Rome

The Evolution of an Army

Colin Mettler

Rome was, by 117 CE, the capital city of an empire that spanned from Britain to Egypt, from Spain to Iraq. But it was not always so powerful. Rome began in the 8th century BCE as a small city-state under the control of a king. During its inception, Rome, like most of the city-states of the time, had no real standing military, instead raising a levy army of self-supplied citizens in times of need. This is a marked difference to the permanent legions of professional, well-disciplined, and standardized soldiers of the later Republic and Imperial periods. The transition between these two very different armies was not quick or easy, but it reveals the reason that the Roman army became such a powerhouse – their adaptability. During the period of transition between these two armies Rome was forced to face numerous obstacles, each of which required innovation and change and so Rome’s military structure went through some very marked evolutions in response to new It is this ability to change and adapt that led Rome to becoming such a military powerhouse.

The Roman army is dated to the 8th century BC with the founding of Rome by Romulus, the first of a line of kings, but there is not much information on the organization of the Roman army at its inception. The earliest reliable sources that do describe the Roman army do so during the 6th century under the control of the Etruscan kings of Rome, nearly 200 years later. However, these sources, primarily Livy, do describe the Roman army of the 6th century from being recruited from archaic 3 tribes. These tribes are often described as being created and named by Romulus, and are the Tities, Ramnes, and Luceres, although some claim that the tribes weren’t created by Romulus in the founding of Rome, pointing rather to the Etruscan origin of the names as evidence of an earlier Etruscan origin. Each tribe was made up of 10 *curiae*, or wards, which were groupings of various Roman *gentes*, or families. The *curiae* would later become the basis of the Roman voting assemblies. Because of this tribal association it can be safely inferred that the Roman army of the 8th century was likely centered around war-bands that were levied from the tribes and organized by familial relationships then headed by a tribal chief, such as the king of Rome or some other general. These would have been small forces primarily used for raiding, or occasional small skirmish-like battles but it is possible that for larger scale battles or in defense of the city these tribal war-bands would be pulled together in to a larger force. In this case of tribe-based warriors the forces would have been temporary, being raised outside of the farming season and then disbanded so as to allow the soldiers to return to their primary occupations of farmers and herders. Those hired for the warband would have likely only been the more affluent members of Roman society, specifically land owners as at this point in history the soldiers would have been required to arm themselves, an impossible task for impoverished members of society.

From warrior-burials dated to the 8th and 9th centuries on the Esquiline hill we gain some idea of what these tribal warriors might have armed themselves with. Most would likely have worn leather helmets and little or no armor. However some more wealthy Romans would have been able to acquire armor, such as the examples of Calotte helmets, a circular bowl-shaped helmet, and primitive rectangular breastplates that were found in some tombs. They would have typically armed themselves with spears, the most common type being a leaf bladed spear, due to the cheapness, ease of use, and hunting functionality. Like with the armor however, some wealthy members may have been able to afford a sword. There was less standardization among swords than spears, with both long and short swords having been found.[[1]](#footnote-1) They likely would have had a shield, with poorer warriors using a wooden shield with an iron or bronze boss but some might have equipped themselves with a fully bronze shield such as the Etruscan style example found in one tomb.[[2]](#footnote-2)

However, some historians also believe that these warbands could be levied not only as a tribe-based force, but also as religious forces dedicated to a specific god. There is some evidence of this in the form of the *Salii Palatini*, a cult dedicated to Mars, and the *Salii Collini*, dedicated to Quirinus. These cults were each populated by a group of 12 priests who were life-members, and all appointed from wealthy patrician families. These priests seemed to have been very militant in nature, not only dedicated to a god of war but also dressing in archaic warrior’s garb[[3]](#footnote-3). Through the descriptions of Plutarch, Livy, and Dionysus it is found that the *Sallii*’s distinctive dress consisted of an embossed tunic, a bronze breastplate – similar in description to the square breastplates found in the Esquiline warrior’s tombs – and a *trabea* cloak. They are also described as wearing an Apex style helmet, a round or conical helmet with a spike, typically of olive wood, coming from the top. The *Salii* are further described as carrying a sword at the hip, a short staff or spear in the right hand, and, perhaps their most distinctive armament, an *Ancile* shield in the left hand. The *Ancile* shield, while no actual examples have been found, is found in relief work and descriptions of the *Salii* and is described as being a large oval shield of bronze, decorated with relief work, and with indented sides. They would have roughly resembled the figure eight shape of Mycenean prototypes, although typically an Italian predecessor is the preferred origin. More than just their garb though, their rituals and organization seem to hint at the *Salii* being the remnants of a religious warrior band. Their leader is titled *Magister*, a word of Etruscan origin denoting military command, and their rituals are often being described as consisting of jumping and dancing, with periodic bashing of their staffs against their shields in a warrior fashion. In much of the ancient world parallels were drawn between dance and battle, and in many cultures, warriors were trained to fight through dance-like rituals and it seems that the *Salii*’s dances might have been a remnant of this.

However, the tribal methods could not stay around forever. As Rome became a larger, more powerful, and more unified city-state it was inevitable that they would come in to conflict with their neighboring states, and this ended up playing out in the 7th century as a conflict between Rome and Etruria, their powerful northern neighbor. Prior to the conflict Greek hoplite tactics and armaments had reached Etruria. This is evident in the finding of Greek-style helmets, armor, and shields in Etruscan tombs around this time. In particular the findings of the round *hoplon* style shields and findings of Etruscan art that depict warriors in hoplite style armaments are strong indicators of Etruscan adoption of the Greek phalanx formation. As ancient historians such as Diodorus and Athenaeus claim, Rome and Etruria clashed during the time in which Rome still had square shields, which would have been the tribal era around the 7th century, and so Rome was pressed to adopt the Etruscan bronze shields and phalanx formation. In doing so Rome managed to successfully fight back against their enemy, having themselves adopted the hoplite equipment and tactics. This would be the first indication of Rome’s predilection to rapidly adapting their army to meet the needs of a new obstacle, primarily by adopting their enemy’s own techniques if possible.

It is during this period that Rome’s army started to become a unified and compartmentalized army. During the tribal period there was no real distinctions or classifications between ranks and warriors nor any real standardization of equipment. But during this period of hoplite armaments, the emergence of this was seen. This was the time of Servius Tullius, the second Etruscan king of Rome and the king attributed with the first true classifications within the Roman army. He conducted the first census and using that he split the army into five major classes of infantry and a single class of cavalry based on the wealth of the soldier. This was important as the army was still entirely self-supplied and made up a of a seasonal levy of farmers. Because he classified the army by wealth and not familial distinctions Tullius was capable of making an army with distinct units armed at a similar level even if not necessarily with the same exact gear, instead of a melting pot of random soldiers.

His classifications started with the richest Romans who made up the *Equites* or Equestrians and formed the cavalry of the Roman army and then descended down to the poorest. Below the Equestrians were the first class, armed with a breastplate, rounded shield, a sword, and a long spear these were the typically the class that formed the Etruscan and Greek inspired hoplites. The second class was similarly armed, albeit it is unlikely that they were capable of affording the entirety of the hoplite armaments most likely forgoing the breastplate and other armor. The third and fourth classes were even more lightly armed then the second, most probably solely using spears and javelins. The fifth class of infantry were the poorest and likely only armed with javelins, slings, and stones providing a rudimentary form of ranged unit.

The hoplite formation worked for Rome for a little while, but it would not be long before its faults were presented to the Roman people in a particularly violent way. In 390 BC, some 120 years after the formation of the Roman Republic, a Gallic group called the Senones led by their chieftain Brennus swept in through Northern Italy. The Romans, arrogantly believing that no barbarian army could beat them, failed to raise and train their levy in sufficient time to successfully combat the Senones. The army was beaten and scattered, and the Senones proceeded to sack Rome itself, only being driven off after a heavy ransom was paid. It was after the sacking of Rome, under the leadership of Marcus Furius Camillus, that Rome started to change their military’s structure. It was the beginning of the end for the Roman hoplite, although they would not be completely removed for quite a while yet.

The change between Roman hoplite to Manipular legion is traditionally accepted as having been finalized at the end of the Samnite Wars around 290 BC. These were a series of wars against the Samnite civilization of central Italy between 343 BC and 290 BC. Samnium, the territory of the Samnites, resided in the hilly terrain of central Italy. This was a particularly hilly and uneven terrain which was a problem as while Rome had been slowly adapting and changing their army since the sack of Rome by the Senones in 390 BC, they were still primarily using the phalanx style formation during the beginning of these wars. The phalanx, while powerful on flat wide grasslands, is easily disrupted when on uneven terrain due to the heavy inflexible nature of the formation. This lead to the Samnites, whose military was already adapted to the terrain of their homelands, making some early victories, something that Rome couldn’t let continue to happen. So, Rome, in their typical fashion of adapting enemy techniques, took inspiration from the Samnites and the end result was the Manipular formation of the Roman army, also called the Polybian formation because the best description comes from the Greek historian Polybus. This legion would last until the Marian reforms of the 2nd century BC and allowed the Roman Republic to gain and maintain such military dominance. While the soldiers of the Manipular legions were still required to pay for their own armaments and were still levied landowners, they were also the first forces of the Roman army to be required to stay on campaign even during the farming season – a stark contrast to the seasonal armies of the earlier Roman people. Because of this it is likely that it was sometime during the inception of this army that military pay was first introduced, and so instead of being classified based on their family’s wealth these new soldiers were primarily classified based on their level of experience. This also made for an army with more homogenous armaments, although not quite standardized.

The Manipular legions was split into 5 distinct classes. The first class were the *Equites*, who were still made up of the rich Equestrian class of Roman citizen and formed the cavalry of the Roman army. They would typically be attached to the army on the sides of the infantry to ward off flanking attacks. The first class of ground troops were the *Velites* who were made up of the youngest and least experienced of the Roman soldiers. They were the ranged units of the army in the form of skirmishes who would disrupt the enemy army with a hail of javelins then retreat behind the heavy infantry. The heavy infantry had 3 classes, the *Hastatii*, the *Principes*, and the *Triarii*. The *Hastatii* were the youngest of the heavy infantry and formed the 1st lines of the legion. Behind them were the *Principes*, who were older and more experienced and formed the 2nd line of infantry. The last line of infantry was made up of the *Triarii*, who were the oldest and most experienced of the heavy infantry. These classes of heavy infantry formed the backbone of the Manipular legion and were what gave the legion its name, as each unit of heavy infantry was called a *maniple* or handful. Each of the *maniples* of *Hastatii* or *Principe* would have numbered at 120 legionaries, while each *maniple* of *Triarii* would have numbered 60 soldiers strong.

Through descriptions by contemporary historians such as Polybus and Livy it is known what the Manipular legion would have been armed with. The *Equites* would have been armored by the *lorica hamata*, a chain mail armor, as well as a spear of some kind. The *Velites,* as the ranged units and skirmishers, wore no armor and were typically armed only with a *verutum*, a javelin with a soft iron tip, and a *parma*, a small round shield, although some depictions include a sword. While it is unlikely that they carried the *gladius hispaniensis* that would become the iconic weapon of the later Roman Empire, they would have been armed with a short iron sword primarily used for thrusting in contrast to the bronze armaments of earlier Roman armies*.* While they did not wear armor the *Veltes* would wear animal skins so as to distinguish themselves to their commanders on the battlefield. The first row of heavy infantry, the *Hastatii,* would have had better arms and armor. They would have been armed with a *pilum,* a javelin with a soft iron tip that would bend on impact similar to the *verutum* except heavier, and a *scutum*, a large oblong shield that would evolve into a more rectangular curved shape as time went on. After the Punic Wars the *Hastatii* would have been armed withthe *gladius* but before this they carried a short spear called a *Hasta*. They would likely have been wearing a rectangular brass breastplate and a Montefortino style brass helmet with feathers. The second line of heavy infantry, the *Principes*, were armed very similarly to the *Hastatii*, although they might have had better quality armor and weapons. The primary difference between the *Hastatii* and *Principes* would have been the experience and age of the soldiers. The third and final line of heavy infantry, the Triarii, were the final remnants of the hoplite army, still being armed with the *Hasta* well after the *Hastatii* and *Principes* had exchanged their own spears for the *gladius*. While the poorer *Triarii* might have still been armored similarly to the younger lines of infantry, most of them would have been wearing the *lorica hamata* like the *Equites*, and they all would have carried large round shields like the earlier hoplite army.

The *maniples* of heavy infantrywould be arranged in the *triplex acies* formation. Three rows arranged by soldier type where each *maniple* was staggered resulting in a checkerboard formation. The genius of this formation was that it allowed for the first lines of troops to rotate back and be replaced by fresher troops which was hard if not impossible with the solid phalanx formation. This was because the *maniples* in frontcould use the distance between the *maniples* of the line behind them to retreat and regroup. This would play out as the *Hastatii* fighting the enemy army until they were exhausted or their line broke, and then retreating between the *maniples* of *Principes* who would march up and engage the enemy. This was a nightmare for the enemies of Rome as they would have to exhaust themselves against the young and energetic *Hastatii* and then immediately have to deal with the seasoned and experienced *Principes*, often leading to their defeat. But even in the occasion that the enemy was capable of fighting off the *Principes* Rome was still capable of using the *Triarii*. While rarely used as having to rely on the *Triarii* was seen as a last resort, this meant that it was extremely difficult to defeat Rome in a pitched battle as any enemy would have had to face waves of fresh, disciplined, and skilled Roman legionnaires even as their own army grew exhausted. It was this ingenious tactic that made the Roman army so much more versatile and powerful and that in turn was the main reason that Rome managed to defeat such great enemies as Philip VI of Macedonia, Pyrrhus of Epirus, and Hannibal of Carthage.

The Manipular legions would last until around 100 BC when Gaius Marius issued another set of reforms. This was not long after the end of the Punic Wars which had inflicted massive losses on the Roman populace, draining the Roman army of much-needed manpower. The Battle of Cannae in 216 BC in particular is estimated to have slaughtered 1/20th of Rome’s entire male population. In addition, fewer and fewer Roman citizens of eligible wealth had a desire to join the military as they did not need the military pay and had no desire to go on years long campaigns in distance lands like Africa while their lands rotted away. This was a problem for Gaius Marius who needed to raise an army to put down the rebellious king Jugurtha of Numidia. In order to rectify this manpower situation Marius decided to recruit any Roman citizen, or Italian national, willing, ignoring the previous property requirements. This was a tempting offer to the massive number of the poor who had previously been unable to join the military as they were incapable of meeting the property requirements but were now able to not only join the military and get paid for it and even be granted some land after they had served a full term of service as well as Roman citizenship if they were an Italian ally such as Etruscan. As a result of this there was a large influx of new poor men joining the army as a career.

Because these were men looking to join the military as a job, this reform would be the foundation for a standing, permanent, professional army. It also became the foundation for a completely standardized army with every soldier being equipped with the same armaments. This was because these new soldiers were not wealthy enough to afford their own equipment, so Marius instead used the state’s funds to buy them all the same arms. In order to facilitate this Marius discontinued the classes of the Manipular legions. In his new Cohort legions each and every legionary would be armed the same and there would be no class distinctions. Old and young, rich and poor, each would be fighting as one, the only distinctions being that of command. Each legionnaire was armed with the same equipment, a *scutum* shield, a *gladius*, and 2 *pilum*. They would wear the same *lorica hamata* mail of the Manipular legions until the development of the *lorica segmentata* around 10 BC. These cohorts were each made up of 6 centuries of 80 men each, leading to a total of 480 men per cohort. The sole exception was the First Cohort which contained 5 centuries of 160 men, meaning that the First Cohort numbered at 800 legionaries. With the disbandment of the previous class system the functions formerly filled by the *Equites* and *Veltes* still needed to be filled. This lead to the development of the *Auxiliary* system. The *Auxilia* were allied or foreign soldiers often recruited from conquered provinces or hired as mercenaries and would fill the more specialized roles needed by the Roman army such as archers, cavalry, light infantry, and skirmishers. While originally somewhat disorganized and unprofessional in the beginning the *Auxilia* were quickly standardized and classified, becoming divided upon ethnic lines and roles within the army and supplied with standardized gear.

In the end the Roman army did not at all resemble its origins. From a small disorganized melting pot of tribal warriors using any weapons that they could buy or find to a standardized professional army of legions of heavy infantry the Roman army had undergone quite a transformation. But through it all the transformation was guided primarily by one important principle of the Roman people – adaptation. The Romans excelled at taking the techniques that were being used against them and adapting their own army to it, using their enemies tactics against them. When facing a threat from the north in the form of the Etruscans they took the Etruscans own hoplite formation to use in battle. Against the Samnites they would adapt their army to this mountainous new terrain using their enemy as inspiration. When faced with technical problems such as the manpower shortages after the Punic Wars they looked inward and once again changed and adapted their army. Through each of these stages the Roman army would not just survive the situation but adapt to it, change, and become even more powerful because of it. Without this proclivity towards adaptation and evolution it is unlikely that Rome would have had anywhere near the military might they did and while they might have been culturally influential, it is their military that truly put them on the map and made them more than just another ancient city-state.

Bibliography

* Polybius, Fridericus Hultsch, and Evelyn S. Shuckburgh. The Histories of Polybius. London and New York: Macmillan and Co, 1889. Print.
* Sekunda, Nick, et al. *Early Roman Armies*. Osprey Publishing, 2008.
* Goldsworthy, Adrian Keith. *In the Name of Rome: the Men Who Won the Roman Empire*. Yale University Press, 2016.
* Balsdon, John P.V. Dacre. “GAIUS MARIUS.” *Gaius Marius (c. 157-86 B.C.)*, [www.thelatinlibrary.com/imperialism/notes/marius.html](http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/imperialism/notes/marius.html).
* “Evolution Of The Ancient Roman Soldier Over A Millennium.” *Realm of History*, 6 May 2018, [www.realmofhistory.com/2017/07/13/evolution-ancient-roman-soldier/](http://www.realmofhistory.com/2017/07/13/evolution-ancient-roman-soldier/).
* “A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities (1890) William Smith, LLD, William Wayte, G. E. Marindin, Ed.” *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities (1890), SACCUS, SACCUS, SALII*, Perseus Digital Library: Tufts University, [www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0063%3Aalphabetic%2Bletter%3DS%3Aentry%2Bgroup%3D1%3Aentry%3Dsalii-cn.\](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0063%3Aalphabetic%2Bletter%3DS%3Aentry%2Bgroup%3D1%3Aentry%3Dsalii-cn.\)
* “Armies of the Roman Empire.” *The Success of the Roman Republic and Empire*, Penn State, [www.sites.psu.edu/successoftheromans/organization-of-the-roman-army/the-armies-of-the-roman-empire/](http://www.sites.psu.edu/successoftheromans/organization-of-the-roman-army/the-armies-of-the-roman-empire/).
* “Armies of the Roman Republic.” *The Success of the Roman Republic and Empire*, [www.sites.psu.edu/successoftheromans/organization-of-the-roman-army/the-armies-of-the-roman-republic/](http://www.sites.psu.edu/successoftheromans/organization-of-the-roman-army/the-armies-of-the-roman-republic/).
* “Battle of Cannae.” *The Success of the Roman Republic and Empire*, [www.sites.psu.edu/successoftheromans/roman-campaigns/battle-of-cannae-216-bc/](http://www.sites.psu.edu/successoftheromans/roman-campaigns/battle-of-cannae-216-bc/).
* Degenhart, Tom. “The Early Roman Army.” *Academia.edu*, [www.academia.edu/6256231/The\_Early\_Roman\_Army](http://www.academia.edu/6256231/The_Early_Roman_Army).
* Mclaughlin, William. “The Samnite Wars, Paving the Way for the Might of the Roman Empire.” *WAR HISTORY ONLINE*, 3 Mar. 2018, [www.warhistoryonline.com/ancient-history/samnite-wars-paving-way-roman.html](http://www.warhistoryonline.com/ancient-history/samnite-wars-paving-way-roman.html).
* “Organization of the Roman Army.” *The Success of the Roman Republic and Empire*, Penn State, [www.sites.psu.edu/successoftheromans/organization-of-the-roman-army/](http://www.sites.psu.edu/successoftheromans/organization-of-the-roman-army/).
* Lloyd, James. “Roman Army.” *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, Ancient History Encyclopedia, 8 Apr. 2019, [www.ancient.eu/Roman\_Army/](http://www.ancient.eu/Roman_Army/).
* “The Evolution of the Early Roman Army.” *Weapons and Warfare*, 15 June 2017, [www.weaponsandwarfare.com/2017/06/16/the-evolution-of-the-early-roman-army/](http://www.weaponsandwarfare.com/2017/06/16/the-evolution-of-the-early-roman-army/).
* Butterfield, Bruce J. “Titus Livius: The History of Rome.” *LIVY - History of Rome*, 1996, [www.mcadams.posc.mu.edu/txt/ah/livy/](http://www.mcadams.posc.mu.edu/txt/ah/livy/).

1. Sekunda, Nick, et al. *Early Roman Armies*. Osprey Publishing, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)