

Studii • Studies**BELLATOR EQUUS. THE LATE REPUBLIC AND THE EXTINCTION
OF THE CITIZEN CAVALRY****Fábián István***[DOI: 10.2478/amsh-2022-0017](https://doi.org/10.2478/amsh-2022-0017)**Abstract**

The Roman Cavalry of the Late Republic could cope with the more “traditional” units of the Hellenistic world, moreover it proved to be rather versatile in terms of equipment and tactics, even though many historians considered to be ineffective. Due to the many new challenges on the battlefield and in Roman policy citizen cavalry was doomed to extinction. The present paper analyses a few military and political causes its disappearance.

Keywords: Rome; citizen; cavalry; battles; challenges

The Roman Cavalry emerged from the Punic Wars as a specialisation with a great combat potential, able to respond effectively to the challenges represented by a wide array of opponents and tactics. More than that, by employing surprising tactics, like dismounting when fighting enemy cavalry, the Romans managed to confuse opposing cavalry riders and assuring them tactical advantage¹. Thus, cavalry became an effective and indispensable instrument in extension of Roman domination in the Mediterranean. “The most spectacular achievements of the second century BC were the decisive battles that humbled the professional armies of those Hellenistic states founded by Alexander’s successors, forcing them grudgingly to accept Roman domination”². In this aspect the battles with the armies of king Philip V are paradigmatic; in 200 BC the Roman and the Macedonian cavalry confronted each other. It seemed that both sides charged without any use of tactics and being equal in weaponry and determination so that the confrontation ended up relatively with little losses (35 Romans and 50 Macedonian

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¹ Jeremiah McCall, *The cavalry of the Roman Republic*, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 97.

² Philip Sidnell, *Warhorse. Cavalry in ancient warfare*, London, Continuum, 2006, p. 197.

causalities)³. But, on the long term the results of the battle were grimmer for the Macedonians: “when Philip V had the bodies of his horsemen collected for proper burial, the Macedonian troops were apparently appalled by the degree of mutilation wrought upon them by the Spanish swords (*Gladius Hispanensis*- n.n.) used by the Roman troopers”⁴. In the same battle, the Roman cavalry soldiers, used their specific tactics of fighting in a line either unmounted either on horseback, forcing the Macedonians to fight stationary, to which they were unaccustomed⁵. In 197 B.C. at Cynoscephalae, the Romans accomplished a full-scale victory against Alexander V, even though the cavalry (beyond skirmishes) did not have an decisive role. But seven years later, at Magnesia “the Seleucid army, the foremost proponent of shock cavalry at that time, was trounced”⁶, due to the determined actions of Roman (and allied) cavalry. The battle represented the first encounter of the Roman cavalrymen with the heavily clad Eastern type shock cavalry: the cataphracts. Outnumbered in matter of infantry (60.000 Seleucid versus 27.600 Roman and allies), cavalry (12.000 to 2.800) and elephants (54 to 16)⁷, the Romans made the best they could by using the terrains and the deployment of troops. The latter aspect was somehow awkward, in terms of cavalry: on the left wing only 4 *turmae* (120 cavalrymen) and some 1200 infantry was deployed (on the banks of the Phyrgeus river), while on the right wing the main mass of the troops was deployed⁸. In this way, Antiochus, took the bait by pressing on his right wing towards the Roman camp, loosing contact with the main battlefield.

³ *Forte et numero et uirtute, utpote lecti utrimque, haud impares aequis uiribus per aliquot horas pugnauerunt. fatigatio ipsorum equorumque incerta uictoria diremit proelium; Macedonum quadraginta equites, Romanorum quinque et triginta ceciderunt. Titi Livi, Ab urbe condita, XXXI, 33, <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/livy/liu.31.shtml> (accessed 2022.11.03).*

⁴ Philip Snidell, *op.cit.*, p. 197; Livy “*nam qui hastis sagittisque et rara lanceis facta uolnera uidissent, cum Graecis Illyrisque pugnare adsueti, postquam gladio Hispaniensi detruncata corpora brachiis cum humero abscessis aut tota ceruice desecta diuisa a corpore capita patentiaque uiscera et foeditatem aliam uolnerum uiderunt, aduersus quae tela quosque uiros pugnandum foret pauidi uolgo cernebant. ipsum quoque regem terror cepit nondum iusto proelio cum Romanis congressum*” Titi Livi, *Ab urbe condita*, XXXI, 34, <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/livy/liu.31.shtml> (accessed 2022.11.03).

⁵ Philip Sabin, Hans van Wees, Michael Withby (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare. Volume I: Greece, the Hellenistic World and the Rise of Rome*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 451.

⁶ Philip Snidell, *op.cit.*, p. 198.

⁷ Michael Sage, *The Army of the Roman Republic. From the Regal period to the army of Julius Caesar*, Penn and Sword Military, Yorkshire, 2018, p. 269. Actually Scipio kept his elephants in reserve not only because of the small numbers, but also because his African elephants were smaller in size than Antiochus’s Indian ones.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 270; Robert E Gaebel, *Cavalry operations in the ancient Greek world*, Oklahoma, University of Oklahoma Press, 2002, p. 251.

In the meantime, after disposing the Seleucid scythed chariots, King Eumenes II of Pergamum, with 2800 Roman, Italian and Hellenistic cavalry routed out the enemy's 6.500 cavalry (among them 3000 cataphracts), eventually charging the flanks and the rear of the Seleucid phalanx. After this battle, the Roman cavalry gained his "solid if not spectacular record against the professional armies of the Successor states"⁹. In the series of battles (such as Pydna in 168 B.C.), which helped the strengthening the Roman domination, around the Mediterranean the cavalry managed to achieve its main objectives and functions: patrolling, skirmishing, but they acted less as shock units in open field battles. This was due to the types of enemies the Romans were confronting with but also to the political changes which were taking place in the Roman society. The intervention in Spain and the Jugurthine war proved to be challenging for the Roman cavalry (and not only for them) and, it seems that these conflicts were the "beginning of the end" for the citizen cavalry.

The war in Spain begun in 197 BC, "though conducted on the Roman side with varying degrees of energy, took the Romans into one new territory after another (...). In 193 the conflict with the Lusitanians began (...). The Senate and the armies persevered with the task year by year, in spite of some occasional reluctance among the soldiers, until a formal peace could be made with the Celtiberians (178) and their final attempt at rebellion defeated (175)"¹⁰. This was an unusual warfare for the Roman (an Italian) heavy cavalry: the "hit and run" tactics, employed by the Lusitanians, was hard to cope with more than that, there was another problem: the mount. The Lusitanian horses had more "stamina, agility and sure-footedness" than the Roman ones¹¹. The leader of the Lusitanian revolt, Viriatus, not only had excellent knowledge of the terrain but, exploited to the maximum the good qualities of the local horse breeds. He just outmanoeuvred and outflanked the Roman troops, without being apprehended by the much slower Roman cavalry. This war of attrition, was called by the Romans *latrocinium*, and Viriatus *latro*. "Such a classification follows from both the status of the enemy under international law and the guerrilla tactics which they employed. In terms of international law, the position of the Lusitanians was, of course, determined solely and subjectively by the Romans. (...) the Romans regarded the Lusitanians as a barbarian people, unable to field a regular army of heavy infantry, trained in and equipped with the weapons of Greco-Roman military science. And they were led by

⁹ Philip Snidell, *op.cit.*, p. 199.

¹⁰ William V. Harris, *War and Imperialism in Republican Rome 327-70 BC*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1979, p. 209.

¹¹ Philip Snidell, *op.cit.*, p. 199.

Viriatus. For this form of warfare there was indeed just one word in Latin: *latrocinium*¹². The combination of highly manoeuvrable light cavalry units (but it seems that the Lusitani had also Celtic type mailed cavalry), light infantry and guerrilla tactics was deadly for the Romans, who, in terms of cavalry, put more and more accent of mailed cavalry units fighting in close formations. Eventually the rebellion was defeated by treason, Viriatus being killed by a group of traitors. Interesting to mention the fact that, the Iberian Campaign brought not only victory but also one of the most important changes in Roman infantry warfare: the shift from *manipulus* to *cohors*. Due to the dispersed enemy and its guerrilla tactics: “warfare required operational groups that were smaller than the legions, capable of quick movement and able to protect themselves. This was a role that cohorts could fulfil (...). Individual maniples were too small to operate independently. The cohort was in effect a miniature legion composed of the three maniples that normally fought together and supported each other in large-scale battles. This was a decided advantage as the soldiers who composed the maniple had already trained together, and often had fought together. The unit was large enough to defend itself, fight independently and could easily be reintegrated into a legion when necessary”¹³. It is obvious that the infantry managed to adapt faster to the new conditions than the citizen cavalry.

A second severe test for the Roman cavalry was the Jugurthine War (112-105 BC). Here once again the gap between the adaptability of the infantry and the cavalry is clear. The Numidians had one of the most effective light cavalry units in the Antiquity, and it is well known that the defection of Masinissa was one the turning points of the war against Carthage. Numidian horses (and generally North-African mounts), “were small and spare in build. These horses had evolved to live in the arid extremes of the northern Sahara. Any excess fleshiness is undesirable in desert-type horses”¹⁴. Titus Livius described the Numidian cavalry as gracile riders on small horses, without armours and saddles, equipped just with a few javelins. The war broke out, when Jugurtha, the adopted son of king Mcpisa (Masinissa’s successor) refused to share the kingdom with Adherbal the former king’s natural son. Jughurta conquered the port of Cirta, slaughtering

¹² Thomas Grünewald, *Bandits in the Roman Empire. Myth and reality*, London-New-York, Routledge, 2004, p. 39.

¹³ Michael Sage, *op.cit.*, p. 307.

¹⁴ Carolyn Willekes, *The horse in the Ancient world. From Bucephalus to the Hippodrome*, London-New-York, I.B.Tauris., 2016 p. 15, Titus Livius, *Ab urbe condita*, 35.11 “*nihil primo adspectu contemptius: equi hominesque paululi et graciles, discinctus et inermis eques, praeterquam quod iacula secum portat equi sine frenis, deformis ipse cursus rigida cervice et extento capite currentium*”.
<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0165%3Abook%3D35%3Achapter%3D11> (accessed 28.11.2022).

the Roman inhabitants. Then he quickly subdued the great part of Numidia, and defeated in 109 BC a Roman army lead by Aulus Postumius Albinus. The Roman Senate acted as expected by sending another consul, Quintus Caecilius Metellus to solve the situation. Like in the case of the Lusitanians, the knowledge of the terrain and the “hit and run” tactics favoured the Numidians who refused an open battle with the Romans. Metellus, acted systematically: he conquered one by one the Numidian cities and in March he “took great care to guard against ambush or sudden cavalry raids. A screen of light infantry slingers, and archers marched at the head of the column, while de auxiliary cavalry, which included locally raised Numidians as well as Thracian units, formed protective screen to either side with more light infantry units in support. The rear, always vulnerable against an elusive enemy in a hostile territory, was entrusted to his talented subordinate, Marius, with the citizen cavalry”¹⁵. During the main battles of the conflict: at Muthul river, in the siege of Zama or at Capsa (this time the Romans being under the command of Marius and Sulla), the Roman cavalry did its best acting as scouts, support or shock units, in many situations deciding the fate of the battle and ultimately of the war. Likewise, Mettelus, and later Marius, made use in terms of infantry of the cohort tactics. For instance, at Muthul, Metellus “sent four cohorts against the Numidian infantry, which helped to bring about a Roman victory. A similar use of both cohorts and maniples is mentioned in 106 when Gaius Marius (...), was marching into winter quarters. In expectation of a possible attack, Marius had his men march in a hollow square; he positioned lightly equipped maniples to the front and rear of the square. He also sent four cohorts ahead along with cavalry to secure his camp”¹⁶.

The Jugurthine war was the last in which the citizen cavalry took part¹⁷. From now one cavalry units were recruited from conquered populations or from allied kingdoms. The usual

¹⁵ Philip Snidell, *op.cit.*, p.201; Curtius Sallustius, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 46,5 “*Neque Metellus idcirco minus, sed pariter ac si hostes adessent, munito agmine incedere, late explorare omnia, illa deditiois signa ostentui credere et insidiis locum temptari. Itaque ipse cum expeditis cohortibus, item funditorum et sagittariorum delecta manu apud primos erat, in postremo C. Marius legatus cum equitibus curabat, in utrumque latus auxilarios equites tribunus legionum et praefectis cohortium dispertiverat, ut cum eis permixti velites, quocumque accederent equitatus hostium, propulsarent.*

https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/L/Roman/Texts/Sallust/Bellum_Jugurthinum/2*.html (acesat 28.11.2022)

¹⁶ Michael Sage, *op.cit.*, p. 308.

¹⁷ McCall asserted that the last mention of citizen cavalry can be traced at the battle of Athesis (102 BC), when during the war against the Cimbri a cavalry unit deserted the consul Catulus and retreated to Rome “Among the horsemen who fled was the son of the noble M.Scaurus, almost certainly an *eques equo publico*”. Cf. Jeremiah McCall, *op.cit.*, p. 101.

explanation is that the cavalry did not perform according to the expectances and it was replaced as soon as other options were available.

The situation is somewhat nuanced because at the end of the 2nd century BC the link between citizens and military service was altered due to long term of service. If early times campaigns lasted a few months and the citizens could return to their occupations, “by the second century BC the acquisition of overseas provinces was stretching this militia system to the limit as more legions were being called up and kept in the field for years on protracted campaigns of conquest and subjugation and providing an ever-increasing number of garrisons”¹⁸. These long campaigns affected Roman economy and society at all levels. Due to the fact that military service became increasingly unpopular, changes had to be made. And, concerning the cavalry, these changes affected its evolution. Rosenstein stressed out the fact that in the aristocratic culture and politics (noblemen being the bulk of citizen cavalry), these changes diminished “the value of a reputation for martial valor that military service, and cavalry service in particular, had helped young aristocrats obtain (...) Greater benefit accrued to a young man setting out on a political career from spending the time required to gain the oratorical mastery needed to shine as a public speaker than from a reputation for courage on the battlefield. And by this point, too, foreign threats began to seem far less urgent. The Social War was the last serious challenge Roman supremacy faced, and consequently the value of martial prowess, while always respected, counted for less in the political currency of the age”¹⁹. This not meant, by far, that Roman aristocracy had given up their military virtues. As later events of the “Roman revolution” will prove, the spirit of the citizen cavalry will survive till the reign of Augustus.

¹⁸ Philip Snidell, *op.cit.*, p. 205.

¹⁹ Nathan Rosenstein, „Military Command, Political Power and the Republican Elite”, in Paul Erdkamp (ed.), *A companion to the Roman Army*, London, Blackwell Publishing, 2007, p. 145.