military activity has been explained most persuasively with reference to the demands of internal politics. Following the defeat of Antony, it was essential to Augustus' political position for him to retain control of the armed forces, and the simplest initial justification for doing so was the pacification of provinces which were insecure either because of the risk of internal rebellion or from external threat. In 27 BC Augustus committed to this task for a ten-year period of authority, which was then repeatedly extended at ten-year intervals until his death in AD 14 – a process which has been deftly characterised as 'making the emergency permanent'.[17] This commitment to pacification meant regular warfare, especially in the first half of Augustus' reign, but any plans for establishing permanent control in Germany were halted in AD 9 when three legions operating beyond the Rhine were ambushed and massacred in the Teutoburg Forest – the infamous Varian disaster, so-called after their ill-fated commander Varus[18] – and this no doubt encouraged Augustus' immediate successors to adopt a more cautious military approach.

What is striking about the Principate, however, is that the period as a whole post-Augustus saw very little further imperial expansion. The two major exceptions were the decision of the emperor Claudius to initiate a campaign to conquer Britain in AD 43 and the emperor Trajan's conquest of Dacia, north of the lower Danube, in the early years of the second century. Given the lack of a strategic or economic rationale for adding Britain, Claudius' decision is best seen as a case of a decidedly unmilitary emperor seeking to strengthen his legitimacy with an easy military success. As an experienced general, Trajan had no such need, and a punitive war rather than conquest of Dacia may have been his original intention.[19]

Limited territorial expansion, however, does not mean that were no other significant instances of warfare during the Principate. After the conquest of Dacia, Trajan embarked on a less successful attempt to conquer Parthia, to the east. The Parthians, an originally nomadic people who had taken over the eastern territories of the Seleucid kingdom during the second century BC, emerged as a major neighbour of the Roman state when the latter extended its reach into the Levant in the first century BC, and had demonstrated their military capabilities in defeating the Roman general Crassus at Carrhae in northern Mesopotamia in 53 BC. Julius

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[17] Rich 2012a.   [18] Wells 2003.   [19] Levick 1990: ch. 13, Bennett 2000: 89.

Caesar was planning a major expedition against them at the time of his
death, but (as in other matters) Augustus resisted the temptation to follow
in his adoptive father's footsteps; instead he contented himself with
achieving the diplomatic success of persuading the Parthians to return
the legionary standards captured at Carrhae, presenting this event in
20 BC as virtually equivalent to a great military victory.[20] A century or
more later, however, Trajan invaded Parthia in 115 and reached the
Persian Gulf before insurgencies forced him to withdraw. Further cam-
paigns against Parthia were undertaken under the emperors Marcus
Aurelius in the 160s and Septimius Severus in the 190s, with some
territorial gains in northern Mesopotamia by the latter.[21] However, these
episodes of increasing Roman military superiority served to destabilise the
Parthian Arsacid regime, which was overthrown in the 220s by the
Sasanian family who established a new dynasty which was to prove a
formidable opponent of the Roman state during Late Antiquity. Germanic
and Sarmatian groups also became growing threats on the Danube frontier
in the later second century, with Marcus Aurelius having to spend signif-
icant time campaigning against them in the 170s.[22]

As in the first century BC, however, external wars were not the only
manifestation of warfare in the Roman world. There were also instances of
civil war, the first occurring in 68–69, the second in 192–3. The former –
the so-called 'Year of the Four Emperors' – was precipitated by the
overthrow of the childless Nero, the last member of the Julio-Claudian
dynasty established by Augustus, by one provincial governor with armed
forces at his disposal, which then prompted others in similar positions to
make bids for power. The eventual winner was Vespasian, who restored
internal stability. Likewise, the overthrow of the childless Commodus in
192 prompted competition for power by leading senators with provincial
armies under their command, from which Septimus Severus emerged as
victor.[23] Internal conflict during the Principate also took the form of
provincial rebellions. The most serious of these were those associated with
the Jews, with three major instances: the war in Judaea in 66–73, the
Jewish revolt in Egypt, Libya and Mesopotamia in 115, and the Bar
Kokhba revolt in Judaea under Hadrian in the early 130s. All of these
required the commitment of substantial military forces to achieve their
suppression. There were also significant instances of rebellion in the

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[20] Cornwell 2017: 125–38.   [21] Bennett 2000: ch. 13, Birley 1999: ch. 13, 2000a: chs. 6–7.
[22] Birley 2000a: ch. 8.   [23] Birley 1999: chs. 10–11, Levick 2017: ch. 4.