

ROMAN WARFARE

(ADRIAN GOLDSWORTHY)

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Adrian Goldsworthy is primarily known for lengthy, but highly readable, volumes on Roman history, such as *Augustus* and *The Punic Wars*. He has two sidelines, in massive reference works on the Roman military, and in fiction about the Romans. All in all, he's a busy guy, and I buy every new book he writes. This recent book is short, just two hundred pages, but aspires to offer a complete overview of Roman warfare. An ambitious goal, to be sure, successfully achieved. Still, while *Roman Warfare* is an excellent book, it is probably best viewed as a gateway drug to more Goldsworthy, as a way to introduce the casual reader, or students, to the fascinating world of Rome.

The Romans viewed war much differently than us. War is a natural state of man. As Plato did not say, though many think he did, "Only the dead have seen the end of war." (It was George Santayana who said it.) The Romans, unlike us, had no moral qualms about war. (Nor did the Greeks, or any ancient people; one only has to read the famous Melian Dialogue to grasp that.) As Goldsworthy points out at the very beginning, any Roman who wanted to exercise political power was obliged to first demonstrate his successful leadership in war. Not only was pacifism, with its Christian roots, utterly alien to Rome, but the Romans, unique among their contemporaries, viewed permanent victory as the goal, and would pay any price, and inflict any pain, thought necessary to accomplish that goal. Maybe they were right; for the most part, once the bodies were buried and forgotten, everyone was better off. As Goldsworthy says, "Roman rule was imposed and maintained by force, but it inaugurated in most areas periods of peace and prosperity far greater than was enjoyed in the centuries before or after the Empire."

Goldsworthy's history is strictly chronological, in keeping with the straightforward, overview nature of the book (which also offers excellent maps). We begin with the founding of Rome, moving quickly through the early Italian wars. The focus is on the military: its equipment, organization, and use, but also its political relevance. Specific battles are not detailed, and even the wars are merely a backdrop. Thus, the early Roman phalanx is discussed at some length, along with noting the

composition of the early military being drawn, as in Ancient Greece, from men able to afford equipping themselves. (Such men were correctly viewed as having more at stake and therefore being both obligated to bear risks and entitled to exercise power on behalf of society, something we have forgotten today, to our loss. As Robert Nisbet said, "Rootless men always betray.") Goldsworthy is clear that the farther back we go in Roman history, the less certain we can be of details, but we know enough to have a pretty clear overall picture of the city and its military.

And that overall picture was quite small, early on. Our vision of Rome in its later vastness distorts thinking about early Rome. "It is sobering to remember that the city of Veii, with which Rome fought a series of wars spanning a century [in the fourth century B.C.], was situated not much more than 10 miles away." But Veii, and all the other neighbors of the Romans, were conquered, annexed, and absorbed. This process gave Rome ever-increasing manpower, and therefore the ability to wage longer wars farther away, using its now more rigidly organized army. Still, occasional traces of the much older style of personalized, heroic, warfare showed up, including the famous self-sacrifice of Publius Decius Mus in 295 B.C. And at the same time, the Roman political system assumed the balanced form that worked so well during the Republic, right up until it didn't.

Next we have the Punic Wars (which Goldsworthy here introduces as "The Wars with Carthage," again suggesting this book is directed to novices). This was the army of the Republic in full flower, and Goldsworthy spends quite a bit of time describing the details of its formations. He excels at these evocative descriptions, which is a major attraction of his books. The army fought in three lines; the rearmost, the *triarii*, were hardened veterans used primarily as reserves. "[T]he Roman proverb 'It's down to the *triarii*' was used to describe any desperate situation." As in some of his other books, the author notes that ancient warfare was not a giant crashing of armies into each other followed by continuous hand-to-hand combat. Goldsworthy sees the clashes as much more tentative, brief periods of vicious hacking followed by halts, with the morale and energy to push forward into the enemy largely determining victory. The battlefield had many gaps; "The ancient battlefield was a far more open place than is often imagined."

By this era there were plenty of hardened veterans in the army, not just farmers called up intermittently, but most did not serve continuously. Instead, they served in a conflict and then returned to civilian life, obligated for sixteen campaigns, a hybrid of the old-type army and future professionals. Discipline was harsh. "Serious crimes, such as neglect of guard duty, theft from comrades or homosexual acts, were punishable by death, with lesser misdemeanors resulting in a flogging." Despite this, there was strong commonality between the rank-and-file and the commanders, all of whom had "a strong sense of shared duty to the state." Critically for the stability of the Republic, military men, current and former, were wholly integrated into society at all levels, rather than being a caste apart. Military honors, including the greatest of all, the *corona civica*, a simple crown of laurel leaves awarded for saving the life of another, derived their luster from being able to be shown to the whole citizenry, an important link between the army and civilian political life. Draft evasion was essentially nonexistent. Moreover, common soldiers, as long as they obeyed the rules, had great freedom to address, criticize, and even openly insult their commanders, again reflecting a system bound by internal strength, not terror.

The Punic Wars also were the classic demonstration of the Roman insistence on total victory, defined as ensuring their enemy would never threaten them again. This contrasts to most ancient warfare, which was usually conducted for positional advantage, trying to minimize cost and obtaining a favorable negotiated solution. The Parthians, for example, were startled by the Romans' flat rejection of their peace overtures. Goldsworthy views this attribute, carried through the centuries despite major changes in both politics and military organization, as a major reason for Roman success (combined, of course, with that Rome was strong enough that none of her enemies could plausibly eliminate Rome as a threat to *them*.)

And so Rome moved on to world conquest, all the way to A.D. 14, when Augustus died. It wasn't all success; the Romans were intermittently defeated, especially in the Gallic Wars, where one problem they faced was that when local power structures were destroyed in an initial push, charismatic leaders such as Vercingetorix and Arminius tended to rise up and cause more trouble than expected. Roman overconfidence didn't help; too often Romans assumed that Romans always won, and

skipped tedious intermediate steps, like adequate training and ensuring unit cohesion. Various organizational and equipment changes came and went. Soldiers were now no longer citizen-soldiers, but mostly professionals recruited from agricultural laborers who owned no land. This was the seed of the Republic's death, though, since the Senate, unable or unwilling to see that the sturdy peasant soldiery had vanished from the scene, refused to provide for demobilized soldiers who had no means of support. At the same time, commanders like Marius and Sulla made enormous fortunes by staying commanders for far longer than had traditionally been the case, using their position to enrich themselves from conquest, and they did not hesitate to provide for their men with their own money, who naturally transferred their primary loyalty to their commanders.

That was Rome at its greatest extent. The emperors could not afford to expand the Empire much further, since sending a general far away, giving him a big army, was, if he was successful, too likely to raise up a political alternative to the emperor. Under the Empire, the army mutated again, both in arms and tactics, and in the addition of auxiliary units from allies (who, Goldsworthy says, were not usually lightly armed, slingers and such, but rather armed like the standard Roman soldier). Now the soldiers were very much no longer integrated into the citizenry; they were viewed as a class apart, looked down on as greedy troglodytes, and feared by the upper classes for their ability to foment civil war. The biggest role of the army was no longer conquest, but administration, keeping order across the Empire. It was scattered throughout the Empire, and fairly mobile, so that it could react quickly to local problems. Often its administration of the provinces is thought of as brutal (in part as a proxy for claiming that modern imperialism was brutal), but as Goldsworthy points out, there were not nearly enough soldiers to keep order by force, and for the most part Roman rule was beneficent and welcomed. Thus, Roman rule was perhaps analogous to British rule in India, where a tiny number of British soldiers kept order in a society hugely benefited by the British presence.

Gradually things fell apart. The emperors began to lead campaigns themselves more and more, since someone had to but they wanted to avoid raising up rivals, but this disconnected them from Rome, and rivals arose anyway. Diocletian tried to solve this, making the role of

emperor more flexible with the Tetrarchy (two emperors each with a pre-selected successor), but that didn't really work. The barbarians became more and more of a threat, which Goldsworthy ascribes less to changes in the barbarians themselves and more to their recognition of Roman weakness and an eagerness to exploit it. The west collapsed under the pressure; the east recovered, somewhat.

Goldsworthy ends with the eastern Empire, noting that the armies were smaller—when Justinian sent Belisarius to reconquer Africa in the sixth century, he only had sixteen thousand men. (Goldsworthy cites a Byzantine military manual of the time, *Maurice's Strategikon*, basically “Eastern Roman Warfare For Dummies,” which sounds so fascinating I ordered a copy.) Crucially, the old Roman doctrine of total war and total victory was wholly lost, not that the Romans had the resources to implement it anyway, so the East settled into an uneasy and draining pattern of intermittent war, leaving it vulnerable when Islam rose. But Goldsworthy does not carry his tale that far; Justinian is where he draws the line, or the end of the line, for Roman warfare.

Thus, the reader finishes the book well informed, and even though he does not know everything there is to know about Roman warfare, he has a good starting point. Goldsworthy helps out by making clear where to look for further information. The book offers not only a “Further Reading” section, but also an excellent glossary, explaining all relevant technical terms used in the book, as well as explanations in the appendices of critical Roman political elements like the *cursus honorum*, and separate capsule biographies of important players. It's a complete, if small, package; I think that anyone, expert or novice, can benefit from this book.