

The Roman Soldier



Tunic

The military tunic was characteristically worn above the knee, a distinction only shared, strangely enough, by slaves. Ordinary citizens did not expose their knees.

The tunic was worn under the armor and seems to have been like a large baggy T-shirt in form, seamed along the sides. We do not know for certain what colors were used, although scholars have suggested both red and white as common military tunic colors (the evidence is equivocal). Materials used included wool and linen.

In the accompanying illustration, the exposed areas of Flavoleius' tunic have been shaded.



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From early times right down to the 3rd century A.D, the Roman army was based on its legions. A *legion* varied in strength from 4,000 to 6,000 men, and was subdivided onto ten *cohorts*. Its leader used the title of *legatus*. His staff officers were called *tribuni*. Senior non-commissioned officers were called *centurions*, who varied greatly in rank. The soldiers of the legion were picked men: They were all Roman citizens and received a higher pay than the auxiliary troops - that is, foreigners who serve with the Roman army.

A legion consisted of heavily armored infantry (foot soldiers). The Roman infantry became a feared force, well disciplined and well trained. Their weapons were two *pila* or javelins each and a short thrusting *gladius* or sword. Cavalry was supplied by the auxiliaries (second line troops) and was organized mainly in units 500 strong.

When it was on campaigns the army was accompanied by a number of specialists. One was the camp commandant, who was responsible for the organization of the camp. The Romans were very careful about their camps - no Roman army halted for a single night without digging a trenches and fortifying its camp. Each soldier took his share in establishing the camp and striking the camp the next day. Another specialist was the *quaestor*, whose duty was to look after all the money matter. then there were the engineers and all kinds of craftsmen and artisans. They were responsible for siege operations and for the rather primitive Roman "artillery", which consisted of big catapults and complicated machines a little like crossbows. These were mainly used for hurling big rocks and stones at the walls of a defense place. The engineers also had to build the moveable towers that were used in sieges - the Roman soldiers went up inside these towers so that they could see over the walls of a fortified place and shoot their stones and arrows into it. The engineers also made the scaling ladders that were used for getting over walls.

The Roman soldiers won their battles just as much from their staying - power as by their courage. They had to be strong and fit, for in addition to his weapons each soldier had to carry provisions for two weeks and tools for pitching camp.

When the soldiers went into line of battle to fight, the formation was called *acies*; when they were marching in column it was called *agmen*. If during a battle the legion were hard pressed the soldiers formed an *orbis*, which was very like the square that the British army formed in the 18th and 19th centuries if it was in difficulties. The standard of a legion was the *aquila* ,or eagle - made of silver or bronze and showing the bird with outstretched wings. It was the greatest disgrace if the eagle was captured.

At its finest period the Roman army was almost unconquerable. There were three main reasons for this :

1. Discipline
2. Hard and efficient training
3. Speed at which they learnt new tactics

Source: Coolmine Community School Web Page; Dublin, Ireland