

# THE BIG BATTALIONS & THE RISE OF ROME

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## **The Rise of Rome**

The decline and fall of the Roman Empire has been a matter of central concern to historians since the days of Edward Gibbon; but, in 'S.P.Q.R.', Mary Beard has chosen to write about the rise of Rome rather than her eclipse; and she boldly asserts that the single most significant factor in this – or at least in Rome's conquest of Italy in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE – was the number of troops she could deploy, rather than 'tactics, equipment, skill or motivation'. 'By the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE', she tells us, 'the Romans had not far short of half a million troops available', compared to Alexander the Great's 50,000 and the Persians' 100,000 in 481 BCE.'

Beard takes the same view in relation to later periods and other theatres of war. Thus, when Rome defeated Pyrrhus of Epirus (319-272BCE), 'between 10 and 25% of the Roman male population would have served in the legions each year, a greater proportion than in any other pre-industrial state and, on the higher estimate, comparable to the call-up rate in World War I.' Moreover, when the Romans were defeated by Hannibal at Cannae (216BCE), any other state would have gone under, but Rome could still draw on 'enormous reserves of citizen and allied manpower'; and this eventually enabled her to triumph over the Carthaginian enemy. Presumably, it was also for this reason that she able to defeat Alexander's successors in 197 and 189BCE, thereby taking control of the Eastern Mediterranean as well as the West.

This is a radical view, because the conventional wisdom has been that the Roman army was unbeatable, not because it outnumbered its enemies, but because it was composed of 'the right stuff' - men who were better trained, disciplined motivated than their opponents. This superiority has in turn been explained by reference to a military revolution which took place in Rome after the sack of the city by the Gauls in 390BCE. It was then that the Romans switched from phalanx to legion and from spears to short swords, and the unbeatable fighting machine was invented, or perhaps re-invented.

Beard contradicts the views of ancient writers on Roman history; and it is worth examining some of these.

## Polybius c. 200 – c. 118BCE)

Polybius was a Greek, but one with first-hand experience of Roman affairs. (Without such experience, he thought, it was impossible to write good history.) Like Beard, he was interested in the rise of Rome but, rather than beginning with the Roman conquest of Italy, he wondered how she had achieved mastery of the world (as he knew it) in the 53 years between the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Punic War in 219BCE and the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Macedonian War in 168BCE.

Rome and Carthage were two powers which were well matched; but the expedition which the Carthaginian general Hannibal took to Italy during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Punic War was inevitably outnumbered; and Polybius gives us some precise statistics in his *Histories*. He tells us that the Romans and their Italian allies had 700,000 infantry and about 70,000 cavalry at their disposal, whereas Hannibal had fewer than 20,000 men. However, the point of including these figures is to emphasize that Hannibal was repeatedly able to defeat the Romans in battle, and indeed come 'very close to overall success,' despite being outnumbered. This was because of his superior abilities as a general, most notably demonstrated at Cannae, where he employed a tactic copied by the American general 'Storming Norman' Schwarzkopf during the First Gulf War of 1990-1.

What is Polybius's explanation for Rome's rise to supreme power? He refers only briefly to her early wars with the Latins, Etruscans, Celts and Samnites, though he does say that the Romans prevailed even then because of their 'courage and military success', adding that their 'trials of strength' with the Samnites and Celts in particular had made them 'true athletes of warfare'. When it comes to his crucial 53 years he says this

Fortune had no bearing on the assurance with which [the Romans] set out to make themselves rulers and masters of the whole world; they had perfectly reasonable grounds for this, because of the training they had received in the course of [a] critical and colossal war, and it was this training which enabled them to attain their objective.

The 'critical and colossal war' referred was the 1<sup>st</sup> Punic War (264-241 BCE), which ended with the Roman conquest of Sicily; and Polybius particularly admired the Romans' decision to build a fleet from scratch, though they had not previously been known for their naval skills. He praises Roman 'audacity' in planning and executing what had to be done; and elsewhere he says: 'the Romans are as ready as anyone to adopt new practices and learn from others how to do things better.' In other words, they were ingenious, adaptable and versatile – a conclusion supported by the fact that, during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Punic War they were able to devise ways of dealing with Hannibal's elephants, and deploy a cavalry arm to match the Carthaginian.

Polybius also gives us a more specific explanation for Rome's remarkable recovery from her catastrophic defeat at Cannae, this being 'the peculiar virtues of her constitution', which meant that, even during her darkest hour, the Senate

continued to deliberate, and did not let fear get the better of it. He gives us a detailed account of this constitution in Book Six of his *Histories*. In his view, it was a balanced one, combining the best of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy; and that in turn meant that the citizens as a whole felt included in the body politic, while the Consuls (who exercised executive power) were free to take the military action necessary to ensure the survival of the Republic.

Polybius was also a great admirer of the Roman military system, which depended on domestic troops and Roman citizens, whereas the Carthaginians relied too heavily on foreign mercenaries. In addition, the Romans left nothing to chance. They conscripted large numbers of men for long-term service, thereby ensuring that there was a large pool of veterans; but they also trained and disciplined their men thoroughly.

Last but not least was valour, or as we might say, morale: 'the determination and will to perform noble deeds'. This was deeply ingrained in each successive generation, by custom, education, religion and public example. In battle, the Romans 'were conditioned never to flee or break rank in any circumstances.' When 8,000 legionaries were nonetheless taken prisoner after Cannae, the Senate refused to ransom them: the message, to friend and foe alike, was that Roman soldiers ought to fight to the death, and never surrender. Polybius adds that 'the Romans feel obliged to finish anything they start and regard nothing as impossible once they have made up their minds.' This is the 'can-do' attitude for which the Americans have subsequently become famous.

### **Julius Caesar (100 - 44BCE)**

As every schoolboy used to know, Caesar was a writer as well as a general, and in *The Gallic War*, he wrote about his conquest of Gaul between 58 and 52BCE. Unlike the Punic Wars, this was a war with 'barbarians' – people who did not live in towns, did not know extensive trade and commerce and had no written literature or history. Caesar therefore fought whole tribes, and indeed confederations of tribes, who undoubtedly outnumbered the Roman legions sent against them. Caesar deployed several legions, each of around 5,000 men; but, in his account of the war with the Helvetii and their allies in 58BCE, he gives the following figures for his opponents, based on a kind of primitive census taken by the barbarians themselves:

The sum total of all these categories came to 263,000 of the Helvetii: of the Tulingi there were 36,000, of the Latovici 14,000, of the Raurici 23,000, and of the Boii 32,000. About 92,000 of these were capable of bearing arms. The total number was about 368,000.

Yet, despite being vastly outnumbered, Caesar always prevailed in battle. Why? Like many Romans, he believed in Fate; but he also refers to Roman 'experience and training', while referring contemptuously to his opponents as 'barbarians of no particular skill'.

The principal factors which strike the modern reader are the professionalism and excellence of the Roman army; but there were other reasons too. Firstly, Caesar was not starting from scratch, when he entered Gaul. The Romans already occupied 'the Province' – a large swathe of territory between Alps and Pyrenees, known as Transalpine Gaul. This gave them a springboard which was both physical and psychological, since their reputation preceded them and they were able to practise the age-old imperialist strategy of 'divide and rule'. Secondly (one cannot avoid the cliché) Caesar was a military genius, and one who was prepared to lead from the front when the occasion required; and he was not alone, having several very able lieutenants, notably Publius Crassus and Labienus. Thirdly, there is the ruthlessness with which the Romans displayed, albeit that it was sometimes tempered with clemency. They were quite prepared to eliminate a barbarian tribe, by massacring all the men, and selling the women and children into slavery, just as they had utterly destroyed the great city of Carthage.

### **Livy 64 or 59BCE – 17CE)**

Livy is the best known historian of Ancient Rome and the only surviving source for the early history of the city. He writes in detail about Rome's early wars with her neighbours - the Veii, Albans, Volscians, Latins, Etruscans, Aeqians and Sabines; and later the Samnites and Campanians; but his narrative is often little more than fable; and he himself says of the numbers:

In describing events so distant in time it is difficult to make a precise or trustworthy estimate of the size of forces engaged, or the number of casualties.

Livy does not ascribe Roman victories in this early period to superior numbers. Thus the Romans captured the Etruscan city of Veii in 396BCE by digging a tunnel, which allowed them to enter the town. In the case of the Aeqians, the enemy themselves have to admit that they are skilled raiders, but cannot compete with the Romans when it comes to mounting a 'massed attack by an organised army.' More generally Livy's explanation for Rome's rise to supremacy is similar to Caesar's. It was 'written in the book of Fate' that the Roman people would become great; but was a fate they deserved, because of their superior character. By contrast, Carthaginians were treacherous, Numidians oversexed, Athenians easily suggestible, and the Gauls were initially fearsome, but easily discouraged.

### **Tacitus c. 56CE – after 117CE**

In *Agricola* Tacitus wrote about his father in law, the general Gnaeus Julius Agricola, who fought several campaigns against the barbarian tribes in Britain between 78 and 84CE. He gives precise numbers only rarely, but it is nonetheless clear that the Romans are at all times outnumbered. On one occasion a British chieftain even

refers to the Romans as a 'handful of invaders', rather as Kaiser Wilhelm II supposedly referred to the British Army in 1914 as 'a contemptible little army.'

However, the Romans always win, over time; and the reason is that the barbarians are incapable of the discipline that is the hallmark of the Roman legion. Like Caesar he explicitly refers to the respect and fear with which the barbarians come to regard the Roman army once they have seen it in action. In addition, he refers to Roman superiority in strategy and tactics (for example in Agricola's choice of sites for his forts); and Roman ingenuity and versatility (in using swimmers to attack the Britons in Anglesey).

### **Vegetius (late 4<sup>th</sup> century)**

In the Middle Ages the most widely read treatise on military affairs was the *De Re Militari* of Vegetius, a 4<sup>th</sup> century Roman writer who nevertheless majored on the Roman Army of the Republic and the Principate. Perhaps his most famous dictum is 'let he who desires peace, prepare for war;' but he also had strong opinions on the unimportance of superior numbers:

In every battle it is not numbers and untaught bravery so much as skill and training that generally produce the victory. For we see no other explanation of the conquest of the world by the Roman people than their drill-at-arms, camp discipline and military expertise.

Vegetius thought that the Gauls were more numerous, the Germans taller, the Spaniards stronger, the Africans more treacherous and richer, and the Greeks cleverer, but Rome beat them all by 'careful selection of recruits, instruction in the rules of war, toughening in daily exercises, prior acquaintance in field-practice, and strict punishment of cowardice.' He also wrote

A small force which is highly trained in the conflicts of war is more apt to victory: a raw and untrained horde is always exposed to slaughter.

### **Conclusion**

In short, ancient writers gave many reasons for the rise of Rome; but numerical superiority was not one of them. On the other hand, Mary Beard asks us to forget the quality and feel the width. Who is right?

Some may think that Beard is being deliberately provocative, in rejecting the very idea that the Romans have anything to teach us about war. At one point she says 'that she no longer thinks that we have much to learn directly from the Romans', at another that she is 'not certain that those generals who claim to follow the tactics of Julius Caesar really do so in more than their own imaginations'. However, to be fair, she is not alone in pointing to the importance of numbers. In his introduction to Polybius's *Histories* (2010) Brian McGing also took the view that

Pyrrhus lost his war with Rome because 'he could not match the manpower at Rome's disposal'. Likewise, Carthage lost the 2<sup>nd</sup> Punic War because 'she did not have the resources to soak up defeat'. In addition, Beard provides an excellent analysis of the way in which Rome increased the number of citizens and allies who owed her military service as she expanded her frontiers, thereby increasing the pool of recruits for her legions. She might have argued convincingly that the size of the Roman Army was just as important as its quality, at least during the conquest of the Italian mainland; but such is not her case. Instead, she expressly denies the importance of tactics, equipment, skill and motivation. In doing so, we feel that she stretches the bounds of credibility.

Firstly, numbers alone tell us nothing. A greatly expanded pool of recruits does not automatically lead to victory, let alone mastery of the world, because in the final analysis, the larger army still has to be able to defeat the smaller in the field. The Persians were not able to do this when they invaded Greece in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, nor were they able to do it when Alexander invaded their Empire in the 4<sup>th</sup>, though, on each occasion, they had greatly superior numbers. One can think of many other examples of stunning victories won by numerically inferior forces led by able generals, from the Spanish conquests in Central and South America in the early modern period to the Israeli victories over Arab forces in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Secondly, even if we were to accept everything Beard says about tactics, equipment, skill and motivation, that would still leave other Roman qualities unaccounted for. For example, the Romans were famously good builders, of forts, siege-works, bridges and roads. Caesar's ability to bridge the Rhine (twice!), and encircle Vercingetorix's camp at Alesia with multiple fortifications, was clearly of critical importance, and still impresses the historian today. Each was a further demonstration of the ingenuity and adaptability which the Romans had repeatedly shown in the time of Polybius, 200 years previously.

For these reasons, we prefer the traditional explanation of Roman greatness, which focussed on the quality of the army. After all, it was when that army declined in quality and was unable to repel large numbers of invading barbarians in the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, that the foundations underpinning the Western Roman Empire finally started to crack.

#### Further reading

Polybius, *The Histories* (Oxford World's Classics, 2010), [Brian McGing](#) (Contributor), [Robin Waterfield](#) (Translator)

Caesar, *The Gallic War* (Oxford World's Classics) Kindle Edition, [Carolyn Hammond](#) (Translator)

Livy, *The Early History of Rome* (Penguin Classics) Kindle Edition, [R M Ogilvie](#) (Introduction), [Stephen Oakley](#) (Preface), [Aubrey De Selincourt](#) (Translator)

Tacitus, *Agricola & Germania* (Penguin Classics)

Vegetius, *Epitome of Military Science*, translated with notes by N.P. Milner (Liverpool University Press, 1993).

Arther Ferrill, *The Fall of the Roman Empire, the Military Explanation* (Thames & Hudson, 1988).

John Burrow, *A History of Histories* (Penguin 2009).

Mary Beard, *S.P.Q.R.* (Profile Books, 2015).