

Women and the Ancient Roman Army

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ABSTRACT

Thesis Statement: During the ancient, Roman republic and empire women warriors and civilians played important roles in warfare.

Methodology: Historiography and conceptual analyses of the writings of ancient and modern historians and analysis of ancient burial grounds.

Results: Women in the home front and in battle performed individual acts of courage and valor important in the wars of antiquity.

Conclusion: During the ancient, Roman republic and empire women warriors and civilians played important roles in warfare.

Keywords: Warfare, Women, Roman Army

Introduction

A painting of Bellona, an ancient Roman goddess of war, by the Dutch artist, Rembrandt (1606-1669), is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. She wears a plumed helmet, is dressed in armor and holds a spear in her right hand. Bellona has firm, large lips, a strong, jutting chin and Roman nose beneath glaring eyes. One can imagine a forceful personality bent on war, destruction and conquest. The Romans apparently understood the potential ferocity of women under the right circumstances.

Women did not serve in the ancient, Roman army. However, those who were warriors were well known in the ancient world. Roman women were capable of close combat as well. Suetonius reported the Emperor Domitian "presented many extravagant entertainments in the Colosseum. including gladiatorial shows by torchlight in which women as well as men took part [1]." Only Roman law prevented women from joining the legions. Women did play a crucial role in civilian activities of the Roman legions known as the home front. In addition, Roman soldiers often encountered female warriors, including queens, in their battles to forge an empire. The important actions of women are often overlooked in articles and books about Roman military operations. This article is an effort to help correct this oversight.

Scope and Method

One of our works about several queens during the time of ancient Greece and Rome who were supreme rulers of nations or states. These queens included Queens Teuta, (3rd Century BCE) of Illyria, Cleopatra, (69-30 BCE), of Egypt. Boudicca (30-61 CE)

of Britannia, and Zenobia (240-274 CE) of Syria [2]. This article is about ordinary women who showed great valor and courage in the face of combat or occupation by the enemies of ancient Rome, and female warriors who fought against ancient Rome.

The Home Front

The eminent psychologist, Abraham Maslow, (1908-1970) pointed out that feelings of belongingness, affection and love are basic human needs. These needs cause people to seek out friends, sweethearts, and to form and treasure families. Soldiers, forced into an unwonted brotherliness by a common external enemy may bond together throughout a lifetime, therefore [2].

Public opinion in favor or against any given military conflict can influence the morale of an army in combat. One should not underestimate the effect of correspondence with friends and family at home as a morale booster. Home leaves are an even a greater morale booster. In Roman times, soldiers stationed in foreign lands could only correspond with loved ones at home through exchanging messages written on wax tablets with a stylus. Couriers on horseback, using relay systems along stations placed off main roads transported military mail to various military outposts. Sometimes officials sent mail and bulkier items by ship. Romans called this state mandated and supervised courier and transportation service the *cursus publicus*. Sulpicia, (first century BCE) wrote to her lover, Cerinthus, in this manner [3]. Unfortunately, the English translation does not depict the beauty of the rhyme, rhythm and meter of this lovely poem: "Love has come at last, and such love I should be more shamed to hide than to reveal. Venus has kept her promise [4].

High ranking officers, such as consuls and tribunes used the *cursus publicus* to correspond with loved ones back home, but it is not

known if ordinary legionnaires shared this privilege, except in emergencies. Rich families kept teams of slaves who would travel on foot or horseback across Italy to send and return their masters' correspondence. Ordinary soldiers could send messages and gifts with cohorts on leave or pay merchants to deliver items for them. However, this method was costly and uncertain. Camp followers were a special group of civilians who accompanied legionnaires on the march, usually with the baggage train, and settled near their encampments [5]. They included merchants, slaves, barbers, purveyors of delicacies and professional prostitutes. Sometimes, military tribunes assigned soldiers guilty of minor offenses to temporarily join the camp followers as a form of punishment. The baggage train could become a target of enemy forces. While Julius Caesar (100-44 BCE) campaigned in Gaul, a Belgic tribe attacked his wagon train at the Battle of Sambre in 57 BCE. Camp followers fled, hid or fought with legionnaires which acted as a guard to the baggage at the rear of the column. Julius Caesar wrote: "The non-combatants, stood up to their attack, unarmed as they were [6]." Sometimes, masses of women and men civilians fled war-torn areas as refugees to seek shelter elsewhere. An example is the Jewish diaspora by the Romans after the Bar Kokhba revolt 132-135 CE) The Romans dispersed the Jewish population of Jerusalem to foreign lands, and they were forbidden to return there for all time [7].

Women Warriors and Heroines

Three virtues, shared by women and men helped the Roman Republic (509-27 BCE) to survive and thrive: Virtus (courage), gravitas (seriousness and dignity) and pietas (reverence for the Gods, family and State). Women and men had the same patriotic commitments towards the guardianship of Rome. Women often cared for wounded soldiers in their homes whenever necessary. There were women physicians, nurses, midwives, wet-nurses and other caregivers during every phase of Roman history Dio [4,8].

Throughout recorded time, women warriors from Gaul, Germania, Britannia and elsewhere engaged in combat against Roman legions who invaded their towns and villages. Roman women were not immune from attacks by enemies. The Roman Republic achieved its independence from Etruria through revolution in 509 BCE. Still, the relationship between the two states remained hostile and unsettled. In 506 BCE, the Etruscans held 10 boys and 10 girl's hostages at a camp near the Tiber River. A female hostage, Cloelia, freed herself and the other hostages. They swam across the Tiber through a rain of spears, and all reached home safely. The Romans marked Cloelia's courage with a bronze, equestrian statue, with the heroine seated upon it, on the highest point along the Sacred Way [9].

In 220 BCE, the Carthaginian General, Hannibal Barca, was in Spain conducting offensive operations to secure the land as a base of operations for his upcoming war with Rome. In the summer he moved against the Vaccaei, and their towns of Hermandica and Arbocala. Vaccaei and Vetton women fought alongside men. The tribes fought a protracted struggle, until Hannibal finally subdued them [9-11]. During the Second Punic War (218-201 BCE) in 216 BCE Hannibal laid siege to Petilia in Bruttium [12-15]. Women and men inhabitants fought valiantly, burned his siege engines. Appian of Alexandria, a Greek historian (95-165 CE) wrote: "the women were no less manly than the men. Hannibal's general, Hanno, eventually slew them all," after a protracted battle, yet "admired their loyalty to Rome and their astonishing zeal." After Hannibal's great victory at the Battle of Cannae In 216 BCE, many of the Roman fugitives went to Canusium in Apulia. A wealthy woman there named

Busa provided them with food, clothing and money, a munificent act for which the Roman Senate formally honored her after the war. There were nearly 10,000 fugitives among them [9]. These events demonstrate that women warriors proved they could fight alongside men with the same ferocity and patriotism as their male counterparts.

Sometimes Iberian tribes sided with the Carthaginians against the Romans. When the Roman general, Publius Cornelius Scipio (236-183 BCE) conducted offensive operations against Illiturgis in Iberia in 206 BCE, the Illiturgi fought back [9]. "Women and boys brought up weapons for the fighters and carried stones to help strengthen the defensive wall of the community [9]." In 189 BCE, the Roman General Titus Manilius, (2nd century BCE) warred with Galatian Gauls on Mount Olympus in Mysia. Significantly, Roman soldiers captured Princess Chiomara, and a centurion raped her. Chiomara ordered her followers to kill and behead the guilty centurion. Her followers complied [11]. In 138 BCE, general Decimus Junius Brutus campaigned to subdue hostile tribes in Lusitania (modern Portugal). He encountered the Bracari tribe whose "women bore arms with the men who died without uttering a cry. Some killed themselves, considering death preferable to captivity. In 102 BCE the Roman General, Gaius Marius (157-86 BCE) engaged the Tetons at the Battle of Aquae Sextiae (Gaul). Women and men fought in concert. Plutarch wrote: "the women came out against the Romans, armed with swords and axes, and with horrible shrieking, fell upon their enemies and into the thick of the battle. They tore at the Roman shields with their bare hands or grabbed at their swords. Although the Romans stabbed and wounded the women, they endured it with unbroken spirits." (Plutarch 1972) At the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE the forces of Octavian defeated those of Mark Antony and Queen Cleopatra, which led to Octavian's mastery of Rome. During the battle Cleopatra was Egypt's commander-in Chief [16,17].

Between 27-22 BCE, Queen Amanirenas (Candace) (57-10 BCE), of the Kingdom of Kush, (Ethiopia) invaded Egypt for its abundant stores of grain and its wealth. Egypt was a province of the Roman Republic since 30 BCE. Dio Cassius reported that: Amanirenas and her army "ravaged everything they encountered" the southern part of Egypt [18]. Roman Governor Gaius Petronius, (75-20 BCE), and his legions, confronted and defeated the Kush army. Petronius followed the retreating army to Ethiopia and captured several of its cities, including the capital at Napata, which he ordered razed to the ground. Queen Amanirenas surrendered on terms favorable to the Romans [19]. From 14-16 CE, Julius Caesar Germanicus (15 BCE-19 CE), led a campaign in Germania against German tribe's hostile to Rome. His expedition led to the Elbe River. Germanicus' wife, Agrippina (14 BCE-33 CE) traveled with her husband into hostile territory. Agrippina proved to be a great asset to Germanicus and his legions. She dispensed clothes to needy soldiers and bandaged the wounded. More important, she persuaded the legionnaires not to destroy a bridge that crossed the Rhine and stood at the bridgehead to thank and congratulate a returning column. Incredibly, Agrippina suppressed a mutiny which Emperor Tiberius (14-37 CE) failed to check. Cornelius Tacitus (56-120 CE) wrote that: "Agrippina's position in the army seemed to outshine generals and commanding officers [20]."

During a Roman punitive expedition during (60-61 CE) in Britannia, under General Gaius Suetonius Paulinus (1st century CE) druidesses waged psychological warfare against his legions at the island of Mona. Tacitus wrote: "Black-robed women, brandishing torches, raised their hands to heaven and screamed dreadful curses [20]." The spectacle initially unnerved the

Roman soldiers. In 61 CE General Paulinus suppressed a ferocious revolt in Britannia by Queen Boudici of the Icenic tribe, in East Anglia, who fought in concert with the Trinovante and several other tribes. Many women warriors fought with the British against the Romans [19-21]. Boudica demonstrated that a woman could lead an army as well as fight in one.

Moreover, Veleda was a priestess of the Germanic tribe, the Bucteri, achieved prominence during the Batavian rebellion against Rome (69-71 CE). Women High Priestesses and Auricles often had considerable influence over political decisions in antiquity [22]. Apparently, Valeda had a forceful, charismatic personality in helping inspire the revolt of the Batavian auxiliaries which spread to the legions and auxiliary units in northern Gaul and Roman areas of Germany. General Claudius Civilis led the revolt. After some initial successful deeds including the destruction of two legions, General Petillius Cerialis crushed the rebellion near modern Treves. In 77 CE the Romans either captured her or offered her asylum [19,20]. The Greek Geographer, Pausanias (110-180 CE) describes a sacrificial feast to Ares, God of War, in Tegea, (ancient Greece) in which only women participated because they defeated the Lacedaemonians (Spartans) without male help [23]. Emperor Marcus Aurelius' wife, Anna Galeria Faustina, (130-175/76 CE) was one of the few Roman Empresses to accompany her husband to war in Germany. She was politically active. She and Marcus often discussed political issues of the day. She sold many expensive possessions to raise money for the war effort and most legionnaires admired her. In 174 Marcus named Faustina Mater Castrorum (Mother of the Camp), the first empress to bear this title. Upon her death the Roman Government deified her, and named a city, *Faustinopolis*, in her honor. The Roman Senate also decreed the mint of silver images of Faustina and Marcus and ordered a golden statue of Faustina placed in the Colosseum [24].

Besides, Emperor Septimius Severus, Julia Domna, also accompanied her husband in his campaigns in Mesopotamia. She was the daughter of a rich, powerful family in Emesa, Syria whose population had Arab roots. She was politically active and during the campaign named Mother of the Camp. Domna was valuable to Severus in Rome as a liaison to elites of the eastern Mediterranean and used these connections to help Severus in his war against Parthia. In 197. When Severus died in 211, Caracalla, his adopted son became emperor. Caracalla often sought Julia's advice and he placed her in charge of his correspondences and replies to petitions. When the Prefect of the Praetorian Guard, assassinated Caracalla in 217, Julia [25]. Clearly, Domna committed suicide. A marble statue of her stands in the Louvre Museum in Paris, France. In 270 Queen Zenobia of Palmyra launched an invasion that brought most of the Roman East under her control and culminated with the annexation of Egypt in 271. Emperor Aurelian struck back in 272 with an army which conquered Palmyra and captured Zenobia [26]. In 274 Roman soldiers captured a group of Gothic women warriors, along with their male counterparts. They paraded the women in a triumphal march in Rome wearing signs which stated "Amazons [27,28]."

Furthermore, in 364 Mavis, (Mawiyya) Arab queen of the Tanukh in southern Syria, led her army in revolt against Roman rule. She rode at the head of her army into Phoenicia and Palestine. Sozomen reported: "Thus war. was conducted by a woman [29]" The Tanukhids repeatedly defeated the Roman legions, until Roman leaders made a truce with Mavis, on her stipulated conditions [30]. During the Fifth Roman-Gothic

War (377-383), Gothic Chieftain Athanaric led a Visigoth army southward from Dacia to Thrace which forced Emperor Valens (328-378 CE), Emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire, to lead armies against them. The Goths won a great victory at Adrianople killing Valens. The Goths moved to the East and attacked Constantinople. In addition to that, Empress Albia Dominica, the wife of Valens, organized a counterattack and paid civilian volunteers to join in the battle. She ruled as de facto regent and successfully defended the capital of Constantinople. Marcellinus [29,31]. This event demonstrates the skill of a woman to effectively plan and launch offensive warfare.

The Amazons

Once regarded as a myth, the existence of horsewomen archers who hunted and waged war is now supported by archaeological evidence. The graves of numerous Scythian and Sarmatian warrior women at kurgan burial sites in the steppes of southern Ukraine and Russia offer some evidence. Twenty percent of the warrior graves on the lower Don and Volga rivers contained women dressed for battle in the manner of male warriors. Armed women accounted for 25% of Sarmatian military burials. The graves contained arrows, swords, daggers, spears, armor, shields, and sling stones. Archaeologists also discovered horse remains buried with female and male warriors in Scythian kurgans from the Black Sea to the Altai River [32]. This suggests that the Amazons were not an exclusive female tribe. It is likely they were athletic, female warriors from Scythia and Sarmatia, and other areas of the Caucasus who fought alongside their male counterparts. They were probably excellent archers who fought on horseback. Wilde offers additional evidence of burial grounds containing men and women warriors at Scythia, Sauromatia and Sarmatia [33]. These lands are in the steppes of modern Ukraine.

Historical evidence points to the Amazon's alliance with Mithridates during the Third Mithridatic War. (75-65 BCE) In 75 BCE Mithridates VI of Pontus (135-63 BCE) declared war on the Roman territories of Cappadocia, Bithynia, and Paphlagonia with 120,000 men. and Roman forces immediately responded. In 67 BCE Gnaeus Pompey (106-48 BCE) received command of the Eastern Roman provinces. The Battle of Lycus (Nicomopolis) (66 BCE) was the decisive encounter of the war. Plutarch reported: "That amazons were fighting with the native troops in this battle and that they had come there from the mountainous areas of the River Thermodon [34]. This river flowed through ancient Boeotia.

Mithridates had a harem of concubines and official queens. A warrior woman, Hypsicratea (Hypsicrates), a Caucasian, rode by Mithridates, side. Plutarch wrote she was "a girl who had always shown the spirit of a man and always been ready to take any risk. She was mounted, never wearied by long journeys and constantly attended to the King's person and to his horse too [35]." Different ancient scholars offer conflicting versions of the battle of Nicopolis. However, they all conclude that the army of Mithridates suffered a crushing defeat, from which he made an escape with Hypsicratea and small army to Colchis. Then they moved from Colchis over the Caucasus to Crimea with the Roman army in pursuit. Valerius Maximus wrote: "She even followed him as he fled through savage nations after his defeat by Cn. Pompeius. Hypsicratea was his unflagging companion in body and soul. For Mithridates, her extraordinary fidelity was his greatest solace and most pleasant comfort in those bitter times, and hardships. He considered that even while he was wandering in adversity he was always at home because Hypsicratea was in exile along with him [36,37]." Mithridates unsuccessfully tried to raise

another army. The king feared eventual capture by the Romans. He could not face the humiliation of being paraded through the streets of Rome in a triumphal march, and then being imprisoned, tortured and put to death. Therefore, he asked Bituitus, a Gallic officer, to end his life with a sword. Appian reported: "Bituitus, much moved, rendered the king the service that he desired [12]." Mayor believes that Hypsicratea survived and died in 14-37 CE [32].

The Roman State (509-27 BCE) and the United States of America (1784-1945) had significant similarities. Both featured a republican form of government under a fundamental document that established the framework of government. The fundamental document in ancient Rome was the Twelve Tables (451-450 BCE). The fundamental document in the United States was The Constitution (1787). These documents were produced when much of the world was living under monarchies. The two republics were capitalistic, and greatly influenced by wealthy nobles or landowners. They also expanded their land and sea territories partially or totally by military imperialism and qualified as superpowers. For the purpose of this study "superpower" means a state or other political system possessing military capabilities, natural resources and economic viability to a point that it is able to exercise control or compelling influence over nations and territories on more than one continent." Neither State allowed women to serve in armed forces. Despite that injustice, American women served on the home front in every war, and some became camp followers. Today women serve in all branches and units of the U.S. military, including Special Forces. Julius Caesar would be astonished.

Conclusion

During the ancient, Roman republic and Empire women warriors and civilians played important roles in warfare. Roman authorities did not allow women to serve within the ancient, Roman army or navy. This study demonstrates that this was a mistake based on a thoughtless interpretation of the Roman virtue of *virtus*. This word can be translated as manhood. However, *virtus*, in a military sense, can be translated as valor, prowess or heroism. Most men possessed these qualities, but some did not. The women of this study did possess them. The feminine version of *virtus*, "*virta*", means celebrated. Men, in general, have superior upper-body strength compared to most women, and this is advantageous in the close combat of antiquity. Nevertheless, there were women athletes who could have served well as legionnaires. The Roman Medical Corps especially could have benefitted from the skills of women physicians, nurses and other healthcare specialists. This study implies that there were women warriors called Amazons. However, evidence from burial sites, and the description of battles by ancient historians imply that they were not a separate tribe. It is likely they were athletic, female warriors from Scythia, Sarmatia, and other areas of the Caucasus who fought alongside their male counterparts. As Wilde stated: "These women fought alongside their men-folk [33]." They were probably excellent archers who fought on horseback. It is also likely they had skill with other weapons as well.

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