Romans at War

Soldiers, Citizens, and Society in the Roman Republic

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12 The manipular army system and command decisions in the second century*

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Introduction

The armies of the Roman Republic did not win every pitched battle they fought, but they won most in the period 218–100.[1] Yet, the yearly commanders of most of those armies, typically consuls and sometimes praetors, frequently won elections without being able to claim significant command experience, if any at all. While they could make claims of superior service and lineage, they often could not claim any superior command ability in order to win the electorate's votes.[2] Nor did defeat necessarily mean political disaster: defeated consuls were just as likely to be elected to a second consulship – rare as that was for any Roman aristocrat – as those who had not suffered defeats.[3] It is counterintuitive, but in this period of the Republic, a commander's actual and perceived ability to make sound command decisions were quite distinct from, and relatively insignificant to, his political status as a Roman aristocrat.

These points raise the question: since the elected commander of a Roman army typically had little command experience, and was not often held accountable for command decisions, what role did such a commander play in the ultimate success or failure of his army while on campaign? Or, to put this another way, to what extent could the Roman army in this period operate effectively without the need for skilled command decisions from the general? The argument this chapter will pursue is that the Roman army of the middle Republic consisted of interconnected systems – soldiers, supplies,

* All dates are BC unless otherwise noted.

1 This period is the focus of the chapter for two reasons. First, the historiographical tradition, where the strength of our main sources – Polybius and Livy – increases. Second, though the maniple and manipular army may have been a gradual and less formal transition from earlier styles of combat initially (see Armstrong's chapter in this volume), the period from 218 to 100 probably best represents the period of the fully formed manipular army, before it began to be phased out in the Late Republic. However, see Gauthier in this volume for questions around these later developments.

2 Rosenstein (1990, 114–52, 2011, 132–36).

3 Rosenstein (1990).

weapons, positioning, terrain, morale, etc. – that, through tradition, habit, and training, tended to operate in certain ways, often without much need for the typical general's direct intervention at all.

This idea of systems based on conventions of behavior benefits from some unpacking. The assertion that the Roman army in this period functioned as a "system" does not mean that the army functioned like a machine – consistent, regular, and precise in its operations. Rather, the term "system" is used here in its basic meaning: a set of interconnected elements that operate together to carry out tasks. The Roman army of our period certainly fits that definition. Soldiers, officers, logistics, and many other elements interconnected and interacted in ways that ultimately led to victory or defeat on the battlefield and to the success or failure of campaigns. Those human parts of the Roman army system had established ways of doing things: habits, traditions, conventions, and practices. These could and did change over time, but still they existed; the Romans did not reinvent anew travel and camping procedures, command structures, and battlefield practices for each campaign.[4] Rather, they relied upon the conventional practices and, at times, wisdom, stored in the collective memory of the veteran soldiers and those many officers who had seen service before. This is what is meant when this chapter speaks of systems in the army – built-up customs and practices for how the parts of the army were to function, not a precisely established set of rules or procedures – though, of course, some of these too may have existed. And, as I suggested, many of these conventions and rules – these systems – operated typically with very little input from the commander of the army.

In addition to the systems of army operation that developed over time via the soldiers and officers who did the fighting, the practices and constraints of Roman battles, which focused on central lines of heavy infantry, further reinforced some conventional practices and systems. Therefore, we should ask systemic questions about the army's operation in this period: what were the required steps needed to get an army to a battlefield, how did the army tend to operate on the march and on the battlefield, and where within these typical army systems were the fundamental command-decision points? At the same time, when considering a particular commander's importance to battlefield success, the exercise of decision-making and agency by those outside of the commander – senators, military tribunes and legates, as well as centurions and common soldiers – must be considered. When were important command decisions typically made by those other than the commander? To what extent could a general rely on others' experience and insight when making decisions? A Scipio Africanus or Gaius Marius might, perhaps, involve themselves in all matters of command and

4 Though, as Milne notes in this volume, this does not mean there was anything like a fixed or "standing" army in the middle Republic.

generally have excellent results to show for it. But what about the "average general," the amateur elected with some experience of battle but not necessarily any experience or skill at commanding an army? Did that "average general" have to make many skilled command decisions to have a successful military campaign?[5] The evidence suggests, and this chapter will argue, that in most situations a general could rely a great deal on conventional military systems and practices of the armies in the middle Republic and did not have to make much in the way of skillful command decisions to achieve military success.

Before the Battle 1: province and army assignments

At the start of a campaign, the senate designated a commander's province, the forces allocated to him, and, often, his intended foes. These instructions could be limited, conditions in a province of operation could change, and commanders might stray from their initial assignments. Still, the senate provided important parameters for where and how a commander was to operate. As the second century progressed, the senate increasingly came to expect magistrates to limit their operations to their assigned provinces. Not all commanders complied, but the point is that the senate provided considerable direction in its yearly assignments of forces, provinces, and commanders.[6] These highest-level decisions that ultimately led to a battlefield, in short, were usually not determined by the commander at all.

Furthermore, the elected commander may not have been typically involved in selecting his direct subordinates, the military tribunes.[7] These were the direct commanders of the legions and the cavalry, tasked with levying troops, executing orders, organizing, commanding, and inspiring their soldiers, and, optimally, keeping them effective in battle.[8] Every year, Polybius asserts, the assemblies elected the 24 tribunes required for the four legions that made up the two standard consular armies; army commanders appointed others.[9] A perusal of Livy's levy notices reveals that, typically, consuls levied and then commanded new legions, though sometimes they did not and simply took over command of existing legions.[10] Commonly,

5 Sieges unfortunately cannot be considered in this small space, nor cavalry, except for their role in infantry battle decisions.

6 Eckstein (1987, xx–xxii); Rich (1993, 55–64); Roth (1999, 246–47); Brennan (2014, 32). Livy 31.3.2–3, 31.19.2–4 gives an excellent example of senatorial planning in the Second Macedonian War.

7 Also see Helm's discussion in this volume, on the important social role of tribunes in the army of this period.

8 Keppie (1984a, 39–40).

9 Polyb. 6.19.1. Livy 43.11–12 reinforces the normal practice of electing tribunes.

10 Some examples where the consuls did not both command new legions: Livy 33.25.10, 35.20.4–5, 37.50.4, 39.20.1–3, 39.38.10.

then, the consuls would have had little or no choice of the tribunes in their army. Even in cases where the consuls assumed command of existing legions, it is not at all clear that they would have been able to pick their own tribunes. The 24 elected tribunes of the year had to go somewhere. Equally important, many tribunes already serving in an existing legion would have experience and ties to their soldiers that might best be preserved. When full replacement might require selecting as many as 48 new tribunes, commanders likely relied on existing officers – perhaps appointing only a few, as needed, when elected tribunes did not fill those posts. The same probably applied also to those praetors holding military commands.

While the senate determined the number of soldiers to levy or retire for the year, the military tribunes actually levied the soldiers who fought the battles.[11] Polybius explicitly states this.[12] Livy agrees. Though he often says the consuls conducted levies, this is likely just shorthand for the real work of the tribunes, as his detailed account of the levies of 171 demonstrates. Livy reports (42.32.6), "The consuls were conducting the levy with by far more painstaking care than usual."[13] A reader might suppose the consuls personally selected the recruits. However, in the next section (42.32.7), he specifies, "When the military tribunes who were appointing centurions were assigning men as they came, 23 veterans who had held the rank of chief centurion on being named appealed to the tribunes of the people."[14] Later still, he indicates that military tribunes were actually selecting the troops.[15] The process, in other words, did not regularly involve commanders handling the selection of individual soldiers.[16] Nor did commanders typically choose those critical unit officers who fought alongside the soldiers, the centurions and *optiones*. According to Polybius, at least in the second century soldiers selected their own unit officers personally.[17] While that may have been normal when insufficient veteran officers were available, Livy's account of the levy for 171, as quoted above, suggests the tribunes were expected to enroll former unit officers to a position at least comparable to their prior rank.

11 Veterans spared the levy: Livy 31.8.6, 32.8.3.

12 Polyb. 6.19–21.

13 Livy 42.32.6: *Dilectum consules multo intentiore quam alias cura habebant.*

14 *Cum tribuni militum, qui centuriones sed primum quemque citarent, tres et viginti centuriones, qui primos pilos duxerant, citati tribunos plebis appellarunt.*

15 Livy 42.33.5: *deprecatus est deinde, ne in nouo bello, tam propinquo Italiae, adversus regem potentissimum, aut tribunos militum dilectum habentis inpedirent...*("then he [the consul] made a request that, in a new war, at so little distance from Italy, against a very powerful king, the people should not hinder the military tribunes who were holding the levy..."). See also Livy 42.34.14, 42.35.2.

16 Polybius' account of the levy is streamlined and problematic (see Armstrong and Helm in this volume), but the citizens who must have been levied by other agents away from Rome must also have typically been selected without the commander's input.

17 Polyb 6.24.1–2.

Up to this point in war preparations, the typical commander provided very little command input. Whether neophyte or veteran officer, he simply relied upon the competence – or lack thereof – of many other individuals to set the army properly in motion. The senate, with its collective years of experience in military affairs – as soldiers, officers, commanders, or all three – determined the size of the army and where it would fight. Tribunes levied the actual soldiers and enrolled centurions. If additional centurions were needed, the soldiers voted for them. All these decisions, large and small, loomed large in battlefield successes or failures and were normally outside the general's purview.

One exception, where the typical commander might exercise significant input, was the decision to train inexperienced troops. A classic example of this comes from Fabius Maximus' dictatorship in 217. Polybius explicitly notes Fabius' plan to avoid pitched battles for a time was partly "with the view of gradually strengthening and restoring by partial successes the spirits of his own troops, broken as they were by the general reverses."[18] Other occasions, when commanders trained their troops, demonstrate that this practice was not unique to Fabius.[19] Clearly, when such training was effective, it helped soldiers keep their formations and stand their ground in the stresses of the killing zone.

Before the Battle 2: getting the army to the battle

On the march, the general had more command tasks, but could still rely on the army's systems and support from officers in carrying these out. Leaving aside sieges, and assuming successful overseas transport, the main task at this stage was to march the army safely to engage the enemy at a suitable time and place. Several points of command input were important in this process. The first was ensuring a sound route of march. Critical to this were logistical operations. Much of a Roman army's supply system, however, fell outside the commander's control and under senatorial authority. Field commanders had some control over their supply lines, but often this amounted to haggling with merchants or recalcitrant praetors in command of naval forces. Generals, not infrequently, delegated operational command over important parts of the supply process to subordinate officers, and elected quaestors often played important roles managing supplies.[20] Roman armies did not regularly fail in this period due to faulty supply systems – the result of successful procedures developed over the centuries. The typical commander could delegate and generally count on the supply system to function without making particularly sophisticated command decisions. When not

18 Polyb. 3.90.4: ἅμα δὲ τὰς τῶν ἰδίων δυνάμεων ψυχὰς προηττημένας τοῖς ὅλοις διὰ τῶν κατὰ μέρος προτερημάτων κατὰ βραχὺ σωματοποιεῖν καὶ προσαναλαμβάνειν.

19 Polyb. 10.20.1–8; App. *Hisp.* 65, 86; Livy 34.13.1–3, 44.1.4; Sall. *Iug.* 44.1–4.

20 Roth (1999, 246–60).

relying on supply lines, Roman soldiers foraged and raided to supply the army. There were a number of factors involved in executing foraging work properly, but it is far from clear that typical generals needed to manage this work personally to ensure success.[21]

In addition to well-developed supply procedures, the Romans had an organized protocol for camping, which was directed by the tribunes.[22] Here, it is worth taking a moment to consider the reliability of Polybius, our main source both for the Roman marching order and camping procedures in this period. There is good reason to suppose Polybius idealized the organization and function of the Roman army in his day, just as he idealized the functioning of the Republic itself, and there are some areas in his account that scholars suggest are problematic, undermining his seemingly rational and highly organized approach.[23] It is perfectly legitimate to read Polybius with caution and recognize that the army likely did not function so mechanistically, so cleanly and orderly, as he suggests.[24] Nevertheless, there is no warrant for rejecting his eyewitness account altogether. For example, to suspect that Roman camps were not always laid out exactly as Polybius said, does not justify the conclusion that the Romans lacked camping patterns and procedures altogether. Indeed, archaeological evidence shows a high degree of structure and consistency in camp layouts at Numantia, which testifies to Roman organization in these matters.[25] The camp layouts do not always perfectly match Polybius' well-ordered description, but they do seem to confirm his account overall. The evidence suggests that the Romans had procedures for laying out camps, albeit procedures that could be adapted to specific landscapes and circumstances. To suspect that the Roman marching order was not always organized the way that Polybius describes likewise does not justify the conclusion that Romans had no orderly procedures for marching. In the absence of developed arguments against it, we can and must suppose that Polybius provided a reasonably reliable description – not prescription – of Roman army practices, and that that description included a fair degree of organization and habitual procedures.

Within the maniples of a legion, each unit/class type was numbered from one to ten (for example, first maniple of *hastati*), and (according to Polybius) each occupied a set place within the camp relative to their comrades in other maniples and legions every night.[26] Each soldier slept, ate, and mustered

21 Erdkamp (1998, 122–40).

22 Polyb. 6.27–42; Dobson (2008, 50–51, 54, 68–70).

23 See Champion (2004) and Scanlon (2015, 202–36) on Polybius' schematizing. See Miltsios (2013) on his narrative devices. See also Armstrong in this volume for discussion with relevance to the army.

24 See Armstrong in this volume.

25 Dobson (2008).

26 General layout of the camp: Polyb. 6.29–31, 6.40–41. Numbered maniples: Polyb. 6.24.1–5, 6.29.9, 6.40.11; Livy 26.5.15, 27.14.8.

next to those soldiers who would hold the line alongside him. The soldiers of every unit customarily knew their camp positions beforehand.[27] Clearly, these camping practices, beyond eliminating the need to make many major decisions on a daily basis, also did much to reinforce the spatial organization of the legion and the connections between and within units.[28] Equally clearly, the tribunes were in charge of setting up the camp, not the general.

The organized procedures, directed by tribunes in the camp, apparently extended to marching. Each legion and allied wing reinforced its organizational integrity by marching as a unit, an integrity that they would need to maintain on the battlefield. A two-legion consular army on the march, says Polybius, followed this order: *extraordinarii*, allied right wing, the two Roman legions, and allied left wing. These positions rotated so that each could lead in turn and access the cleanest water and best forage.[29] The preservation of grand tactical units in the daily marching order reinforced unit identity and cohesion, and the process needed little commander oversight. Furthermore, though here direct evidence is scarce, since protocols governed the transition from march to camp, it is reasonable to suppose protocols dictated how marching columns deployed for battle to avoid an ad hoc scramble of units from column to line. The Romans also had a special marching order in dangerous country. In these cases, the *hastati*, *principes*, and *triarii* of the army tended to march in three parallel columns so that the army could swiftly deploy to the left or the right of the marching route, with at most the *hastati* having to shift positions to face the enemy.[30] The tribunes, as the ones who supervised the camp and sometimes – if not regularly – carried out deployments, likely managed these changes in order and organization, presumably with help from centurions and *optiones*.[31]

Though the ancient sources generally do not specify reasons for Roman defeats, they identify two major causes during the march: ambushes and camp attacks. Ambushes presumably resulted from ineffective reconnaissance, poorly chosen routes of march, or both. Deploying scouts was certainly an important command decision, though it is quite conceivable that the actual deployment of scouts, and the specific circuits they took, were decisions also relegated to the tribunes. Ineffective scouting on the march could, of course, prove disastrous. The most infamous example of this is the battle of Lake Trasimene. The source tradition about the consul Flaminius is generally hostile, though over time an account developed of his honorable deportment in the face of impending death.[32] Whether that hostility included inaccurately attributing the defeat to his poor command decisions

27 Polyb. 6.41.10.
28 Culham (1989, 193). See also Rosenstein (2012a) and Helm in this volume.
29 Polyb. 6.40.9.
30 Polyb. 6.40.10–14.
31 See below on tribunes carrying out deployment.
32 Rosenstein (1990, 77–78, 116–17).

is far from clear. In both Polybius' and Livy's accounts (the latter heroizing the consul), Flaminius willfully ignored his advisors' pleas for caution when approaching a mighty enemy with superior cavalry forces. They asked him to wait for the other consul to arrive, but Flaminius would not. He failed to ensure the route was properly scouted and led the Roman army into a lakeside ambush from which they could not recover.[33] The Carthaginian army sprung the trap, assaulting the Roman marching columns in the mist by the lake, and Polybius asserts:

> ...the Roman centurions and tribunes were not only unable to take any effectual measures to set things right but could not even understand what was happening. They were charged at one and the same instant from the front, from the rear, and from the flanks, so that most of them were cut to pieces in marching order as they were quite unable to protect themselves, and, as it were, betrayed by their commander's lack of judgement. For while they were still occupied in considering what was best to do, they were being slaughtered without realizing how.[34]

Two crucial points surface in the narrative. First, the general allegedly ignored his advisors, pursued a formidable enemy with insufficient reconnaissance, and stumbled into an ambush. One may be concerned that these accusations are false, but there is no evidence to seriously support discarding them. If the hostile tradition of his disastrous decisions had some truth, Flaminius was more of a derelict general than a mediocre one, overriding the safeguards and practices that ordinarily allowed the Romans to fight a pitched battle. Second, the ambush prevented the officers from properly organizing the men into functioning units at all, and this disruption of deployment practices increased the catastrophe. The sources note other instances of ambushes in this period, and these too must have resulted from poor reconnaissance or route choices.[35] Similarly, those instances of Roman armies attacked while either in camp or pitching camp can be attributed to the command system's failure (and perhaps the commander's) to set effective

33 Polyb. 3.82–84; Livy 22.3–8.

34 Polyb. 3.84.2–5: οὐχ οἷον παραβοηθεῖν ἐδύναντο πρός τι τῶν δεομένων οἱ ταξίαρχοι καὶ χιλίαρχοι τῶν Ῥωμαίων, ἀλλ' οὐδὲ συννοῆσαι τὸ γινόμενον. ἅμα γὰρ οἱ μὲν κατὰ πρόσωπον, οἱ δ' ἀπ' οὐρᾶς, οἱ δ' ἐκ τῶν πλαγίων αὐτοῖς προσέπιπτον. διὸ καὶ συνέβη τοὺς πλείστους ἐν αὐτῷ τῷ τῆς πορείας σχήματι κατακοπῆναι, μὴ δυναμένους αὑτοῖς βοηθεῖν, ἀλλ' ὡς ἂν εἰ προδεδομένους ὑπὸ τῆς τοῦ προεστῶτος ἀκρισίας. ἔτι γὰρ διαβουλευόμενοι τί δεῖ πράττειν ἀπώλλυντο παραδόξως.

35 L. Manlius Vulso in 218 : Polyb. 3.40.11–4; Livy 21.25.8–14); C. Flaminius in 217 : Polyb. 3.82.1–84.5; Livy 22.3.1–7.5; L. Postumius Albinus in 216/15 : Livy 23.24.6–13; L. Cincius Alimentus in 208: Livy 29.36; Cn. Baebius Tamphilus in 199: Livy 32.7.5–7; Q. Marcius Philippus in 186: Livy 39.20.5–10; Q. Fulvius Nobilior in 153: App. *Hisp*. 45–47; C. Vetilius in 147: Livy, *Per*. 52; App. *Hisp* 63; L. Cassius Longinus in 107: Livy, *Per*. 65; Caes. *BGall* 1.7.4, 1.14.

sentries.[36] Unlike at Trasimene, however, it is not generally clear in these other ambushes and the associated failure to take adequate reconnaissance was primarily due to the general, the officers, or even the scouts themselves. Still, reconnaissance and the choice of marching routes were important command tasks where human errors at any point could destroy an army.

Before the Battle 3: choosing the battleground

If the army successfully made contact with the enemy with the intention of engaging them, then the choices of time and place to engage in a pitched battle were the two most important command decisions open to a general. Terrain, weather, and the size and position of the enemy forces could have a significant impact on the success of a Roman army in battle. However, our sources rarely suggest the legions lost due to unfavorable deployments, although it did happen. Ti. Sempronius Longus' decision to send his hungry troops across the frigid Trebia to fight Hannibal was clearly a poor deployment choice.[37] At Cannae, Varro chose ground that Aemilius had dismissed as unsuitable.[38] In 185, C. Calpurnius Piso sent his troops to support Roman foragers who had begun to skirmish with Spanish foragers. Perhaps a reasonable order given the importance of foraging, but the decision sparked a full-scale battle on unfavorable terrain.[39] In 104, M. Titinius engaged a slave army with an inferior Roman force on poor terrain, and his small army was routed.[40]

The sources, perhaps, do not mention this more frequently because of the manipular army's flexibility. Polybius suggests that, compared to the Hellenistic phalanxes, the division of the Roman manipular army into small, independent units made it readily adaptable to different terrains, and Roman armies certainly did operate effectively on varied terrains.[41] Still, when the Roman strategy was to engage the enemy army in a decisive battle, as was often the case, a commander generally had to, if possible, select ground that did not patently favor the enemy. This was certainly not an insignificant task, but it was often a reasonably straightforward assessment of level ground and obstacles.

Before the Battle 4: commanders, military councils, and legates

The prior discussion clarifies that the typical commander had two command tasks: (1) determining a sound route of march, including attendant supply lines, effective reconnaissance, and suitable water and forage opportunities; and (2) choosing a suitable time and place for battle. When making

36 M. Claudius Marcellus in 196: Livy 33.36.4–15; L. Aemilius Regillus in 190: Livy 37.2.11, 37.46.7–8; A. Manlius Vulso in 178: Livy 41.2; C. Marcius Figulus in 156: App. *Ill.* 11.

37 Polyb. 3.72.3–5; Livy 21.54–55.

38 Polyb. 3.112.2.

39 Livy 39.30–31.

40 Diod. Sic. 36.3.5.

41 Polyb. 18.32.10–12; Polyb. 18.22–26; see Livy 33.9–10, 41.18.

decisions to execute each of these important tasks, however, the general was not simply left to his own devices. Ever present was his military council, and often present was an experienced legate, who was able and expected to offer competent advice.

Judging by its frequent mentions in the sources, the commander's military council played a very important role in Roman command decisions.[42] The first centurions of each maniple apparently held a place on the military council, along with the military tribunes and, presumably, any legates who happened to accompany the commander.[43] These were usually all veteran campaigners. The councils were a critical link between the commander and the army: at these meetings, the commander relayed instructions to the officers in the council so that they could pass these on to the troops in the units.[44] More than just a command link though, the council provided a sounding-board and a source of advice for all kinds of critical military issues: routes of march, when and where to engage the enemy, what towns to attack, changes in strategy, responses to emissaries, truces; the list goes on. Essentially, military councils offered counsel on exactly those most important decisions the commander faced prior to the actual clash of soldiers. For example, when P. Cornelius' army attempted to intercept Hannibal near the Rhône, he discussed the most suitable locations for a battle with his tribunes.[45] After the Syracusans repulsed a Roman army, Ap. Claudius' council unanimously decided to forego any future attempts to take the city by assault.[46] In the Second Macedonian war, the consul P. Villius consulted his council to determine whether the army should march through a gorge – risky but direct – or take a less direct, but safer route.[47] When L. Scipio failed to goad Antiochus into engaging in a pitched battle, he consulted his military council, which, in turn, decided he should launch an attack.[48] In the Third Macedonian War, the consul P. Licinius Crassus summoned his council to determine where the army should operate in Thessaly.[49] Livy and Polybius sometimes note differences of opinion in councils, times when the commander was persuaded, and times when he was not. Their testimony indicates that the military council was an important, regular part of decision-making, providing the commander valuable input. Though responsibility for success or failure in a campaign would not be laid at the council's feet, this group provided important advice for the general.

42 References to military councils: Polyb. 3.82.4–5, 3.89.3, 8.7.5, 14.2.11, 14.9.1, 21.14–15, 21.16–17, 27.8.6; Livy 22.3.8, 24.45.2, 26.15.1–6, 27.20.1, 27.46.5, 30.5.1, 30.36.10, 37.14.4–15.9, 42.57.1, 44.35.4, 45.7.5–8.7.

43 Polyb. 6.24, 8.9, 8.7.5.

44 Livy 30.5.2–3, 37.5.2.

45 Polyb. 3.41.8.

46 Polyb. 8.7.5.

47 Livy 32.6.3.

48 Livy 37.39.1.

49 Livy 42.57.1.

In addition, the use of legates increased steadily during this period. Legates were experienced subordinate commanders, chosen by the general, and placed in commands of higher authority than that wielded by military tribunes. They provided additional command experience and ability that the commander could draw upon when on campaign.[50] They often performed important command tasks, ranging from commanding detachments, to commanding large segments of the battle line, and to standing back with the general to monitor a battle. Judging from Livy's references for the second century, they were generally of high rank, praetorians or, frequently, consulars.[51] When consular, they would often have more command experience than their commander – surely an asset for decision-making.

The Battle 1: deployment and order of battle

With the place and time of battle decided, the army deployed. The Romans of the middle Republic, who had a set order to pitching camp, fixed places for bunking units, and set procedures for breaking camp and marching, also had a standard battle deployment – at least in its basic form. Polybius refers several times to a customary order of deployment. Sometimes he does this to indicate the Romans deployed that way, and occasionally to indicate a deviation from the norm, as at Cannae.[52] Here, again, one may question the degree to which Polybius has over-rationalized deployment and presented it as excessively orderly, though there is little need to worry that his basic picture is not sound. When Polybius described a customary deployment, he meant just that: customary, a conventional deployment pattern for the Romans. Livy's descriptions of battle deployments also support that a conventional deployment existed. Indeed, the nature of battle, based on heavy infantry battle lines clashing, dictated a general shape of deployment. This deployment consisted of cavalry on the wings, heavy infantry maniples in the center, and skirmishers in the front; indeed, that is regularly how the Romans deployed in the late third and second centuries. Tellingly, when Polybius described the mustering of allied troops for Roman field armies, he noted that they were divided into a left wing and right wing, surely denoting their common positions in the battle line.[53] Each legion and wing, and their constituent maniples, maintained their

50 Keppie (1984a, 39); Rosenstein (2011, 136–37). See *MRR* 1.237–573 for known legates in the period 218–101.

51 Command tasks: Livy 31.3, 31.21, 31.27, 31.44, 32.28, 34, 17, 34, 50, 36.17, 37.1, 40.27.3–6, 40.39. Consular and praetorian ranks: Livy 32.28, 36.1, 36.17, 37.1, 40.27.3–6.

52 Polyb. 1.33.8–9, 2.28.2, 2.30.1, 3.27, 3.72.10, 3.113.1, 14.8.5. See also Serrati's chapter in this volume.

53 Polyb. 6.26.

integrity in their camp positions and on the march, reinforcing their need for integrity in the battle line.[54]

The Roman legions commonly occupied the center of the battle line, with the allies on the flanks, but this was not always the case. The legions could occupy the flanks, or one legion and one wing might occupy the battle line while the others remained in reserve.[55] Clearly, the size of the battlefield must have played a role in deployments like these. Still, the deployment of heavy infantry in the center, cavalry on the wings, and skirmishers out front, did not vary greatly in the middle Republic.[56] The placement of this legion or that allied contingent in the main battle line certainly could contribute to the battle's outcome, but it is not at all clear that any general could accurately assess the unit cohesion of two comparable legions or allied infantry wings before battle. In short, decisions about the composition of the main battle line largely came down to two questions: which heavy infantry units should occupy the front and which units, if any, should be kept in reserve?[57] These were not necessarily taxing command decisions.

What did not seem to change from commander to commander was the structure of the Roman legionary part of the central battle line. The Roman heavy infantry was made up of maniples arranged in at least three lines – those of *hastati*, *principes*, and *triarii* – possibly providing a built-in mechanic for relieving ineffective Roman troops in the killing zone.[58] While a rare commander may have adjusted the normal manipular spacing or depth, there do not appear to be any references to commanders deploying maniples in anything shallower than the standard three lines.[59] Though it is hardly certain, there is a good reason to suppose that, in the second century, even the allied Italian heavy infantry was organized into maniples, or maniple-like units.[60] Polybius states that the allies used the same levy selection methods as the Romans and makes no distinction between allied Italian and Roman heavy infantry when discussing battles, suggesting that at least *he* thought that there was no tactical distinction. Indeed, he uses the manipular terms of *hastati*, *principes*, and *triarii* to refer to all the heavy infantry.[61] In addition, Livy and Plutarch suggest Italian and Roman infantry

54 Dobson (2008, 66–121); Polyb. 6.40. The hand-picked *extraordinarii* were the exception: Polyb. 6.40.4–6.

55 Some examples: Livy 27.13.15; 31.21.7; 34.15.3.

56 On skirmishers, see Anders (2015).

57 Since the Romans had an orderly rotation of the army's marching order, perhaps they also had an orderly rotation of the units occupying the front line.

58 Livy 8.8.9–14.

59 On tactical deployment of the Roman army, with varying frontage and line depth, see Taylor (2014).

60 See Armstrong's chapter, in this volume, for the possible flexibility of this term.

61 Erdkamp (2007a, 49–55). See also Helm's chapter in this volume for more discussion of the social and regional make-up of legionaries in this period.

had at least roughly comparable equipment.[62] Even supposing, however, that the allied heavy infantry was organized fundamentally differently than the maniple system, there is no reason to suppose this influenced the conventions of grand deployment.

The commander must have regularly delegated the actual details of deployment to the tribunes. Polybius gives an example at the battle of the Telamon (225) where both consuls explicitly instructed their tribunes to draw up the infantry battle lines while they proceeded with the cavalry.[63] Since the infantry battle line of even half of a consular army would have conservatively stretched over one mile – quite out of voice range and indeed quite likely out of effective sight – the tribunes had to manage the actual deployment.[64]

Though it happened rarely, if a general unwisely tinkered with the conventional deployment system, catastrophe could result. C. Terentius Varro's deployment plan at Cannae seems the clearest example. Varro accepted battle when Aemilius would have looked for more favorable ground, then doubled down on his error by deploying the maniples in deeper-than-normal attack columns, positioned closer-than-normal to adjacent maniples. The soldiers were packed too tightly to fight effectively.[65] Hannibal's tactical brilliance certainly contributed significantly to the Roman defeat, but Varro aided matters by overriding the maniples' normal deployment. A failure to deploy in normal battle order may also have caused Cn. Fulvius Flaccus' 212 defeat at Herdonea, though Flaccus may not have initiated the faulty deployment. His reportedly unruly soldiers were so eager to fight that they impulsively deployed with little regard for their assigned positions and refused to reform properly when the tribunes pointed this out. Granted, Livy's narrative of this battle is a notorious doublet suspect, and a skewed source might have blamed Fulvius' lack of control or absolved him and blamed the soldiers.[66] Either way, the testimony suggests the resulting battle line was not planned and poorly formed. The Romans could not withstand the Carthaginian charge, and some 16,000 soldiers died.[67] These exceptions, however, suggest the rule. The system functioned properly without micromanagement when left untampered with – though, of course, this by no means necessarily resulted in victory.

62 Polyb. 6.21.5; Livy 34.38–39; Plut. *Aem.* 20.

63 Polyb. 2.26.3, 2.27.4.

64 A rough estimate: 1 legion = 10 maniples each of 120 men in lines of *hastati* and *principes*. Positing a depth of three men in each maniple and 4.5 feet occupied by each soldier in the line, each maniple extended 180 feet (120 men / 3 ranks = 40 men × 4.5 feet spacing = 180 feet long). 10 maniples + 9 maniple-sized gaps in between = 3420 feet of infantry. Half of a consular army would extend well over a mile (± 6840 feet not including cavalry). When both legions and wings formed the main battle line, it would extend 13,680 feet without cavalry.

65 Polyb. 3.113.3, 115; Livy 22.47.8–10.

66 Erdkamp (2006a, 549–51).

67 Livy 25.21.1–10.

The Battle 2: The infantry clash and battlefield dynamics in the "killing zone"

Historians in recent decades have analyzed the mechanics of the manipular army in battle.[68] At the macro level, pitched battles between the Romans and their enemies from 218 to 100 consisted of clashes between battle lines of, more-or-less, close-ordered infantry. As units in the battle lines engaged in the limited "killing zones" of hand-to-hand and missile-weapons, each sought to disrupt their opponents so those enemy units would fail to hold position, become disordered, and, optimally, disintegrate – their constituent soldiers no longer resisting and instead fleeing or dying. At this scale, terrain and the positioning and maneuvering of units could play an important role. Ideally, a heavy unit faced one foe in one direction, as units along the battle line would, when not flanked or encircled. Attacks to the side and rear by infantry or cavalry tended to increase the disruption in a unit as soldiers felt compelled to respond not only to a single direct threat to their front – the default and anticipated vector of enemy attack – but also multiple attacks from multiple vectors. Under such stressors, units in a battle line could fail to withstand the enemy. When enough units failed, so did the battle line.[69]

Many questions remain concerning the behavior of the soldiers in the killing zone. To address some of these, Sabin has developed an informal model of combat accounting for four features of Roman battles: (1) their length of many hours; (2) the far greater casualties suffered by the defeated, suggesting both sides sustained relatively few casualties until one side broke; (3) the infantry's ability to backpedal for significant distances yet remain in the fight; and (4) the importance of multiple lines of soldiers in combat. He proposed that, in the killing zone, Roman battles did not consist of soldiers jammed into a shoving match of locked shields, such as with the usual image of the traditional Greek-phalanx style *othismos*. Nor did the infantry engage in a single, continuous, hours-long match of psychologically and physically exhausting hand-to-hand dueling – a physical impossibility. Instead, infantry combat consisted of a series of pauses with some space between opposing front lines – a default state of rest – punctuated by flurries of hand-to-hand combat when the lines clashed. During the pauses, the front-rank fighters would rest and, optimally, regain the strength and determination to clash again.[70]

At the level of the individual soldiers and smallest tactical units in the killing zone, morale (the willingness to stay in the fight) and unit cohesion (the capacity of a unit's soldiers to maintain their positions in formation and resist enemies) were the critical factors in the success or failure of an

68 Culham (1989); Sabin (1996); Sabin (2000); Goldsworthy (2000); Zhmodikov (2000); Goldsworth (2001); McCall (2002); Quesada Sanz (2006); Koons (2011); Rubio-Campillo, Valdés Matías, and Ble (2015); Anders (2015); Slavik (2017).

69 Culham (1989) is the landmark description of this system.

70 Sabin (2000). See also Quesada-Sanz (2006).

ancient army locked in battle – a point Culham noted decades ago.[71] Soldiers in units that maintained their space, kept formation, and were able to withstand clashes with enemy infantry, would succeed against those who lost their ability to resist attack, physically or, more often, psychologically. Units of soldiers that lost the capacity to resist, deformed, disintegrated, and fled.[72]

The success of any formation depended on its unit cohesion. Soldiers who stayed in their ranks, if not actively attacking, then at least defending themselves and their nearby comrades, collectively made stronger and more stable unit formations. These, in turn, enabled the main battle line to maintain its formations and hold its ground. Defeat in battles, a point well attested in ancient sources and emphasized by modern scholars, came with the disruption and turning of one army's units. The stressors of close combat were enormous, as soldiers fought and died in the noise, dust, and stink of the battlefield. The safety and effectiveness of those soldiers' formations depended on the individuals in it resisting fear and panic and staying in their place alongside their comrades. Once enough soldiers in a unit reached that turning point, where fear and the accompanying panic and hope for self-preservation overwhelmed any desire to stand firm with one's comrades, the unit lost its cohesion and disintegrated, either during one of the pauses in combat or during a melee with the enemy. After this threshold moment of disintegration, the soldiers of the defeated formations fled the battlefield, opening themselves to slaughter. On the larger scale, a critical breaking point was reached when enough soldiers abandoned the safety of their formations, and the battle line itself turned and broke. Then the losing infantry formations collapsed, losing their spatial integrity as individuals sought to save their own lives. The defeated fled, and the victors often pursued, killing those unfortunate enough to be caught in flight.[73]

These interactions between soldiers in and around the killing zone must be understood not as a chaotic system but rather as a complex system.[74] Rubio-Campillo, Valdes, and Ble make the critical distinction:

> Warfare is not a chaotic system; the situations studied by military historians and conflict archaeologists are robust enough to minimal variation on the initial conditions, as they will not produce major changes on the dynamics of the system. Even though some authors suggest the contrary, by its mathematical definition a chaotic system is not a good model of human interactions, because the sensitivity of the system to minimal changes on initial conditions is not as extreme as to be impossible to predict.[75]

71 Culham (1989); discussed as "horizontal cohesion" by Brice in this volume. See also Helm in this volume.

72 Culham (1989); Goldsworthy (1996, 206–27); Sabin (2000); McCall (2002, 13–20).

73 Culham (1989, 196–202); Sabin (2000, 14–15); McCall (2002, 13–20); Koon (2011, 91–93).

74 Culham (1989) employed the term "chaotic."

75 Rubio-Campillo, Valdés Matías, and Ble (2015, 246).

In a chaotic system, the authors note, changing the number of combatants in an army of thousands by one soldier would have extreme effects – an unlikely proposition. And so, complex systems theory provides a better framework for modeling ancient combat than chaos theory:

> [Complex systems] portray a situation where the interactions between the components of the model are non-linear. This means that some properties of complex system cannot be detected in any individual part but emerge from the relation of their components. These emergent properties are difficult to predict, but not chaotic.[76]

The battlefield systems, the clash of weapons, horrific sounds, sights, and smells, all affecting the bottom line of soldiers' morale and units' cohesion, developed in a complex and non-linear fashion. The condition of an individual soldier, his morale, his willingness to stick with the unit and stay in the fight, and the extent to which their comrades nearby perceived this, all affected those comrades. The affected comrades, in return, influenced the individual with their own projections of fear. The system was a complex set of feedback loops, increasing or decreasing unit entropy. If the entropy in a portion of a unit was too great, the morale of one or more of the soldiers there too low, those soldiers would lose their ability to defend their space and keep formation, crowding against their comrades and surrendering ground. Unit cohesion diminished. At the breaking point, soldiers fled. If this flight panicked enough other soldiers, the unit disintegrated. As the small units collapsed so too, ultimately, did the larger units of the army and the battle line itself.[77]

The field of Roman battle studies has to date not produced broadly persuasive, detailed, and formal – that is, mathematical – models of ancient combat dynamics.[78] Still, Rubio-Campillo, Matías, and Ble's effort to develop a simple one helps us visualize the systems at play in the killing zone that has been proposed in historians' various informal models. Several identifiable factors must have determined whether a formation remained combat-effective, and maintained its space and shape on the battlefield: (1) the physical condition of each soldier, including levels of fatigue, hunger, and wounding; (2) the psychological condition of each soldier, including resistance to battlefield stressors generated by friend and foe and the willingness, conscious and unconscious, to stay with comrades in formation, which is what we mean by morale; (3) the presence of nearby comrades and their own psychological condition; and (4) the presence of veterans, and unit officers, like centurions, to the extent they served to inspire and steady

76 Rubio-Campillo, Valdés Matías, and Ble (2015, 247).
77 Culham (1989).
78 Though for an investigation of how video games provide the features of formal models of combat, see McCall (forthcoming).

nearby soldiers through setting an example. The effectiveness of a battle line came down to the individual soldiers. Their individual ability to withstand pressures and harm, and maintain their space ultimately determined the cohesion of the maniples. The cohesion of the maniples determined, ultimately, the ability of the battle line to withstand the enemy. Generally, then, a successful battlefield army would consist of soldiers that (1) maintained their formations while interacting with terrain, enemy formations, and the stressors of battle; (2) put physical (wounding, killing, sometimes shoving) and psychological pressure on soldiers in enemy formations so that those soldiers lost morale and their formations disintegrated; and (3) capitalized on the disintegration of enemy formations by killing and capturing significant numbers of the enemy, optimally crushing further resistance in that engagement and campaign.

In a complex system, such as that which existed in the killing zone, a commander had little control over the performance of soldiers and the elemental units of the battle line.[79] Instead, the critical task of keeping the soldiers in the core units together and the men in the fight came, first, from the centurions and then from the tribunes. The Romans recognized this, acknowledged Polybius, in their criteria for selecting effective centurions:

> [The Romans] wish the centurions not so much to be venturesome and daredevil as to be natural leaders, of a steady and sedate spirit. They do not desire them so much to be men who will initiate attacks and open the battle, but men who will hold their ground when worsted and hard-pressed and be ready to die at their posts.[80]

Anecdotes confirm the potential of centurions, and even tribunes, to provide heroic, low-level leadership and keep their soldiers in the fight.[81] It was, perhaps, their most important function and, critically, they normally had to operate without direct oversight from the commander.

The Battle 3: the commander in battle

Still, Roman commanders had some limited decisions available to help soldiers and officers remain orderly and in the fight. They could (1) inspire a section of the battle line through their personal presence; (2) support a flagging section through the deployment of reserves; (3) add additional vectors

79 Culham (1989, 199–201).

80 Polyb. 6.24.8–9: βούλονται δ᾽ εἶναι τοὺς ταξιάρχους οὐχ οὕτως θρασεῖς καὶ φιλοκινδύνους ὡς ἡγεμονικοὺς καὶ στασίμους καὶ βαθεῖς μᾶλλον ταῖς ψυχαῖς, οὐδ᾽ ἐξ ἀκεραίου προσπίπτειν ἢ κατάρχεσθαι τῆς μάχης, ἐπικρατουμένους δὲ καὶ πιεζομένους ὑπομένειν καὶ ἀποθνήσκειν ὑπὲρ τῆς χώρας.

81 Tribunes: Livy 27.14.8; 34.46.11–12, 41.2.9. Centurions: Livy 25.14.4–5; 26.5.12; 34.46.11–12; 39.31.9.

of attack against the enemy through flank and rear attacks by cavalry and unengaged infantry; and (4) help maintain order after the battle, especially when pursuing defeated enemies. These will be considered next.

1. Inspiring

Commanders in the middle Republic, as Rosenstein noted, were not expected to be particularly skilled at command decisions, but were expected to be outstanding models of *virtus*, martial manliness, in battle.[82] This ethos reflected the practical reality that offering moral support was often the only thing a general could do once the battle lines clashed, a task requiring character and empathy, not tactical skill. No doubt the presence of the general, facing danger, sharing risks, and urging his soldiers on, could provide a great boost to surrounding soldiers' morale. Certainly, multiple examples exist of generals providing moral support to a segment of the battle line.[83] The length of battle lines, the din of battle, and the grimly absorbing work of killing or being killed must have ensured, however, that such commander support was limited to a small section of the line.[84] Additionally, when the general committed to rallying soldiers at points along the front of the line, he sacrificed any ability to monitor the battle as a whole.[85]

2. Deploying reserves

Beyond the relief systems built into the three lines of maniples, Roman commanders sometimes kept additional troops in reserve to relieve units faltering in the main battle line.[86] This deployment of reserves at key moments in the action could be one of the general's most important command tasks in battle. Unsurprisingly, reserves that were effectively deployed could tip the balance, by bringing fresh troops into the killing zone and allowing comrades weakened by fatigue, wounds, and stress to retire. Assessing when and where to deploy reserves could be critical.[87] The command itself, however, was not enough to guarantee a successful reinforcement and an ineffective relief operation could lead to the collapse of a battle line. Livy suggests such a collapse occurred under M. Claudius Marcellus at Numistro against Hannibal. Marcellus had kept the 18th legion in reserve and deployed it to relieve

82 Rosenstein (1990, 114–52).

83 See Rosenstein (1990, 188–120 and n. 11). Goldsworthy (1996, 146–63); Livy (34.14) gives an excellent example of Consul M. Porcius Cato rallying men.

84 Livy (41.18.11–12) notes when the consul Petillius was killed in front of the standards, rallying his troops, only a few saw the disaster; the rest of the army was unaware. Before our period, P. Decius Mus' self-sacrifice at Sentinum was not perceived by his colleague Fabius and the troops on the right of the battle line (Livy 10.29.5).

85 Goldsworthy (1996, 149–70).

86 Some examples: Livy 31.21.7, 34.15.1, 35.5.1–2; App. *Hisp.* 40.

87 Cato the Elder in Spain is an excellent example: Livy 34.14.

the allied right wing and *extraordinarii* when they faltered. Something went terribly wrong. The press of allies falling back and the legion moving forward dissolved into disorder. The whole segment of the line collapsed, and the Romans lost the battle.[88]

3. Outflanking by tactical maneuver – the cavalry and infantry

Though tactical assessment and maneuver have been touted as the critical skills of a great commander, once an army was deployed, a general could often do little to execute such tactical maneuvers.[89] When they did occur, these maneuvers were intended to outflank the enemy formations and attack them from the flank or rear, additional vectors that further strained soldiers already fighting an enemy to the front.

Most often, however, flank and rear attacks in this period occurred, not through an infantry maneuver, but through the success of the Roman cavalry.[90] Beyond pursuing a defeated enemy, cavalry fulfilled two critical tasks on the battlefield. They defended the flanks of the Roman heavy infantry battle line and sought to harass the flanks and rear of the enemy battle line. This latter function often required engaging and driving off enemy cavalry who were similarly tasked.[91] The Roman cavalry of the Republic were generally effective at this. There is little reason to suppose, however, that their maneuvers were specially controlled by the commander, except in cases – increasingly rare in the second century – when the army commander rode with the cavalry. Their long range and high speed of operation prohibited this. Rather, the cavalry functioned according to the principles held for centuries, perhaps reinforced by the general at the start of a battle, but standard nonetheless: guard the flank and look for ways to attack the enemy's flank and rear.

Authentic Roman infantry flanking movements, where the commander maneuvered infantry to attack the sides or rear of the enemy battle line, are not common in the sources.[92] Some of the greatest Roman victories in this period suggest that even the most skilled Roman generals did not always engage, or need to engage, in such maneuvers to win.[93] Scipio's planned and executed double-flanking movement at Ilipa stands out as an exception of complex tactical outflanking maneuvers.[94] He did not repeat himself at Zama; there his only major maneuver, if it can be called that, was not to

88 Livy 27.12, though note that Plutarch (*Marc.* 24) makes no mention of the defeat.

89 Goldsworthy (1996, 169–75).

90 See McCall (2002, 53–62). Examples: Polyb. 2.30, 2.34, 15.9–14 (Livy 30.33–34); Livy 31.21, 33.36 (possibly), 35.5 (probably), 37.42, 39.31, 40.40 (probably).

91 McCall (2002, 13–25).

92 Some exceptions: Polyb. 10.39; Livy 34.14, 38.26, 40.32.

93 Taylor (2017b) has helpful overviews.

94 Polyb. 11.22–23.

flank at all but to recall his pursuing *hastati* – who, it should be noted, had succeeded against Hannibal's infantry with blood and steel and struggle, not through any tactical maneuver – and reform his battle line so that the *principes* and *triarii* occupied the wings, with the *hastati* still in the center.[95] Ultimately, Laelius and Massinissa knew the role of cavalry well as they brought their troopers home to strike the Carthaginian rear after driving off enemy cavalry. They sealed the victory.[96]

When infantry successfully outflanked the enemy, a sub-commander was often responsible, not the overall commander. At the Metaurus (207), Claudius Nero, commanding on the right wing and finding the right largely unengaged by the enemy, detached some inactive cohorts and marched them behind the Roman battle line so that they arrived to support Livius Salinator by attacking the enemy's right flank.[97] A sub-commander also exploited an opportunity at Cynoscephalae. Though the battle narrative is difficult to disentangle, Polybius insists (and Livy concurs) that the Roman victory sprang from a tribune who, on his own initiative, led 20 maniples in an attack on Macedonian right flank from the rear.[98] At Magnesia, Roman and auxiliary forces defeated the Syrian wings, including a stalwart defense by a subordinate officer at the Roman camp. No significant heavy infantry flanking maneuvers happened that day, and the commander, L. Scipio, seems not to have directed any tactical maneuvers at all in this victory.[99] Even at Pydna, the commander Aemilius Paullus reportedly did not order the outflanking of the Macedonian battle line, but noticed gaps in the Macedonian line as it drove the Romans back and ordered the Roman soldiers to work into those gaps and attack the less maneuverable phalanx in these weak spots.[100] These examples do not suggest that a commander initiated tactical flanking maneuvers often or that they were regularly a decisive part of battlefield victory. They do illustrate, however, that effective sub-commanders could often initiate such maneuvers and thus do a great deal to make a general shine.

4. Pursuing the defeated

Not uncommonly, the victorious army would pursue the defeated enemy, continuing to deal death and potentially shattering the defeated army beyond recovery. This pursuit, however, could be a hazardous affair. The victors could become disordered in pursuit. Under effective leadership, an enemy in flight might rally and take advantage of the Roman disorder. Appian attests

95 Polyb. 15.9–14; Livy 30.33–34.
96 Polyb. 15.12–14; Livy 30.33–35.
97 Livy 27.48.12–14.
98 Polyb. 18.26.1–3, Livy 33.9.7–9.
99 Livy 37.40–44.
100 Livy 44.41, Plut. *Aem.* 20.

to this several times in wars against the Spanish tribes. The Romans drove off the enemy, grew disorganized in pursuit, and were defeated when the enemy rallied.[101] This may have been a result of the often-rugged Spanish terrain, but the danger must have existed in theaters outside Spain. Keeping the troops orderly in pursuit was an important command task. Still, subordinate officers must have been critical in this. Scipio at Zama, for example, used a bugle call to make his *hastati* stop their drive on the enemy and reform ranks. The *hastati* listened. That they did must have reflected their training and the quality of their officers. What if they had not listened? Would Scipio have had any real control beyond that point?

Conclusions

Some years ago, as Nathan Rosenstein's graduate student, I read in *Imperatores Victi* that the aristocracy could not allow skill at command to be an important factor in the electability of a praetor or consul. It would make for an uneven playing field and privilege a small number of aristocrats, when the aristocracy collectively sought to maintain the flow of offices and honors to a larger number of the elite. And so, the Romans tended to explain military defeat in three fundamental ways that did not involve the skill or ineptitude of the commander: his poor display of *virtus* on the battlefield, the insufficient *virtus* of his soldiers in the battle, and his failure to secure the gods' blessings through proper sacrifice and observation of omens.

I underestimated the Romans at the time, thinking they avoided reality and expected far too little actual skill from their generals. Twenty years later, I suggest they understood all too well that any commander had quite limited control over the outcome of a battle, and that limited control was best in a system where usually it was elected amateurs who commanded armies. What this brief investigation suggests most of all is that the elaborate system of protocols combined with – often frequent – command inputs from subordinates, buffered the typical general from disaster. They made it so the typical commander needed very little command skill to expect a positive outcome from his year in command – or at least to avoid a disaster. A mediocre commander, who did not insist on micromanaging things his own way, could rely on the system. The province and enemy, as well as the army and officers, were set by the senate, electorate, tribunes, and soldiers. Logistics were overseen by the senate and quaestors, and could regularly be delegated to subordinates. The commander did have to make important decisions about routes of march and reconnaissance, and the place and time of battle, but a military council, and quite often legates – not to mention tribunes and centurions – were at hand providing experienced advice, and the general could go with the wisest counsel.

101 App. *Hisp.* 56, 58, 64 (a feigned flight), 67.

Once the actual battle commenced, a commander typically required little tactical skill. The tribunes deployed and managed legions and wings in battle, the manipular system had built-in reserves, and the battle line remained constant with one or more legions of heavy infantry in the front, the rest in reserve, cavalry on the wings, and skirmishers in front. Centurions were the point officers in the killing zone, assisting the soldiers in their formation, helping them hold firm, rallying for new clashes with the enemy close by. Tribunes were generally nearby to provide greater direction if needed, sometimes even winning battles by initiating tactical maneuvers. Cavalry had a clear task. The general was left to intervene personally to shore up morale and, perhaps, to issue the order for reinforcements if the triple-maniple line was insufficient. Very occasionally, he might order a unit to flank or exploit an enemy weakness, but this was not common. Above all, infantry holding the line and cavalry attacking flanks and rear accounted for most Roman victories. Finally, if the Romans soldiers proved victorious, the general might command an orderly pursuit of the defeated, though this too would fall to the sub-officers to execute.

At best, Roman battles – from the command perspective – were loosely controlled mayhem. Victory was never guaranteed in a complex system like a Roman battlefield. A well-trained army, talented officers, and a skilled commander could still lose a battle. Events at one spot in the killing zone could magnify into the collapse of a line. The typical general could do very little to bring about victory or defeat once the battle began.

A Roman commander could rely upon little – except for the system: skilled officers, tested conventions for units, camps, deployments, and procedures. The manipular system, developed over the decades, generally operated efficiently and effectively regardless of the commander. The average general could, if he chose, rely on the system and the experience of others at most steps in the process: the selection of army, officers, and province, the camping, marching, and supply of the army, and even the time place and deployment for battle. And so Roman aristocrats could happily compete for the consulship, knowing that if they did secure the office, they would not generally require any special qualifications, other than simply being an aristocrat, to avoid disaster and probably even secure some level of victory in their year of command.