

The era of the imperators: A system at its limits

Rome's many wars made the empire rich and powerful. At the same time, they demanded more military recruits for a longer term of service than a citizens' militia could provide. Legionary became a profession. Now, soldiers felt obliged to no one but their commanders – which made these commanders just as powerful as the Roman senate.

01 The era of the emperors: A system at its limits

An army organised on the basis of economic standing

Initially, members of the Roman army privately funded their arms. The equites, the cavalry, constitute the richest division, followed by heavy and light infantry. Exempt from military service were only 'those counted by head' (capite censi), meaning those owning too little property to afford own equipment.



Re-enactment by the 'Legio VIII Augusta' near Marles/France. Photo: Wikicommons / Pierre C / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.de>

02

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Wars and their consequences

By the time of the Second Punic War, war had practically become a permanent condition. It became increasingly difficult for drafted peasants to sufficiently work their lands and thereby make a living.



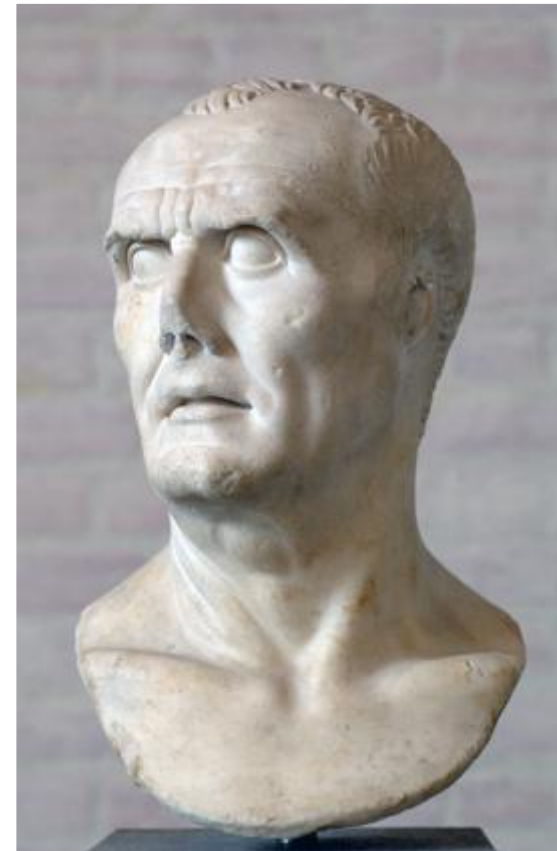
Pompeian wall painting, from the house of Julia Felix, AD 63–79. Naples National Archaeological Museum. Photo: Wikicommons / The Yorck Project/Zenodot.

03

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Breakdown ...

Extensive impoverishment of the Italian peasantry was the result. This, in turn, thinned out the militia as the impoverished peasants were not liable to military service anymore. The military system in its current form was no longer viable and a reform inevitable. The one who implemented it was Gaius Marius after 104 BC.



Anonymous effigy, usually identified with Marius. Glyptothek, Munich.
Photo: Wikicommons / Bibi Saint-Pol.

04

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... and radical reform of a system

Both organisation and equipment of soldiers were fundamentally altered under Marius. The income limit for recruits was first lowered and later abolished altogether as the state paid for the now uniform equipment. Now even poorer Romans, proletarians, could serve as volunteers in the professional army.



Gravestone of legionary Quintus Petilius Secundus, Legio XV Primigenia, around AD 65. Replica, exhibited at Archäologischer Park Xanten; original exhibited at the LVR-LandesMuseum Bonn. Photo: Wikicommons / Ad Meskens / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by->

05

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Veteran country

Military service was obligatory for a term of 16 years, which could be extended to 20 years. After leaving service, retired soldiers, called *veterani*, were allocated a piece of land. Due to a lack of available land, this was not always easy. For the *veterani*, their general became the guarantor of their pension, which explains the exceptionally close relationship between commanding officers and veterans, or military clients. The retired soldiers considered their general their patron and, if necessary, supported him politically as well as militarily.



Tombstone of veteran Nertus Lingauster. Hungarian National Museum, Budapest. Photo: Wikicommons / Szilas.

06

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General does not equal imperator

In theory, every military leader had an 'imperium', which roughly means the 'power to command', and could thus call himself imperator. In fact, however, this title required a victory over foreign enemies. Only then did generals gain the right to be called imperator by their troops. This designation, in turn, was required by the senate to consent to the triumphal procession leading up to the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus.



Triumphator in quadriga, Rheinisches Landesmuseum Bonn. Photo: KW.

07

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Representation and reality

On this coin, Lucius Cornelius Sulla presents himself as triumphant imperator. This is remarkable in so far as he had not yet celebrated his triumph at the time of minting in 82 BC. It is true, he had defeated Mithridates VI of Pontus the previous year after fierce battles, but instead of being granted his triumph by the senate he had first been sent to deal with the supporters of Marius in a civil war before finally marching into the city as triumphator in 81 BC. The meaning of the coin message is obvious: Even though he had not yet officially gained this title, Sulla definitely felt like a triumphator, consecrated by the gods.



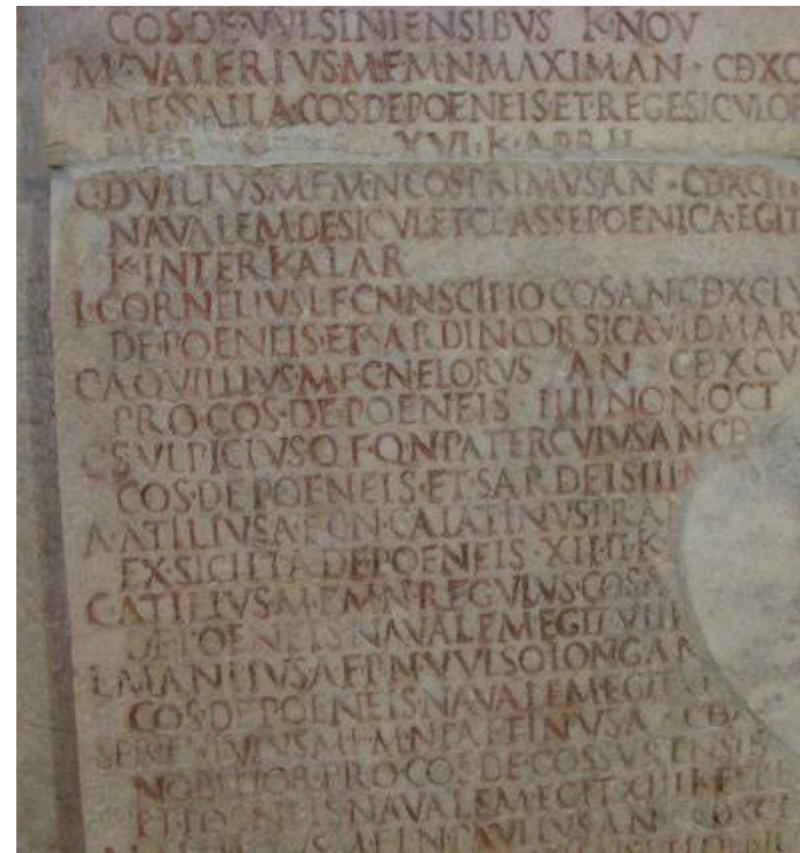
Denarius of L. Cornelius Sulla, 82. Obverse: Roma. Reverse: Sulla as triumphator.

08

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What does it take for a triumph?

To celebrate a triumph, of course a general had to win a victory first. But how to achieve this according to Roman belief? Absolutely indispensable was *virtus*, the sum of all Roman virtues which defined what a real man (*vir*) was, above all courage. Still, the most virtuous man would not be victorious without *pietas*, a deep respect for all ancient traditions and gods. After all, it took the favour of the gods to score a victory.



Fasti Triumphales, listing the triumphs during the First Punic War. Capitoline Museums, Rome. Photo: Wikicommons / Rossigno Benoît / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en>

09

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The gods' favourite

The conviction that the gods only granted victories to him who possessed enough *virtus* and *pietas* by implication led to the self-understanding that a victor had evidently been especially selected by the gods. A particularly striking example was Sulla, a virtuoso orchestrator of the cult of his personality: He traced his lineage back to Venus and repeatedly took her up as a coin motif. He also named himself Epaphroditos, 'Aphrodite's favourite', and on request was given his official byname Felix, 'the lucky one', by the people's assembly.

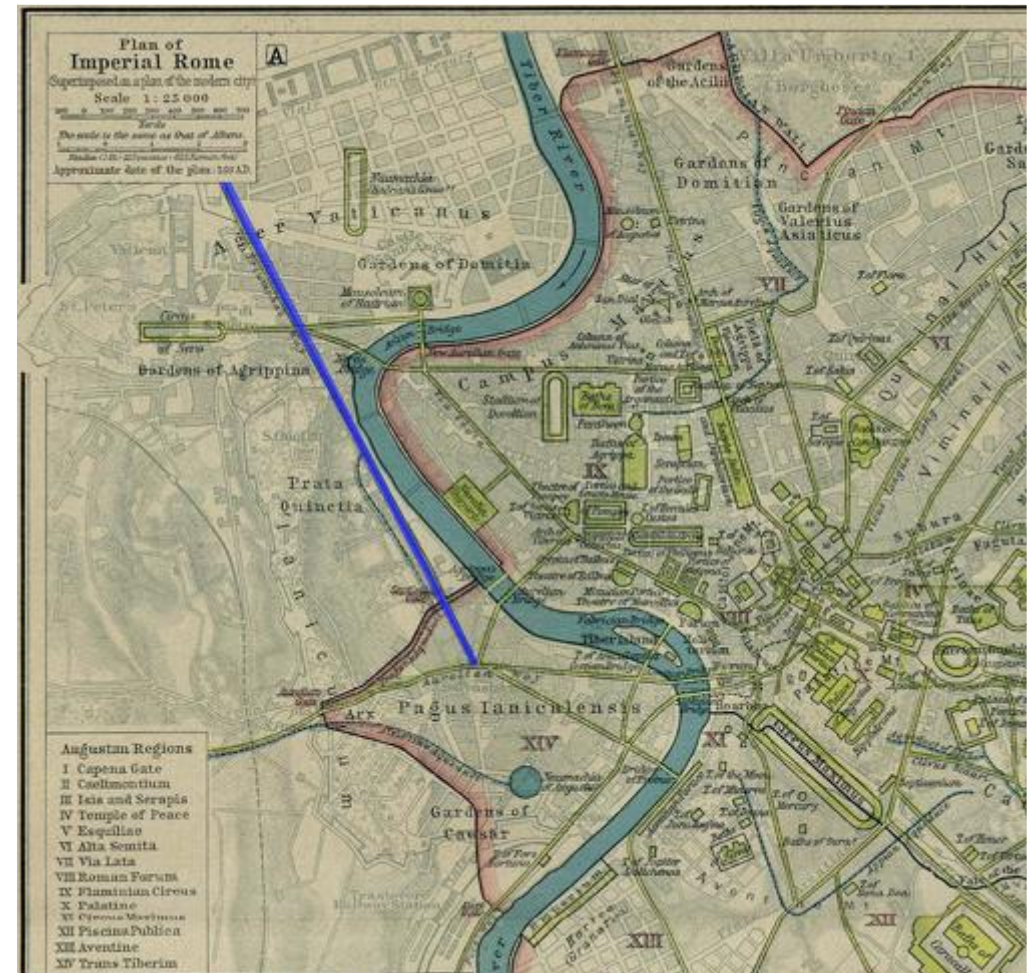


Denarius of L. Cornelius Sulla, 81. Obverse: Venus. Reverse: Garlanded Cornucopiae.

10 The triumph as benediction

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With the triumph the emperor also thanked the gods for their favour and honoured the vows he had made before the military expedition. In a ceremonious procession the emperor led his soldiers to the Campus Martius and sacrificed bulls to Jupiter at the Porta Triumphalis.



Map of ancient Rome, indicating starting point of the triumphal

11

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A colourful spectacle

After the sacrificial ritual, the emperor put on a crimson, gold-embroidered toga. His face was painted red and his head adorned with a laurel wreath. In his hands he was holding a laurel branch and the eagle-tipped sceptre. Standing on the quadriga, a chariot drawn by four horses, the triumphator now crossed the city's sacred boundary. The procession made its way through the Circus Maximus, across the Roman Forum and up the Capitoline Hill. It was not unusual to show off prisoners of war, exotic war booty or large posters with pictorial representations of the war's most important scenes.



Roman triumph. Painting by Peter Paul Rubens, around 1630. National Gallery, London. Photo: Wikicommons / Mathsci/Sailko.

12

The era of the emperors: A system at its limits

Even the gods' favourite was not immortal

During the procession, a slave would be holding the golden Etruscan crown above the emperor's head and whisper in his ear: 'Turn around, look back and remember that you are only a mortal.' On arrival at the Capitoline Hill, the victorious general would ascend the steps leading up to the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus to offer a great sacrifice. This triumph in the strict sense was then followed by multi-day games and sometimes by banquets for the citizens of Rome.



A ROMAN TRIUMPH.

Roman triumph. Engraving by an anonymous artist, Illustrated School History, 1876. Source: Wikicommons.

13

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Triumphs as PR campaigns

The triumphal insignia were perfectly suited for presenting and promoting one's family in motifs: Take for example this coin of Faustus Cornelius Sulla, who with the three wreaths referred to the triple triumph of his father-in-law Pompey. Pompey had defeated Marius's followers in Africa, Sertorius in Spain and Mithridates in Africa. The central globe is a reminder to the Roman people that his family significantly contributed to securing Rome's world domination.



Denarius of Faustus Cornelius Sulla, 56. Obverse: Hercules. Reverse: Globe surrounded by wreaths.