

Rome inhabited by Romulus, the half-god, half-human son of Mars and Rhea Silvia. The prevailing impression left by the former vision is one of ease, order, peace and sumptuousness, while the reality of the latter is best associated not with peace and prosperity but poverty, squalor and bloodshed. No matter how it is dressed up, the fact is that this was a desperate and unappealing place, and the original Romans a race of rude roughnecks.

As we fully appreciate, among the legacies of the Romans bequeathed to modern man is the fully developed practice of war. Yet in the very beginning the Roman way of war was little different from that practised by other Italic peoples. In part this was because no single tribe was superior in military technology, either in the sense of the manufacture of arms or of military tactics. And not merely in technology either, for in economic and social development Rome and its neighbours were all closely placed. Existing in societies centred on war, they met quite frequently on the field of conflict, in shifting alliances and hostilities, and any technical developments would quickly have been copied or shared. The armament industry is apt to be international, and a good weapon, or a good bit of protective gear, will travel quickly once its advantages are appreciated. Likewise, tactics are very much a transferable skill.

CLAN CHIEFTAIN

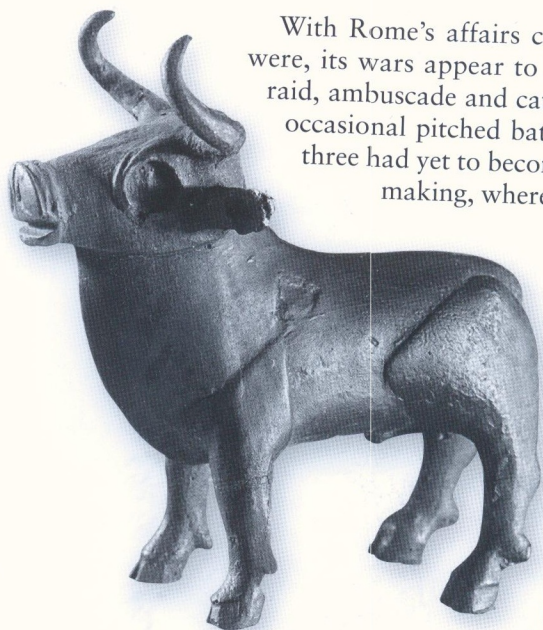
Local wars and vicious raids for booty, indistinguishable in the eyes of Romulus' world, were organized affairs often involving a clan, managed by the clan chieftain, or they could be larger in scale, involving a number of clans acting cooperatively. Invariably there was an expeditionary leader. One of his functions was to act as the paramount chief and keep the restless clans together. His other, equally important, function was to carefully divide the booty derived from pillage and plunder, 'so no one', explains Odysseus, 'not on my account, / would go deprived of his fair share of spoils' (*Odyssey* 9.48–49 Fagles). Movable property was thus continually changing its owner, according to the victorious sword. This filled the hands of the victor with riches, and enabled him to gratify his armed followers, on whose strong arms his status rested. They risked their lives on his command in exchange for a share in the booty. The greater the plunder, the more his followers loved him. 'The shepherd of the people' is a Homeric commonplace. The sword-bearing chieftain thus gave protection at home and plunder in war, and one might here quote Goethe's philosophic axiom: 'He who is no warrior can be no shepherd.'

Naturally, a chieftain who failed to provide for his followers would lose them, and with them all the power and status they conferred on him. So booty fuelled these clans and their warrior bands, and such a lifestyle dictated an expansionist policy towards one's neighbours, since, in order to distribute wealth to his followers, a chieftain first had to accumulate it. But that was only part of the story. Seeking glory in combat and exerting a great fascination over his contemporaries, personal courage was obviously very important to this aristocratic warrior, and the bearing of arms, especially a long-bladed sword for slashing, may have been regarded as a potent symbol, of both free manhood and of power and wealth. Clan chieftains rose and fell by the casual brutality of the sword, and on some occasions single combats (probably fought to the death) could be formally arranged with the opposition. For these proud men there was something correct and consecrated about a flat field, a fair fight, no respite and a fair death.

They were resplendent in shining helmets, pectorals and greaves, which were fashioned from beaten bronze often beautified with embossing. Their swords were of the superb antennae type, so named after the cast-bronze tang ornamented with spiral horns. The two-edged blade, invariably of bronze (iron being comparatively rare), was designed mainly for cutting, but could also be used to thrust or jab. It was above all the sword, and the ability to use it, that constituted the chieftain's *insignia dignitatis* ('esteemed badge/mark'), and no other weapon more clearly proclaimed his authority in society or prowess in combat. Swordplay not only allowed a chieftain to display his courage but also his individuality. Here we have an example of such a clan chieftain, a man whose business was fighting. He grips an ash-wood spear and a long sword hangs at his side. On his head sits comfortably a splendid example of a Villanovan helmet, while his armour is based upon the elaborate poncho-type cuirass discovered at Narce (Tomb 43) in Etruria.



After precious metals, cattle were the most sought-after form of spoil because of their value as a measure of wealth and status. Here we should note that coinage was a very late arrival in Rome, and that *pecunia*, the Latin word for money, originally meant 'cattle' (cf. *pecus*). This is a bronze bull figurine (Vienna, Naturhistorisches Museum), Celtic Late Hallstatt, 5th century BC. (Werner Forman Archive)



Volumnia before Coriolanus, by Gillis van Valckenborch (c.1570–1622). It is said that the young Coriolanus won his spurs at Lake Regillus. It is also said that later in his life he starred in his own legendary tragedy. According to the story, Coriolanus, now a defector at the head of Volscian raiders, stormed up to the gates of Rome, only to be turned away by the supplications of Roman matrons, including his mother (Livy's Veturia, Shakespeare's Volumnia) and wife. (Rafael Valls Gallery, London, UK / Bridgeman Art Library)

With Rome's affairs confined to Rome itself, as it were, its wars appear to have been organized around raid, ambush and cattle rustling, with perhaps the occasional pitched battle between armies. The first three had yet to become the definitive form of war-making, where the destruction of the enemy is the goal. Pitched battles were fought by little more than warbands formed by a warrior aristocrat, his kinsmen, friends and clients, much like the clan gathering of the Fabii with its 'three-hundred and six clansmen and companions' (Livy 2.49.4) who proudly marched to battle against Veii, Rome's Etruscan neighbour just across the Tiber, and tragically died fighting at the river Cremera. We cannot know the size and maintenance of such forces for sure from the evidence available to us, but it is unlikely that numbers were large. Though friends, neighbours and clients served to extend the natural limits of a clan, these warbands could not have exceeded a few hundred men at most, and in most cases numbered far less, because of the economic and logistical constraints inherent in the subsistence-type economy (based on cultivation and animal husbandry, augmented by hunting) over which Romulus' village presided.



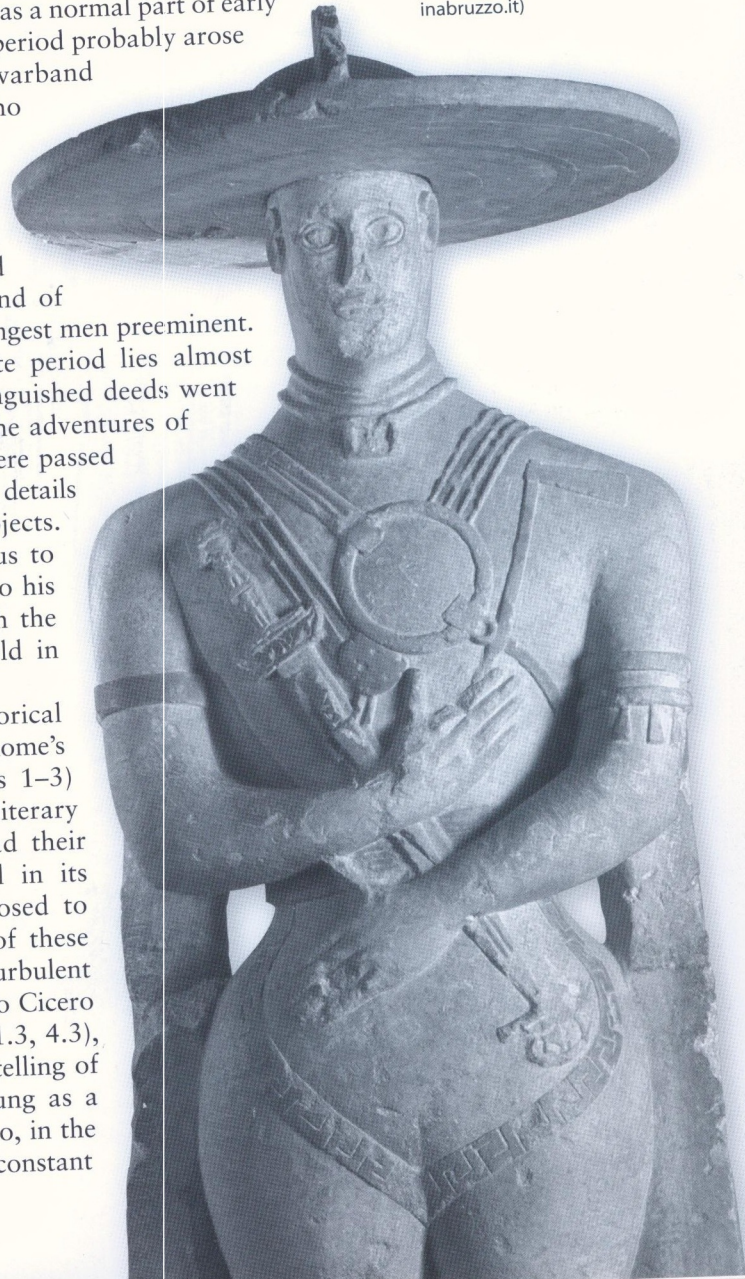
These small numbers did not detract from their effectiveness in the field, however. Even if Livy's rather exact figure cannot be accepted at face value (some would argue it has been distorted for poetic gain), and raw numbers by themselves can be rather misleading, a raiding force of 306 panoplied warriors prepared for war, as observed from the receiving end, could cause considerable damage and terror, and would be fast, versatile and predatory. Moreover, as well as maximizing the benefit of surprise, a smaller force also minimized the risk of casualties by not seeking involvement in pitched battle. In short, military matters during this pre-urban period were on a very modest and personal basis, with the clan chieftain fighting for personal glory, his retinue of armed followers out of loyalty to him and, of course, the prospect of having that loyalty rewarded with portable loot. This single fact suggests that large-scale larceny was inseparable from small-scale warfare.

Clan warfare

So raiding and ransacking the neighbours was a normal part of early Roman warfare, and the chieftains of this period probably arose from among the 'big men' common to 'warband cultures', restless and charismatic types who made good mainly through the redistribution of surplus wealth that warlike success could bring, fighting as individuals, relying only on their own pure courage and the strength of their hard bronze arms. That was certainly the kind of fighting that was bound to make the strongest men preminent. However, Rome throughout this remote period lies almost outside recorded history and such distinguished deeds went unwritten. For all that, it is likely that the adventures of these valorous and generous warriors were passed on by bards who, in doing so, embellished details concerning the real history of their subjects. And so it takes little imagination for us to equate our clan chieftain, who looked to his bard to immortalize him in verse, with the brigand boss who seeks glory and gold in simple and unadorned predation.

Destitute as they are of historical credibility, many of the heroic tales of Rome's early history recorded by Livy (books 1-3) were not entirely a figment of his literary imagination but in fact may have had their origins in the panegyric poetry, oral in its presentation and transmission, composed to celebrate the hawkish achievements of these clans and their chieftains during this turbulent time of borderland forays. According to Cicero (*Brutus* 75, *Tusculanae disputationes* 1.3, 4.3), a near contemporary of Livy, ballads telling of the feats of olden days were once sung as a popular form of entertainment. Even so, in the course of long-term transmission and constant

The warrior of Capecstrano (Chieti, Museo Nazionale di Antichità delgi Abruzzi e del Molise), dated to the second half of the 6th century BC. This limestone statue, 2.09m tall, was found in Capecstrano in the Apennines and represents an Italic highlander in full battle gear. He wears disc armour held on by a leather harness. He is armed with a sword, which is slung across his chest, an axe and two javelins with throwing loops. His throat is protected by a throat guard, and his broad-brimmed hat almost resembles a sombrero. (ph. Giovanni Lattanzi / inabruzzo.it)



reinterpretation, such tales are likely to have been transformed into a potpourri of wild nonsense mixed with sober fact. After all, boasting about warlike deeds was the chief job of inspired bards.

So the story of infant Rome appears to be a confection of fluid oral traditions, confused folk memories, hoary myths, dubious romantic fiction, idle hearsay and unblushing lies. For the emperor Caligula Livy was 'a wordy and inaccurate historian' (Suetonius *Caius* 34.2). The *obiter dicta* of an immature iconoclast perhaps, but who are we to argue with an emperor of Rome? By our own standards the patriotic Livy may be a rotten historian, the historical substance of his accounts falling under the shadow of uncertainty cast by the nonexistent documentary record of Rome in its beginnings, but he was certainly a skilled journalist who liked nothing better than a good yarn. Written at a time when Rome itself was still shocked and riven by anarchy, in many respects these initial books of his great saga hark back to the so-called golden years of Rome and allowed the Romans of his day to wallow in their own history and traditions.

However, even if we must suspect that Livy indulges in a measure of bardic licence, his *History of Rome* is not a flat-footed lament for departed glory. Contemplation of Rome's past may offer more than simply an escape from the present, it may also show how to recover a former excellence and a return to the good old days and to innocence, free from the various political and social ills that plagued their society. We ourselves tend to remember the best about our ancestors and forget what in any way diminished them. The Romans even more so.

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CLAN WARRIOR

Uniformity was never a characteristic of any warband, and the quality and quantity of weapons and equipment would vary widely, ranging from abundant to minimal. Because of archaeology, we can say with some confidence that these Roman warriors of fewer means, the military backbone of warbands, were without armour and almost certainly armed with a shield for protection and a spear for thrusting, with perhaps hand weapons such as dagger or axe for close-quarters battle. Evidence from grave goods reveals that the sword, the weapon that should be associated with the wealthier or more successful members of a clan, was the least common of principal hand weapons. In contrast, the spear and shield were plentiful, being made largely of wood, which was cheap and readily available to clansmen, who, after all, were free men who normally farmed and herded as clients of a chieftain to whom they owed allegiance. Therefore, if a clansman's complete war gear consisted of two spears and shield, then we can infer that one of the spears was thrown as a missile weapon, while the other was retained for use as a stabbing weapon once the opposing sides had closed on each other and become locked in combat.

Against this array of offensive weaponry, the clansman entrusted his safety first and foremost to his shield, which was in all likelihood the Italic *scutum* with its signature long central wooden spine, metal boss-plate and single handgrip. With the exception of all but a few of the wealthiest warriors, body armour was not worn and the existence of metal helmets rare. Obviously no one who went to war would feel entirely safe without one, and no one would pass up the chance of grabbing one if he possible could. They were an obvious target of looters after battle. Every clansman had a foundation in simple skills, such as sewing, repairing equipment, replacing rivets and the like, which they used to enhance the protection of the gear they scavenged, looted or otherwise acquired.

Though a variety of different helmet patterns are known – cap, conical, bell, pot, disc-and-stud, broad-brimmed – simple skullcaps of *cuir bouilli*, fitting snug and tight, were used at the least, and anything that would protect the head from the blows of the enemy could have been pressed into service, such as wickerwork reinforced with discs or plates of bronze. Each man would bring whatever he could afford or could scrounge on an individual basis. For the most part, however, the only things that prevented a clansman's sudden death or serious injury in the hurly burly of battle were his *scutum*, large enough to screen a crouching man, his own martial prowess and his physical strength and agility.

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