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Organization and Strategy of the Roman Legion

The Roman legion was a global powerhouse at the time of the Gallic Wars. Their superior organization, tactics, and chain of command allowed for complete domination on the battlefield. So long as the legion was not vastly outnumbered, they had the ability to obliterate nearly any enemy force (Cowan).

One of the Roman legion’s massive advantages over other fighting forces of the time was its strict organization. With each legion containing over 500 men, it was a massive task to organize them all into an orderly fighting force. Each legion was broken up into ten Cohorts, with commanding officers presiding over them. The first Cohort was both the biggest and most respected cohort, containing 800 men. Each cohort had 6 centuries, and each were led by a centurion in charge of 80 men, but in the case of the first cohort, which only had 5 centuries, the centurions were known as centurion primus pilus and led 160 men each (Pope). Centurion primus pilus were men who had worked up the ranks. They would hold the position for one year, and then either retire, or if they were of a higher social class, they could be appointed praefectus castrorum, or the commander of the camp. Each centurion was equipped with a sword known as a gladius that would hang on the left side of the belt, as well as a scutum, a tall shield that allowed them to block enemy attacks. They were also equipped with spears known as pilum, designed so that the tip would snap off with enough force, rendering it useless when recovered by the enemy after use. They were equipped with identical armor to the soldiers they commanded, except for a distinguishing red plume on their helmets. They were also given vites, short sticks which were used to punish soldiers who disobeyed. These soldiers, known as legionnaires, fought with the same gladius, scutum, and pilum as their superiors. However, their gladius was attached to the right side of the belt instead of the left, and they did not have a red plume on their helmets (“The Success of the Roman Republic and Empire”). Fighting side by side with the Centurions were the Optio. Essentially the second in command for each cohort, Optio were to be put in charge if the centurion was unable to fight, either due to absence from battle or injury and death. In addition to the centurions and optiem, each century also had a standard bearer to signal to the troops, as well as a tesserarius, who would organize guard shifts. In addition, centurions had the option to appoint one or two clerks, who would oversee general organization (Pope). Soldiers that were under the command of centurions but were not legionnaires were known as Auxilia. These auxilia included specialty units such as slingers, archers, light infantry, and cavalry (“The Success of the Roman Republic and Empire”). Above the centurions were the senior officers. These were the men that maintained and commanded the entire legion. The commanding officer of a legion was known as a legatus and served as a senator in Rome. These men were very important to Rome as a whole and were often kept distant from the scene of battle. This meant that in the heat of battle, orders had to be given out via horn (Cowan). These horn players were known as cornicen, and each cohort contained a cornicen (Pope). There was also a cornicen that served the entire legion (Cowan). Each legatus was served by five tribunes, as well as one tribunus laticlavius, or senior tribune. This senior tribune would be essentially an intern for the job of legatus, whose title he would take over for a few years of service, after which, he would begin his political career. In this way, the typical evolution of a Roman politician would be from a tribunus laticlavius to a legatus to a politician.

Another cause of the Roman’s success was their superior tactics on the field of battle. One fantastic example of this dominating strategy can be seen in Caesar’s battle of the Sabis in 57 BC during the conquest of Gaul. Caesar, in control of around 40 thousand men, were standing across the river from the opposing Gallic army of over 60 thousand men. The first fight was a small one between some Gallic infantry and Roman cavalry, slingers, and archers, resulting a Gallic retreat. The Gauls launched a large counterattack against the Romans, catching them off guard (“The Success of the Roman Republic and Empire”). In response, the Romans quickly rallied to form a simplex acies, or “Simple Sword” defense. This was a straight line that would force the enemy to fight repeated one on one sword fights, resulting in heavy losses for the less experienced Gallic forces. While the line held, the cavalry had the opportunity to mount and come from the left and right flanks of the roman legions (Cowan), driving back the Gauls to across the river and winning the day (“The Success of the Roman Republic and Empire”).

It was both the quick response time of the organized legion and the strategic oversight of Caesar that allowed the Romans to procure victory, even after being caught off guard. Both organization and tactics allowed the Roman army to go on to conquer most of Europe, ensuring the safety and prosperity of the Roman empire.

Works Cited

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