



The Ancient World: Extraordinary People in Extraordinary Societies

Warfare in Ancient Rome

The Romans had a very well-developed military force consisting of both an army and a navy. At its peak, the Roman Empire spanned from present-day Spain to Asia Minor, and from modern Scotland to northern Africa. The military forces of Rome—namely the prestigious Roman Legion and the Roman Navy—were necessary for the expansion and preservation of the Roman Empire and its many far-flung provinces and territories. Their military conquests were also largely responsible for the Roman Empire's great wealth. The Roman Army was considered the most advanced army of its time.

— — BACKGROUND & HISTORY — —

The Roman Legion

The basic component of the ancient Roman Army was referred to as the Roman Legion, which consisted of a heavily-armored infantry division of foot soldiers, or legionnaires. The legion was usually made up of between 5,000 and 6,000 men, including doctors and administrators, and is believed to be one of the first full-time, paid military jobs in the world. Legionary soldiers would travel in clearly defined cohorts, and the legion had a clearly-defined hierarchical structure to maintain leadership and order.

The Roman Legion would be called upon to defend Rome from invasions, and to expand Roman territory. The legionary soldiers wore heavy armor made of iron and bronze that were fashioned into plates, scales or chain mail. They also carried personal weapons such as shields, swords, daggers and javelins. Additionally, the legions traveled with larger artillery such as the carroballista, which operates like a giant crossbow firing iron-tipped bolts at the enemy; and the onager, which was a giant catapult capable of firing large boulders to smash through enemy walls and fortifications.

Participation in the Roman Legion was a source of pride and honor, and service was rewarded in a variety of ways. The Legion had its own series of decorations, like that of a modern military, to recognize specific achievements. These achievements included being the first soldier to

make it over the walls of an enemy city, or saving the life of a fellow soldier during a battle. Service was also rewarded through grants of land or other privileges upon its conclusion, which made membership in the legion an attractive prospect for a young Roman seeking upward mobility. Many soldiers settled in the lands that they helped to conquer.

The Roman Navy

The Roman Empire relied heavily on the sea for many resources, particularly for the shipping of goods. As such, the Roman Navy played an important role in keeping the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea safe for traders. However, the Navy also played a significant role in the expansion of the Roman Empire, particularly in areas such as northern Africa, where the Romans refounded Carthage, and the British Isles.

Prior to the third century BCE, Rome did not have much need for serious naval power. The primary function of the navy was to support trade and provide basic coastal defense. However, near the middle of the century, Roman expansion to the southern tip of Italy caused them to come in direct contact with the Carthaginians, the empire that controlled northern Africa, Spain, and the major islands in the Mediterranean, including much of Sicily. Confrontation ensued, leading to the Punic Wars, a series of three wars fought between 264 and 146 BCE, and the need for Rome to develop more sophisticated naval power. In fact, it is believed that early Roman naval ships were actually modeled after a Carthaginian ship that had crashed onto Roman shores.

Over time, the Roman Navy made significant improvements in its equipment and strategies. Rather than resorting to unsophisticated techniques such as ramming or boarding enemy ships to engage in hand-to-hand combat, the Romans were eventually able to develop their sea-based military skills to a level comparable with the Carthaginians or the Greeks. As a result, the Punic Wars ended in victory for Rome with the sacking of Carthage in 146 BCE, as the Romans were able to bring their navy to the coast of Africa and attack the city of Carthage itself. However, once Rome had completely destroyed the Carthaginians, there were no longer any other major powers patrolling the Mediterranean Sea, and piracy became a serious problem. Rome eventually needed to take drastic measures to regain control over trade in the Mediterranean Sea.

The Roman Navy also played a significant part in bringing the British Isles into subjugation. The first attempted conquest was led by Julius

Caesar around 55 BCE, but was unsuccessful in establishing a permanent Roman presence in southern England. The relationship between the two civilizations remained one of trade until the successful invasion under the Emperor Claudius in 43 CE. The Roman's much-improved naval presence on the sea made it possible to land legions of foot soldiers on the British Isles, and eventually extend the Roman Empire throughout England and into present-day Wales and Scotland.

—CULTURAL & HISTORICAL IMPACT—

Warfare & the Expansion of Rome

During the course of its several hundred years of existence, the Roman Empire expanded significantly. Some of this expansion was peaceful; rulers of smaller civilizations would sometimes simply agree to be absorbed into the empire, perhaps to avoid imminent destruction if war broke out. However, much of the expansion was the result of a well-organized military force and strategically-planned attacks designed to seize areas of land that were rich in the resources needed to keep the Roman Empire functioning.

The first Roman settlement was taken over by the Etruscans in 616 BCE, but by 509 BCE, the Romans expelled the Etruscan king and regained their own sovereignty. At the time, Rome was made up of several civilizations residing in modern-day Italy. However, the other civilizations resented the powerful control Rome exerted over the alliance, and tried to obtain their freedom from domination. Rome fought back, took over the other territories, and by 280 BCE, the Romans controlled all of central Italy. They then moved on to the Greek cities established in southern Italy. By the middle of the third century BCE, they overtook those as well, and expanded the Roman civilization all the way to the southern tip of Italy.

There is some scholarly debate as to the reasons behind the expansion of Roman control. Some believe the primary motivation was to usurp land that contained valuable natural resources, and others believe it was simply the desire for more power. However, with so many civilizations vying for power and control over the same region at the same time, it has also been suggested that, in many instances, the display of military force was simply a matter of wanting the advantage of being the first to strike, rather than waiting for a competing civilization to do the same.

Because of all the fighting and competition, it was extremely difficult for civilizations to maintain control over conquered cities. However, Rome

seemed to have more luck than most in this respect. It is believed this positive outcome was a result of Rome's desire to absorb the conquered city into its folds, rather than the desire to destroy it completely. Roman armies generally tried to leave the conquered cities intact, and the Roman government would grant the cities certain rights in exchange for taking over control of the local government. This policy had a profound impact in two significant ways: it enabled the Romans to succeed in holding onto conquered territory in situations where other civilizations had failed, and it paved the way for the influence of other cultures on Roman art, architecture and trade.

The Role of the Punic Wars

By the third century BCE, Rome had expanded its territory all the way down to the southern tip of Italy, and began to look out across the water to Sicily. However, parts of Sicily were already controlled by the Carthaginians, a group of people who had previously been part of the Phoenician state in northern Africa. The capital of the Carthaginian Empire was Carthage, which was located on the Mediterranean near what is now the city of Tunis, in the country of Tunisia. The Carthaginians controlled almost all of northern Africa, as well as some of the southern areas of Spain, and the islands of Corsica and Sardinia. They also controlled most of the trade in the Mediterranean.

These two cultures had been able to exist peacefully until this point, but eventually the Sicilian city of Messana fought back against Carthaginian control. The Romans intervened, thus leading to the First Punic War (from 264-241 BCE). This war ended in something of a stalemate, but Rome gained the island of Sicily as a result. Rome then decided to seize the island of Corsica as well, which drove the Carthaginians to seek a stronger holding in Spain. Various policy decisions and maneuvers eventually led to the Second Punic War (from 218-202 BCE), where the Carthaginian leader Hannibal stormed through and destroyed the Italian countryside. Rather than attacking his forces head-on, the Romans attacked Spain, since that is where Hannibal's primary support was coming from. Once they did that, the Romans headed directly to Carthage itself, and eventually an agreement for peace needed to be reached to protect the home city of Carthage. The resulting peace negotiation ended with the Roman Empire gaining a great deal of territory in northern Africa and Spain, and several major islands in the Mediterranean.

The Third Punic War came many years later, from 149-146 BCE, after the city of Carthage managed to regain some influence and power from its trade interests. Rome, feeling threatened by the increasing influence of the Carthaginians, insisted that the city of Carthage be abandoned and all its residents move further inland. The Carthaginians refused, on the grounds that their livelihoods depended heavily on trade, and thus their proximity to the sea. Unsatisfied with this response, Rome attacked Carthage, slaughtered or sold into slavery all of the city's inhabitants, and literally covered the ground of the surrounding countryside with salt so that the land would be uninhabitable.

Some of the most significant territory gains, as well as changes to the cultural and strategic framework of Rome, came by way of the three Punic Wars. In particular, the first Punic War represented a significant turning point for the Roman Navy. Fighting the Carthaginians required far more naval power than the Romans possessed up to that point, so many advances were made in order to fight a successful battle on the sea. Additionally, once the Carthaginians were defeated, the Romans became the primary controllers of the Mediterranean Sea, and needed to keep the seas safe for trade, and their shores safe from invasion.

Class & Wealth in Military Service

In the early days, the role of the Roman Legion was filled by a slightly different military organization known as the Republican Roman Legion. Unlike the later legion, this earlier organization maintained a strict policy regarding who was permitted to serve—only landowners were allowed to participate, and the total amount of one's wealth determined one's status ranking within the order. Flexibility in this policy was only permitted in situations in which invasions posed a serious threat to the stability of Rome. This strict policy ceased to operate around the late second century BCE, but in practice, many of the higher ranking military officers continued to be members of the ruling class, as they were appointed by the emperor or the Roman Senate. Regardless, the liberalization of who could serve in the military opened up many opportunities to Romans who were not members of the ruling class by providing them with the chance to own land and earn the respect of their fellow Romans.

— — — INTERESTING FACTS — — —

The Romans modeled many of their naval ships after Carthaginian ships that had crashed into Roman territory. The Romans later defeated the Carthaginian civilization for control over the Mediterranean Sea.

Led by Pompey, the Roman Navy was responsible for sweeping the Mediterranean Sea almost completely free of pirates in 67 BCE.

During Emperor Hadrian's reign in the second century CE, an estimated 180,000 Roman soldiers were in service.

The Romans built and employed various siege weapons to attack fortifications, including battering rams, siege towers, and onagers, a type of catapult.

The Roman army also consisted of a cavalry, which would pursue retreating enemies on the battlefield.

—Tracey M. DiLascio, Esq.

— — — — **BIBLIOGRAPHY** — — — —

- 1** Davison, Michael. *Ancient Rome*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1980. This book provides images and descriptions of the historical significance of a variety of art and artifacts from Ancient Rome, including busts of important Roman figures, and important architectural features such as the remains of aqueducts and the Roman Forum.
- 2** Cullen, John T. *A Walk in Ancient Rome*. New York: iBooks, 2005. This book is written in the style of a travel guide, leading the reader on a walking tour of the city of Rome in the year 150 A.D. and providing many colorful details of what life was like in Ancient Rome.
- 3** Grant, Michael. *The World of Rome*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1960. This book provides a scholarly perspective on a number of topics related to Ancient Rome, including citizenship, religion, philosophy, and the arts. It also contains a number of useful maps, as well as images of Roman art, architecture, and coins.
- 4** Liversidge, Joan. *Everyday Life in the Roman Empire*. B.T. Batsford, Ltd., 1976. This book provides useful details about life during the Roman Empire, and is a particularly good resource for what life was like outside of the city of Rome.
- 5** United Nations of Roma Victrix. URL [<http://www.unrv.com> (<http://www.unrv.com>)]. Accessed September 2009. This site provides a comprehensive history of Rome and details of its many different aspects, as well as news updates for modern scholarship on topics dealing with Ancient Rome.

— — — — WORKS CITED — — — —

- 6 Berry, Dominic. Ancient Rome Timeline. http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/rome_timeline.shtml (http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/rome_timeline.shtml). Accessed September 2009.
- 7 Cullen, John T. A Walk in Ancient Rome. New York: ibooks, 2005.
- 8 Davison, Michael. Abbeville Library of Art: Ancient Rome. New York: Abbeville Press, 1980.
- 9 Dupont, Florence. Daily Life in Ancient Rome (English translation). Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1993.
- 10 Grant, Michael. The World of Rome. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1960.
- 11 Liversidge, Joan. Everyday Life in the Roman Empire. B.T. Batsford, Ltd., 1976.
- 12 United Nations of Roma Victrix. <http://www.unrv.com> (<http://www.unrv.com>). Accessed September 2009.
- 13 Washington State University. World Civilizations: An Internet Classroom and Anthology. <http://www.wsu.edu/~dee/WORLD.HTM> (<http://www.wsu.edu/~dee/WORLD.HTM>). Accessed September 2009.

Citation Types

Type	Format
MLA Style	. "Warfare in Ancient Rome." <i>The Ancient World: Extraordinary People in Extraordinary Societies</i> , edited by Shally-Jensen Michael, Salem, 2016. <i>Salem Online</i> .
APA Style	. (2016). Warfare in Ancient Rome. In S. Michael (Ed.), <i>The Ancient World: Extraordinary People in Extraordinary Societies</i> . Hackensack: Salem. Retrieved from https://online.salempress.com
CHICAGO Style	. "Warfare in Ancient Rome." <i>The Ancient World: Extraordinary People in Extraordinary Societies</i> . Hackensack: Salem, 2016. Accessed January 31, 2018. https://online.salempress.com .