The Roman Army

The Roman army was the largest and meanest fighting force in the ancient world and is one of the main reasons Rome became so powerful. It conquered a vast empire across the world and was very advanced for its time. The soldiers had the best training, weapons and armour. When the Romans invaded Britain, their army was so good that it took on armies 10 times its size and won!

At its largest, there might have been around half a million soldiers in the Roman army! To keep such a large number of men in order, it was divided up into groups called ‘legions’. Each legion had between 4,000 and 6,000 soldiers.

A legion was further divided into groups of 80 men called ‘centuries’. The man in charge of a century was known as a ‘centurion’. He carried a short rod, to show his importance. He would also use it to beat any soldier who disobeyed him.

Some soldiers had special skills. They shot bows and arrows, flung stones from slingshots, or could swim rivers to surprise an enemy.

Roman soldiers usually lined up for battle in a tight formation. After a terrifying burst of arrows and artillery, the Roman soldiers marched at a slow steady pace towards the enemy. At the last minute, they hurled their javelins and drew their swords, before charging into the enemy. Then they used cavalry (soldiers riding horses) to chase anyone who tried to run away.

The Roman soldiers lived a tough life, but a worthy one. In the army, to be officially accepted, each soldier got “the military mark”, which was a brand burned onto their hands with a hot iron.

A new enlistee was known as a ‘Tirones’.
The Standard Bearer

The *aquila*, a golden eagle was the *standard* for the legion. This only left camp when the whole legion set out. It was made out of solid gold or silver and carried by the *Aquilifer*. A standard is a long pole with a badge or flag on and was fiercely protected as it signified the Romans honour.

The standard bearers wore animal skins over their uniforms. The heads of the animals were carried over the bearers’ helmets so that the teeth were actually seen on the forehead.

Each of the 50 centuries had its own spear *standard*, called a *signum*. This was carried by the signifer (on the right). This tall standard served as a rallying point for the men in battle.

When a detachment was sent out they took a *vexillum*, (a small square piece of cloth attached to a cross-bar carried on a pole). This showed which Legion they belonged to. It was carried by the vexillarius (on the left). The lettering on this flag is *LEGXX*. LEG is the abbreviation of Legio (legion)

Standards helped the troops to keep in the right positions during battle. The *cornicen* also gave commands by sounding different signals on his large circular horn called a *cornu* (on the left)

The Legion carried a portrait of the emperor, the *imago*, this was to remind the troops they owed their loyalty to him, helping soldiers to be fierce and brave when fighting. The bearer was called the *imaginifer* (right)

Unlike todays army, no women were allowed in the Roman Army. There were two main types of Roman soldiers: *legionaries* and *auxiliaries*.

The Romans also had archers who fired arrows at the enemies.
**Legionaries**

The legionaries were the elite (very best) soldiers. A legionary had to be over 17 years old and a Roman citizen. Every new recruit had to be fighting fit - anyone who was weak or too short was rejected. Legionaries signed up for at least 25 years’ service. But if they survived their time, they were rewarded with a gift of land they could farm. Old soldiers often retired together in military towns, called ‘colonia’.

The legionary was armed with a *pilum* (javelin) and a short *gladius* (sword). The pilum was about 2 metres long and had a killing range of about 35 metres. Unfortunately, the pilum also weighed down the shields of the defending army and therefore made them virtually useless. The thin metal shaft of the pilum buckled on impact so it could not be thrown back at the Romans.

On the left side of the soldier’s body was his *scutum* (shield) used for protection. It had rounded design so that any missiles thrown at the soldier would be deflected to one side. After throwing their javelins the legionnaires would rush forward and fight with their double-bladed swords. In battle, the sword was used like a bayonet in a stabbing motion.

**Centurion Soldiers**

In ancient Rome the "centurion" meant "captain of 100", and the Roman centurion was captain over 100 foot soldiers in a legion. The centurion was loyal and courageous, beginning as a soldier in the army and working their way up the ranks. They were noticed by the general for their skill and courage in battle, and were made officers.

The backbone of the Roman army were the centurions. The centurions were legionaries and they were clearly noticed because they wore a special helmet (with a sideways horse hair crest on the top), a cloak, medals awarded for battle bravery and a finely made and a more ornate harness of much better quality. They carried a short *vinewood staff* as a symbol of rank. They worked their way up the ranks as soldiers, and were promoted for their dedication and courage. They were the veteran soldiers who commanded 100 men each, within a legion of 6,000. There were thus 60 centuries in a legion, each under the command of a centurion. During the time of Augustus there were 28 legions.

Centurions wore their sword on the left and their dagger on the right (different to the legionary). They got paid almost 5 times as much as an ordinary soldier. Their deputy, the *optio*, carried a wax tablet with the days orders on it.
Auxiliary Soldiers

An auxiliary was a soldier who was not a Roman citizen. The name auxiliary means 'helpers', and they assisted the Roman legionary troops by providing extra manpower and specialised fighting techniques, mainly providing the army's cavalry and light infantry. Most auxiliaries wore a simple mail or scale shirt over their tunic. Some also wore leather or woolen trousers.

Auxiliaries wore helmets similar to the ones worn by the legionaries. Their shield however, was usually made from leather and wood and was oval shaped. Unlike legionaries who received land when completing 25 years service, auxiliary soldiers received Roman citizenship when they retired.

Auxiliary regiments had both numbers and names, part of their name indicated where the unit was originally formed. The regiments (large groups of Auxiliay soldiers) were attached to a legion, and normally there would be the same number of auxiliaries as legionaries in the resulting group commanded by a prefect (praefectus) or tribune who answered to the legionary commanders.

The legion's commanding officer was in control of the whole group. He was only paid a third of a legionary’s wage. Auxiliaries guarded forts and frontiers but also fought in battles, often in the front lines where it was the most dangerous.

Other Roman Weapons

Artillery soldiers fired giant catapults called 'onagers'. These machines fired rocks or balls of burning tar which smashed through enemy walls.

Like our crossbow's today, the romans used a ballista (ancient crossbow) to fire iron tipped arrow like bolts towards their enemy. The bolts travelled very fast and could penetrate armour causing fatal injuries and destruction.
Roman soldiers wore a linen undergarment. Over this they wore a short-sleeved, knee-length woollen tunic. Romans originally believed that it was *effeminate* to wear trousers. However, as their empire expanded into territories with colder climates, soldiers were allowed to wear leather, skin-tight trousers.

Roman soldiers wore armour made of metal strips. These strips were hinged and laced together to allow for the maximum amount of movement during battle. Round his neck, the legionary wore a scarf to protect his skin from the metal armour.

At first Roman soldiers wore bronze helmets. However, they did not provide adequate protection against the swords used by the barbarians, and they were replaced by helmets made of iron.

The shield that the soldier carried was made of thin strips of wood glued together. To give it extra strength, the grain of each strip was at right angles to the piece next to it. The surface of the shield was made of iron or bronze. After losing several battles to the barbarians, the Romans altered the size and shape of the shield to give the body more protection. The round shield was called a *parma*, and it would have offered less protection than the body-length shield on the right, which was called a *scutum*. The soldier holding the scutum would have been in a tight formation in front of the soldier holding the parma.

The officers wore cloaks to distinguish them from ordinary soldiers. The colour of the cloak would depend on their rank.
Soldier Training

A Roman soldier was a well-trained fighting machine. He could march 20 miles a day, wearing all his armour and equipment. He could swim or cross rivers in boats, build bridges and smash his way into forts.

After a long day's march, Roman soldiers had to build a camp, complete with a ditch and a wall of wooden stakes. The next day, they had to do it all again!

A Roman soldier almost always followed orders. Anyone who didn’t faced tough punishments. If you fell asleep on duty, you could be sentenced to death.

Roman soldiers weren't always at war - they spent most of their time training for battle. They practised fighting in formation and man-to-man. Legionaries also patrolled their conquered territories and built roads, forts and aqueducts (a bridge which carried water).

Along with fitness, the Roman soldiers trained to use his weapons and armor in combat. Repeatedly they trained from 6:00 AM until Midnight. Before battles they would spend weeks training, getting ready for the war. The soldiers used to train using wooden swords, shields, javelins and spears which were deliberately made heavier than the actual equipment they would use in battle.

The soldiers usually fought in lines, marching forward with their shields facing the enemy. If they were being fired at from above (with arrows or rocks), the men would lift their shields over their heads for protection. They looked like a tortoise, so they called this formation the testudo (Latin for tortoise).

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