



Soldiers and Silver: Mobilizing Resources in the Age of Roman Conquest

by Michael J. Taylor.

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Soldiers and Silver is a compelling and insightful exploration of the “grand game of Mediterranean geopolitics” (3) during a portion of the Roman Republican period (509–27 BCE). Historian Michael Taylor (Univ. at Albany) investigates “how well resources, specifically military manpower and fiscal revenues, explicate the outcomes of interstate warfare in the third and second centuries BCE” (1). He concentrates on resources, including manpower and public finance, available in the Mediterranean region in the period 280–168 BCE. He concludes that, although the Seleucids and Ptolemies outmatched the Romans in revenue and manpower, they were ultimately impeded in their conquests by a series of political and fiscal barriers.

Carthage and Rome may have had fewer revenue streams to tap for military endeavors, but their governance as republics—unlike dynastic Antigonid Macedonia, whose revenues were of similar magnitude—allowed them to better navigate aristocratic drains on financial stores and easily replace commanders when need be, thereby avoiding many of the restrictions that accompanied dynastic rule.

Rome’s conscription policy enabled it to mobilize many self-supporting soldiers in various conflicts. This saving on both manpower and military costs made Roman armies agile and able to fight on multiple fronts without overstressing their resources. Taylor’s well researched, logically developed argument makes his book an exceptional resource for both students and established scholars.

The book comprises an introduction and four chapters (two on “Manpower” and two on “Finance”). These present Taylor’s data on the state finances and military deployments of the great powers alongside contextual historical information. Taylor skillfully summarizes current scholarly consensus, but the vestiges of his doctoral dissertation¹ are evident in, for instance, his relegation of the majority of his discussion to the book’s conclusion. One wished his analysis had been woven more effectively throughout, better integrating his argument with its basis in the research data. That said, this structural quibble does not undercut the excellent quality of the content.

Taylor is fully conversant with the relevant work of other scholars,² but manages to make a refreshing move away from solely Rome-centered scholarly narratives to spotlight Roman military and fiscal activity within the wider geopolitical context of Mediterranean relations.

Overall, the metric of maximum attested mobilization, when placed in a comparative framework, correlates quite closely with the known out-comes of interstate warfare.... Rome enjoyed the largest attested mobilization in the Mediterranean, but the fact that Carthage came in at a reasonably

1. Univ. of California, Berkeley (2015).

2. E.g., P.A. Brunt, *Social Conflicts in the Roman Republic* (NY: Norton, 1974), Arthur M. Ekstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome* (Berkeley: U Cal Pr, 2006), Nathan Rosenstein, *Rome at War: Farms, Families and Death in the Middle Republic* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2004).

close second place explains the bloody and protracted nature of the First and Second Punic Wars. The Seleucids and Ptolemies achieved roughly identical maximum mobilizations, a parity that corresponds to their intermittent wars over Koilē Syria. Macedonia, in distant last place, was unsurprisingly the first Hellenistic kingdom overthrown. (169)

Taylor argues that the Roman state's capacity to draw upon its neighbors and allies, as well as its influence within Italy, secured its hegemony in the Mediterranean despite its comparatively scant fiscal resources. The sources provide a dubious patchwork of sporadic information, and Taylor frankly acknowledges the wide margins in his data:

This project has many layers of error. The first begins with the ancient recordkeepers themselves, whose official figures must have been marred by some degree of incompetence or even corruption." The next layer of error comes from the ancient historians and how much their figures may be tainted by sloppy research, exaggeration for patriotic or dramatic purposes, or blatant falsification. Another layer of error arises in the manuscript tradition, where it was easy for a bleary-eyed scribe to corrupt a number. Finally, my own interpretations, estimates, and analyses, while reasoned, are hardly infallible. (20)

Despite references to "maximum," "average," and "minimum" rates of pay or mobilization, it is sometimes unclear what method is being used to deduce which category applied to a given figure. Not all of Taylor's figures will be universally accepted. For instance, he claims Carthage paid wages at rates similar to the Romans' (143), despite the absence of "basic data ... about Carthaginian state expenditures" (139). Like Eckstein³ before him, Taylor adopts a schematic approach that sometimes presupposes a degree of cultural and social homogeneity among the "five great powers" at the heart of this study. Yet the data remain exceptionally useful. Overall, the quantitative study re-evaluates the earlier estimates presented in the scholarship (chiefly, those of Frank (1932)⁴ and Brunt (1971)⁵ and so provides valuable, tangible data illustrating how Rome's military machine functioned alongside its neighbors in the region.

Taylor highlights Rome as "exceptional" (186). The Seleucids and Ptolemies, despite their exceptional wealth relative to Carthage and Rome, could not convert their high revenues and manpower reserves into strategic advantages. Specifically, monarchies had high fiscal costs due to benefactions to towns and communities and cultural patronage (148). By contrast, republics like Carthage and Rome enjoyed greater political maneuverability and "infrastructural advantages" that allowed them to achieve more with less revenue. Military losses could be ascribed to failed generalship (176) and, Taylor observes, Rome's war machinery required less expenditure. States that relied on conscription also enjoyed far greater flexibility than "taxation states" (184): since wars could be fought in different theaters simultaneously, several regions could be defended or retained through a projected military presence. Military losses were less devastating thanks to their greater manpower sources (173–76). Allied and conscripted troops were paid for mostly by their home cities as part of Roman treaties and settlements (8). Taylor even argues that Roman combat formations were less dense, which enabled battles to be fought by fewer troops than Rome's rivals possessed (173). The overall argument here suggests avenues for future research.

Taylor makes other perceptive observations on a range of topics. He acknowledges the impact of corruption and bribery at Rome (122, 124, 152) and Carthage (140, 151, 215n. 15). He also corre-

3. See n. 2 above.

4. Tenney Frank, "The Public Finances of Rome: 200–157 BC," *Amer. Journ. of Philology* 53 (1932) 1–20.

5. See n. 2 above.

lates reductions in the weight of Roman coinage with the size of the army and rate of Roman pay (111–13). He considers the roles of mercenaries, Roman citizenship in the Italian peninsula, and taxation. He addresses not only the “fiscal apparatuses” for military activity, but also the costs of such social activities as running the royal court (147) and mounting lavish games (*ludi*) and festivals, including sacrifices, public feasts, gladiatorial games, and theatrical productions (121). He also adduces material evidence to support conclusions. For example, he uses the *gladius Hispaniense* (“Spanish sword”) found near Jericho to reiterate his argument that foreign forces sought to “copy Rome’s formula for military success” (98).

Undergraduates will find *Soldiers and Silver* to be an invaluable overview of inter-Mediterranean conflicts and the military economy in this period. Its sometimes daunting technical details are mitigated throughout by many tables summarizing the volume’s detailed arguments. Thankfully, long primary-source quotations are translated, making the book accessible to non-specialist readers interested in the history of the ancient Mediterranean. The author presents Rome as one geopolitical player among others in the Mediterranean, not an independent powerhouse monopolizing finances, diplomacy, and grand strategy. Michael Taylor’s *Soldiers and Silver* will no doubt become a standard “go-to” text for military historians regarding economic aspects of the Roman conquests of the Republican era.