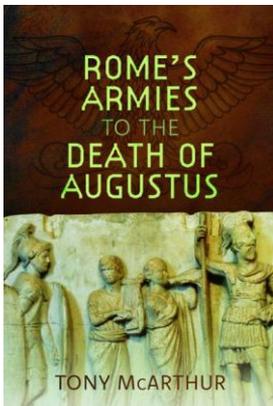


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The revision of the traditional understanding of various aspects of the functioning and development of the Roman army in historiography, in our opinion, took place relatively recently. This is particularly evident with the emergence in the second half of the 20th century of J. Harmand's fundamental work, which remains relevant today.¹ In this study, certain aspects of Polybius' description of the Roman military organization were questioned, particularly the duration of military service and the powers of magistrates.

The work also refuted the assumption of the dominance of voluntary enlistment in the late 2nd-1st centuries BCE, which was supposedly the cornerstone of the so-called "military reform of Gaius Marius". Moreover, for the first time in historical literature, it raised the issue of the absence in ancient sources of information regarding a permanent, professional army allegedly established by Marius.² A similar approach was taken in the article by J.W. Rich.³ The monograph by F. Cadiou is exceptionally detailed and meticulous in its analysis of sources and the extensive body of literature reviewed.⁴ In this work, the French scholar critiques and refutes the long-established model of analyzing the late Republican military, particularly regarding the social composition of the legions in the 1st century BCE. Additionally, F. Gauthier⁵ and M.J. Taylor⁶ have questioned the tactical and

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¹ Harmand, 1967.

² Harmand, 1967: 11-19.

³ Rich, 1983.

⁴ Cadiou, 2018.

⁵ Gauthier, 2016.

⁶ Taylor, 2019.

technical aspects of the so-called “Marius’ reform” and confirmed the continuity of traditional practices within the Roman army.

While previous authors analyzed only selected aspects of the Roman army’s functioning – political, social, organizational, and tactical-technical, – McArthur takes a broader approach to the issue, arguing that the term “army” has several different meanings in modern English and other world languages (3, 24). Therefore, it would be incorrect to apply the phrase “Roman army” to this phenomenon in the singular (xi). Using the term “Roman army” without chronological qualification risks implying that it retains a consistent meaning over a millennium while ignoring the numerous changes that took place during that period (25). But what exactly is revolutionary about McArthur’s perspective? Let us examine this in detail.

At the core of his work, the Australian researcher rejects and refutes the traditional metanarrative regarding the Roman military institution, particularly by substantiating the formula: “not the Roman army, but the armies of Rome” (xii). In other words, McArthur aims to demonstrate that there was not a singular “Roman army” functioning for nearly a millennium under the traditional historiographical label “the Roman Army”, but rather multiple Roman armies, existing from the regal period to the death of Octavian Augustus (xi). The author does not insist that the basis of his work lies in the analysis of the usual differences in Roman armies, which developed over many centuries – internal structure and organization, although his entire monograph is permeated with this issue. First and foremost, he aims to refute the thesis that, starting from the early modern period, the Roman army is compared with contemporary military forces, primarily in terms of terminology and its institutional understanding. There are too many assumptions surrounding such concepts related to the military history of Ancient Rome as “reform”, “standing army”, and “professionalism” (xi). McArthur considers it unacceptable to apply modern terms to the Roman armies. The author’s primary goal is something akin to a “reboot” of the already established views on the ancient Roman military, which has often been studied through the lens of social or political history (xii). The author points out the anachronism of the comparative method, which involves comparing contemporary armies with those of Ancient Rome (25). He traces the progression of Roman military interest – from Byzantium and the antiquarian interest of scholars and military figures during the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods, to the historians of antiquity and researchers of ancient armies in the 19th and early 20th centuries (5-23). Returning to the comparison of Roman armies with modern ones, McArthur suggests that the Romans viewed their armed forces in much the same way that citizens of modern countries view their national armies. That is, they saw the contemporary military as a distinct social institution, which separated its members from others. In our view, the author slightly misinterprets the relationship between ordinary civilian Romans with the status of *civitas* and their fellow citizens in military service – *miles*. This is

especially true when considering the periods of the Early, Middle, or even Late Republic. The Roman military system was based on the polis system, where citizen militias were composed of individuals who held the honorable right and duty of military service. The statuses of *civis* and *miles* were distinct from one another in both time and space, as well as in the sacred-legal dimension. In this regard, the military was viewed as a separate, sacred institution – *sacrata militia* (Liv. 8.34.10). After crossing the sacred boundaries of Rome – *pomerium* (Aul. Gell. 15.27), – civilian Romans were transformed into soldiers, losing some of their civic rights, and were subject to sacred norms and relationships. Accordingly, when returning to peaceful life, *quirites* underwent purification rituals, which were preserved even during the Imperial period. However, McArthur rightly notes that being a Roman male citizen meant, *ipso facto*, among other things, being a soldier (25).

In the section “What did the Romans call their Armies?”, the author addresses one of the key issues of the monograph – namely, the existence of a “standing army” in Ancient Rome. Before Augustus, the Romans did not have a regular army. Legions and allied contingents were assembled only for specific campaigns and disbanded once they were completed. McArthur emphasizes that the Romans did not view their armies as part of a formal institution, like modern armies; rather, they were simply a natural part of a Roman citizen’s life, much like religion or elections. These armies resembled militias more than a national standing army. The term “exercitus” was used to refer to the army and its assemblies, as noted by ancient authors (Veg. *Mil.* 2.9, 3.1, 3.9, 3.10; Vell. Pat. 2.16, 2.111; Tac. *Ann.* 2.16; Tac. *Agr.* 41; Tac. *Hist.* 4.57; Sall. *Cat.* 61; Sall. *Hist.* 2.47.7; Cic. *Prov. cons.* 5), rather than to describe a state-run military organization (28). McArthur mentions a passage from the work of Cassius Dio (52.27.1, 56.40.2), in which the historian uses the phrase στρατιώται ἀθάνατοι, meaning “immortal warriors” or “immortal army”. This is how Dio refers to the standing army in his work. Another Roman historian, Herodian (2.11.4-5), described the changes that he considered the most significant in the history of the Roman military during the Principate period. Both authors write about the emergence of permanent military camps, which first appeared under Augustus, where soldiers remained in a state of constant combat readiness and underwent regular training. As described in Chapter 8, “The Armies of Imperator Augustus”, Augustus’ armies were not fully disbanded, and the military service practices introduced by this emperor became the norm for the armies of subsequent princes. This suggests a certain idealization of both the army and the “divine Augustus”, who is often credited with creating a professional military force. McArthur explains that the term “Roman army” is meaningful only when it is clearly defined and applied within specific chronological boundaries – without implying its existence as a social institution or a national army. Any other usage of the term is too vague and risks unintentionally equating Rome’s

armies with modern national armies. To avoid this confusion, McArthur instead uses the phrase “armies of Rome” (31).

In Chapter 3 “Changes in Rome’s Armies, the Problem with ‘Reform’ and an Alternative”, the author addresses the issue of changes and innovations in the Roman military, which modern historiography traditionally labels as “reforms”. McArthur clearly defines the concept of “reform” and its key components. He argues that the Romans themselves did not describe changes as reforms in the modern sense of the word. Moreover, there is no direct evidence that the so-called military reforms described by modern scholars actually occurred in a specific place and time. While it is undeniable that changes took place in the Roman army from the time of Servius Tullius to Augustus, the question of why these changes happened remains open (33).

Sometimes these “reforms” have been described as evolutionary, reinforcing the perception of progressive development in the Roman military (35). McArthur questions this interpretation, asking: “How appropriate is the word ‘reform’ and its associated concepts for describing changes in Rome’s armies to the death of Augustus?” (36). The author argues that in pre-Christian Latin, there was no equivalent for the word “reform”. Instead, Latin had several terms conveying aspects of reform, such as “correctio” or “emendatio”, which meant “removal of errors”, “improvement”, or “correction” – quite different from the modern meaning of “reform” (36). To refer to restoration or improvement, Romans used the verbs *reddo* or *reficere* (“to restore”). The word *reformare*, from which the modern term “reform” is derived, first appears in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (9.399, 11.254), where it means a return to a previous state or rejuvenation. It is the Latin equivalent of the Greek term μεταμόρφωσις (“*metamorphosis*”) (Diod. Sic. 4.81.5) (36). This means that even this Latinized Greek term did not carry the meaning that it later acquired in Late Antiquity, the modern, and postmodern periods (37-39). Returning to the military context, certain changes in weaponry and equipment were not interpreted as progressive changes (37). Reforms are often seen as synonymous with progress or evolution, but in this regard, McArthur compares Greek and Roman perceptions of these concepts. The Romans, unlike the Greeks, did not view the future as something inherently positive and did not embrace the idea of progress – except, perhaps, in the field of technology. By nature, they were deeply conservative, especially regarding state institutions, virtues, and daily life. The Greeks, on the other hand, acknowledged limited progress in fields such as philosophy, science, and the arts, but not in moral or political activities (40). Thus, the author of the monograph argues that reform as a means of progress was not used by ancient authors to describe changes in the Roman army or anything else. However, this does not necessarily mean that the use of the term “reform” is inappropriate in modern discourse. For historians, it is methodologically challenging, – if not outright anachronistic, – to explain the past using modern terminology, even though history remains an ongoing dialogue between the past and the present. To describe something

as a reform rather than simply a change implies that it was progressive toward a specific goal and beneficial by certain criteria. Some scholars may assume that the discourse of reform is merely an alternative way to describe change. However, such an assumption is, at best, careless, and at worst, reflects a lack of awareness of how modern perspectives on history are shaped both by previous historical experiences and by our own contemporary viewpoints (41). McArthur aims to convey to modern scholars that they should avoid the outdated practices common among historians of previous centuries. Instead, they should strive to immerse themselves in the specific realities of the time and, where possible, rely on deeper research rather than mere assumptions. This approach is essential for a better understanding of historical phenomena and events, – in this case, the changes (or so-called “reforms”) in the Roman military, – and whether they were truly effective and beneficial for the armies of Ancient Rome. According to McArthur, the most significant role in organizational and tactical changes within the Roman army was played by commanders and generals (54). While they were technically limited by their magisterial powers, they often wielded unrestricted imperium. Moreover, in the late Republican period, the lack of rapid communication between the provinces and central authority forced high-ranking officers to act independently, often without consulting the Senate (45-46). However, caution is needed when analyzing accounts of their actions in ancient military literature, as these sources may be biased or embellished. Favorable portrayals often reflected the author’s personal admiration for a particular commander or were influenced by the ruler under whose reign the work was written.

Nevertheless, as McArthur points out, Roman generals were highly adaptable, adjusting their leadership and strategies to the challenges of field conditions, even in difficult or unpredictable circumstances. Ultimately, they were the “key agents of change” in the Roman military throughout the entire history of Ancient Rome (54-55). But as the author emphasizes, none of the changes initiated by a particular Roman “general” can be called a “reform”. Even if the Roman army continued to exist for many centuries, certain transformations might have led to changes in the composition of the armies or in battle formations. However, these were by no means decisive, groundbreaking reforms. Examples of such armies include Pompey’s forces in Spain and Caesar’s troops after an extended stay in Gaul (54). The author also mentions the adaptation to local conditions and changes in ethnic composition and battle tactics in the second chapter (129). However, McArthur does not refer to such changes as reforms. The examples of micromanagement described in Frontinus’ *Strategemata* or Polyaeus are small and incidental. Over time, many of these small, conditional decisions during military actions led to changes (55).

The next Chapter 4, “The Myth of Professionalism in Rome’s Armies before 14 CE”, addresses the issue of the existence of professional armies from Marius to Augustus (56-85). While the myth of a professional or semi-professional army under

Marius and his successors in the 1st century BCE has already been debunked by numerous publications (see above), the debunking of the thesis about Augustus' military reform and the professional army of the Principate period is a new development in modern historiography. An exception is the article by D. Lee, in which he questioned the professionalism of Roman armies during the imperial period,⁷ but McArthur has approached this problem more thoroughly. He argues that the claim that the term “professionalism” can be applied to the institutions of Ancient Rome, particularly to the military, is flawed, since the term itself appeared in the English language only in the mid-19th century (56). It was around this time that the discourse on professionalism as a phenomenon emerged, particularly when it comes to the Roman army, and a direction in historiography developed, with scholars focusing on various aspects of the functioning of the military system of Ancient Rome (59). For example, the editors of the collective monograph *Skilled Labour and Professionalism in Ancient Greece and Rome* disagree with this perspective, arguing that “professionalism” is also applicable in the ancient context, although “no Greek or Latin word corresponds to this term”.⁸ There is no need to expect that “professionals of the ancient world” would meet modern standards, especially since it is practically impossible to reconcile a proper definition for their modern counterparts.⁹ In light of this, it would be more appropriate to describe the Roman army of the imperial period as “standing” rather than “professional”. McArthur analyzes 20th-century scholars who interpreted the emergence of “professional soldiers” in the 2nd–1st centuries BCE in different ways (61-65). However, in this analysis, the author inexplicably omits the work of J. W. Rich (see above), which is crucial for refuting the thesis about the beginning of the formation of a professional army during Marius' time. His actions in recruiting volunteers and the poor *capite censi* were “isolated incidents” or “isolated cases”. They did not affect the subsequent practice of recruitment and organization of legions, and Marius' successors did not follow his example – at least, this is not mentioned in the sources.¹⁰

The monograph also mentions Spurius Ligustinus,¹¹ a figure often cited by researchers as an example of the “first professional soldier”. This centurion, of Sabine origin, is only mentioned by Livy and may be a fictional character. As we have already noted, according to Livy's description, Spurius Ligustinus did not serve in the army permanently but sporadically, when Rome was engaged in military campaigns outside Italy. The irregularity of his military service could not be seen as evidence of his professionalism as a soldier or even as a volunteer (*uolones*) – he was simply fulfilling

⁷ Lee, 2020.

⁸ Stewart, Harris, & Lewis, 2020: 6-7.

⁹ Stewart, Harris, & Lewis, 2020: 12.

¹⁰ Rich, 1983: 319, 328, 331.

¹¹ Taylor, 2020.

his civic duty, like most of his fellow citizens. Although, due to frequent campaigns and participation in numerous battles, this centurion gained substantial military experience, he remained a poor peasant, a representative of the *plebs rustica*, working his small plot of land during his free time from military service and raising a large family (Liv. 42.34.2-4).¹² M. Taylor also pointed out some inconsistencies and flaws in Livy's biographical description of Ligustinus in a meticulous study.¹³ However, the American scholar does not exclude the possibility that such a type of "proto-professional officer", with modest means and a large family, could have existed during the republican period.¹⁴ However, McArthur disagrees with the thesis that Spurius Ligustinus was a "professional soldier". He argues that military service was a duty for Roman soldiers, not their profession in the modern sense of the word (66-67). In addition to his analysis of the emergence of "professionalism" in the Roman army and Marius' involvement in this process (62-65), the author briefly examines the works of scholars who mention the creation of a "standing army" by Augustus (63-66, 69). He criticizes these researchers for their careless approach and uncritical use of modern terminology when applying it to the realities of that time (69-70).

In the next, second part of the monograph, "Rome's Armies Before and After Polybius", McArthur addresses not only the issues of "military reform" and "professionalization" but also the problem of the most important changes in the Roman army, particularly in battle formations, weaponry, and equipment, which became standard for legionaries for centuries (81-67). A key point is the acknowledgment of numerous borrowings by the Romans in the military sphere. Although the Romans were conservative in their views on life and traditions, they were not averse to adopting practices from their neighbors and enemies (83). While mentioning the involvement of allied troops (*socii*) by the Romans, McArthur does not characterize their significant influence on the Roman army in the 1st century BCE, particularly after the Social War (91-87 BCE) (85). This is especially relevant in terms of increasing the human resources for replenishing the legions and the appearance of the cohort legion instead of the manipular legion.¹⁵ The monograph also includes references to the war with the allies, but the author does not discuss its importance for the further development of the Roman army (117-118, 124).

In Chapter 7 "Rome's Armies in Caesar's Time", the author returns to the topic of the "Marian reforms" (111-113). McArthur agrees with the conclusions of F. Cadiou and other scholars that Marius did not introduce permanent changes to the Roman army, and there is no evidence to support the idea that he did (111). The author points out that the use of terms like "professional army" and "reform" by modern scholars to

¹² Oliynyk, 2016: 229-230.

¹³ Taylor, 2019: 261-278.

¹⁴ Taylor, 2019: 275-276.

¹⁵ Oliynyk & Strelbycka, 2021: 196.

explain changes in the Roman army reflects, rather, the convenience of using these terms to explain various transformations within the military environment (110). Additionally, McArthur argues that the phrase “standing army” in modern works is “...anachronistic, inaccurate and misleading...” (114). As part of the so-called “Marius reform”, the author mentions the disappearance of *velites* from the legions in the 1st century BCE (112, 115, 122), but for some reason, he ignores the work of F. Gauthier, which addresses the existence of this category of soldiers throughout the entire 1st century BCE.¹⁶ Regarding the equipment of the legionaries, the author notes that Caesar’s legions, as well as those of his contemporaries and predecessors, were inconsistently equipped and provided with armor. This was due to the cost and difficulty of manufacturing such gear. Narrative and archaeological sources confirm this (126-127). When comparing the narratives of Polybius and Caesar, McArthur tends to favor Caesar’s works as more reliable and vivid in their descriptions of battles and the relationships between different categories of soldiers. This, however, does not diminish the authority of Polybius’ Ἱστορίαι (130). Indeed, the works of the Roman general are richer in events related to military history, despite his self-justification as a victorious commander when describing certain political events and the bias in his characterization of his enemies and opponents.

The final Chapter 8 “The Armies of Emperor Augustus”, focuses on the impact that Octavian Augustus had on the Roman army. McArthur immediately emphasizes that there is a remarkable consensus among contemporary scholars regarding Augustus’ influence on the changes in the military sphere, which are often referred to as reforms (132). This contrasts with the interpretation of the so-called “Marius reforms”, where views differ among scholars. However, the discourse surrounding the “military reform of Augustus” is not without disagreement. While some explain the “reform” as active planning by the *princeps* to achieve long-term goals, “...others have seen Augustus’ success as the product of successful, reactive responses to crises or as evolutionary adaptations to circumstances” (133). The fact that Augustus became the sole commander of all legions in 27 BCE was a unique confluence of circumstances, not the result of changes initiated by the emperor himself. Augustus did not become a “reformer” by design, but rather the Roman commander with the most extraordinary command ever held by any Roman before him. Even the creation of the military treasury, the *Aerarium Militare*, in 6 century CE was not the result of long-term foresight, but rather a pragmatic solution to the problem of paying the large number of soldiers from the disbanded legions (133). McArthur also points out the anachronism in the commonly used term for the Praetorian cohorts, “Praetorian Guard”. The word “guard” originates from the medieval period and is inappropriate in this context. Augustus did not “create them from scratch”, but rather preserved

¹⁶ Gauthier, 2021: 69-82.

the cohorts that had guarded him during the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE for his personal protection. Only their terms of service and pay were reorganized (135). The emergence of new auxiliary units (*auxilia*) was an evolutionary change, without Augustus' reformist actions, as these units appeared long before his principate, and new units were formed after his death. This was yet another example of conditional adaptation that led to certain changes in the structure of the Roman army (136-137). "The 'military manual', as they are often termed, claimed for Augustus mostly reflect assumptions arising from what is known of Roman armies after Augustus' death. To claim that Augustus intended to 'reform' the armies lacks an evidentiary basis. The application of the discourse of 'professionalism' for Rome's armies prior to Augustus is unsustainable", – concludes McArthur (139). Even the sources do not provide confirmation of Augustus' reformist actions. In particular, Suetonius does not claim that the *princeps* introduced anything new but only adapted some things to old customs (139-140). When characterizing the *Res gestae divi Augusti*, Augustus proclaimed what had already been in place – pensions for retired legionaries, granting them land, and founding colonies. In other words, the creation of the *Aerarium Militare* was the only true creation of this *princeps* (153). The fact that this led to the emergence of the "immortal armies", mentioned in Ῥωμαϊκὴ ἱστορία by Cassius Dio, essentially permanent forces, was an accident of history, not a military reform (152). According to McArthur, there are two reasons for the emergence of these στρατιῶται ἀθάνατοι – internal challenges to Augustus' dominance within the state and the necessity of engaging in external wars (141).

The author attempted to challenge the widely accepted view of the Roman military (or Roman armies) from the earliest times up to the death of Augustus in 14 CE and to debunk the traditional perception of them. The revision of three metanarratives – the use of the terms "Roman army" in the singular, "reform" and "professionalism" – in this monograph evolved into a detailed analysis of the military institutions of ancient Rome. What was often attributed to Roman military leaders as the sole initiators of reforms was, according to McArthur, merely a conditional adaptation to circumstances, not a "reform". McArthur did an excellent job with the task at hand. Although his monograph lacks more in-depth analysis of the scholarly literature on the issue and overlooks several aspects of the functioning of the Roman military, it remains highly valuable. It is surprising that when addressing logistics, the author cites only one work by P. Erdkamp from 1998, even though many studies on the topic have been published recently.¹⁷ Despite lamenting significant gaps in narrative sources about food supply, the author omits references to archaeological research on the subject, especially more recent studies.¹⁸ However, this does not diminish the value of many of

¹⁷ Roth, 1999; Erdkamp, 2002; Donahue & Brice, 2023.

¹⁸ Enckevort *et al.*, 2024.

the author's conclusions. While we may disagree with some of his points, particularly the claim that the Roman army remained virtually unchanged from the mid-3rd century to the mid-1st century BCE (156), the innovative approaches to the issue of the functioning of the Roman army, especially the new perspective on Augustus' military reform, make McArthur's book both fascinating and contentious. It encourages further exploration of the problem, pushing for new studies on the causes, course, and consequences of changes and transformations within the Roman military during the Republican and Imperial periods.

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