

THE BARBARIANS: GERMANIC & SARMATIAN ARMIES

Aurelian offers just two kinds of barbarian armies: Germanic and Sarmatian. This is a deliberate shorthand and simplification to express major regional differences. The word “German” refers to the tribes along the Rhine, in Germania, and also the Goths who attacked the empire’s center. The word “Sarmatian” refers to those East-Germanic and Scythian tribes that were closest to the Empire’s eastern and Danube frontiers, and includes the Alans, Vandals, and several smaller tribes.

If this seems like an unacceptable abstraction, we should note that the Romans themselves rarely differentiated among barbarian tribes within regions. Procopius, despite having the advantage of writing two centuries after Aurelian (albeit with his habitual confusion regarding barbarian names), asserted that the Germanic peoples

...while they are distinguished from one another by their names, do not differ in anything else at all. They all have white bodies and yellow hair, are tall and pleasing to the eye, they use the same laws and practice a common religion... of old they all came from one people and later were distinguished by the names of those leading each tribe.

— Procopius, *The Wars* III 3:2

Even the most educated Romans had difficulty distinguishing the different barbarian tribes and as far as the Romans were concerned, they were fighting a more or less homogenous Germanic enemy. To a certain extent that eventually became true. The trend in the 3rd century appears to have been that individual barbarian tribes — many of which had fought the Romans before — became gradually unified in confederations under a single powerful king or family. This made it much more difficult for the Romans to play the tribes off against each other, as they had in the past, and meant that barbarian invasions were inevitably larger and better organized.

Many barbarian invasions occurred in the winter because their soldiers were also farmers who needed to harvest in spring and autumn. They were not as nomadic as the Romans believed and their tendency of course was to settle at least long enough to feed their horde, or perhaps longer if the Romans would permit.

In the space of this long period we have inflicted and incurred many losses. Not the Samnites, not the Carthaginians, not the Spanish and Gauls, not even the Parthians have chastised us more often. Indeed, German liberty is a tougher opponent than the empire of the Persians.

— Tacitus, *Germania*.

That said, we can assert broadly that the Sarmatians were more nomadic than their Germanic contemporaries, if for no other reason than the fact that their land supported larger herds of horses and other beasts of burden, and a much greater proportion of their warriors and civilians could therefore be mounted. They were not as mobile as the later Huns (a fact which Roman writers commented upon), but they were more mobile than the Germans. Large portions of Sarmatian armies were mounted.

The infantry should be drawn up eight ranks deep.... there should be silence until the enemy comes within missile range. Because of the incredible weight of missiles, we may hope that the advancing Scythians will not get very close to our infantry formation. But if they do get close, then the first three ranks should lock their shields together and, standing shoulder to shoulder, withstand the charge with all possible strength in the most concentrated formation.

— Arrian, *Ectaxis contra Alanos*, 11-31.

BARBARIAN ARMIES

In a barbarian army the great majority of men had a shield and a spear. They typically wore little or no armor and did not carry a sword, those being the trappings of leaders and noblemen. A barbarian king was served by several *optimates* – regional aristocrats who pledged their fealty and who brought their own armed clans and warriors (singular: *optimas*). Each *optimas* had his own armed retinue, and a king had an even bigger one. These retinues constitute a sort of “Guard” in a barbarian army.

We do not know how many barbarian warriors comprised a “unit,” but they likely copied the Romans or at least recognized the limits of verbal or visual command, and thus a typical barbarian unit was probably around 500 men gathered in a dense mass. Something like a light skirmish screen may have existed, perhaps simply those warriors who happened to have javelins, slings, or a bow. Among the tribes of Germania, it was rare to see more than one-fifth of the army mounted. Among the Sarmatians and the Danube tribes, one might routinely see a third to a half of the army on horseback. In either case, archers tended to be rare.

Barbarian cavalry was often quite good. The Romans learned much from them and Roman cavalry often suffered at their hands. Eastern cavalry was usually bow-armed, and likely to skirmish. Some historians assert that the Sarmatians developed the first truly armored cavalry of this period, while others believe they copied the Persian-style cataphracts. They were likely not as disciplined nor well-equipped and certainly not as well-armored as the cataphracts, given the scarcity of good metalworking in the Sarmatian lands.

When a king had time and the cooperation of his *optimates*, he could call out a large army, sometimes as big as thirty or forty thousand men. But these were huge battle forces, very difficult to feed, and often fragile for organizational reasons such as the rivalries among tribes.

More crucially the barbarians had no logistical system at all. They relied on plunder and suffered accordingly. They often had surprisingly good local intelligence from Roman deserters or escaped slaves, from locals and provincials, or from previous raids. They often knew, for instance, when the legions were gone or what the status of Roman garrisons was.

Barbarian leaders tried to avoid pitched battles since they usually lost them. But if they had to fight, they tried to use the terrain as best they could. Fighting in the open, in the Roman style, virtually guaranteed defeat. If the enemy could be lured into woods, rocks, or bogs, however, then the odds of victory improved dramatically.

THE ROMAN ARMY IN TRANSITION

Many people are familiar with the appearance and organization of the early imperial army, the forces of the Roman empire's first two centuries. Fewer people are familiar with the forces of the late empire. Very few indeed are familiar with the process of transition that occurred throughout the 3rd century, as the former morphed into the latter. That period, however, is the subject of *Aurelian*. If you choose to play a Roman army, you are playing a force that will witness fundamental change, to the point that the army you end with might bear little resemblance to the army you started with.

Aurelian presents Roman massed infantry as a single type called “cohorts,” differentiated only by their level of experience. The game does not make a distinction between classical legionary and auxiliary cohorts. This bears some discussion and explanation.

THE TRADITIONAL ROMAN ARMY

For two centuries the empire was defended by a number of legions, typically around 30 in number, comprised entirely of Roman citizens. These were large, expensive weapons of conquest, professional soldiers who were not ideally employed in perimeter defense or chasing after small groups of barbarian raiders on the frontiers. Those tasks were left to the *auxilia*, men recruited from the frontier provinces and organized into cohorts of infantry and *alae* of cavalry. In many cases these men were culturally quite similar to the barbarians on the other side of the frontier, and they were certainly paid less, while being expected to perform a greater variety of tasks than the highly-disciplined legions.

Because of these factors, and because of disparaging comments made by Vegetius more than a century later, the conventional wisdom has been that the *auxilia* were inferior troops. That might have been true at some point. Marcus Aurelius was apparently the last emperor to take great pains to recruit only superior soldiers to the legions while expressing indifference about recruiting for the *auxilia*. For most of the Pax Romana, the *auxilia* were paid significantly less than the legionaries. Veterans of the *auxilia* were traditionally granted citizenship only after honorable discharge from 25 years' service, indicating that some *auxilia* units were recently-settled barbarians of whose loyalties Rome could not yet be certain.

Several recent historians (Elton, Campbell, Bohec) have asserted that in fact the *auxilia* were in many ways *superior* to the legions by the 3rd century, simply because their smaller unit sizes made them more flexible tactically, and that *auxilia* were more often adept in different sorts of warfare. By Trajan's time a number of *auxilia* had become specialized in missile weapons. And in cavalry at least, the *auxilia* were superior in both number and (probably) quality to their legionary comrades, since provincials tended to have more experience with horses, including horse archery.

Mille Sarmatas, mille Francos semel et semel occidimus mille Persas quaerimus.

(We've killed thousands of Sarmatians, thousands of Franks again and again, and now we're looking for thousands of Persians.)

— Historia Augusta, *Vita Aureliani*, 7.2.

Throughout the 2nd century, emperors increasingly relied on detachments called *vexillations* to form field armies. When a major campaign was required, it was preferable not to pull entire legions off the frontiers and then hope that those frontiers remained tranquil. Rather, two or more cohorts were removed from a legion as a vexillation, perhaps brigaded with a vexillation from some other legion, and usually with auxilia, both mounted and on foot. In the early empire, Roman armies tended to support the legions with auxilia on something close to a 1-to-1 ratio.

The character of the soldiers was corrupted and they learned to have a disgraceful and unbounded craving for money, while despising any feelings of respect for their emperors. Since there was no one to take any action against the soldiers who had cold-bloodedly murdered an emperor... the soldiers' steadily increasing lust for money and contempt for their leaders culminated in the shedding of blood.

— Herodian, 2.6.

These detachments were often gone for so long that they became standing military units in their own right, permanently transferred to some other region of the empire. The invasions and civil wars of the 3rd century dramatically accelerated this process, to the point that a Roman field army was no longer composed of a number of classical legions and auxilia, but rather of several vexillations from a variety of places.

In 212 the emperor Caracalla conferred citizenship upon nearly all free Romans throughout the empire. Thus the original distinction between legions and auxilia was removed at a stroke. Over the next few decades as the empire dissolved in civil war, commanders created vexillations by taking elements of legions and elements of auxilia, often together as ad-hoc units, moving them hundreds or even thousands of miles, and generally scrambling the traditional organization of the legions so badly that by the time of Aurelian there was likely very little difference between legions and auxilia. What mattered was experience and loyalty: veteran soldiers were superior to recent conscripts, regardless of their uniforms or origins.

As the civil wars devoured manpower and the plague reduced the possibility of local recruitment, Roman armies became gradually more dependent upon a third source of soldiers: entire units of native, non-Roman warriors under their own chiefs, either on foot or mounted. Their presence in the army of the 3rd century was a harbinger of things to come in the late empire.

TOWARDS A NEW ROMAN ARMY

A significant bit of conventional wisdom has been overturned by scholars in the past few decades. It had once been assumed that the transformation of the legionaries was visible in their armor. As the original segmented armor gradually fell out of use in the 3rd century, so the theory went, thus also did unit quality decline until the 5th century legions in the West were mostly un-armored and weak.

Modern scholars now largely reject this thesis. Rather, they point out that the segmented armor was phased out in the 3rd century because it was replaced with *better* armor protection, often in the form of chainmail cloaks. Indeed, the mid/late imperial soldiers often had superior armor, relatively speaking, to that of their ancestors.

The banded/segmented armor of the early empire, and with it, the simple tunic of the legionary uniform, began to disappear in the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries. As with all things in the Roman Empire, this change happened gradually and irregularly and took generations. Some historians point to the arrival of Septimius Severus in Rome in 193. The newly-proclaimed emperor arrived with his veterans from Pannonia, and Romans were shocked to see the men wearing trousers and facial hair, and looking distinctly barbarian in both dress and mannerisms. The legions along that frontier had gradually begun to adopt the barbarian styles, which eventually spread throughout the empire.

From a Roman point of view, this might speak to a “barbarization” of the army, but it would probably be more accurate to refer to a “provincialization” of the military and the empire. By the time of Diocletian and the end of the 3rd century, an entirely new system was in place: a regiment (confusingly often still called a “legion” out of tradition or custom) was somewhere around 1000-1500 men, commanded by a *tribune* (also called “Praepositus”) and often grouped with another regiment and placed under the command of a *comes*. The army also listed barbarian *foederati* and “allies” as regiments, and these terms appear often to have been interchangeable. They were usually commanded by a Roman tribune as well.

The new field army (*Comitatenses*) absorbed the old legions and auxilia. To replace the latter, units of *limitanei* now garrisoned walled forts and towns. During times of crisis these supposedly regional *limitanei* were often “promoted” to field army status (which presumably did nothing for their morale) and marched away from their garrisons on campaign.

The *limitanei* went by a number of names, depending upon region, period, and tradition. In the 3rd century their organization was clearly based upon the *auxilia*: the infantry was organized into cohorts, and the cavalry into *alae*, each about 500 strong. In theory, they were also grouped into legions, but in practice they were divided into small regional garrisons and rarely massed. There was no sort of brigade structure, but there was a prefect in charge of several cohorts of *limitanei*.

In times of crisis, these part-time soldiers could find themselves transferred into the *auxilia*. There are even indications that units of the urban cohorts of Rome were conscripted into the field armies en masse, and taken as far away as the eastern frontier against the Persians. (Urban Cohort XIV moved out with *Legio II Parthica* to join the army in Syria.)

Where are the Auxilia? (Or: “Mustafus Samus, Give me back my Legions!”)

During the development of the game we had a number of discussions about how best to represent the evolving Roman infantry. The Romans entered the third century with Trajan’s army, in which there was still a distinction between auxiliary cohorts and legionary cohorts. But they ended the century with Diocletian’s army, a very different animal indeed, and with something more like “regiments.”

We eventually (well, most of us) came to agree that experience and loyalty were the most important attributes for massed infantry. The crazy confusion of the third century, in which vexillations combined cohorts from both *auxilia* and legions, and sent them all over the empire to be re-combined as needed, necessitated a more “generic” approach. Thus the Romans have only “cohorts,” rated for their experience and effectiveness.

THE GUARD

In 193 Septimius Severus disbanded the praetorians, who had murdered an emperor and auctioned the throne. He then recreated a new praetorian guard from his trusted veterans and officers, likely about 15,000 strong, and encamped them near enough to Rome that he could call upon them quickly, but not so close that they were part of daily political life.

Four years later Severus created three new legions for his Persian campaigns: *I, II, and III Parthica*. After that campaign he brought *II Parthica* back to Italy and gave them a permanent garrison near Rome. This created an additional imperial reserve (and a force of loyal veterans to keep an eye on the praetorians). They were usually on campaign with the emperor throughout the 3rd century, which means that they covered a lot of ground, from Britain to Syria. Eventually they also were whittled away by vexillations, but for most of the third century they constituted a sort of second guard.

The crisis of the third century saw the demise of the praetorians, both as a military and a political force. Diocletian tried to replace them with a new grade of field regiments, the *Palatini*, initially as a sort of imperial guard that would accompany the emperor's army and act as a reserve, but the constant shuffling of units around the empire soon scrambled everybody.

ROMAN CAVALRY

The classical Roman army had been an infantry force that used cavalry primarily for scouting and border patrols. There was a handful of elite cavalry units that an emperor could use as a personal mobile reserve. But in general the Roman mounted arm was usually inferior to its opponents and often playing catch-up to them.

At the start of the 3rd century, most Roman horsemen were in the *auxilia*, patrolling the frontier. An *ala* of cavalry (plural: *alae*) was about the same size as a cohort of infantry: roughly 500 men. In some cases, particularly during this period, Roman commanders created *cobors equitata*, combined foot/mounted forces of up to 1000 men, of whom one-quarter to one-half were mounted. In game terms, we can consider these to be two units.

By the time that Gallienus created his mobile cavalry reserve in the 260s, he could draw upon a large and diverse body of auxiliary horsemen. According to some sources Gallienus also increased the cavalry component of each legion by more than 100%, but given the disruptions of the legions it is difficult to know how that played out. We do know that Roman cavalry at the start of the 3rd century was primarily composed of auxiliaries and light horse with a small proportion of true battle cavalry, but by the end of the century the Roman battle cavalry, in many cases armored, had significantly increased in obvious imitation of their enemies. Thus by the end of the 3rd century we see Roman *clibanarii*, a copy of the Persian cataphracts that had proven so formidable in the eastern campaigns.

The prominence of cavalry in the late Roman army has likely been exaggerated. By the time of Diocletian's reforms, cavalry likely never exceeded one-third of the total force. About 60% of the later Roman cavalry were shock regiments: *scutarii*, *promoti*, and *stabliesiani*. The elite armored cavalry (such as the *clibanarii*) never exceeded 15% of the total cavalry force.

Roman horsemen may have occasionally carried bows, but their training was for shock. Of course, as entire barbarian units began to be taken into the army intact, a Roman commander may well have fielded more cavalry, including even mounted archers by the late 4th century.

THE SASSANID PERSIAN ARMY

The Persian army of *Aurelian* represents the creation of a single man: Ardashir I, *Shabanshab* (King of Kings), founder of the Sassanian dynasty.

For two centuries the Romans had become accustomed to fighting the Persians over the territories on their eastern frontier: the regions of Mesopotamia, the Levant, and the mountainous northern territories of Armenia and Kurdistan. The Persians who had contested these regions were more properly called the Parthian Empire, a sprawling feudal polity that had virtually no standing army.

The Parthians could hold their own against the Romans but were perpetually hobbled by internal strife among the multi-ethnic nobility and multiple contenders for the throne. In 226 Ardashir, who had conquered several border provinces, brought his army to Ctesiphon and ended the Parthian Empire at a stroke, creating a powerful and more centrally-organized new empire just as the Romans teetered into the abyss of civil strife. Within four years of his accession, war began.

For the next three generations the Sassanian army was a continual nightmare for the Romans, overrunning Roman garrisons and entire provinces in the east, evading Roman punitive expeditions or taking them by surprise. In 260 Ardashir's son Shapur I commanded the army at the Battle of Edessa and dealt the Romans a crushing defeat, including the capture of the Emperor Valerian, who — if Persian legend is to be believed — was used as a footstool for the Persian ruler for the rest of his life.

The Sassanid army as a whole was known as the *Spâh*, and a specific field army was called a *Gond*, commanded by a *Spâhbed* (a general). Each field army was divided into several *Vasht* (divisions), usually a homogenous force with one type of unit. A cavalry division was commanded by a *Sardâr*, and an infantry division by a *Sâlâr*. There was a separate commander of the elephants, and another of the archers.

If the king himself commanded the army, then all divisional commanders reported to him. Otherwise, the monarch might appoint an *Eran Spâhbed*, a sort of “Field Marshal” who had royal authority to command multiple field armies in the king's name.

ARDASHIR'S ARMY

Conscious of the need for unity of command and nervous about the power of the highest-ranking noble families, Ardashir created an officer caste that was separate from the traditional Persian aristocracy and thus loyal only to him. This enabled him to subdivide the *Spâh* into something like “corps” of around 10,000 men, each commanded by a loyal subordinate.

The Persians finally rose to such distinction and power that they actually made war on the Romans at that time, and from then onwards down to the present day were considered comparable to them. They are indeed formidable in warfare... they have never been completely conquered, but even now are a match for us.

— Cassius Dio, 40.14

The most important corps was the armored cavalry, collectively known as the *Savaran*. The centerpiece of this institution was the heavily-armored cataphracts. The effectiveness of these units deeply impressed the Romans, who soon began to copy them, particularly in the eastern provinces. By the time of Shapur the Persian heavy cavalry were entirely armored, both man and horse, a shock weapon of limited flexibility and endurance, but with awesome striking power.

Cataphracts were essentially mounted knights. The horsemen were aristocrats and those retainers/squires who accompanied them on campaign. A nobleman typically brought at least one of his sons along as well, since a Sassanian aristocrat was not allowed to inherit his father's lands until he had fought for the king. Other feudal levies (peasants from the lords' lands) ended up in the infantry.

A Persian army always marched with a large corps of light cavalry, although the term "light" is perhaps a bit misleading, since these men and horses were often at least partially armored. These were typically regional and tribal units, vassals or mercenaries. Their duties included all of the traditional scouting and raiding expected of light cavalry in most armies. When the commander massed his forces for a battle, they too were expected to arrive on the field. Sassanid commanders preferred to have at least as many light horseman as cataphracts on the battlefield. This light horse was often equipped with bows.

In sharp contrast to the Romans, the Sassanid army's weak link was in heavy formed infantry. There was essentially no standing army of "regulars" that could in any way compare to the Roman legions. The Romans took note of this with some relief; more than one Roman commentator expressed his contempt for the conscripted "mob" of Persian infantry sheltering behind their wicker shields. This was certainly true of the conscripted *Paighans*, who were equipped with spears and given only rudimentary training, little to no armor, and expected mainly to serve as auxiliaries in sieges. However, there were also infantry units of reasonably good quality, either feudal contingents from Media, or mercenary soldiers from the northern province of Daylam, who may not have been the equal of veteran Roman legionaries but who nonetheless were steady and disciplined in battle. It is telling, though, that the Persian army usually deployed its cavalry up-front, and infantry in the rear and in reserve, the reverse of most ancient armies.

Persian commanders had great respect for the power of massed archery, and it is here that the Sassanid infantry redeemed themselves to some degree. Unlike the archers of most ancient armies, who were deployed as a thin screen in front of the main body, the Sassanids trained entire massed units of archers (*Kamandaran*) who could move in tight formations and shoot rapidly to rain down arrows upon an unfortunate section of the enemy's line. Although they were not capable of standing up to true heavy infantry, nonetheless they could harass and discomfort enemy forces and disrupt formations. Alongside these professionals, Persian armies typically also deployed the sort of light irregular slingers and archers that one could find in any number of ancient armies.

The overall theme and organizing principle of Ardashir's military, and his empire in general, was a return to what he believed had been the greatness of the Achaemenid empire in the era of Cyrus the Great. This included heavy state sponsorship of the Zoroastrian religion as well as a revival of many old terms and traditions. In the military, it also meant the return of two sorts of elite units that were classically Persian.

According to tradition, the empire's elite reserve of "Immortals" (*Zbayedan*) had numbered 10,000, and Ardashir supposedly revived the corps at this strength. Their nickname was a Greek invention, originating from the claim that whenever a soldier was killed, he was immediately replaced by a new one, and thus the corps never died. The original Immortals had been unusual among professional footsoldiers of their era, in that they were armored, professional heavy infantry who were also expected to act as archers. There is considerable skepticism among historians as to whether Ardashir truly resurrected the corps, and whether he also mounted them, thus converting them into a form of elite reserve cataphracts who could theoretically also serve as horse archers.

It is likely that the new immortals were a sort of praetorian institution or palace guard whose purpose was political stability. The extraordinary expense of creating and maintaining this elite force was apparently sobering enough that Persian commanders rarely allowed them to fight. Again, we can only speculate based upon legends. An educated guess would place the immortals in reserve, with their tight ranks and gleaming armor serving as a morale-boosting reassurance to the rest of the army, or perhaps simply to guard the Shahanshah.

The other uniquely Persian units of this period were the war elephants. Historians now believe that they were re-introduced long after the time of Aurelian, and that references to their actions against "the Romans" are more accurately references to fighting the Byzantines. Nonetheless we cannot completely rule out the possibility that they served in Aurelian's time.

The Sassanids used Indian elephants, often given some armor and usually some sort of protected tower from which several archers could shoot. Elephants were considered a separate division of the *Gond*, under authority of a special officer who had taken part in the training of the great beasts. The crew were often mercenaries from India, working as a team with a particular animal. Eventually the Sassanids kept a royal stable of elephants and bred them in Iran. Elephants were a dramatic and sometimes unpredictable weapon. They could terrify enemy men and horses alike. If Persian sources are to be believed, the Romans dreaded them. The fate of a later Arab commander, who was crushed by an elephant in mid-battle when he tried to lead a cavalry charge against them, gives some indication of the reason for this fear. The best use of elephants included protecting them with a screen of light infantry skirmishers, to prevent the enemy from enraging or panicking them with bold attacks on their flanks. A panicked elephant was more likely to damage its own side than that of its enemies.

THE PERSIANS AS AN ENEMY OF ROME

The Sassanids were interested in Roman politics only insofar as they could be used to immediate local advantage. They had no ambition of conquering the entire Roman empire. Rather, Ardashir and his successors intended to take advantage of Rome's division and internal strife in order to restore Persian control over places like Armenia and what is today Iraq. Their ambitions likely extended to present-day Jordan, Syria, and eastern Turkey. It is possible that they even considered the feasibility of severing Egypt from Roman control and turning it into a Sassanid vassal.

The restoration of Roman unity under Aurelian eventually frustrated most of these ambitions, but the Sassanids remained a formidable foe for the next four centuries, contending with Roman and Byzantine armies until the arrival of Islam.