



2015-005

Jonathan P. Roth, *Roman Warfare*. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2009. Pp. xvii, 310. ISBN 978-0-521-83028-7.

Review by Peter Probst, Heinrich-Hertz-Schule Hamburg (peter.probst@uni-hamburg.de).

The Roman military has been a popular topic within the study of ancient history for a long time. This consistent interest has yielded both scholarly works and introductory surveys for novices. *Roman Warfare*, by Jonathan Roth (San José State Univ.), belongs to the latter category; it is meant, according to the publisher, to provide a “first point of reference” for students of classics and military history “who have no prior knowledge of or familiarity with Roman antiquity.”¹ Besides furnishing a chronological survey of Roman military history, the book also touches on topics like weapons and gear, military organization and command structures, tactics, and combat, among others.²

The author (uncontroversially) explains in his introduction, “Sources and Methods,” that war must be seen as an essential element of Roman history. His definition of “warfare” extends to the Roman army as an institution.³ Roth then describes the relevant source materials—literature, inscriptions, papyri, ostraca, archaeological evidence, and artwork⁴—while discussing the problem of their wide chronological and regional distribution.

The book’s fifteen chapters give an overview of Roman history from the first settlements by the Tiber River in the eighth century BCE to the end of the western Roman Empire in 476 CE. We read here of Rome’s military awakening in the fourth century BCE, its rise to regional hegemony in Italy, the challenges of the Roman-Carthaginian wars, the conquest of the Mediterranean world in the second century BCE, the political and military changes in the late Republic, the career of Julius Caesar and the downfall of the Republic, imperial-era wars and conquests, the threats to the western empire in Late Antiquity, and its eventual collapse. Three of these chapters are more thematic in character, focusing on the army of the republican period, the reforms instituted under Augustus, and the organization of the army in the imperial era.

In a fluent and appealing prose style, Roth explores the causes of Roman success, not only in military operations but in the political sphere. He emphasizes, for example, that Rome in the republican era eschewed negotiating with opponents even in periods of weakness. He describes the Romans’ impressive mobilization of enormous resources in times of crisis and their adept exploitation of technical and military innovations. He also highlights their shrewd policy of building stable alliances while isolating enemies, especially during their advances beyond the borders of Latium in the fourth century BCE.

One after another, the Romans defeated the Etruscan city-states, until the whole region had fallen under their control. After this, Rome moved into Umbria, making treaties with the Picentes, and then into central Italy, exterminating or absorbing their ancient enemies, the Hernici and Aequi. The Marsi and Paeligni were forced to become Roman allies. Like the Latins, the Oscan allies kept their independence but were required to provide a specified number of troops to Rome under Roman command. As in their earlier conflicts, the Romans utilized strategic alliances during the Second Samnite War effectively, using them to break up possible enemy coalitions, provide staging points, and supplement Roman forces, especially in light infantry and cavalry. (30-32)

1. “Cambridge Introduction to Roman Civilization” series statement of purpose at the front of the book.

2. Roth repeatedly refers to his own earlier work, esp. *The Logistics of the Roman Army at War (264 BC–AD 235)* (Boston: Brill, 1999) and many articles, in particular about Roman-Jewish relations in Palestine.

3. He is careful to outline the shift in meaning of the term “Roman” itself over the centuries.

4. But not coins, though he uses them as evidence several times.

Due attention is given to such subjects as logistics and naval warfare, for instance, during the Punic Wars; tactical improvements; economic incentives for war, for example, during the second-century BCE conquests in the Eastern Mediterranean; bureaucratization of the military administration during the Empire; and the reorganization of the military structure in Late Antiquity.

The book's ancillary materials include a comprehensive timeline listing wars, battles, and dates of birth and death of politicians and commanders; a useful glossary of Latin military terms; an index of significant military leaders; a bibliography of (English-language) secondary literature, including a section "For Younger Readers" and a webliography; and indices of places, persons, and Latin terms.

Roman Warfare is, then, a solid overview of Roman military history set in the context of relevant political developments. Certain topics are covered once (sieges), others (equipment and weapons) several times to allow for the discussion of their evolution. The illustration program is most helpful and supports the text appropriately. Oddly, Roth treats "warfare" per se—despite his book's title—merely in passing. He seldom delves into deeper explanations of military operations or actual combat, and then usually in boxed inserts set off from the text proper.

Has the author achieved his stated goal of writing a work suitable for uninitiated students? To be sure, he conscientiously clarifies unfamiliar technical terminology and adopts a lively, often anecdotal narrative style. But readers will be challenged by the highly compressed presentation of Roman history and inundated by dates, place-names, and personal names—not all of them properly introduced in the text or listed in the index. A less exhaustive selection of material would have benefited the author's envisioned audience. It is regrettable, too, that the absence of footnotes or specific citations of modern literature will frustrate those students eager to learn more. Additionally, errors of fact, syntax, and orthography tarnish the general impression.⁵

Because of these reservations, I can recommend this book only to those undergraduates who have previously had a good general introduction to Roman history. Specialists and students seriously interested in Roman warfare should turn to any of a number of better books on the subject.⁶ However pleasant it is to read, *Roman Warfare* offers no new insights for such readers.

5. See the extensive comments by Roger Tomlin in *Classical Review* 61 (2011) 216-18. A few additional notes: much more than "a few dozen metal diplomata" are extant (5), *optio* was not the highest position a soldier could reach in the military hierarchy (141), and the establishment of the Germanic provinces did not occur under Tiberius (146). The continual use of "German" for "Germanic" (e.g., 2, 109, 158, 210) is annoying. The statement that "Juvenal hated soldiers" (173) is ill-advised, given the satirical character of his work. Finally, for "Mithreum" read "Mithraeum" (183).

6. E.g., Harry Sidebottom, *Ancient Warfare: A Very Short Introduction* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2004), with review at *MiWSR* 2007.03.01; Adrian Goldsworthy, *Roman Warfare* (NY: Collins/Smithsonian, 2005); and Philip Sabin, ed., *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare*, vol. 2: *Rome from the Late Republic to the Late Empire* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2008), with review at *MiWSR* 2008.09.02.