

THE ETERNAL RETURN TO THE SOURCES OF MODERN MILITARY STRATEGY: ROME AND ITS BATTLES¹

Florin PINTESCU 

Stefan cel Mare University Suceava (Romania)

E-mail: florinp@atlas.usv.ro

Abstract: *Rome was and remains to this day, in terms of military history, the inspiration for the world's great strategists. Thus, the Kingship and the early period of the Republic include thirteen wars, the first part of the 4th century BC involves the Eternal City in seven military conflicts, the long conflict with the Samnites records nine wars, and the completion of the conquest of Italy by the Romans involves another three wars.*

Rome's expansion outside Italy is mainly through the first two Punic Wars, the wars in the Iberian Peninsula, the Illyrian Wars, the two wars with the Celts (Boii), the two wars fought with Philip V of Macedon, and the war fought with Antiochus III Megas of Syria.

These military events, which shaped the fate of the ancient world in Europe, northern Africa, and much of Asia, are described based on ancient sources and the research of modern historians, by an author from Romania.

Keywords: *Rome, Italian campaigns, Celtic Wars, Samnite Wars, Pyrrhic War, Punic Wars, Lusitanian Wars, Numantine War, Macedonian Wars, Syrian War.*

Rezumat: *Eterna reîntoarcere la sursele strategiei militare moderne: Roma și bătăliile sale.* Roma a fost și rămâne până în prezent, în materie de istorie militară, inspiratoarea marilor strategii ai lumii. Astfel, Regalitatea și perioada timpurie a Republicii

Copyright © 2024 "Codrul Cosminului", XXX, 2024, No. 2, p. 507–512.

¹ Ionuț Apostol, *Bătăliile Romei* [Battles of the Rome], vol. 1, *Italia nu este de ajuns* [Italy is not Enough], Dorohoi, Prosexi Publishing House, 2023; *Bătăliile Romei* [Battles of the Rome], vol. 2, *De la Hannibal ad portas la Hannibal ad Pontos* [From Hannibal at the Gates to Hannibal at the Black Sea], Dorohoi, Prosexi Publishing House, 2024.

cuprind treisprezece războaie, prima parte a sec. al IV-lea î. Hr. Implică Cetatea eternă în șapte conflicte militare, lungul conflict cu samniții înregistrează nouă războaie, iar finalizarea cuceririi Italiei de către romani implică alte trei războaie.

Expansiunea Romei în afara Italiei se face în principal prin intermediul primelor două războaie punice, a războaielor din peninsula Iberică, a războaielor illyrice, al celor două războaie cu celții (Boii), al celor două războaie purtate cu Philip al V-lea al Macedoniei, și al războiului purtat cu Antiochus al III-lea Megas al Siriei.

Aceste evenimente militare, care au modelat soarta lumii antice din Europa, nordul Africii și o mare parte a Asiei, sunt descrise pe baza surselor antice și a cercetărilor istoricilor moderni, de către un autor din România.

The military history of Rome, both in terms of organization and practice of the art of war, remains fascinating for researchers and the average people, due to its spectacularity and complexity, practically unmatched until the advent of mass levy armies from the 19th century. Or, as a classic of military history showed, "... the superiority of the Roman art of warfare was based on the army organization, a system that permitted very large masses of men to be concentrated at a given point, to move in orderly fashion, to be fed, and to be kept together ... The Roman army was not simply a mass, but an organized mass, and it could be a mass only because it was organized and formed a complex and living entity".²

A well-organized army, with a long-refined art of war, could provide lessons for 20th and even 21st-century strategies. As noted by Edward Nicolae Luttwak, a renowned specialist in military history, geo-strategy, geo-economics and international relations, born in Romania: "An investigation of the strategic statecraft of the Roman Empire scarcely requires justification. In the record of our civilization, the Roman achievement in the realm of grand strategy remains entirely unsurpassed, and even two millennia of technological change have not invalidated its lessons. In any case, the study of Roman history is its own reward"³.

The Romanian author Ionuț Apostol provides a cohesive examination of the military history of Rome, with the initial two volumes (of a planned four) critically analysed below, focusing on the military history of Rome from the time of the Republic.

This synthesis is a unique contribution to Romanian historiography since

² Hans Delbrück, *History of the Art of War*, vol. 1, *Warfare in Antiquity*, translated by Walter J. Renfro, Jr., Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 1975, pp. 510-511.

³ Edward N. Luttwak, *The grand strategy of the Roman Empire. From the First Century A.D. to the Third*, Sixth printing, Baltimore and London, The John Hopkins University Press, 1993, p. XI.

existing works that partially examine the military history of Rome are limited to those authored by Dumitru Tudor⁴ and Manole Neagoe⁵.

The Battles of Rome through Volume I, with the subtitle *Italy is not Enough* and Volume II, *From Hannibal at the Gates to Hannibal at the Black Sea* mark the beginning of an extensive exploration into Rome's ascent to prominence. This work reflects the author's endeavour to quantify this evolution in military operations of smaller or larger scale, which elevated Latin civilisation to a pinnacle in Antiquity and laid the foundations for the modern world.

The canonical division of the great chapters in the history of Rome was made based on a combination of criteria, yet the chronological one is particularly indicative. Thus, in the first volume, the author highlights the battles that shaped Rome's evolution from its legendary origins to the completion of the conquest of Italy. Upon crossing the border of continental Italy, marked by the outbreak of the First Punic War, the author shifted from a chronological system to an organic approach. This method interwove the evolution of Rome with the decline of all great Mediterranean powers – Carthage, Macedonia and the Seleucid Empire – while also incorporating the figures of Hannibal and other military leaders, including Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus, Philip V, Philopoemen and Antiochus III Megas. The latter were deliberately positioned by History within the same context that facilitated Rome's dominance over what would subsequently be known as Mare Nostrum.

Starting from the episode of Aeneas' landing on the shores of Italy, the narrative encompasses the clan wars with the local populations of Latium and the Etruscan neighbours, the defence against the invasions of the Gauls, wars for regional hegemony with the Samnites and the consecration of the rule of Italy against Pyrrhus. The author places Rome into the prologue of the great Mediterranean conflicts stretching from the Pillars of Hercules to the Hellenistic East. Among these, the first two Punic Wars, the Second Macedonian War and the Syrian War are notable references.

The documentary evidence, less generous for legendary and semi-legendary times and increasingly rich as inquiry advanced, is reflected in the information

⁴ Dumitru Tudor, *Mari căpitani ai lumii antice* [Great commanders of the Ancient World], vol. 1-3, Bucharest, Enciclopedica Publishing House, 1969-1971; Idem, *Figuri de împărați romani* [Personalities of Roman Emperors], vol. 1-3, Bucharest, Enciclopedica Publishing House, 1974-1975. With various reprints.

⁵ Manole Neagoe, *Mari bătălii din istoria lumii* [Great Battles in World History], vol. 1, Craiova, Scrisul Românesc Publishing House, 1973. Reprinted in 2022.

provided by the two volumes. The first volume, covering nine centuries, comprises 362 pages, while the second, which spans just 82 years, contains 614 pages. Despite the apparent imbalance, the 119 (first volume) and 156 (second volume) battles, fights, skirmishes and sieges described respect a thematic plan. The author took into account the following elements: the historical background, the causes of each conflict, an analysis of the combatants' motivations, the military forces deployed, tactical arrangements, stratagems and tricks used, the overall balance sheet and the political, diplomatic, social and economic consequences of the events that unfolded.

The most faithful and detailed rendering of the battles of Rome required critical analysis of the available ancient sources, a list that includes Titus Livius' *Ab urbe condita libri* and Polybius' *Histories*, the collections of stratagems by Frontinus and Polyaeus, Vegetius' treatise on military art, Plutarch's biographies, the epitomes of late historians of Antiquity, the epics of Vergilius and Silius Italicus, Strabo's Geography as well as other lesser-known travel guides, the moral, philosophical and political musings of Cicero and Valerius Maximus, or the so-called erudition literature represented by Aulus Gellius and Macrobius.

The ancient sources were used in parallel with the interpretations provided by modern exegetes.

Contemporary reference works include extensive commentaries on the work of Titus Livius, Polybius and Dionysius of Halicarnassus by S. P. Oakley, R. M. Ogilvie, J. Briscoe, S. Pittia; complex analyses of the Punic Wars by D. Hoyos, J. F. Lazenby, Y. Le Bohec, A. Goldsworthy; interdisciplinary works signed by A. M. Eckstein about the rise of Rome and the elimination of risks associated with the multipolarity of the Hellenistic world; and synthesis works by eminent scholars such as Th. Mommsen, P. Green, N. Hammond, J. D. Grainger and D. Rankin.

The author's research work for the debut volume involved the study of 27 ancient narrative sources and 65 modern works. The area of study has expanded considerably for the second volume, which features a bibliography that includes 50 ancient writings and over 170 modern treatises, compendia, articles and studies. Although not a professional in the strictest sense regarding the analysis of material provided by ancient historians, the author has proven impartiality in interpreting historical sources. Consequently, he neither succumbed to Titus Livius' patriotic impulse to the point of bias nor was he completely captivated by the much-vaunted rigour of Polybius. Furthermore, while certain ancient authors, such as Appian and Diodorus Siculus, were either marginalized by criticism or regarded as unreliable sources, the author has occasionally extracted from their

work even a core of truth that is difficult, if not impossible, to discern amid the multitude of names, dates and facts that have been transmitted to us.

The author skilfully navigates a vast array of facts, rigorously analyzing both controversial aspects of Roman history, some still obscured by the mist of time, and others distorted by ancient historiography. The narrative style is academic, but fluid, incorporating literary valences. The facts are described with verve, presenting a genuine depiction of ancient Rome in its military aspects, while simultaneously revealing the social, political, and legal elements that define the city of Romulus.

The display of information indicates the author's preference for symmetry. Each volume is divided into four substantial segments, reflecting a clearly delineated era, from both chronological and structural perspectives.

The first volume, *Italy is not enough*, at least until the Samnite Wars, has a heterogeneous content. Nonetheless, this is not the author's fault. It was a time when wars were often simple skirmishes or were conducted in the form of raids as analysed by ancient Fathers of history. The author extracted largely unknown episodes from this documentary darkness and organised them into a coherent temporal sequence, enhancing both readability and comprehension of the evolution of Rome, from an obscure village to a regional power in the first phase.

The second volume, *From Hannibal at the Gates to Hannibal at the Black Sea* is much more compressed, although events from the entire Mediterranean area are analysed and presented indissolubly.

The first chapter details two wars and then proceeds to the second chapter on transition, which encompasses five other conflicts. This is succeeded by the narrative fresco that immortalizes the Second Punic War and its codicil, the First Macedonian War.

The epic of interconnectedness concludes with the fourth chapter on military conflicts spread throughout the Mediterranean. It delights us with seven of the most varied wars while also stimulating our interest in what The Battles of Rome and the author will provide next.

At the end of the analysis, several conclusions must unavoidably be reached. Overall, we are addressing a thoroughly documented, well-written work, which represents a definite gain for Romanian and possibly even European historiography.

However, the author could, in a revised edition of the two volumes already published and in subsequent volumes, emphasize the comparative analyses of the military history of Rome, done during the 20th and 21st centuries, which he may include in his own analyses. At the same time, he may also consider archaeological sources and modern methods of analysis and dating of artefacts.

Only then can a thorough and complete “Roman” military history exist, which will brilliantly meet the requirements of modern historical science and, implicitly, the demands of readers.

REFERENCES

1. Apostol Ionuț, *Bătăliile Romei* [Battles of the Rome], vol. 1, *Italia nu este de ajuns* [Italy is not enough], Dorohoi (Romania), Prospexi Publishing House, 2023.
2. Apostol Ionuț, *Bătăliile Romei* [Battles of the Rome], vol. 2, *De la Hannibal ad portas la Hannibal ad Pontos* [From Hannibal at the Gates to Hannibal at the Black Sea], Dorohoi (Romania), Prospexi Publishing House, 2024.
3. Delbrück Hans, *History of the Art of War*, vol. 1, *Warfare in Antiquity*, translated by Walter J. Renfro, Jr., Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 1975.
4. Luttwak Edward N., *The grand strategy of the Roman Empire. From the First Century A.D. to the Third*, Sixth printing, Baltimore and London, The John Hopkins University Press, 1993.
5. Neagoe Manole, *Mari bătălii din istoria lumii* [Great Battles in World History], vol. 1, Craiova, Scrisul Românesc Publishing House, 1973.
6. Tudor Dumitru, *Figuri de împărați romani* [Personalities of Roman Emperors], vol. 1-3, Bucharest, Enciclopedica Publishing House, 1974-1975.
7. Tudor Dumitru, *Mari căpitani ai lumii antice* [Great commanders of the Ancient World], vol. 1-3, Bucharest, Enciclopedica Publishing House, 1969-1971.