

= Velites =

Velites (singular : veles) were a class of infantry in the Roman army of the mid @-@ Republic . Velites were light infantry and skirmishers who were armed with a number of light javelins (Latin : *hastae velitares*) to fling at the enemy , and also carried short thrusting swords , or *gladii* , for use in melee . They rarely wore armour as they were the youngest and poorest soldiers in the legion and could not afford much equipment . They did carry small wooden shields for protection though , and wore a headdress made from wolf skin to allow officers to differentiate between them and other heavier legionaries .

Velites did not form their own units ; a number of them were attached to each maniple of *hastati* , *principes* and *triarii* . They were typically used as a screening force , driving off enemy skirmishers and disrupting enemy formations with javelin throws before retiring behind the lines to allow the heavier @-@ armed *hastati* to attack . They were normally the ones who engaged war elephants and chariots if they were present on the field ; their high mobility and ranged weaponry made them much more effective against these enemies than heavy infantry . An early Roman legion contained approximately 1000 velites . Velites were eventually done away with after the Marian reforms .

= = Equipment and organization = =

Velites were the youngest and usually the poorest soldiers in the legion , and could rarely afford much equipment . They were armed with *hastae velitares* , light javelins with tips designed to bend on impact to prevent it being thrown back , similar to the heavier *pila* of other legionaries . As backup weapons , they also carried *gladii* , relatively short thrusting swords 74 centimetres (29 inches) in length that were the main weapons of the *hastati* and *principes* . They fought in a very loose , staggered formation like most irregular troops and carried small round shields , 90 cm (3 feet) in diameter .

In the legion , the velites were attached to each maniple of *hastati* , *principes* and *triarii* . They usually formed up at the front of the legion before battle to harass the enemy with javelin throws and to prevent the enemy doing the same before retiring behind the lines to allow the heavier infantry to attack . In a pitched battle , the velites would form up at the front of the legion and cover the advance of the *hastati* , who were armed with swords , and were the first line of attack . If the *hastati* failed to break the enemy , they would fall back and let the *principes* , similarly equipped though more experienced infantry , take over . If the *principes* failed , they would retire behind the *triarii* , heavily armoured , spear armed legionaries and let them carry on .

= = History = =

Velites were descended from an earlier class of light infantry , *leves* , dating from the Camillan legion of the 5th century BC , who had a very similar role to the velites . They were also the poorer and younger soldiers in the legion , though the *rorarii* and *accensi* classes were considerably poorer and were eventually done away with , having insufficient equipment to be effective soldiers . *Leves* were likewise armed with a number of javelins , but carried a spear rather than a sword . Like the velites , *leves* did not have their own units , but were attached to units of *hastati* .

Velites were first used at the siege of Capua in 211 BC , and were made up of citizens who would normally be too poor to join the *hastati* but were called up due a shortage of manpower . They were trained to ride on horseback with the *Equites* and jump down at a given signal to fling javelins at the enemy . After the siege , they were adopted into the legions as a force of irregular light infantry for ambushing and harassing the enemy with javelins before the battle began in earnest .

With the formal military reforms of Gaius Marius in 107 BC , designed to combat a shortage of manpower due to wars against Jugurtha , the different classes of units were done away with entirely . The wealth and age requirements were scrapped . Now soldiers would join as a career , rather than as service to the city , and would all be equipped as medium infantry with the same , state purchased equipment . *Auxilliae* , local irregular troops , would now be used to fulfill other roles such

as archery , skirmishing and flanking .