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# The Roman Army in the First Century

William J. Hamblin

At the time of Jesus, the Roman army was at the height of its power and prestige. In the preceding four centuries, Roman legions had raised Rome from a small regional city-state to master of the entire Mediterranean world. Barring a few notable defeats—such as during the war against Hannibal or the battle of the Teutoberg Forest—Roman arms had proved victorious against Gauls, Germans, Iberians, Britons, Mauritians, Numidians, Carthaginians, Libyans, Egyptians, Illyrians, Macedonians, Greeks, Thracians, Capadocians, Armenians, Persians, Syrians, Arabs, and Judeans, creating one of the greatest military empires of world history.<sup>1</sup> The overwhelming military power of Rome was the most important political reality in Judea at the time of Christ.

## Organization and Numbers

The fundamental organizational unit of the Roman army during the early empire (31 B.C. to A.D. 193) was the legion (*legio*).<sup>2</sup> In theory the legion consisted of ten cohorts (*cobors*) of 600 men, each composed of six centuries (*centuria*, “hundred”) of 100 men, giving a theoretical total of 6,000 infantry in a legion.<sup>3</sup> To this was added a small cavalry detachment (*ala*)<sup>4</sup> of 120 men for scouting and communications. In practice, cohorts were independent administrative units that could be detached from legions. Furthermore, units would have had losses from illness or casualties. Many legions would therefore have been under strength, giving the ten cohorts an average of approximately 480 men each,<sup>5</sup> with 80 men per century.<sup>6</sup> However, the first cohort was sometimes a double-strength unit of perhaps 960 men, giving a practical total of about

5,280 infantry in a legion. Each legion was usually designated by both a number and name, such as the “Second Augustan” or the “Tenth Fretensis” (which participated in the siege of Masada and later garrisoned Jerusalem).

Legions were commanded by a legate (*legatus*), usually a member of the Roman senate or aristocracy, who was under the command of the governor of the province in which the legion was stationed. Six tribunes—roughly equivalent of modern colonels—were assigned to each legion as staff officers. They may or may not have been attached to specific cohorts, but could be given *ad hoc* assignments by the legate. In actual combat, the most important officer was the centurion, who commanded the century. Other important officers included the senior centurion, known as *Primus Pilus* (First Spear); the *Praefectus castrorum* (Camp Prefect or commander), who was in charge of logistics and organizing formal camps; and the *Aquilifer* (Eagle Bearer), who bore the sacred legionary eagle standard.

During the first centuries of the empire, the number of legions varied between twenty-five and thirty. According to Tacitus, in A.D. 23 there were twenty-five legions in the provincial Roman army, giving a total of about 125,000 regular legionaries.<sup>7</sup> In addition there were 10,000 men forming the garrison, police force, and imperial bodyguard at Rome, and another 40,000 in the navy.<sup>8</sup>

Except for the cavalry used for reconnaissance duty, Roman legionaries were exclusively heavy infantry, armed with javelins and swords (see below). At the time of Jesus, the approximately 125,000 regular infantry legionaries were assisted by an equal or greater number of auxiliary troops (*auxilia*), recruited from allied and conquered peoples, bringing the total standing army to at least 250,000 men.<sup>9</sup> Auxiliaries began as non-Roman allied troops who served with Roman legions during the wars of conquest under the Republic. The auxiliaries included a wide range of specialized troop types. The most important was cavalry, in which traditional Roman legions were notably deficient. A strong auxiliary force of cavalry was especially important when facing the armies of North Africa or Parthia. Other auxiliaries included light infantry, archers, and slingers. Most infantry auxiliaries were organized into cohorts—roughly the equivalent of legionary cohorts—but various

other types of units based on local military traditions from which the auxiliaries were recruited were also known. They sometimes had specific ethnic identities, such as German infantry, slingers from the Baleric islands, Cretan archers, or light cavalry from Mauritania or Numidia in North Africa. Although originally *ad hoc* units raised for specific purposes or campaigns, these auxiliaries became increasingly regularized and permanent as time progressed. At the time of Christ, there were several auxiliary cohorts stationed in Judea (see below).<sup>10</sup>

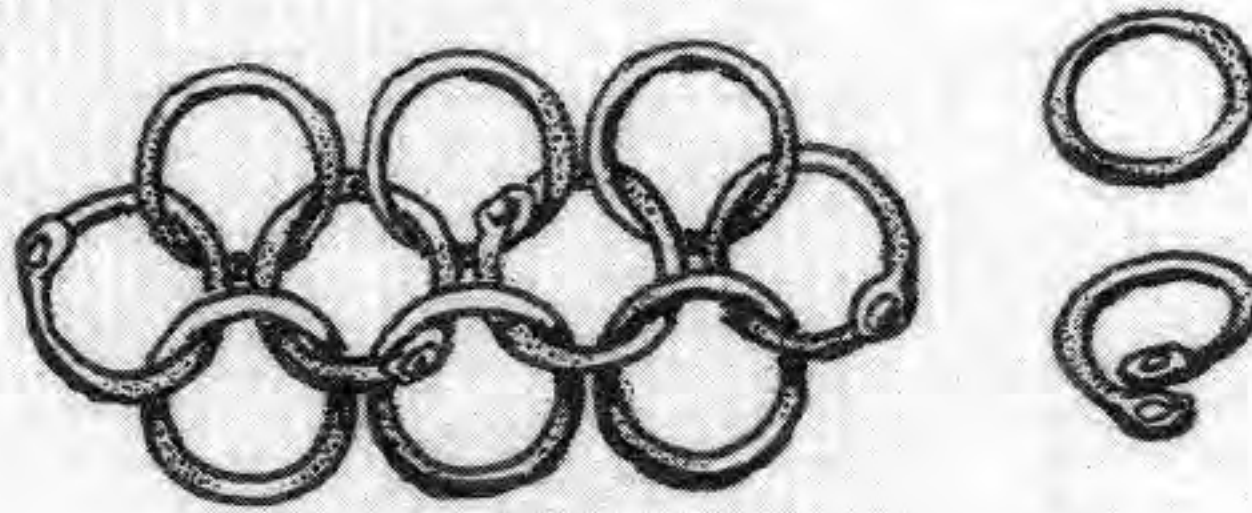
## Arms and Armor

The arms and armor of the imperial Roman army have been reconstructed in some detail, using archaeological, artistic, and philological and historical evidence.<sup>11</sup> The first-century imperial legionary was a heavy infantryman with fairly standardized equipment. An iron helmet with large neck and cheek guards protected the head. Legionary body armor was in a state of transition in the first century. Late Republican armor consisted of a coat of mail (*lorica hamata*), perhaps ultimately derived from Celtic models.<sup>12</sup> Beginning around A.D. 20, however, the mail coat was increasingly replaced by the so-called *lorica segmentata*—segmented plate armor covering the shoulders and torso, with, occasionally, a knee-length apron or kilt of eight leather straps strengthened by metal studs, protecting the waist and upper thighs. Scale armor—small, roughly two-inch rectangular plates sewn in overlapping fashion on leather coats—also continued in use among both cavalry and infantry.<sup>13</sup>

The protection provided by the armor was supplemented by a large, curved, rectangular, leather-covered wooden shield (*scutum*), reinforced by iron bosses.<sup>14</sup> The two major legionary weapons were the javelin (*pilum*) and double-edged short sword designed for stabbing (*gladius*—see p.341). The javelin was generally thrown at the enemy just before contact, after which the sword was drawn for close combat. The military tunic was generally white or reddish brown.

As noted above, the standard Roman legions often had insufficient missile and cavalry troops. These deficiencies were

Mail armor



Scale armor

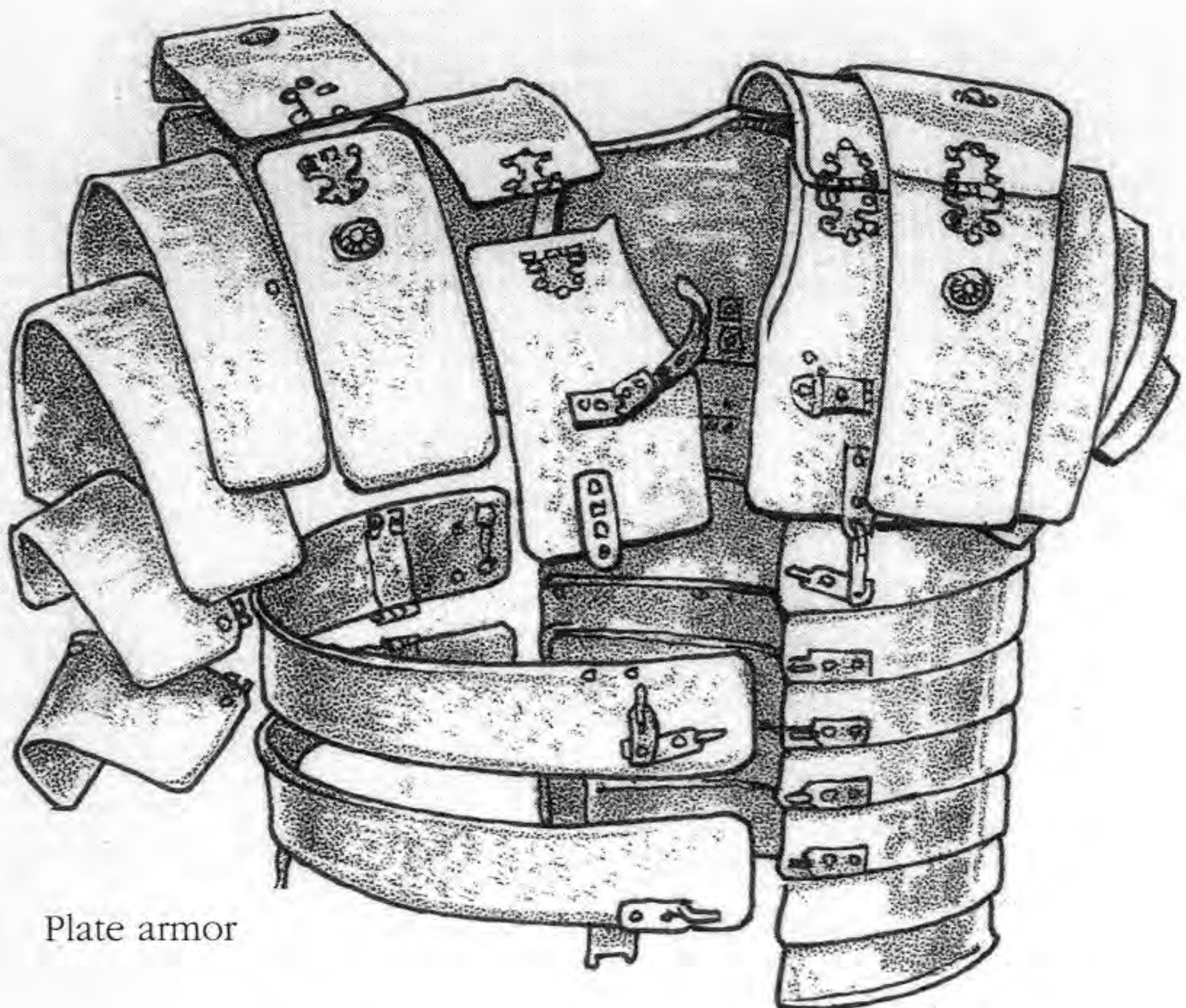
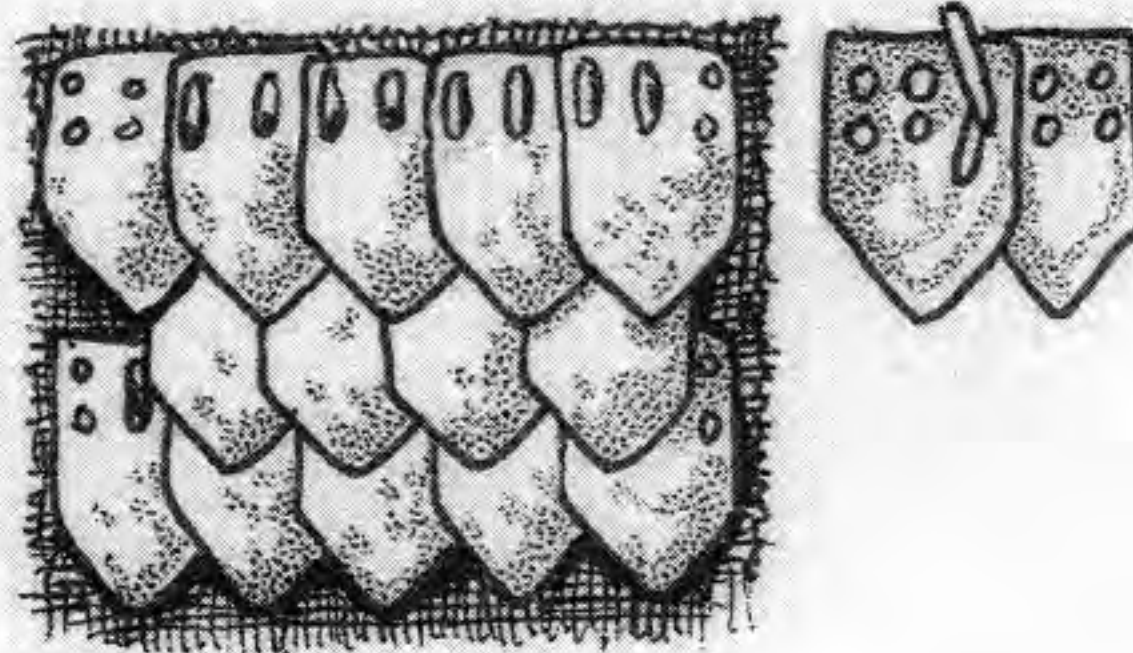


Plate armor

Roman legionary armor. Starting A.D. 20, the Roman army replaced mail armor with plate armor. Scale armor was also in use about the time of Masada.

*Facing page:*

Armed Roman legionary. Wearing plate armor, the legionary is also protected by his shield (*scutum*). In his hand is his javelin (*pilum*), and at his waist is his *gladius*, a double-edged short sword.



remedied by the use of non-Roman auxiliary troops, who were equipped with a wide array of arms and armor, ranging from unarmored light infantry and missile troops to heavily armored cavalry. Heavy cavalry could be equipped with heavy scale or mail armor, a long (about 30 inches) cutting sword, and a lance.

As cavalry became increasingly important to the Romans, formal cavalry regiments (*ala quingenaria*) of about five hundred men were organized, equipped with mail or scale armor, shields, lances, and long cutting swords. To some extent, the equipment of early imperial auxiliary infantry cohorts was standardized, with a mail jacket, a large, oval shield, several six- to seven-foot-long broad-headed spears that could be used for throwing or thrusting, and a short sword.<sup>15</sup> As a general rule, the equipment of the auxiliaries during the early empire was inferior to that of the legionaries. During the later empire (third and fourth centuries), distinctions between legionary and auxiliary infantry in both equipment and functions tended to blur.

Thus, although Roman legions were quite regular in uniforms and equipment, the presence of auxiliaries would make the composition and appearance of each specific Roman army unique. Auxiliaries could be recruited and armed according to the military practices of their ethnic group and region. Mounted archers were used along the Parthian frontier, camel-mounted troops were found on desert borders, and Gallic troops assisted in the Roman conquest of their British cousins. Furthermore, auxiliaries and mercenaries from any ethnic group or military type could be found serving in different parts of the empire at one time or another. For example, Herod the Great had a bodyguard of four hundred Gauls, while North African light cavalry campaigned with Trajan in Dacia (Romania).

Legions also often included various forms of mechanical artillery, ranging from small bolt- or stone-throwing ballistae and catapults to larger siege engines. Some of the smaller machines could be mounted on carts and moved about on the battlefield. Larger machines were used only for sieges.<sup>16</sup> Roman legions excelled in military engineering and almost always included skilled military engineers to build roads and bridges, to construct camps and field fortifications, and to create siegecraft.

**Swords.** The sword is the most frequently mentioned weapon in the New Testament. The English word *sword* translates two Greek terms: *machaira*, meaning “large knife, short sword, or dagger,”<sup>17</sup> and *romphaia*, meaning “large, broad sword.”<sup>18</sup> In the Vulgate—often followed by the King James translators—both *romphaia* and *machaira* are almost always translated as *gladius*, “sword.”<sup>19</sup>

The meaning of *machaira* can range from a knife or dagger to a short sword.<sup>20</sup> It often translates the Latin *gladius*, meaning sword in a broad sense, but often refers more technically to the short sword of Roman legionaries. The sword of the legionaries of the late Republic was the *gladius Hispaniensis* (Spanish sword), adopted from the Iberian steel-cutting sword in the third century B.C. and measuring about thirty inches long and two inches wide.<sup>21</sup> By the early Principate, however, this weapon was replaced by a shorter *gladius*, a steel, double-edged weapon ranging from sixteen to twenty-two inches long, and from two to three inches wide, designed for either cutting or thrusting.<sup>22</sup> This was the standard Roman legionary sword at the time of Christ. Cavalry swords averaged around thirty inches.

However, swords manufactured from many different sources—Judean, Nabatean, Syrian, Greek, or Parthian—were undoubtedly available in Palestine in the first century and manifested a variety of shapes and functions. Furthermore, swords used by Roman auxiliaries could be less standardized. Nonetheless, it is likely that the *machaira* mentioned in the New Testament generally refers to weapons broadly similar to the Roman short sword, double-edged and pointed, ranging from about one and one-half to two feet long and two to three inches wide.

The *romphaia* refers to a longer cutting weapon than the standard legionary *gladius*, with somewhat exotic or barbarian overtones; it is said to have originated in Thrace. In the New Testament, the *romphaia* is generally used to designate the swords carried by angels or other celestial beings.<sup>23</sup> The sword of Christ’s mouth is a *romphaia* (Rev. 1:16; 2:12, 16; 19:15, 21). The sword carried by the apocalyptic horseman of war is a *machaira* in Revelation 6:4, but a *romphaia* in Revelation 6:8. Since the horsemen of the apocalypse are probably supernatural beings or metaphors, the *romphaia*, as an angelic weapon, is perhaps appropriate. The saints, on



the other hand, are slain by a machaira of the beast (Rev. 13:10, 14). Thus it seems that for New Testament writers, the word *romphaia* is reserved almost exclusively as the celestial weapon of angels and God, while the *machaira* is an earthly weapon of mortals.

**Spears.** The word *logchē*, meaning “lance, spear, or javelin,” occurs only once in the New Testament, referring to the spear which pierced the side of Christ.<sup>24</sup> The standard spear of the Roman legionary was the *pilum*, “a short-range, armour-piercing, shock weapon, thrown shortly before physical contact was made between the Roman line and its foe.”<sup>25</sup> The *pilum* was characterized by a wooden staff around four feet long, onto which was bolted a thin iron head, one and one-half to two feet long, with a small, arrowlike pointed tip. The thin iron shaft was meant to penetrate an enemy’s shield and then bend on impact, making the shield more cumbersome to use and preventing the enemy from throwing the *pilum* back at the Romans. If the soldier who thrust the spear into Christ’s side was a Roman standard legionary, the weapon used was probably the *pilum*.

On the other hand, it is quite possible, if not likely, that the soldiers who executed Christ were not legionaries, but auxiliary infantry. The Roman garrison of Judea at the time of Christ consisted of five cohorts of infantry and one *ala* of cavalry. Some of these units were auxiliary, comprised of Samaritan and Greek troops (see below). The Roman administrative capital was Caesarea, not Jerusalem, and the cohort which garrisoned Jerusalem could have been a regular legionary unit or an auxiliary unit. The

#### *Facing page:*

**Silva’s camp.** To besiege Masada, the Romans established several camps outside the wall they built around the base of Masada. This photo shows the remains of camp F, which housed Silva, the Roman commander. The camp was more than thirty meters away from the siege wall and had its own stone walls with a gate in the middle of each. The small camp at the top left was built after Silva left.

**Roman siege ramp (*agger*).** Because of the cliffs protecting Masada on all sides, the Romans had to build a ramp to attack the fortress walls. The ramp was about 175 meters long with a slope of about 1:3. The ramp was constructed from dirt and wooden beams, which shored it up.



presence of Pilate at Jerusalem, however, may indicate that he had brought regular legionary troops with him as a guard.

## Recruitment

In theory, all citizens in the Roman Republic owed military service as part of their duties of citizenship. Although the original Roman army was composed of citizen-soldiers serving as needed for a particular campaign before returning to other careers in private life, by the time of Jesus, service in the Roman army had become professional, with soldiers serving from sixteen to twenty-five years before being discharged with a pension and other grants.

Service in the legions was limited, theoretically, to Roman citizens, with non-citizens serving only in the auxiliaries. In practice, however, citizenship could be granted to non-Roman volunteers who entered legionary service. Thus, as time progressed, Roman legions garrisoning the provinces became increasingly composed, not of Roman citizens from Italy, but of provincials who had been granted citizenship. At the time of Jesus, the legions in Judea would probably have been still partly composed of Italian Romans, but the number of provincials serving in the legions would perhaps have been on the rise. Auxiliaries were enrolled under various terms of service and for different periods of time, sometimes for a single campaign, but increasingly on a more permanent basis.<sup>26</sup>

## The Roman Army in Judea at the Time of Christ

Throughout the first century, Judea was ruled either by client kings or princes or as a Roman province under either Roman prefects or procurators appointed by the emperor. In either case, as a frontier province at risk from Arab desert raiders, Parthian invasion, and internal revolt, Judea generally had a Roman military presence. In the greater Roman province of Syria, which included Judea, there were three legions during the reign of Augustus<sup>27</sup> and four under Tiberius,<sup>28</sup> though more could have been transferred there in times of war.

There is general agreement that from the reign of Herod the Great to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in A.D. 70 the garrison of Judea comprised one cavalry regiment of Sebasteni (*ala I Sebastenorum*)

[referring to its original recruitment under Herod at Sebastia, the Hellenistic name for Samaria] and five cohorts of infantry, among them at least one cohort of Sebasteni (*cobors I Sebastenorum*).<sup>29</sup>

Roman military power in Judea was not based solely on Roman legionaries. Gentile, Samaritan, and Jewish mercenaries were recruited from Caesarea, Sebastia, and other Hellenistic and Jewish towns. These troops might be recruited as full-time auxiliaries, hired for a single campaign, or made to serve in the provincial armies of Jewish client rulers such as Herod and Agrippa I.<sup>30</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>On the rise of Rome from city-state to empire, see Frank W. Walbank, ed. *Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 7/2, *The Rise of Rome to 220 B.C.*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); A. E. Aston, ed., *Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 8, *Rome and the Mediterranean to 133 B.C.*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and J. A. Crook, ed. *Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 9, *The Last Age of the Roman Republic, 146-43 B.C.*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>2</sup>P. G. W. Glare, *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 1013c (hereafter cited as *OLD*). The term *legion* is related to *lego*, "to gather, select, pick or choose." *OLD*, 1014b. The men of the legion are those gathered or chosen for warfare. For detailed studies with full bibliographies and sources on the organization of the early imperial Roman army, see Yann le Bohec, *The Imperial Roman Army* (New York: Hippocrene, 1994); Lawrence Keppie, *The Making of the Roman Army* (London: Batsford, 1984); and Graham Webster, *The Roman Imperial Army* (London: A. and C. Black, 1979). A brief survey is provided by Brian Dobson, "The Empire," in *Warfare in the Ancient World*, ed. John Hackett (New York: Facts on File, 1989), 192-221. More popular sources with excellent artistic reconstructions of Roman military equipment are Peter Connolly, *Greece and Rome at War* (London: Macdonald, 1981); and John Warry, *Warfare in the Classical World* (New York: St. Martin's, 1980).

<sup>3</sup>*Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2d ed., s.v. "legion."

<sup>4</sup>*Ala* literally means "wing" (*OLD*, 92a), reflecting the usual position of the cavalry on the flanks or wings of an army.

<sup>5</sup>*OLD*, 348b; the Greek term for a Roman cohort, used in the New Testament, is *speirai*, originally a Ptolemaic tactical unit. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 1625b (hereafter cited as *GEL*).

<sup>6</sup>OLD, 299c. Although originally of one hundred men as its name implies, the century at the time of early empire had been reduced to eighty men.

<sup>7</sup>Tacitus, *Annals* 4.5.

<sup>8</sup>For details on legionary organization see Bohec, *Imperial Roman Army*, 19–35; and Webster, *Roman Imperial Army*, 107–42; these figures are all estimates.

<sup>9</sup>According to one estimate, in the mid-second century the Roman army included about 157,000 legionaries and 227,000 auxiliaries, for a total of 384,000 men, of whom about 70,000 were cavalry (cited by Dobson, “The Empire,” 198).

<sup>10</sup>For details, sources, and bibliography on the *auxilia*, see Bohec, *Imperial Roman Army*, 25–29, 30–32; Webster, *Roman Imperial Army*, 142–55; and Dobson, “The Empire,” 196–201.

<sup>11</sup>The archaeological evidence has been collected and summarized by M. C. Bishop and J. C. N. Coulston, *Roman Military Equipment: From the Punic Wars to the Fall of Rome* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1993). The two most important representational sources for the early imperial Roman army are Trajan’s Column (Ian A. Richmond, *Trajan’s Army on Trajan’s Column* [London: British School at Rome, 1982]) and Trajan’s *Tropaeum Traiani* or “Adamklissi,” a military monument in modern Romania (Florea B. Florescu, *Das Siegesdenkmal von Adamklissi*, 3d ed. [Bucharest: Verlag der Akademie der Romanischen Volksrepublik, 1965]). For a full survey of the representational sources on Roman military equipment, see Bishop and Coulston, *Military Equipment*, 19–32. Modern artistic reconstructions of Roman military equipment can be found in Connolly, *Greece and Rome at War*, and Warry, *Warfare in the Classical World*.

<sup>12</sup>On Roman mail, see Bishop and Coulston, *Military Equipment*, 59–60.

<sup>13</sup>On first century legionary armor, see Bishop and Coulston, *Military Equipment*, 81–101.

<sup>14</sup>Bishop and Coulston, *Military Equipment*, 81–96.

<sup>15</sup>Bishop and Coulston, *Military Equipment*, 206–9.

<sup>16</sup>Eric William Marsden, *Greek and Roman Artillery*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969–71).

<sup>17</sup>GEL, 1085a. *Machaira* occurs twenty-seven times in the New Testament: Matthew 10:34; 26:47–55; Mark 14:43–48; Luke 21:24; 22:36–52; John 18:10–11; Romans 8:35; 13:4; Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12; 11:34, 37; and Revelation 6:4; 13:10; 13:14. *Machaira* is probably cognate with the Greek *machomai*, “to fight,” and related terms. GEL, 1085b. There is no unique word used in the New Testament for knife or dagger. See also Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1964–76), 4:524–27 (hereafter cited as *TDNT*).

<sup>18</sup>GEL, 1574b. *Romphaia* appears seven times in the New Testament: Luke 2:35; and Revelation 1:16; 2:12, 16; 6:8; 19:15, 21; see also *TDNT*, 6:993–98.

<sup>19</sup>The exception is Luke 2:35, which transliterates the Greek *romphaia* as *rompbeam*. In all other cases, *romphaia* is translated as *gladius*. On *gladius*, see OLD, 765c.

<sup>20</sup>TDNT, 4:525. *Machaira* is used in the Septuagint to refer to knives on several occasions (Josh. 5:2; Gen. 22:6) and refers to a sacrificial knife in Homer.

<sup>21</sup>Bishop and Coulston, *Military Equipment*, 53–54.

<sup>22</sup>Bishop and Coulston, *Military Equipment*, 69–74.

<sup>23</sup>*TDNT*, 6:995–98. In the Septuagint, the sword of the *cherubim* (Gen. 3:24)—*hereb* in Hebrew—is translated by the Greek *romphaia*, which may be the origin of the tradition of the *romphaia* as an angelic weapon. On the other hand, *romphaia* is a standard Septuagint translation of *hereb*.

<sup>24</sup>John 19:34. On the meaning of *logchē*, see *GEL*, 1059b. The term is translated in the Vulgate as *militum lancea*. Spearmen (*dexiolabos*) are mentioned in Acts 23:23, translated in the Vulgate as *lancearios*. Hebrew terms translated as “spear” or “javelin” in the KJV Old Testament include *chanith* and *romach*.

<sup>25</sup>Bishop and Coulston, *Military Equipment*, 208. The pilum is also described as a “throwing-spear or javelin.” *OLD*, 1380a. For a survey of the archaeological evidence, see Bishop and Coulston, *Military Equipment*, 48–53, 65–69.

<sup>26</sup>On recruitment in the Roman armies, see Bohec, *Imperial Roman Army*, 68–102.

<sup>27</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.286.

<sup>28</sup>Tacitus, *Annales* 4.5.

<sup>29</sup>Michael Speidel, “The Roman Army in Judea under the Procurators,” in *Roman Army Studies*, ed. M. P. Speidel, 2 vols. (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1992), 2:224. A dated but still useful survey is Thomas Robert Shannon Broughton, “Note XXXIII. The Roman Army,” in *The Beginnings of Christianity, Part I: The Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Fredrick John Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake, 5 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1933), 5:427–45. Also see E. Mary Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 146–47.

<sup>30</sup>Fergus Millar, *The Roman Near East: 31 B.C.–A.D. 337* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 356.