

The Roman Army

The Roman Empire stretched across three continents, from the border between England and Scotland, all the way to modern day Iran. This enormous territory was governed without the use of cars, planes or mobile phones. How did the Romans do it? The answer was their army.

The Roman army was the largest and best organised fighting force in the world. Every last detail from their equipment, to their battle formations, to their leadership was carefully considered and copied across the Roman Empire.

A Roman soldier was called a legionary. They all had the same armour and weapons equipment, perfect for marching and fighting across Europe, North Africa and the Middle East (see image below). Each legionary also carried spare clothes, cooking equipment and food. Every time they set up camp, the army would build a small wooden fort so each legionary would carry some wooden stakes and tools, so that the fort could be taken down in the morning and reassembled in the evening.



Cassis: A metal helmet, with a peak designed to protect the forehead from being smashed, and a guard at the back to protect the neck.

Lorica: A suit of armour made out of metal strips tied together with leather straps. It was very protective, but still allowed freedom to move.

Tunica: Under the armour, a red, woollen tunic.

Pilum: A long, metal tipped javelin to throw at enemy shields. The metal would bend on impact making it difficult for the victim to remove.

Gladius: A short, sharp, double-edged sword for short range combat. Carried on the right.

Baltea: A belt, or apron, of leather strips to protect lower part of the body, weighed down with metal weights.

Scutum: A large shield made of thick wood covered in leather, and rimmed with iron. It was curved to deflect arrows and wrap around the legionary.

Caligae: Heavy leather sandals for marching, with nails driven into their soles to improve the grip.



The Roman army had a very clear organisation, so that everyone knew who was in charge. A legion was made up of around 5,000 legionaries, and there were around 30 legions in the entire Roman army. A legion was then divided into ten cohorts, and each cohort was divided into six centuries. A century was the essential unit of the Roman army, made up of around 100 legionaries and led by a centurion.

The Roman army had very effective tactics for marching into battle. A century could turn itself into a human tank. The legionaries would form a square, with the men on the outside holding out their shields, and the men on the inside holding their shields above their heads. This formation was called a 'testudo', meaning 'tortoise' in Latin, as it had a similar protective shell.



Roman Testudo

The Roman army recruited soldiers not just from Rome, but from all over their Empire. The Roman army had soldiers from Africa, France, Germany, the Balkans, Spain, the Middle East and Britain. If a Roman soldier fought for 25 years, and survived, they would be allowed to retire with a generous pension, making them very wealthy.

