

# Analysis of the changes of the military system in the late Roman Republic and the reasons behind them

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**Abstract.** The military is essential for Rome to develop from a small city-state in central Italy into a vast empire spanning three continents in history. However, due to the defeat of the war, social contradictions, the shortage of troops, and the expansion of the Empire's territory, the old military system that the Romans were proud of was questioned. The Romans urgently needed military reform to meet the growing country. Compared with the old civil military service system, the reformed conscription system has more sources of soldiers, more powerful fighting capacity, longer service time, more Roman troops, and more systematic militarization management. The military reform of Marius was a change that Rome had to make. At that time, the Roman Republic was unstable, and the severe land annexation in Rome led to middle- and lower-class civilians having to rely on the nobles to survive. As more and more civilians attached to nobles, fewer and fewer wealthy civilians could meet the conditions for joining the army. At the same time, the territory of the Roman Republic is not limited to the Italian peninsula. Once invincible on the Italian peninsula, the military system and tactics are no longer advanced enough. Roma needs to change their tactics and system to defeat those strong opponents.

**Keywords:** Marius reform; Roman legion; Military system.

## 1. Introduction

From a tiny city-state on the Tiber River to a vast empire spanning three continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa, one of the essential means for Rome to maintain and conquer its territory was its solid military capability.

In this regard, the most significant difference between Rome and other empires lies in the solid national cohesion and resilience of Rome. Rome did not always win in its expansion, and the Romans also suffered many disastrous battlefield defeats. There have also been severe conflicts and turbulence in Rome. However, without exception, Rome did not lose confidence because of the disastrous defeat of several battles or social conflicts but finally turned defeat into victory.

The military reform of Rome at the end of the Republic can well represent the national characteristics of ancient Rome. During this period, the Roman Republic suffered severe military losses, such as the losses of the Second Punic War, which Rome bore since its founding. Moreover, Rome's severe social contradictions and class conflicts almost toppled the country.

To sum up, it is necessary to study the military reform at the end of the Republic, which can not only understand the military system of Rome and the progress of the military system but also understand some severe problems at home and abroad in Rome at the end of the Republic, and finally understand how Rome overcame difficulties.

This paper will take the works of ancient Roman writers and nowadays historians as the basis and combine the ancient works with the research results of modern historians to get the most comprehensive analysis results. Some historians in Rome have written books during this period, and the historical community has recognized their reliability. For example, Polybius, Livius, and Tacitus all had a comprehensive introduction and research on the Roman Legion and the Roman military system. Their works are an essential basis for studying military reform in the late Roman Republic. In addition, Suetonius also recorded the specific details of the Roman Legion, which can enrich this article. In addition, some famous Chinese and foreign scholars are doing detailed research on the Roman military system, which will be the reference materials for the article.

Given the different records in the literature and the different interpretations of events by modern scholars, the conclusion and organization of the article need to be closely analyzed to reach the most likely result. The works in the ancient Roman period are limited by the level of science and technology and the age. Historians have made mistakes and inconsistencies, which need to be considered and analyzed to delete the wrong information and obtain reliable content.

This paper focuses on military reform's content and cause and effect analysis. For the Romans, military affairs were almost the most critical link in ancient Roman life, closely related to Roman politics and economy. The study of Roman military reform is also an analysis of the political and economic fields of the same period.

This paper takes the content of the Roman military reform as the goal, ancient documents as the basis, and modern scholars' research results as the reference, systematically studies and analyzes the emergence of this reform, and analyzes more deep-seated conflicts behind it.

## **2. Background**

At the end of the Roman Republic, the early Roman military system was not enough to support the Roman Republic to continue its expansion. The defeat of the war, the change of the social structure, and the expansion of the territory of the Republic all led to the implementation of military reform.

### **2.1 The Defeat of the Punic Wars**

In the Second Punic War, the Roman Legion suffered unprecedented losses. In the battle of Cannae, the Romans not only lost 78000 soldiers but also lost the consul and the commander of the Roman army [1]. Although Rome finally won the Second Punic War and destroyed Carthage in the third Punic War decades later, the defeat in the battle of Cannae still hurt the confidence of the Roman Republic [2]. Years of war led to the self-employed peasants who occupied the primary source of Roman troops either dying in the war or the land they owned being annexed by the nobles. The peasants went bankrupt one after another and became landless. The foundation of the civil-military system was seriously damaged [3].

### **2.2 Failure of Gracchus Reform**

The Gracchus tried to carry out reforms to save the destroyed civil-military system. Their main reform content is based on two points: one is to give part of the land occupied by Roman nobles to farmers; the other is to expand Roman citizenship. However, such reform, without exception, attracted strong opposition from the nobles and was brutally suppressed by the latter [4]. The reform of Gracchus finally failed. The failure of this reform led to the growth of the power of the elders and nobles. It was no longer feasible to solve the decline of the Roman Legion by restoring the number of farmers. Rome could only replace the old civil-military system with a new military system.

### **2.3 Expansion of the Territory of the Roman Republic**

The equipment of Roman soldiers in the early period of the Republic was uneven. Some soldiers only had helmets, others only had breastplates, and even soldiers without armor only wore short swords. The equipment for conscription was quite simple [5]. The Roman army was limited to mountainous and hilly areas in the early military system. The speed of the Roman Legion was relatively slow, and the whole legion was rather heavy. The Roman infantry square has a strong deterrent and control over the enemy in the front, but the weakness of the flanks and the rear makes the Roman army easy to attack, leading to a decline in morale. To play their role, the Roman army had to arrange an infantry square in a large-scale plain. In the battle between the Gauls, The Gauls' army was agile in battle, loose in formation, and swift in attack, which left a deep impression on the Roman [6]. The Roman Legion needed a massive reform to address overcrowding and mobility problems.

## 2.4 The Marius Military Reform

The military reform of Marius had a substantial impact on the military development of Rome and led to the improvement of the fighting capacity of the Roman Legion. The military reform of Marius is mainly reflected in three aspects: the first is the change from the temporary conscription system to the professional conscription system; the second is the extension of the soldiers' service life; the third is the standardization of military pay and remuneration; the fourth is the change of the establishment of the Corps, and the fifth is the change of the tactics of the Corps. This reform not only solved the problem of a severe shortage of troops but also helped the combat effectiveness of the Roman army. In the following centuries, Rome always used the framework of military reform of Marius and became the absolute hegemon of the Mediterranean world.

## 3. Military System before Marius Reform

### 3.1 Conscription System

After the reform of Servius in the late period of the monarchy, Rome established the civil conscription system. The wealth level of citizens determines the principle of conscription. Only citizens in Comitia Censurata who are above the fifth level with a wealth of more than 12000 AS (a kind of copper coin) are eligible to join the Roman army and become glorious Roman soldiers [7]. However, due to the continuous war, the economic level of the farmers was getting worse and worse, and the number of Roman citizens who met the conscription standard was also getting smaller and smaller. Therefore, the conscription standard began to decrease with time. In some special cases, the wealth required by conscription was even reduced to 1500 AS [8].

### 3.2 Military Salary

In the early period of the Roman Republic, there were no full-time soldiers, which meant that soldiers, as the mainstream of the labor force, needed to participate in agricultural work. In order not to delay the grain harvest, the Romans often arranged their foreign wars in spring or summer, and in winter, they would have a truce or a temporary truce.

However, with the increasingly frequent external expansion of the Roman Republic, some continuous wars often lasted until the winter or even passed the winter. The inability to go home to participate in agricultural work also caused significant losses to the soldiers. To stabilize the morale and mood of the soldiers, the Roman government began to pay military salaries regularly [9].

It was not until the Gallic War that Rome finally began to pay the soldiers who went out to fight, and the military pay system became formal and fixed. At this time, a Roman infantry can get 2 As per day, and the centurion's salary is twice that of ordinary infantry, that is, 4 As per day. The centurion's bonus is also higher than that of ordinary soldiers: Chapter 4 of the *Bellum Gallicum* records that Caesar's reward for the centurion is ten times higher than that of ordinary soldiers [10]. The daily salary of the cavalry is about 1 denarius (1 denarius = 10 As), and the salary of the auxiliary legion is much lower than that of the Roman Legion [11].

### 3.3 Service Life

Polybius once recorded that for Roman soldiers before age 46, the service life of cavalry was at most 10 years, and that of infantry was at most 16 years. If a long-term war breaks out in the country, the service period of soldiers may be extended to 20 years [12]. This is the most extreme case. Usually, a Roman citizen can be discharged from the army after only six years of service.

However, even after the end of their service, Roman veterans will still be called up as volunteers. In order to ensure the quality of the army, some generals will recruit soldiers who have been discharged after many years of service as volunteers before the start of large-scale campaigns. These volunteers will receive compensation for their pay, which is about twice that of ordinary infantry in the same period [13].

### 3.4 Number of Legion Soldiers

The Histories by Polybius mentioned that during the reign of Romulus, each legion included 3000 infantrymen and 300 cavalries [11]. However, in the Republic period, with the expansion of the territory and the change of the organizational structure of the legion, the number of legions began to increase. The main changes occurred in the infantry, while the number of cavalries did not change significantly from the birth of Rome to the early Roman Empire. The cavalry's population has been maintained at 300 or more.

Before the Marius reform, that is, until the Second Punic War, the fixed strength of the legion was about 4000-4500 soldiers, but the number of legions could be expanded to 5000 in case of emergency. Livius once recorded that the Roman Legion sent to Spain had 5000 infantrymen and 400 cavalries. Even after the Second Punic War, the number of Roman legions controlled by Scipio reached 6200 soldiers [14].

To sum up, the number of regular soldiers in the Roman legions before the reform was about 4000. If they were stationed in other regions or emergencies, the population would increase to 5000. In some exceptional cases, there might be 6000 Roman soldiers in a legion.

### 3.5 Army Allocation

Livius and Polybius described the staffing of the Roman Legion and the corresponding battlefield responsibilities of the personnel before Marius' reform. At that time, Rome divided the infantry into three types based on the age of the soldiers. The first type of soldier is the spearman (called *Hastati* by the Romans). They are all young soldiers. One legion has 15 spearman Squadrons (Squadrons are called *manipuli* by the Romans), one squadron has 60 soldiers, and two centurions. Two-thirds are heavy infantrymen, and the rest have little protective armor.

The second type of soldiers is the principal soldiers, most of whom are aged between 30 and 40. The principal soldiers are all heavy infantrymen, and they carry an oval *scutum*, becoming the battlefield's core combatants.

The third type of soldiers is the back soldiers or reserve soldiers, which are divided into the veterans (Romans called *Triarii*) after six years of service, the light infantry (Romans called *Rorarii*) with weak age and experience, and the auxiliary soldiers (Romans called *Accenti*) with no combat experience. They have 15 squadrons, but each squadron has 180 people, three times more personnel than other squadrons.

In the battle, the spearman and the prominent soldiers form the first line of defense, while the back soldiers stay behind the front to support the friendly forces. Cavalry units are responsible for opposing the enemy's cavalry units or attacking the enemy's flanks [14].

The disadvantages of this complicated personnel allocation and tactical allocation are very obvious. The tactics of the Roman Legion are too complex. For the Roman soldiers with relatively short military training time, it took them a long time to integrate into the tactical system. For recruits, they are not familiar with tactics, and it is easy for them to destroy the camp in the battle, eventually leading to disintegration. Moreover, because of the civil-military service system, the weapons of soldiers are not issued by the government, which also makes the weapons of the Roman army very chaotic. Only experienced soldiers can find their ranks and complete their tasks.

## 4. The Military System after the Marius Reform

### 4.1 Conscription System

The threat of the Second Punic War affects Rome. The two disastrous defeats in the Battle of Trasimeno and the battle of Cannae made Rome lose many well-trained Roman troops and even made the Romans feel the threat of national subjugation. In this crisis, the Romans showed strong national cohesion and confidence. The Roman Republic dispatched almost all the remaining Roman citizens who could join the army, even criminals, proletarians, and teenagers. They even bought 8000 slaves

from wealthy private merchants and incorporated them into the army in violation of the national conscription strategy.

Finally, in 202 B.C., the Roman army led by Hippias Jr. defeated Hannibal's allied forces and won the Second Punic War [15]. It can also be seen from the above situation that Rome has begun to change the conscription system. Although the original intention was to maintain the stability and morale of the army, the extension of control time to the dictators in the war provided a precedent for the later military dictatorship and even for the imperial society and created conditions for the transformation of the Roman army into a professional army.

Ultimately, with the depletion of Roman conscription resources and the demand for more troops from the vast territory, Marius changed the conscription system determined after the reform of Servius, that is, judging whether the conscription conditions were met according to the property level and civil rights. The new conscription system does not need to meet the property requirements. As long as the Romans had citizenship, they could become Roman soldiers. Moreover, soldiers do not need to participate in the production. They will receive military pay during service and land rewards as a living guarantee after retirement [6].

#### **4.2 Military Salary**

After the reform of Marius, the nature of soldiers changed from the integration of the army and agriculture to professional soldiers, so the requirements for salaries have become more outstanding. According to Marius, during a soldier's tenure, the daily salary of ordinary infantry is 3.3 As, the centurion is 6.6 As, and the cavalry is 10 As [16]. Compared with before the reform, the salary of infantry has dramatically increased, while the salary of cavalry has changed less.

In addition, if a soldier's term of office exceeds the specified service period, the state will provide a piece of land to the veterans as compensation, which seems to ensure the stability of the Veterans' subsequent life, but it is not. According to *The Annals* by Tacitus, although the land given to the veterans was nominally rich, it was a stagnant swamp or a barren wasteland [17].

After the transformation of Rome from a republic to an empire, Augustus, in order to strengthen his control over the Empire, became more dependent on the army, which led to a relative increase in military pay. During this period, the daily salary of ordinary Roman infantry was increased to 10 dinars, and the army also received additional rewards from Augustus from time to time. In *The twelve caesars* written by Suetonius, it is recorded that Augustus once made a will to give 1000 Sestertius (about 2500 as or 250 denarius) to each of Augustus's Pro army and 500 Sestertius to each of the soldiers who were guarding Rome [18]. This kind of gift from the emperor harmed future generations. Over time, rewards and gifts became the primary income of soldiers. The soldiers also regard gifts and rewards as a standard for judging the emperor: the soldiers will support and fight for the emperor who gives more rewards.

#### **4.3 Service Life**

After the reform, the service life of the Roman Legion did not change much. The service life of the Roman Legion was 16 years. However, after completing six years of service, the reformed Roman Legion will most likely be required to continue to serve for 20 years. After 16 years of service in Rome, Augustus would ask them to continue to serve for four years and become a reserve force to form a Veterans' army. The Auxiliary Corps in Rome will even serve for 25 years [19].

#### **4.4 Number of Legion Soldiers**

After the reform of Marius, the standing number of the Roman Legion was about 5000 to 6000. Plutarch records in his works that the number of Roman legions with six total ranks can reach 35000 people, so the number of a legion is about 5000. During the civil war, Anthony had 28 Roman legions providing 170000 soldiers, and one legion had about 6000 people [6]. The number of soldiers in each legion has increased slightly compared to before the reform. The increase is mainly reflected in the

infantry, and the number of cavalries has no noticeable change from before the reform. It can also be seen that the Romans relied on heavy infantry more than cavalry.

#### **4.5 Army Allocation**

After the reform, the Roman Legion had ten brigades, and the number of one brigade was about 300-600, usually 500. As the most critical brigade, the number of the first brigade is twice that of the standard brigade, that is, 1000 people. During the period after the reform of the Marius, the squadron system and the brigade system may coexist for a period to deal with some situations on the battlefield. However, in Caesar's time, the squadron system was completely abandoned [20].

The complicated and unfair strategy of dividing different arms by age was abolished, and the squadron system was replaced by the brigade system (the Romans called cohorts). In the past, the squadron system had a weak cooperation ability because the arms and equipment were not consistent. However, the Roman Legion of the brigade system has unified equipment, and the brigade contains different types of infantries, and the coordination has been dramatically improved. This change made the New Roman Legion more integrated, and its mobility and combat effectiveness were significantly improved compared with those before the reform.

### **5. Reason Exploration**

The military reform of Rome at the end of the Republic was not only caused by the failure of several battles but by the conflict of countless factors. Social conflicts, military weakness, and political contradictions have accelerated this crucial military transformation, from civil-military service to professional military service. The relations between the government and soldiers have also changed into the relations between generals and soldiers.

#### **5.1 Serious Land Merger**

Rome differs from Carthage and Greek city-states, sea power countries based on trade. The economy of Roman times was based on agriculture. The early Romans, whether nobles or civilians, participated in agricultural activities and gave birth to a national spirit of diligence, thrift, and economy. This also meant that the rise and fall of the Roman Republic were closely related to the land system change, which was regarded as the foundation of countries' rule.

In the early period of the Roman Republic, there were a large number of farmers and citizen soldiers, which formed the basis of the Republic's advance. The former provided food for the Empire to survive, and the latter conquered more land for the Empire. In the struggle between the ordinary people and the nobles, the early Roman Republic's land system eventually benefited the ordinary people, ensuring that the ordinary people owned land and had civil rights.

However, the long-term external expansion led to the bankruptcy of the small-scale peasant economy, the rapid decline of the economy of the middle and lower classes of citizens, and brought many new lands conquered by Rome. The nobles took advantage of this opportunity to annex land in large quantities, and the increasing amount of land covered up the land annexation of the nobles during the Republic period. In other words, when the total amount of land increases, civilians can also obtain land, so few people will pay attention to the share of land obtained by nobles. Eventually, the frequency of Rome's external expansion slowed down, and when foreign wars decreased, the contradictions caused by the annexation of land by nobles became increasingly prominent.

On the other hand, the retirement of many soldiers has caused a land shortage. The land of these soldiers was annexed by nobles long during the war, and the land obtained under military merit after the war has also become a dead letter due to the reduction of land in the Republic, which has triggered fierce social contradictions. Some people cannot afford taxes, so they must sell their land to nobles or large landowners to avoid taxes. As a result, the public land of the Republic was reduced, which could not meet the needs of civilians for land, which led to the reduction of state taxes and the number of civil soldiers [21].

## 5.2 Shortage of Source of Troops

The vast land of Rome needs a massive army for the garrison. Otherwise, there would be rebellion and mutiny in the vast land, bringing great trouble to the Roman Republic. For example, in the short 14 years from 149 BC to 135 BC, three large-scale uprisings broke out in Rome: the Macedonian, the Spanish, and the Sicilian slave uprising [22]. All of these prove that Rome needs more troops and more powerful legions to maintain the peace of its territory.

However, due to the severe land annexation, fewer and fewer Roman citizens meet the conditions for conscription, which also put the Roman army in a dilemma. The Roman army needed more troops, but the actual situation was that the number of people who could become soldiers was declining. Livius once recorded that the number of Roman citizens was 337000 in 164 B.C., but by 131 B.C., before the reform of the Gracchus brothers, the number of Roman citizens had dropped to 318000 [14]. The Gracchus reform has enabled about 75000 bankrupts to regain land and civil rights, but it is still a shortage in the bucket for workforce resources. The Social War that broke out in 91 B.C. forced Rome to open its civil rights to its Latin allies and other allies, which also made the number of Roman citizens soar to 900000 in 70 B.C. [23]. Such a large-scale increase can show the war potential of Rome. The Roman Republic has enough potential workforce but is limited by citizenship and property requirements.

## 5.3 Strategic Change

In the 2nd century B.C., with the external expansion of Rome reaching its peak, the early military system of the Republic began to decline, the morale of the Roman legions was low, the discipline was loose, and various drawbacks were vividly reflected in the Punic War.

Before the war with Carthage, the expansion of Rome was limited to the Italian peninsula, and its military system applied to small-scale operations on land [24]. The Punic War significantly impacted this military system, and the Roman Legion needed to cope with a more complex war environment. Facing the vast Mediterranean region and the vast plains in the north of the Alps, the old Roman Legion of civil soldiers was not enough in number or organization. In addition, the old military system allows citizens to join the army in wartime and participate in agricultural work after the war. This irregular service mode is not conducive to military army training, nor is it conducive to the birth of the fighting tradition of the army.

A professional army is a necessary condition for the expansion of the territory of the Roman Republic. Rome was in different times, and its corresponding military needs differed. In the Republic's early days, the Roman territory was in the warm Italian peninsula. Although there were enemies, their organizational system was relatively backward tribal or city-state, which did not pose a significant threat to the Roman Republic. At the same time, many Latin allies of the Roman Republic in the South and north of Italy could also help Rome resist foreign enemies. However, at the end of the Republic, Rome not only wanted to frighten the countries and peoples of the Italian peninsula but also needed to mediate or deal with overseas territories and more developed countries. Rome must have professional soldiers to protect their land and people.

## 6. Conclusion

In the process of Roman expansion, the advanced military system was undoubtedly the important pillar and foundation of Roman development. Although the military system of the early Republic underwent reform at the end of the Republic, this event cannot be explained by simple upgrading. As the Chinese philosopher, Mencius said, when people get things, they also lose things, and there will never be perfect results.

Although the civil-military service in the early Republic restricted many people from participating in the army based on property, it seemed to waste labor resources. However, Roman citizens' military service ensured the country's development without delaying agricultural work, almost killing two

birds with one stone. Early Roman people regarded military service as a symbol of honor and identity. They did not fight for their interests but combined national honor and national interests.

This solid national cohesion made the Roman army almost invincible, and even if it lost, Rome could recruit an army willing to fight for its country again in a short time. After the reform, it seems that the source of troops has expanded, the army has become systematic, and the fighting capacity has become more robust. However, soldiers have lost their sense of national honor. Most soldiers no longer fight for national honor but join the army for their interests. In other words, they were driven to serve by the enormous benefits brought by the war. This also led to the attack on Rome in the third century and the end of the Western Roman Empire.

Marius's military reform did not solve the contradiction between the aristocracy and the civilian class but covered the truth with a reform. Due to the land annexation and the widening gap between the rich and the poor caused by the aristocracy, more and more free people eventually became bankrupt and attached to the aristocracy. The destruction of the small-scale peasant economy is almost irreversible because to save the small-scale peasant economy is bound to strike at the vested interests of the aristocracy, so many reformers who wanted to try have failed without exception and were brutally retaliated. The military reform of Marius opened the eligibility for enlistment to the proletariat, which gave way to those who became proletariats because of the bankruptcy of the small-scale peasant economy, temporarily alleviated social contradictions, and solved the problem of the source of troops in the old military system. However, in the long run, the Roman Republic seems to become the Republic of the wealthy class. For the proletariat at the middle and lower levels, there seems to be little difference between the imperial system and the republican system.

Since then, the new military system has completely replaced the old military system; the professional standing army has replaced the conscription system that was conscripted during the war, and the desire of soldiers for interests and power has replaced the loyalty of former soldiers to the Republic.

This reform seemed to solve the contradiction between the source of troops, improve military combat effectiveness, and make the army more systematic and professional. However, it planted a seed for the demise of the Roman Republic and later the Roman Empire. From then on, the soldiers no longer had feelings for the Republic but were loyal to the generals who paid them or the emperors who gave them benefits. This reform can also contribute to the transformation of the Roman Republic, like the Roman Empire, to a certain extent.

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