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Military Comparison of the Han Dynasty and the Roman Republic

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The Middle and Late Roman Republic (264 BCE - 27 BCE) and the Han Dynasty (202 BCE - 220 CE) characterized two concurrent military superpowers of the ancient world. Anchoring opposite ends of the Eurasian continent, the two powers shared structural similarities that enabled their longevity and resilience to ruination.

Both states suffered crippling civil wars and recurrent external threats, causing robust government and military organizations to grow. They approached the competition continuum as differently as Latin script to Chinese characters (potentia vs. 力—power) but reached similar foundational deductions. Rome persistently expanded throughout its Republican period, requiring a flexible, adaptable military backed by the “excellence of their institutions.”¹ After the initial reconquest, the Han inherited existing Qin structures, reforming and strengthening its bureaucratic-military system despite “Confucian pacifism and antimilitary bias of the scholar-official class.”²

Republican Rome and the Han dynasty shared similar characteristics of strong-rooted governmental institutions resilient to catastrophe enabled by their depth of manpower and dominant ideologies.

Founded in 509 BCE, the Roman Republic formed after deposing the last Tarquin king and carefully balanced power between the Roman patricians (nobles) and plebeians (commoners). The Romans observed the various Greek systems on which to base their newfound government, ranging from monarchies, oligarchies, and democracies. To Polybius, the Roman Republic echoed the finest features of the three, astutely picking and choosing the strengths of each system.³

Looking to adopt an official constitution, the Romans sent envoys to inspect Athenian democracy. They returned with a copy of Solon's laws, leading to the implementation of the Law of Twelve Tables, effectively the Roman Bill of Rights.⁴ The Tables enacted governing legislation that strengthened the concept of citizenship and lasted well into the Roman Empire.⁵

³ Polybius, The Histories, 380.
The enfranchisement of Roman society birthed a structurally resilient, multifaceted system to buttress its military institution and mobilize massive reserves of manpower.6

The Qin dynasty united all of China for the first time in 221 BCE, gaining the Mandate of Heaven and laying the foundation for the successor Han dynasty.7 Only lasting for fifteen years, the Qin supplied the Han with precedence for ruling a unified Chinese state. The Qin rose from the Warring States period (476-221 BCE), employing effective reforms bequeathed by the philosopher Shang Yang (390-338 BCE). His changes included “programs of administrative efficiency, agricultural reform, and single-minded pursuit of political and military power.”8

Shang Yang’s systematic reforms strengthened the Qin state enabling it to unify China, which the Han subsequently inherited. The cruelty of the Qin discredited the ideal of imperial government, but after the Han, “it was accepted as the orthodox norm for organizing mankind.”9

The Han vilified the Qin emperor, Shih-Huang, to distance themselves from his cruelty.10 Imperial power centralized around the Emperor supported by the Mandate of Heaven — divine legitimacy — originating from the Qin's predecessors, the Zhou.11 Ultimately, the Mandate of Heaven enabled the establishment of a resilient state dependent on subservience that had astutely learned from the shortcomings of its predecessors.

Republican Rome rose from a single city to a multi-state power, unlike the Han, who inherited an entire empire after a brief civil war. Under the Han, China began seeing itself as a unified culture; in contrast, Rome mistreated its' allied states, catalyzing rebellions, and resulting in the Social Wars, leading to the extension of citizenship to their Italian allies.12 Geographically, the Han held relatively secure territory, focusing on external threats at the northern and western borders from the steppe.

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Their primary nomadic foe, the Xiongnu, vacillated between unified confederations and internal conflict, which the Han approached in a Byzantine-like fashion, often expending capital instead of troops.  

In comparison, the Romans faced other dominant empires during this period, nearly suffering catastrophe in the Second Punic War against Carthage. Still, subsequently, it quickly overcame the other western hegemons, such as the Greek Successor States. Geopolitically, Rome and the Han were at dissimilar stages in their rise to power but dominated their respective spheres concurrently. Ultimately, Rome remained in ascendancy while the Han focused on territorial control.

The Roman Institutional Model

The Roman political state continually evolved to balance its growing power and expand its citizenship base. The pillars of the Roman Republic revolved around the patricians — the consuls and Senate, contrasting with the plebeians — who fell within societal ranks based upon wealth. The first Roman census predated the Republic, enacted by the sixth king of Rome, Servius Tullius, and split the population into five military classes based on asses (Roman currency). In addition, citizens too poor to achieve placement in the fifth class were exempted from military service. Consequently, the census served as a tool for the government to collect taxes and register eligible men for the legions.

In the Republican era, the Roman government functioned as a continual clash between patricians and the plebeians, which provided a constant friction point in peacetime but reformed to enfranchise more of the population.

Two Roman consuls, elected for a year, served as the chief government magistrates in the Republic. Resident in Rome, they were “responsible for all matters of public concern, since all the other officers, except the tribunes of the people, (were) subordinate to them.” In war, they had almost unlimited power, able to “order allies around as they please, appoint military tribunes, levy troops, and select the best men for particular jobs; they have the right, out in the field, to punish anyone under their command; and they are also entitled to draw as much money from the public purse as they see fit.”

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14 Livy, The Early History of Rome, 81-82.
17 Polybius, The Histories, 385.
19 Polybius, The Histories, 381.
Republican Rome “militated strongly against anything that could lead to the elevation of one aristocrat to a commanding position within the state.”\textsuperscript{20} Skepticism of unlimited lifetime power in one competent citizen, a result of the overthrow of the Tarquin kings, prevented the long-term centralization of authority until the fall of the Republic. In a crisis, the Romans chose a single dictator to replace the two consuls, serving a limited term but holding supreme emergency authority.\textsuperscript{21}

Ultimately, the Roman system paired executive power with legislative leadership, which enabled Roman consuls to act decisively in war, and the brevity of the office provided accountability.

In legend, the founder of Rome, Romulus, created the Senate with one hundred "fathers," or "Heads of Clans."\textsuperscript{22} Initially only filled by patricians, the Senate expanded to include plebeians, growing to three hundred in 509 BCE.\textsuperscript{23} Senators arose from experienced magisterial positions — aediles, quaestors, and other governmental offices — and served for life.\textsuperscript{24}

The Senate had the power of legal interpretation and drafting decrees, but the people ultimately decided whether “to pass any law to deprive the Senate of their authority, incomes, and privileges.”\textsuperscript{25} Its most critical job centered on managing the treasury and enacting taxes, thus controlling the capability of the state to conduct war.\textsuperscript{26} Lastly, the Senate served as a leadership pool filled with prior Consuls and war-experienced commanders, which tempered Roman foreign policy with realism.

The plebeians, by far the largest societal group in Rome, manned the legions and filled several critical political positions within the government. The people exercised institutional power through elected tribunes who retained a veto, able to temper patrician decrees.\textsuperscript{27}

Citizenship enfranchised the Roman plebeians, allowing them to vote for tribunes and guaranteed equal protection under the Twelve Tables. In 451 BCE, a temporary executive of ten \textit{decemvirs} replaced the consulship and developed the Twelve Tables, proposing them to the public.\textsuperscript{28}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{22} Livy, \textit{The Early History of Rome}, 40.
\bibitem{24} Andrew Lintott, \textit{The Constitution of the Roman Republic}, 68-69.
\bibitem{25} Polybius, \textit{The Histories}, 383.
\bibitem{26} Polybius, \textit{The Histories}, 381.
\bibitem{27} Polybius, \textit{The Histories}, 385.
\bibitem{28} Livy, \textit{The Early History of Rome}, 235.
\end{thebibliography}
The plebeians reviewed, edited, and adopted the Twelve Tables, which became "the fountainhead of public and private law." Ultimately, friction between the patrician and plebeian classes caused continual reform to the law system, but the solid foundation of the Twelve Tables buttressed Roman societal structures, giving plebeians of the five conscripted classes a stake in the state's survival.

The Roman institution controlled a complex network of bilateral treaties that tied allied Italian states to Rome, supplying armies when Rome beckoned. The allies suffered mistreatment as second-class citizens, causing the Social War, which broke out in 90 BCE but illustrated a shift in allied attitude as the Italian elite now preferred equality and citizenship over independence. The Italian allies supplied enormous manpower to the Roman war machine. For example, despite losing 120,000 men in the Second Punic War, more than half at the Battle of Cannae (216 BCE), “casualties that would have crippled most ancient states,” it managed to man multiple theaters concurrently to defeat Hannibal.

Furthermore, in 225 BCE, a Gallic invasion forced Italy to arms. By census, Rome determined it had 273,000 men available versus Italian allies’ 361,000, emblematic of their crucial role in the Roman military machine.

Moreover, practical accounting of available manpower enabled Rome to draw upon deep reserves from all classes of citizens and allies to serve in the legions, which created a system resilient to even multiple military disasters.

The Han Institutional Model

The Han dynasty had inherited and owed a deep debt to the Qin's imperial governmental models and practices, whom “they castigated as cruel and despotic.” Fundamentally, the Han established systems that prevented unlimited power by spreading the responsibility of offices amongst two or more officials of equal rank. Bureaucrats and administrators held power in the Han dynasty as part of the inherited Qin system. Bureaucrats formed a political entity, sometimes even becoming kingmakers, as in the case of the Second Emperor's demise.

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30 Sage, The Republican Roman Army, 125.
32 Sage, The Republican Roman Army, 125.
33 Sage, The Republican Roman Army, 125.
Imperial eunuch Chao Kao engineered the fall of the Qin dynasty after creating an illusion of insanity for the Second Emperor, who subsequently committed suicide.\(^{36}\) In addition, Chao Kao eliminated the two most competent Qin generals, Fusu and Meng Tian, by ordering them to kill themselves in the emperor's name, which they eventually did.\(^{37}\) Ultimately, bureaucrats held an outsized position of power in the Qin, which continued into the Han dynasty.

After Chao Kao's play for power, the Qin dynasty collapsed into civil war. Liu Bang, subsequently known as Emperor Gaozu, reunited the empire in February 202 BCE, founding the Han dynasty and ending the civil war.\(^{38}\) After regaining the territory of the Qin, the Han initially relied on force to govern but soon sought “a moral and intellectual justification which would legitimize their rule in superhuman terms” and thus regain the “Mandate of Heaven.”\(^{39}\)

The earlier Zhou dynasty (1046-256 BCE) introduced the concept of the Mandate of Heaven as the foundation of political legitimacy, which backed the emperor with divine will.\(^{40}\) Heaven, as the source of the emperor's authority, conferred inferiority to the sacred, which “is supposed to monitor the ruler, to caution him through portents and omens, and, in an extreme situation, to replace him with a new incumbent.”\(^{41}\) The temporary nature of the Mandate meant the subjective ability to lose divine will, tying the emperor to caution and, ideally, to benevolence.

Lastly, the dominant philosopher Confucius wrote that he understood the “Decree of Heaven,” suggesting he had embraced his destiny to guide the ordinary people through virtue, emblematic of the prevalence of divine determinism in Chinese philosophy.\(^{42}\)

When the First Emperor of the Qin consolidated power, he divided the empire into “thirty-six commanderies each subdivided in turn into an unknown number of counties,” establishing the basis for imperial control that the Han later adopted.\(^{43}\) Each commandery had a civil governor, military commander, and imperial inspector who ruled as an administrative triumvirate.\(^{44}\)

\(^{36}\) Bodde, “The state and empire of Ch’ in,” 84.

\(^{37}\) Bodde, “The state and empire of Ch’ in,” 84.

\(^{38}\) Bodde, “The state and empire of Ch’ in,” 85.

\(^{39}\) Loewe, “The structure and practice of government,” 103.

\(^{40}\) Yuri Pines et al, Ideology of Power and Power of Ideology in Early China (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2015)

\(^{41}\) Pines, Ideology of Power and Power of Ideology in Early China, 279.


\(^{43}\) Bodde, “The state and empire of Ch’ in,” 54.

\(^{44}\) Bodde, “The state and empire of Ch’ in,” 54.
Alongside the commanderies, ten mini kingdoms ruled semi-independently in 202 BCE, but after six years, all but one king had been replaced “by a brother or a son of the emperor.” 

45 These administrative districts managed military recruitment and training, funneling available troops into the Han national armies as needed. A bureaucratic army of magistrates governed counties, meritoriously earning their positions, and could be recalled at any time by the central government, ensuring accountability. 

46 Moreover, the Standard Histories implied that top-level positions such as chancellor or imperial counselor gained appointment by “the emperor’s own act, and in formal and constitutional terms appointments were presumably authorized in this way.” 

47 The Han dynasty followed the Qin model, maintaining a strong centralized government with three senior statesmen advising the emperor directly. 

48 In 177 BCE, this office was reduced to two positions, as “appointments to the office of supreme commander ... were exceptional.” 

49 Nine ministers controlled different branches of government, supported by an expansive staff of subordinates. 

50 The separation of power between the imperial counselor and chancellor marked a fundamental truism across all positions of power in the Han dynasty, providing a system of checks and balances for each critical decision. 

51 For example, the superintendents of agriculture and the lesser treasury shared fiscal responsibility. Additionally, the garrison troops of the capital city likewise divided themselves between northern and southern barracks. 

52 Ultimately, the decentralization of decisions forced multilateral agreement amongst the bureaucracy but obstructed decisive military action in crisis. 

53 After reunification, the Han enforced a demilitarization of society, and the new emperor proclaimed a general amnesty. For reconciliation, the emperor honored “the privileges due to those who had received orders of aristocratic rank and announced a general bestowal of these marks of social distinction,” which carried material advantages. 

54 The civil war had marshaled society, putting armies of hundreds of thousands in the field, numbers rarely seen mobilized for any external threat.

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46 Scheidel, Rome and China, 26.
48 Loewe, “The structure and practice of government,” 120.
49 Loewe, “The structure and practice of government,” 120.
50 Loewe, “The structure and practice of government,” 120.
53 Loewe, “The structure and practice of government,” 120.
For example, prominent warlord Xiang Yu, king of the Western Chu, reportedly attacked the governor of Pei with 400,000 men who levied 100,000 in defense. Even reduced by half, the army sizes in the civil war illustrated the enormous manpower available to Han commanders, which needed reintegration into peacetime. Ultimately, the emperor had to demilitarize and reunify a fractured society, losing martial experience in the process.

**Institutional Comparison**

Republican Rome and the Han dynasty shared complex, resilient governmental structures at different political maturation stages. The Han exited a civil war in 202 BCE, while the Romans moved towards multiple internal wars in the first century BCE. Rome and the Han shared skepticism of unbridled authority, resulting in similar checks and balances, albeit instituted differently. The Han having an imperial model, relied on the emperor for ultimate supremacy, whereas Rome only established a temporary dictator when an existential threat required unilateral control. Lastly, the divination of leaders did not exist in Rome until the end of the Republic, whereas the Mandate of Heaven provided the Han emperor with sacred legitimacy.

In the second century BCE, Rome ruled only a small piece of Italy directly but controlled the peninsula through a complex web of military alliances and appointed officials, which amounted to enormous, combined manpower. The Han divided dominion into commanderies and mini kingdoms, with individual military leaders similar to the Roman governor; however, the Han commanderies leaders could not raise armies without explicit orders from the Emperor, preventing private wars and unilateral action. The Han emperor personally controlled sixteen commanderies, empowering the other kings to be “responsible for raising and training armed forces.”

Roman patricians shared similar power structures to the bureaucrats of the Han, competing for important offices; however, attaining governmental positions in the Han varied from meritocracy to nepotism, whereas entrance to the Senate was mainly familial, with the censors ultimately controlling admission. Consequently, Republican Rome and the Han shared sophisticated political structures, enabling mass mobilizations of their population, but conflicted in the concept of citizenship and the relationship between the executive and commoners.

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The Roman Army

The Roman military began as a small-scale single-city militia defense force, growing through practical adaptation and imitation. The infantry-centric Roman army evolved through multiple iterations, generally in reaction to an external threat. It began with the phalanx, copied from the Italian Greeks or the Etruscans. The Romans later reformed it into a manipular system, described as a "phalanx with joints," to defeat the Greek-style phalanx through its superior maneuverability.

The Romans demonstrated an “uncanny ability to learn from defeat and to imitate the methods of adversaries if found to be more efficient than their own.” This introspective quality led to the adoption of various equipment and tactics from enemies, including their renowned gladius, which they reproduced from the Spanish in the early fourth century BCE, emblematic of the practical views on military reform.

Rapid adaptation through adopting superior equipment and tactics developed from the temporary nature of Roman leadership. Consuls and military tribunes, easily replaced, provided immediate accountability and introspection over defeat. For example, the transition from the maniple (120 men) to cohort (500 men) system likely resulted from defeat at the hands of the Cimbri and Teutones.

According to Plutarch, the Romans lost an incredible 120,000 men against the Cimbri and Teutones at the Battle of Arausio in 105 BCE. Quickly reacting after this devastating defeat, the “consul in Rome hired teachers from a gladiator school to improve the soldier's dueling skill.”

Additionally, in the First Punic War, despite having zero nautical experience, the Romans copied a beached Carthaginian quinquereme and, in the space of just four years, built and proficiently manned an amazing 330 ships (an estimated 140,000 men), defeating the hegemonic Carthaginian navy in the Battle of Cape Ecnomus. Thus, the reform after Arausio and victory at Ecnomus illustrate the dynamism of the Roman military, enabling it to defeat numerous warrior cultures and adapt to overcome multiple fighting styles.

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64 Santosuosso, *Storming the Heavens*, 21.
The Han Army

Due to geographical location, two dimensions dominated the Han military calculus — internal strife and border confrontations against nomadic confederations. The Han inherited the Qin infantry-centric militia system, which arose victorious from the Warring States period.66

The Warring States produced well-armed large peasant armies that overthrew the warrior classes due to the preponderance of iron weapons.67 Shang Yang reformed the newfound peasant-dominated armies through practical adaptation. For example, he recognized the Kingdom of Wei’s superior military formations and imitated their elite units to form the Qin army.68 These heavy troops carried a large crossbow, halberd, and lamellar armor, providing the Qin with the era’s dominant army.69 Consequently, the chaos of the Warring States required innovative changes for ultimate victory, producing the tremendously successful Qin army, which the Han inherited.

Shang Yang’s reforms encouraged the Qin population to focus on agriculture and war, creating a culture of farmer militia warriors. To Shang Yang, “war serves not only to conquer enemies and seize their resources but also to consume any internal surplus that would otherwise destroy the state,” representative of the practical views Legalists held of war.70 Additionally, the Han militia required all “able-bodied males between the ages of twenty-three and fifty-six” to serve a mandatory two years and remain in reserve for recall in times of emergency throughout their adult lives.71

The earliest surviving census from the Han dynasty, conducted in 2 CE, numbered 57,700,000 people.72 This incredible figure signified that the Han possibly had millions of men in active reserve. Shang Yang’s reforms involved the entirety of imperial society, providing massive depth to the Qin and Han armies.

67 Bodde, “The state and empire of Ch’ in,” 47.
70 Lewis, The Early Chinese Empires, 50.
Army Comparison

The Han dynasty and the Roman Republic developed large, efficiently run armies out of necessity, arising out of local conflicts as dominant powers.

Rome relied on flexibility and adaptation, whereas the Han depended on efficient control systems. Rome faced a diverse array of enemies while expanding, which forced its continual evolution to face different threats.

The Han struggled to defeat the nomadic border tribes, relying on the construction of walls, and directed their tactical focus on countering mobile missile-armed cavalry.73

Additionally, both powers utilized an infantry-centric military, depending on differing but early forms of citizenship to fill the ranks.

The closest census to the 2 CE Han figure for Rome occurred in 14 CE, numbering 4,937,000 residents, indicating the Han had twelve times the population of the later Roman Empire.74

Compared to the Roman Republic, the Han existed in a matured political state and drew upon the entirety of its citizenship base to fill its militia ranks. The Roman Republic initially only utilized citizens within its five societal classes until reforms enacted by the general Marius in 107 BCE tapped the enormous manpower of its lowest classes, signifying a significant shortcoming of the Roman system.75

Ultimately, the two superpowers relied almost entirely on militia forces, which marshaled their citizenry but created a high-turnover rate and lost institutional experience.

Roman Culture

In 435 BCE, the censors Gaius Furius Pacilus and Marcus Geganius Macerinus approved the construction of the Villa Public on the Campus Martius, which subsequently held the future censuses.76

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73 Bodde, “The state and empire of Ch’in,” 63.
74 Frank, "Roman Census Statistics from 225 to 28 B. C," 331.
75 Sage, The Republican Roman Army, 238-239.
Beyond conducting the census, the marshaling of Rome's armies occurred on the Campus Martius or “Field of Mars,” which sat outside the city's boundary, and the crossing of which signified the ritual change into military service. Upon entering the army, military tribunes administered the Sacramentum, a sacred oath initiating recruits into service by holy ritual.

Deeply religious, Roman society strove to maintain peace with the gods, which meant a declaration of war required the gods' permission to embark on the risky venture. For example, the Romans sought to declare “just war” through a “ritual process conducted by special priests, the fetiales, thus ensuring that they did not offend their gods.” Roman theology embedded itself in every aspect of warfare, from enlistment to declarations of war, pre-battle sacrifices, and death rituals, illustrating the juxtaposition of religion and war in Rome.

Traditional values dominated Roman society, denoted by the concept of Mos Maiorum or the “customs of our ancestors.” Mos Maiorum constituted an unwritten “highly idealized version of the community's behavior,” which governed day-to-day actions and military virtue. Mos Maiorum aligned with the religiosity of the Roman populace and carried an embedded traditionalist respect for elders and military valor. Military integrity was essential to Roman societal status, reflected in primary source literature by hagiographic biographies of renowned war leaders.

Revered epics such as the Iliad enshrined warrior virtue, culminating in the later Roman Aeneid, emblematic of the high regard Roman society held for heroic virtue writ large. Additionally, Mars, the god of war and agriculture, “in importance second only to Jupiter,” portrayed the duality of war and agriculture to the Roman pastoral institution. The Roman army filled its ranks with its land-owning farming class due to wealth requirements, illustrating the societal connection between farming and war.

Roman culture rewarded the bravery of citizens through the public bestowment of symbolic crowns and victorious commanders with the highest honor in Rome — the triumph. Crowns came in various materials designating specific heroic achievements that the awardee could wear publicly.

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77 Goldsworthy, The Complete Roman Army, 33; Sage, The Republican Roman Army, 123.
78 Sage, The Republican Roman Army, 123.
80 Dillon and Matthew, The Roman Republic: Religion and Classical Warfare, 3.
81 Santosuosso, Storming the Heavens, 22.
82 Santosuosso, Storming the Heavens, 23.
84 Sage, The Republican Roman Army, 215-216.
Grass crowns for freeing besieged allies, gold for victorious commanders, a naval crown for victory at sea, oak for saving a citizen's life, and the olive crown, achievable without being in battle, each of which placed the wearer in a publicized glorified status. Moreover, the most prestigious Roman accolade, the triumph, rated the recipient commander a public parade through the capital and recognition for life as a hero of Rome. The state, religion, warrior virtue, and personal fame intertwined in Roman society to create an unparalleled western martial culture worshipping heroic deeds religiously.

Han Culture

In contrast, two primary philosophies dominated Han society — Confucianism and Legalism — both of which long predated the Han. The Qin state enforced Legalism through Shang Yang's reforms, preaching order and stability, and incentivized military action to retain peace. Legalists believed “that people should be socially regimented, bureaucratically administered, rewarded only for success in war and agriculture, punished for the slightest transgressions, and subject to the absolute will of the ruler.” Therefore, Legalism demanded strict obedience to the state and emperor. In the end, the Han blamed the harsh rule of Legalism for the fall of Qin, but the institutional bureaucracy installed by Legalism continued into the Han regime.

Still dominant today in Chinese doctrine, the philosopher Confucius (551 - 479 BCE) preached “humaneness and righteousness” and that individuals should seek their proper place within the ancient ritual order. Confucian schools developed in the fifth century BCE and gained supremacy in Han Wudi's reign (141-87 BCE). Confucius taught that order through punishment only led people to adapt to avoid danger but failed to imbue a sense of shame to act morally.

Instead, Confucius preached virtue, which he believed developed “a sense of shame,” causing the people to “reform themselves.”

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85 Sage, The Republican Roman Army, 216.
87 Dreyer, “Continuity and Change,” 23.
90 Confucius, The Analects, 63.
91 Confucius, The Analects, 63.
Confucian bureaucrats saw war as a “necessary evil” despite the “military skills of chariotry and archery (being) two of the six skills of a Confucian gentleman.” Consequently, martial skills supported Confucius's idea of a “gentleman,” resulting in a conflicting stance on military practices.

In practice, Confucius made few comments about warfare, seemingly avoiding the topic. When the Duke Ling of Wei asked Confucius about military formations, he replied, “I have, indeed, heard something about the use of sacrificial vessels, but I have never studied the matter of commanding troops,” and pointedly departed the next day.

Confucians believed “that the need to use force was a sign of the failure of virtue, and in part from a desire to restrain the power of rival elites (such as military men and eunuchs).” Confucius made some general military statements in The Analects (circa 496 BCE). For example, “to send the common people to war untrained is to throw them away,” and “after a good man has trained the common people for seven years, they should be ready to take up arms.” His few martial quotes demonstrate a base knowledge of warfare from living in the Warring States period and provide insight into his conscious omission of military ideology from his philosophy.

Cultural Comparison

The Roman Republic, bolstered by the Homeric epics, believed in the virtue of military valor, and thus sanctified military service. In comparison, Confucian Han bureaucrats, who rarely had military experience, governed with hostility towards militarism, reflecting their anti-military views in their writing.

The ideals of the Confucian classics (virtue) were very different from those presented in the Aeneid (power through conquest). In one instance, the Confucian administrator Lu Chia remarked to the emperor, “an empire could be conquered but not administered on horseback,” providing insight into the duality of Confucianism towards war, believing it necessary but inferior to administration. In Rome, military success paired with political prosperity for the patrician class and embedded martial virtues into the society through Mos Maiorum.

Mos Maiorum, Legalism, and Confucianism shared distinct attributes by some metrics. For example, Mos Maiorum and Legalism preached adherence to the social order and traditionalism, which enshrined military solidity. Furthermore, Mos Maiorum and Confucianism believed in societal virtue but differed by definition.

95 Confucius, The Analects, 123.
96 Kramers, “The development of the Confucian schools,” 753.
In China, from the earliest records, “we find the principle of wu (martial, military) in polar opposition to wen (literate, civil).”\textsuperscript{97} The Han had no martial theology comparable to pagan Roman religion. Confucianism and Legalism do not equate to a deity of war. Instead, war in the Han dynasty centered on allegiance to a god-like emperor who attempted to maintain control over a vast population while fending off nomadic raiders.

In contrast, Republican Rome, still in an expansionist stage, had not achieved its zenith of a unified empire and saw an opportunity for wealth and prestige through the subjugation of foreign states. When King Antiochus of the Seleucids asked Hannibal whether his richly adorned army was enough to defeat the Romans, he replied, “enough and quite enough for the Romans, however greedy they are,” implying the richly adorned Seleucid soldiers may be considered irresistible plunder to the Romans.\textsuperscript{98}

Republican Roman and Han warriors fought for near oppositional reasons, conquest versus stability, mirrored in their dominant theological doctrines.

**Roman Military Leadership**

In war, the consul had almost unlimited power, designating military tribunes, who commissioned centurions to form the Roman hierarchical command structure.\textsuperscript{99} The Republic relied on a militia system, meaning each successive army started from scratch in training and leadership positions.\textsuperscript{100} This turnover often led to initial failure, “from the middle of the 2nd century nearly every conflict began with Roman disasters, many of them humiliating.”\textsuperscript{101} However, the Roman system pairing executive consular power with generalship ensured bypassing bureaucratic roadblocks and enabled rapid reformation to learn from defeat.

Unlike the consulship, the office of the military tribune required prior military service, according to Polybius.\textsuperscript{102} Consuls appointed “fourteen with five years' service and ten others with ten years' service.” The requirement of military experience likely slackened into the first century BCE, filled by men who did not pursue a senatorial career later.\textsuperscript{103} Generally, six tribunes served with a single legion.\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{97} Niccolo Di Cosmo, *Military Culture in Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 4.
\textsuperscript{99} Polybius, *The Histories*, 381, 388.
\textsuperscript{100} Goldsworthy, *The Complete Roman Army*, 43.
\textsuperscript{101} Goldsworthy, *The Complete Roman Army*, 43.
\textsuperscript{102} Polybius, *The Histories*, 385.
\textsuperscript{103} Sage, *The Republican Roman Army*, 104.
\textsuperscript{104} Sage, *The Republican Roman Army*, 104.
They conducted the organizational duties of the camp, levying troops, determining daily camp locations, administering military justice, and occasionally commanding detachments or legions.  

For example, Polybius wrote of a tribune taking the initiative during the Battle of Cynoscephalae (197 BCE), “one of the tribunes who was with them having twenty maniples with him and, perceiving on the spur of the moment what needed to be done, contributed greatly to the success of the entire battle.” This tribune brought a flank's victorious troops to crash into the rear of an overextended Macedonian phalanx, winning the battle. Ultimately, the tribune served as a critical administrative figure in the legion, chosen for competence, and occasionally contributed to battlefield leadership through initiative.

Next, in the command, the tribunes selected sixty centurions to act as a “crucial link between the high command and the common soldier.” Centurions served as non-commissioned officers and, as their name implied, commanded around one hundred legionaries. Two centurions led a single maniple, providing redundancy in the chain of command to ensure the maniple never went without leadership.

According to Polybius, “the ideal centurion, from the Romans' point of view, is a natural leader, with a stable and resourceful cast of mind, rather than being a daring risk-taker.” Furthermore, centurions held tactical command of their units in battle and generally had a prior service background before assignment. Consequently, the Roman meritorious command hierarchy system encouraged the appointment of proficient, able leaders but relied on retaining men with previous experience due to militia turnover.

**Han Military Leadership**

Leadership in the Han military had no fixed component of general officers; instead, the government appointed generals to lead expeditions as the need arose. They had numerous titled open positions in wartime, from General of the Van to General of the Rear.

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Like in every other institution relating to power, the Han split responsibility amongst sometimes even several generals for a campaign with “disastrous results.” In peacetime, colonels commanded the permanent garrisons of the capital, the Northern and Southern armies.

Furthermore, Han generals gained appointments directly from the emperor, ideally selected from the professional colonel corps based on merit. They held a position of “rank and pay just below that of the nine ministers of state” and suffered extreme penalties for campaign failure.

The Han officer corps, originally “semi-independent commanders of the military elite of the civil war and early decades, were gradually supplanted by agents of the court with no military experience.” The central government began appointing military leaders based on obedience rather than experience. Despite bureaucratic historian bias, generals in the Han unquestionably held significant power, demonstrated by the fact that “some of the most prominent commanders were kinsmen of imperial consorts,” and further illustrated it as a pathway to an authoritative position.

Han emperors rarely led troops personally outside civil wars, and overly militaristic emperors gained hostile biographies from the bureaucratic elite. No records exist of the first Qin emperor commanding troops despite the enormous terracotta army found in his tomb. The emperor Wudi, described as the “Martial Emperor” (156-87 BCE), never personally led soldiers but earned his title by initiating a massive campaign to conquer the nomads.

Ultimately, the Han military leadership centered on appointed commanders, whether in the commanderies who trained and equipped the militia or the named positions of campaigning generals. Consequently, leadership competency fluctuated due to politics, hampered by the fear of internal revolt.

114 Bielenstein, The bureaucracy of Han times, 114.
117 Scheidel, Rome and China, 42.
118 Scheidel, Rome and China, 42.
119 Graf and Higham, A Military History of China, 15, 11.
120 Dreyer, “Continuity and Change,” 23.
122 Scheidel, Rome and China, 44; Graff and Higham, A Military History of China, 12.
Leadership Comparison

The Roman and Han military leadership shared qualities when the need for competency arose.

Republican Rome sometimes suffered incompetent commanders due to politically connected appointments but occasionally caused by a simple lack of practical experience.

After the reunification under the Han, military competency degraded due to the long phases of peace.

The rank of general existed in both armies, and the position of colonel may have conferred a similar position of a military tribune; however, the Han had no documented non-commissioned officer rank like the Roman centurion.

Unsurprisingly, wartime experience enabled the deployment of well-led armies, a truism of any military institution. Ultimately, the variable that separated the Han and Roman militaries from their competitors centered on their ability to learn from defeat enabled by their massive numerical reserves.

Roman Recruitment and Training

Recruitment in Republican Rome began with consuls submitting a numerical estimate of required troops for a campaign to the Senate. The Senate then issued a decree drafting men and distributing them into the army. According to Polybius, the standard size of a legion numbered 4,200 men, 5,000 “in times of exceptional danger.” An enlistee had to appear on a specified day or face severe punishment but could ask for excusal for reasons including “physical incapacity and political or religious office, or a record of exceptional service.” Consuls also opened the rolls to volunteers, resulting in some famous commanders attracting thousands of enlistees. For example, after a revolt in Spain in 134 BCE, “Scipio, the conqueror of Carthage, was able to attract 4,000 volunteers,” further emblematic of the cult of the warrior in Rome.

After levying the army, the tribunes divided the troops by class.

123 Sage, The Republican Roman Army, 120.
124 Sage, The Republican Roman Army, 120-121.
125 Polybius, The Histories, 386.
126 Sage, The Republican Roman Army, 121.
127 Sage, The Republican Roman Army, 121.
128 Sage, The Republican Roman Army, 121.
They chose “ten men of suitable caliber from each of these divisions (except the youngest) to serve as company commanders (centurions).” Tribunes selected the velites (skirmishers) from the youngest men, hastate (first line) from the next age group, principes (second line) from “those in their prime, and the triarii third line) from the oldest” who formed the most experienced reserve of the army.

The three lines of legionaries generally wore similar equipment, bronze helmets, breastplates, greaves, “Iberian swords,” shields, and two throwing spears per man. More affluent men wore chainmail instead of a breastplate, and the triarii carried thrusting instead of throwing spears.

Polybius saw the “superiority of the Roman formation in its flexibility, especially its capability to adapt itself to any terrain, and its ability to meet an attack from any direction.” Consequently, the maniple system enshrined class division but created a resilient infantry-centric block.

During the Roman Republic, the legions did not consist of the popularized professional soldiers of the later imperial army; instead, military service interrupted the sedentary life of levied citizens. On average, a Roman citizen saw six years of military service, and an estimated half of all males would see some time in the army. To compensate, the government paid a minimal wage. The regular infantryman received two obols a day, a centurion four, and a cavalryman a drachma. Six obols equated a drachma, and a drachma equaled an estimated ten asses.

Additionally, the property values to qualify for service correlated to 100,000 asses for class one, 75,000 for two, 50,000 for three, 25,000 for four, and 11,000 for five, meaning a basic infantryman required 3,300 days of pay by that estimate to qualify for the fifth and lowest class. Therefore, the meager income paid by the Roman government did little to incentivize the legionaries to serve; however, the distribution of spoils from a victorious campaign provided a powerful inducement towards service and later resulted in loyalty to their commander over the state. According to the historian Dr. Antonio Santosuosso, the late Republican legionary became a “pillager” willing to put “his own life in jeopardy only if the potential loot justified the risk.”

133 Sage, *The Republican Roman Army*, 86.
136 Sage, *The Republican Roman Army*, 141.
137 Sage, *The Republican Roman Army*, 141.
139 Santosuosso, *Storming the Heavens*, 42.
The Roman allies supplemented, sometimes doubling the citizen army with legions that, over time, became more synonymous with the native Roman armies. The “allies usually provide the same number of infantry as the Romans, but three times more cavalry and a third of their cavalry and a fifth of their infantry are withdrawn to make up the extraordinarii (elite in Latin).”

In other words, the Romans siphoned off the best-allied troops to form independent hard-use units. Furthermore, by the first century BCE, native Roman cavalry had entirely disappeared, replaced by allies. Unfortunately, Roman leaders exposed the allied troops to more dangerous military positions, leading the front and covering the army's rear on the move. Roman leaders shortchanged the allies with battle loot and treated them like second-class citizens, causing the outbreak of the Social War in 90 BCE.

Rome incentivized martial virtue through a complex reward and punishment system. According to Polybius, “for wounding an enemy, a man receives a spear, and for killing an enemy and stripping him of his arms and armor, a medal (if he is an infantryman) or a harness-medallion (if he is a cavalryman).” In a siege, “the first man to scale the wall during an assault on a town receives a golden crown” and would receive the same reward (an oak crown) for saving a friendly life.

Additionally, disciplinary power rested with the commander, who could punish and sentence as he saw fit. Stealing, failure to pass necessary orders, and leaving one’s post all warranted beating with a club (often to the death) by the members of the camp to involve as many soldiers as possible in the punishment. In the worst case, for a legion requiring a stiffening of resolve after cowardice in battle, commanders used the practice of decimation, meaning every ten men drew lots, resulting in one of the ten being beaten to death by the other nine.

Despite the enormous amount of primary source Roman military literature, no written evidence exists for a standardized training scheme for the legions before the first century BCE.

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140 Polybius, The Histories, 390.
141 Santosuosso, Storming the Heavens, 31.
142 Santosuosso, Storming the Heavens, 31-33.
143 Polybius, The Histories, 399.
144 Polybius, The Histories, 399; Sage, The Republican Roman Army, 216.
145 Sage, The Republican Roman Army, 225.
146 Sage, The Republican Roman Army, 226-227.
147 Sage, The Republican Roman Army, 229.
148 Sage, The Republican Roman Army, 229.
Therefore, training methods fell to the commander's initiative but likely followed a similar methodology to Vegetius’ military manual *De Re Militari* from the fourth century CE, where he divided training regimens into physical conditioning, weapons training, and group formations.\(^{149}\) Few prior examples exist, but in one instance we know that after the catastrophic loss of the Battle of Arausio, the consul Rutilius Rufus brought in gladiators to train the legionaries in swordsmanship, where they instructed a “more flexible method of giving and avoiding blows.”\(^{150}\)

In another example, Scipio Africanus implemented a strict training program in Spain during the Second Punic War. He sent his men on long marches in full armament and set aside specific days for missile weapon practice and sword exercises.\(^{151}\) The training of pre-professional legions relied on commander aptitude. Still, it was taken seriously as it “was seen as giving the Roman soldier the advantage over the enemies he faced, particularly the barbarian peoples of Europe.”\(^{152}\) In contrast, in cases where soldiers lacked the training to operate with one another, disaster could occur, like at the Battle of Cannae.\(^{153}\)

**Han Recruitment and Training**

The Qin military earned victory in the Warring States period by utilizing an effective militia-type system, gaining practical experience through numerous campaigns. The Qin gained its experience through routinely warring with non-Chinese “'barbarians,” which gave its people a “reputation for ruthlessness in war.”\(^{154}\) Furthermore, their freedom from the traditions of the “more purely ‘Chinese’ states made it easier to institute radical innovations.”\(^{155}\)

As inheritors of the Qin militia system, the Han military consisted of “conscripts, volunteers, and convicts,” but conscripted peasants formed the army's core.\(^{156}\) The Han system required “all able-bodied males between the ages of twenty-three and fifty-six, or for a short period between twenty and fifty-six” to serve in the army for two years and stay in reserve for times of emergency.\(^{157}\) The forced conscription of the entire male populace provided the Han with enormous manpower and enabled the addition of pre-trained reserves in times of crisis.

\(^{149}\) Sage, *The Republican Roman Army*, 230.
\(^{150}\) Santosuosso, *Storming the Heavens*, 21; Sage, *The Republican Roman Army*, 232
\(^{151}\) Sage, *The Republican Roman Army*, 231.
\(^{152}\) Sage, *The Republican Roman Army*, 229.
\(^{154}\) Bodde, “The state and empire of Ch’in,” 47.
\(^{155}\) Bodde, “The state and empire of Ch’in,” 47.
\(^{156}\) Loewe, *The structure and practice of government*, 479.
\(^{157}\) Loewe, *The structure and practice of government*, 479.
Upon entering the army at age twenty-three, a Han conscript spent a year training at home, the type of which depended on the locality. The Han inherited the Qin's infantry-centric army, equipping their soldiers with spears, swords, shields, bows, and crossbows. Their crossbow's sophisticated trigger latch mechanism “was a closely guarded state secret.” According to historian Edward L. Dreyer, “even though infantry bearing shields, swords, and spears existed, there is no trace of either a ‘phalanx’ or a ‘legion’ style of infantry fighting.” Contradicting Dreyer, historian Peter Lorge said, “(Han) military writers had long stressed the importance of combining long and short weapons, along with long-range missile weapons. Ordinary soldiers, therefore, learned to cooperate in interlocking formations that took advantage of each weapon’s strengths.” Consequently, according to Lorge, something resembling a basic shield well may have existed in the Han military, recognizable to a western military.

After a year of training, Han conscripts served as Garrison Conscripts for a year, either as Guards “under the Commandant of the Guards in the imperial capital, or as Guards at the courts of kings, or as troops in the commanderies and at the frontier.” Afterward, the soldiers returned home, entered the militia, and trained every eight months (starting in the Later Han times.) At age fifty-six, they exited the militia, retiring from possible service except in dire emergencies.

Consequently, the Southern Army consisted entirely of conscripts, and due to the high turnover rate, they struggled to gain lasting organizational experience. In contrast, the Northern Army “unquestionably consisted of professional soldiers, forming a standing army at the capital.” Furthermore, from 85 BCE onward, the government offered land in exchange for frontier service to build a self-sustaining professional garrison army. Ultimately, the Han employed its levy primarily to stabilize its internal provinces; however, in hotspots and the capital, the government recognized the benefit of professional soldiers to ensure organizational competence.

Despite the Confucian abhorrence of militarism, Han societal structures encouraged martial valor through a complex reward system and twenty-rank hierarchy.

158 Bielenstein, The bureaucracy of Han times, 114.
159 Dreyer, “Continuity and Change,” 27.
160 Dreyer, “Continuity and Change,” 27.
161 Dreyer, “Continuity and Change,” 27.
163 Bielenstein, The bureaucracy of Han times, 114.
164 Bielenstein, The bureaucracy of Han times, 114.
165 Bielenstein, The bureaucracy of Han times, 114.
166 Bielenstein, The bureaucracy of Han times, 114.
167 Bielenstein, The bureaucracy of Han times, 116.
168 Scheidel, Rome and China, 32.
For soldiers, “all social status was a direct reflection of military performance.”169 For example, promotions required the captured heads of slain enemies for the regular soldier.170 Furthermore, if someone died in battle, their descendants gained the rank he would have received.171

A head equated one level on the social ladder, and officers, who could not cut off heads themselves, relied on the heads cut off by subordinates.172 Interestingly, not a single officer in the terracotta army of the Qin emperor had a weapon, lending evidence to officers going disarmed.173 Incredibly, the head-cutting rank tradition continued for fifteen hundred years into the Song dynasty, outlasting the ancient dynasties as a practical martial reward system.174

Han military disciple originated in military law, which governed every action, and in the view of intellectuals, “there was, practically speaking, no distinction between warfare and punishment.”175 Shang Yang’s reforms had divided the army into “tens and fives” to supervise one another and “be mutually liable.”176 In this squad system of mutual accountability, soldiers “were responsible for each other's behavior and were obliged to denounce a fellow member's crime; otherwise, they would be held equally responsible for the crime.”177 Ordinary soldiers kept detailed logs of their daily activities, which required some degree of literacy for the average conscript.178 Furthermore, imperial inspectors conducted “regular tests in archery to which officers were subjects, and of the inspectors' reports on the state of efficiency of sites and equipment.”179 As written by Han bureaucrats, the military maintained strict disciplinary standards held accountable by military law and regular inspections.

Recruitment and Training Comparison

The Han dynasty and Republican Rome employed a militia system primarily, which drew upon massive manpower reserves and involved most of the male population. The Han utilized its entire manpower base, whereas possibly only half of Romans served, marking a deficiency in the Roman system.

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Both militaries suffered an experience drain due to the high turnover rate of conscripted men, causing the Han to use professionals in critical positions and Rome to search out men with prior service for leadership. Harsh Han military law and Roman military punishments installed strict discipline, with cowardice punishable by death.

Due to its constant military readiness, the Han army utilized a formal year-long training period. In contrast, Rome required a decree to marshal legions, limiting training time by necessity to respond to threats and ultimately relying on the martial nature of its society to remain in perpetual readiness.

Thus, the Han maintained a constant higher readiness level, with the ability to draw upon its enormous reserve, superior to the Roman system in that regard; however, the tendency of Rome to appoint experienced leaders surpassed the skeptical bureaucratic appointments of the Han.

The Roman Army in Distress

Long-term military success did not occur without occasional setbacks, and how military systems reacted to defeat served as an indicator of institutional strength. For example, Republican Rome suffered catastrophic losses at the Battle of Cannae in the Second Punic War. The censuses recorded by Livy of 234 and 209 BCE show an incredible decrease of 133,000 available manpower (270,713 to 137,108), illustrating the tremendous losses suffered by the legions against Hannibal.\(^{180}\)

Rome’s loss of half its recorded potential manpower would’ve crippled a lesser state. Hannibal racked up successive major victories against Rome, Trebia (218 BCE), Trasimene (217 BCE), and culminating in Cannae (216 BCE). In *The War with Hannibal*, Livy described the slaughter of 15,000 men at Trasimene:

> Some 6,000 of the leading column succeeded by a vigorous effort in breaking through and got clear of the pass without knowing anything of the situation in their rear; they halted on an eminence, whence they could hear shouts and the clash of arms, but the mist was too thick for them to see the progress of the battle or to know what was happening. All was nearly over when at last, the heat of the sun dispersed the mist, and in the clear morning light hills and plains revealed to their eyes the terrible truth that the Roman army was almost totally destroyed.\(^{181}\)

Horrifically, the losses at Cannae dwarfed the losses at Trasimene. According to Livy, the Romans lost nearly 50,000 men at the Cannae, and Polybius placed the number higher at 70,000, making it one of the bloodiest battles of human history.

\(^{180}\) Frank, "Roman Census Statistics from 225 to 28 B. C.," 229-230.
This catastrophic loss left an assault on Rome within possibility for Hannibal. Polybius remarked, “no other nation in the world could have suffered so tremendous a series of disasters, and not been overwhelmed.” In reaction, Rome fortified its city, lowered the recruitment age to seventeen, and brought 8,000 slaves willing to serve in the army.

Furthermore, it shifted its strategy, avoiding a decisive battle in Italy. Instead, it sent an expeditionary force to Spain under Publius Cornelius Scipio to strip away the Carthaginian external power base. The campaign in Spain provided Scipio with the experience needed to face Hannibal and culminated at the Battle of Zama (202 BCE) in Africa with the final Roman victory of the Second Punic War. Despite repeated disasters, Rome demonstrated an unparalleled resilience to catastrophic loss, pragmatic introspection to shift strategy, and martial boldness by assaulting the Carthaginian homeland.

The Han Army in Distress

The Han dynasty had the unfortunate geographical military position bordering the great steppe, which bred warlike nomadic equestrian societies like the Xiongnu. Without stationary homes, the Xiongnu provided an elusive moving target for the sedentary Han. Quick to raid and retreat, warfare against the Xiongnu relied on defense in depth and the expansion of stationary defenses; consequently, “the Chinese, throughout their history, have been more wall-minded than any other people.”

The Xiongnu, as boys, learned “to ride sheep and shoot birds and rats with a bow and arrow. If the battle is going well for them they will advance, but if not, they will retreat, for they do not consider it a disgrace to run away.” Their ability to “shoot arrows accurately while riding their horses at full gallop gave them an enormous tactical advantage over the huge armies of infantrymen that Chinese generals often fielded against them.”

In the time of the first Han emperor, Gaozu, the Xiongnu invaded in force, capturing the king of Han's capital city — Mayi.
Emperor Gaozu rushed north with 320,000 men, immediately falling into a trap, where the Xiongnu emperor Maodun surrounded him on a mountain with 400,000 horsemen.191 “Gaozu (Liu Bang), was defeated in a major battle with the Xiongnu and narrowly avoided capture.”192 Consequently, the Han “feared and respected the Xiongnu after this,” and for many decades, attempted bribery instead of warfare.193 The Xiongnu, dependent on the strength of their confederation, exacted significant tribute and raided Han territory at will despite multiple peace treaties.194 In 158 BCE, 30,000 Xiongnu invaded the Shang and Yunzhong province, killing and carrying off inhabitants.195 The Han armies mobilized to the border in reaction but arrived too late to catch the quick-moving horsemen.196 Eventually, the Han decided on a military response instead of tribute, sending increasing-sized forces under different generals. Finally, the Han commander Wei Qing mobilized six generals and over 100,000 cavalry to attack the Xiongnu.197 Wei Qing defeated them by adopting cavalry warfare tactics, “capturing or killing over 50,000 of the enemy.”198 Thus, Han success against the Xiongnu relied on horses, failing when using only infantry-centric armies; however, for the Han, “horsemanship was an acquired skill, not second nature as with their opponents.”199 In retribution, emperor Wudi launched a massive reprisal campaign against the Xiongnu, lasting three decades, and intelligently enticed their enemies, the Yuezh and Wusum, to join, which weakened the Xiongnu and caused a civil war amongst the tribes.200 Furthermore, the emperor Wudi “began to remake the imperial army, employing large corps of mounted troops as well as professional soldiers during his campaigns.”201 Large mounted armies of Han horsemen proved critical to defeating the Xiongnu but came at an enormous financial and logistical burden.

192 Wright, “The Northern Frontier,” 64.
193 Wright, “The Northern Frontier,” 64.
194 Qian, Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty II, 146.
196 Qian, Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty II, 148.
197 Qian, Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty II, 151.
198 Qian, Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty II, 179.
201 Scheidel, Rome and China, 44.
The Han never entirely solved the nomadic border crisis but partially stemmed it through practical reforms, professionalizing segments of the army, improving stationary defenses, and creating a well-trained mounted component that matched the steppe horsemen's range.

**Concluding Comparisons**

The Han dynasty and Republican Rome fought numerous external threats. The nomadic menace continually reappeared despite multiple costly campaigns into the steppe. In contrast, Rome suffered catastrophic losses against Hannibal and feared an existential siege of their capital city after Cannae, nearly bringing the Republic to its knees.

Congruent with their superpower positions, the Han and Rome approached crises with temperance, looking for practical actions after careful deliberation. For example, Rome deprived Hannibal of further decisive battles on his terms and instead picked away his weaker allies and satellite states. The Han, in turn, expanded its cavalry core when the infantry-centric Han military could not engage the Xiongnu. Ultimately, the incredible numerical depth of the Han and Roman levies enabled initial mistakes so that subsequent commanders could learn and apply lessons to adjust military strategy.

The professional reforms of Marius and Wudi fixed the rapid turnover of experience within the militia system. However, in Rome, the professionalization and privatization of armies led to unilateral actions, such as, for example, Caesar's conquest of Gaul. In contrast, the peasant-led Yellow Turban revolt in 184 CE supplied an opportunity for Han generals and governors to establish themselves “as regional warlords who fought one another for dominance while paying little more than lip service to the authority of the emperor.”

Accordingly, in both Han and Roman cases, the decentralization of command enabled military success but led to political instability and civil war. The interchange of reverence for the Republic, in Rome's case, and the emperor, in the Han's, led to fundamental shifts in the established power paradigms.

In producing this comparison, deciphering historical Han military sources proved a far more challenging task than the plethora of classical Roman books.

Han historians approach military history from the top down, in contrast to bottom-up Roman writers.

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The antimilitary bias of the Han bureaucrat bled through their records and ignored the specifics of battles; however, despite the non-martial tendencies of the bureaucratic historian class, the Han empire focused an incredible amount of effort on producing an effective military.

Occasionally reverence for effective commanders appeared in the *Records of the Grand Historian* (91 BCE) by Sima Qian, as in the case of the death of general Li Guang, “the day he died all the people of the empire, whether they had known him or not, were moved to the profoundest grief, so deeply did men trust his sincerity of purpose.” The Han had recognized the valor and sacrifices Li Guang had made fighting the Xiongnu, but Sima Qian reduced his fame to his “sincerity.” Nonetheless, any mention of reverence from the historian Sima Qian spoke volumes.

Historically, the Romans and Han appeared aware of one another through foreign trade; however, the Parthians purposefully blocked them from making direct contact for centuries to maintain their control of the silk trade.204 In 166 CE, envoys from the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius arrived at the Han court, offering gifts to the Han emperor.205 The Han called the Roman Empire the Ta Ch'in (the Great Ch'in) named so because “its people and civilization were comparable to those of China,” demonstrating an awareness and respect for Rome’s cultural hegemony in the west.206 Still, the Han took it in course that a foreign king should provide gifts of subservience to the Han, illustrating their hubristic introversion. In contrast, the Romans looked to open a direct silk-trading route to the Han to cut out the middlemen Parthians.207 As a consequence, this distant bilateral awareness illustrated the magnetism of might the two powers held occupying opposite ends of Eurasia.

The Han and Roman militaries maintained supremacy until institutional decay catalyzed external invasion and internal collapse. Ideologically, the Roman *mos maiorum* and polytheistic religion upheld and revered the cult of the warrior. In opposition, Confucianism abhorred military violence, seeing it as a necessary evil; however, Legalism preached strict adherence to the social order and obedience to the god-like emperor.

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205 Ying-Shih, “Han foreign relations,” 461.
206 Ying-Shih, “Han foreign relations,” 379.
207 Ying-Shih, “Han foreign relations,” 460-462.
Ultimately, Republican Rome’s external focus incentivized further war, in opposition to the Han’s internal fixation, which mostly ignored foreign campaigns of conquest and centered on territorial control.

Despite ideological differences, the two systems mirrored one another in many ways and reached similar conclusions due to external pressure. In Rome, combining executive consul power with generalship gave it a mighty war tool, contrasting well against the Han’s largely ineffective distribution of authority amongst generals. Nonetheless, the Han more effectively marshaled their entire populace, levying more men by not relying on a property-based class system like Rome.

Additionally, their differential ideologies enforced governmental obedience, easily transferred to battlefield discipline. Both sides fought for a complex reward system, whether for awarded crowns or severed heads; both conferred a gain in societal status. Whether the Han bureaucrat wrote it or not, the Han military served as an opportunity for political advancement, although less so than in the Roman system.

Republican Rome and the Han similarly used a warrior-farmer militia, which organized large segments of their societies requiring effective government institutions. This numerical depth enabled them to suffer multiple defeats, reflect on shortcomings, and adjust to the threat. Furthermore, both states eventually professionalized at least segments of their militaries, adopted tactics from their enemies, and rightly feared the power of victorious generals to displace central authority.

Ultimately, the Han and Republican Roman systems involved most of the society in collective defense, providing a sense of unity and a stake in their governmental institutions. The eventual fraying of that unity through the decentralization of authority led to internal collapse, destroying the Han Dynasty, and causing the fall of the Roman Republic.

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