

Marius and the reform of the Roman army

Background: the Roman army in the second century BC

Scipio Africanus' triumphant return to Rome at the end of the third century BC marked a fundamental change in the structures of Rome's politics and her army. Scipio Africanus was given proconsular powers at the age twenty-five, whereupon he recruited and trained his own army and paid them in booty from his successful campaigns. The Punic Wars had demonstrated that a citizen army and seasonal warfare were no longer sufficient to protect Rome's growing empire. Troops were required across the Mediterranean for extended periods of time, and the job was quickly becoming a professional undertaking. The administration of the army, however, remained ad hoc, with recruitment and payment of soldiers often falling upon generals. The result of this arrangement was that Rome's armies developed loyalty to an individual rather than the state. Moreover, when soldiers returned home, as seen in the agrarian crisis under the Gracchi brothers (end of the second century BC), many found that being a soldier was incompatible with being a farmer.

Predictably, the Senate was not happy with the growing wealth and power that successful generals were accruing; and having the ability to settle lands upon their soldiers only made such men even more powerful. The need to gain approval for veteran settlements also dragged generals, who were not necessarily politicians, into the political world of Rome. If the government had taken responsibility for looking after its veterans, this could have diminished the power of the generals, creating an army that was loyal to the state. Instead, the Senate's insistence on 'reining in' the generals often disadvantaged their armies in the process.

The Roman army was growing but it lacked cohesion. Rome's powerful generals, often drawn from the most prestigious families (e.g. Scipio Aemilianus (185–129 BC) was a member of the famous Scipio and Aemilli families), thus faced personal financial losses in the redistribution of public lands (suggested by Tiberius Gracchus in 133 BC) and they were fiercely competitive with each other. What the army lacked was a supporter who not only represented their needs but hailed from their own class in society and thus did not have a conflict of interest.

Gaius Marius (157–86 BC) (Slide 2)

Was it difficult to rise as a new man in the late second century BC?

Gaius Marius was born in Arpinum (southern Latium), a town that was granted citizenship as late as 188 BC. Although in his home town he was probably of some standing, and he was a member of the *equites* (second) class, in Rome he was a small fish in a massive pond. Nevertheless, he proved a competent soldier in the field and rose under the patronage of Scipio Aemilianus (according to Plutarch) and later the prestigious Metelli family (who were not patricians but were incredibly wealthy) before being elected as a military tribune in 134 BC (at the age of twenty-four). Unlike members of both of these wealthy families, Marius had a long road to success. He followed the *cursus honorum* to quaestorship and came back as plebeian tribune in 120 BC, at the age of thirty-seven (the age at which Scipio Aemilianus had been

elected as a consul). He was elected praetor in 116 BC, then secured a governorship in Spain and married Julia, a daughter of a patrician family called the Caesars. In 109 BC, his patron Caecilius Metellus, commander against Jugurtha, appointed Marius as his legate and right-hand man and he performed admirably. However, when he asked to return to Rome the next year to run for consul, at the age of almost fifty, his patron suggested that he should wait until his – Metellus’ – son could run with him (which would mean in about twenty years’ time). This response betrays two assumptions: that Marius would still be alive at seventy years of age; and that Metellus’ son would be elected to a consulship the first year that he was eligible to run. Clearly, Rome’s ‘best’ *optimates* families felt they were governed by different rules than everyone else.

However, by now Marius had sufficient popularity in Rome to break free from his patron, and that was what he did. Reports from the field hailed him as a genius on the battlefield and this reputation – combined with his determination to liberate himself from patrician support – won him an overwhelming fan base in the consul elections for 107 BC. His portraits reflect his popularity, depicting him as battle hardened and thoughtful (Slide 3).

‘The general’s [Metellus’] noble rank, which had previously been a distinction, became a source of unpopularity, while Marius’ humble origin afforded him greater favour ... More than this, the spin-doctoring magistrates were exploiting the feelings of the people, in every assembly accusing Metellus of treason and exaggerating Marius’ virtues. Eventually, the crowds were so excited that all the artisans and farmers, whose prosperity and livelihood depended upon manual labour, abandoned their toils and came to Marius, treating their own needs as less important than his success. As a result, the *optimates* were defeated and after an interval of many years the consulship was given to a “new man”.’

(Sallust, *Jugurthine War* 73)

Sallust, who was also a supporter the *populares* and closely linked with Caesar, is fairly kind to Marius, despite knowing the later history of the man. However, the fact that he and his patron Caesar both hailed from Rome’s nobility while his principal enemy Cicero was a *novus homo* could explain his slightly sneering use of the term. He also notes that it had been a long time since a *novus homo* had been elected, suggesting that the new order of Roman aristocrats (*optimates*) was no more tolerant of newcomers than the patricians had been.

Military reforms: the new Roman legion

How revolutionary were Marius’ reforms?

Marius (no more a brilliant orator than Cicero was a brilliant general) focused on his strengths, introducing significant reforms to the Roman army, which came to be known as the ‘Marian reforms’. Responding to the changing needs and function of the army, he implemented and formalized a number of changes in its recruitment and organization. The task of recruiting an army was traditionally passed on to consuls and some of them were better at it than others. Marius’ reforms meant that a consul would no longer have to recruit, train or supply an army at short notice. His plans could be seen as revolutionary in terms of reducing the strict property qualifications for enlistment, but in actuality it is likely that these standards had been relaxed for

some time (as was evident in Scipio Africanus' recruitment after [the Battle of Cannae](#)). Making a professional career of military service offered poorer Romans a lifetime position (sixteen, then twenty, years of service) with a land settlement at the end. By removing property qualifications and promising land settlements to soldiers, Marius is often accused of creating an army that was loyal to its generals rather than the Roman state. However, the swift passage of these reforms suggests that this sort of behaviour was already commonplace (albeit informally) and the loyalty of an army to its general for a form of payment (be it land or booty) was well established. By setting out this practice legally, Marius removed a number of poor, disenfranchised men from Italy and offered them training in a lucrative fighting machine. As someone who benefited greatly from Roman citizenship in his home town, he also offered citizenship rights to a number of Italian allies (e.g. Etruria), should they choose to fight for Rome.

Marius also employed organization, training and innovative weaponry. His army was not seasonal but worked all year round and could be used in a number of useful tasks in addition to fighting (e.g. building roads and walls). This required some changes, however. The traditional army, like everything else in Roman society, was very hierarchical, consisting of the *equites* (second-class wealthy citizens who could afford a horse), the *triarii* (experienced infantry, who held the line), the *principes* (third-class, heavily armoured troops), the *hastati* (fourth-class citizens who had a sword and a shield) and finally the *velites* (fifth-class citizens who had little, if any, armour and were often destined to act as human shields during an advance: they would march ahead of the rest of the legion, throw their javelins, then retreat).

Marius reorganized the legiones into ten different cohorts, each of which had six centuries of a hundred men each (eighty soldiers and twenty workers), except for the first cohort, which was a super-cohort of five centuries of 160 men each. In turn, the centuries were broken down into groups of ten-men *contubernia* (tent-fellows). He set out standard equipment for the soldiers (similar to that used previously by the *principes*) which weighed an estimated seventy pounds and included armour, tools, a mess kit and a blanket. As they had to carry this themselves, the soldiers, known as 'Marian mules', became less dependent on cumbersome baggage trains and were able to cover territory faster (see web resources, below). Another innovation was to alter the *pilum* (javelin): a weak spot was created in the centre, so that it would break upon impact and could not be reused by the enemy ([Slide 4](#)).

The origins of the Roman army as many understand it today lie in Marius' professionalization of military service, which made it a lucrative career with unparalleled opportunities for social advancement. Land distributions also seemed a good way to 'Romanize' the provinces with veterans who could serve and then settle abroad. Marius' reforms were broadly successful not necessarily because they were radical, but because they embraced changes in the nature of the army and formally organized it. Empowering generals, who were often chosen from Rome's best families, was not necessarily an immediate issue for aristocrats in the Senate, and the fact that consuls could now command an experienced and cohesive unit made military engagements more straightforward.

Marius' successive consulships

Marius' reforms were wide reaching, but he could not affect the competition and acrimony between Rome's political factions. In 106 BC a *novus homo* consul, Gn. Mallius Maximus, suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of the Germanic tribes when his *optimatus* proconsul Q. Servilius Caepio refused to follow orders. Over 400 years, the Roman constitution had proved to be quite malleable, but securing a global empire pushed it to the very limits of practicability. Provincial offices such as proconsul (an individual with consular powers abroad) had no official 'check' in the system, so when a consul of Rome turned up in a proconsul's territory, who was in command? Clearly, it should have been the consul of Rome, but with a Germanic invasion looming, an unusual exception was made to appoint Marius as a consul *in absentia*. As a military figure with unprecedented power, one might ask why a dictator was not appointed. Well, the Roman constitution was written for an Italian-based population and the term of six months was not necessarily sufficient for a military campaign abroad. And even if it was, who would run Rome while a dictator fought hundreds of miles away? To prevent another disaster like that between Maximus and Caepio, Marius was continually re-elected as consul, even though this was against laws prohibiting successive office-holding.

The exceptions made for Marius in a time of war, not unlike those made for Scipio Africanus early in his career, seemed perfectly reasonable at the time. The problems lay in the precedents they created. When Marius finally returned to Rome and Roman politics, he quickly got himself into trouble with a *populares* legislator named Saturninus. He ultimately came down on the side of the Senate but after that he retired from public life for a number of years until being tempted back to Rome by the Social Wars and the insurrection that followed Sulla's first march on Rome. He collected a motley army (of slaves and criminals) and marched on Rome in 87 BC, slaughtering a number of Roman citizens (supporters of Sulla) as he went. This set the image of the empowered general and the new recruitment policy in a ghastly light. He died after only seventeen days as consul.

Conclusions

For ancient and modern historians alike, it is difficult to see Marius' army reforms outside of the events that followed in his political career. However, it is too easy to lay the blame for the actions of all the subsequent generals of the republic at the feet of the man who formalized their power and, at times, clearly abused his own position. Marius did not create the concept of a powerful general or the political rivalries that plagued the Roman republic. The professionalization of the army was a recognition that change was essential as Rome transformed itself from a city state to a global empire. His successive consulships demonstrated the extent to which the Roman empire had outgrown its constitution and how divisions between the *optimates* and *populares* now had global military, political and economic repercussions. Even without Marius' reforms, fundamental cracks in the stability of the Roman republic would eventually have widened, and the close links between soldier and general would have persisted, albeit in a less organized fashion.

Web resources

For images (modern reconstructions) of soldiers in different gear, see:

<http://www.roman-empire.net/army/army.html>

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