Reforging an Empire… Repeatedly
The Story of Roman Adaptation, Innovation, and Endurance

There's a reason why Rome is called "the Eternal City". Aeneas' descendants believed that, no matter the rise and fall of other polities, their city would stand perpetually preeminent[1]. And, for a millennium, they were right. In that timeframe, the Romans would subjugate a domain stretching from Britain to the Levant[2], accomplish extraordinary feats of engineering such as the Aqua Claudia, baths of Caracalla, and Circus Maximus, the largest stadium ever to exist[3], and popularize the Latin alphabet and Christianity, the most prevalent script[4] and religion[5], respectively, to this day. But the factor that most profoundly contributed to Rome's legacy was its longevity. It was the state's full millennia in the sun that enabled its culture, institutions, and symbols to entrench themselves into the very fabric of Europe. Other empires of Antiquity would possess more territory or subsist for longer. But no civilization, save perhaps the Chinese, has ever remained in such a totally ascendant position as the Romans for so long. Yet, the history of Rome is rife with internal crises and external catastrophes, punctuated only intermittently by stretches of relative tranquillity. From its bloody inception to its dying breath, the city-state turned empire would be forced to contend with foreign threats and domestic division. So, how did Romulus' city manage to persist in the limelight for so long? Rome's prolonged success cannot be pinned down to one leader, as in the case of the Macedonians' Alexander, or technological supremacy, as with the European colonial powers. Rather, the Romans' ultimate boon for over 2 millennia was their underlying socio-military attitude: a will to persevere and

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[1] John Cabot University, "Why "The Eternal City"?".

[2] Kelly, *The Roman Empire*, p. 3.

[3] Humphrey, *Roman Circuses*, p. 126.

[4] Vaughan, "Most Common Writing Systems".

[5] Hackett and Grim, *The Global Religious Landscape*, p. 9.

capacity to adapt. The only constant in Rome was change. Time and time again, the Romans would stare disaster in the eye and refuse to die, adopting adjustments to their political structure and martial strategy to maintain internal unity and overcome their foes. While reform wouldn't always be immediate, its coming was usually inexorable, be it through institutional endorsement, the tide of popular desire, or the projects of august men and, while no fix would last forever, the Romans remained ready to tackle problems borne of their old solutions with new ones. So it is that the greatest heritage of the Roman people was their endless ability to ascertain when change was imperative, and their agility in transforming to embrace that change.

The Republic's first act of political experimentation was in its own founding. Rome's period as a monarchy spanned from 753 to 509 BCE, culminating in the kingship of Tarquinius 'Superbus', literally, "the Proud". Having illegally seized power from his adopted brother, Tarquin bypassed the Senate and ruled as an autocratic tyrant, murdering senators loyal to the old king, imprisoning and executing his domestic enemies without trial, and building grand monuments, funded with property confiscated from the rich and constructed using the forced, backbreaking labour of the poor[6]. Tarquin's despotism engendered hatred among both the patrician and plebeian classes. Their chance to free themselves would come in 509 BCE, after the sovereign's son, Sextus Tarquinus, raped the virtuous wife of his cousin, Callatinus, who then swore to expel the Tarquinii[7]. His companion, Lucius Junius Brutus, used his position as a tribune of the plebs to convene the Roman *comitia* ("assembly") and, through reference to the recent rape as well as Tarquin's intolerable program of oppression, incited them to divest and exile the autocrat[8]. But

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[6] Dionysus, *Roman Antiquities*, bk. 4 chs. 41–44; Livius, *Ab Urbe Condita Libri*, bk. 1 chs. 47–48, 50–52, 56–57; Matysak, *Chronicle of the Roman Republic*, pp. 38–41.

[7] Dionysus, *Roman Antiquities*, bk. 4 chs. 64–70; Livius, *Ab Urbe Condita Libri*, bk. 1 chs. 58–59;

[8] Dionysus, *Roman Antiquities*, bk. 4 chs. 71, 75–85; Matysak, *Chronicle of the Roman Republic*, p. 42.

then the comitia made a revolutionary decision, starkly showcasing the Roman willingness to discard unsuitable conventions. Instead of inaugurating a new dynasty with himself at its head, Brutus famously abolished the monarchy, ushering in an oligarchic republic to replace it. The Romans had suffered the abuses of unlimited monocracy and contrived never to permit a single man to hold permanent authority unchecked. They implemented a two-headed executive system of consuls with single-year terms, with Brutus and Collatinus as the inaugural officeholders[9]. This pioneering model ensured that one leader could always use veto power[10] to check the ambitions of the other and that, if either turned to tyranny, they could be subjected to harsh recriminations under the law after their incumbency. These measures were immensely successful, and the Republic prevented the sort of violence and debauchery characteristic of totalitarian rule until the proscriptions of Sulla over 4 centennia later.

But the Republic did finally fracture to political infighting, as great men of the *Populares*, populists, and *Optimates*, traditionalists, vied for primacy within the commonwealth. First came the Gracchi brothers, who were beaten to death in the streets for advocating populist reforms, then Marius and Sulla, who engaged in a deadly cycle of purge and counter-purge, and finally the Triumvirs, Pomey, Crassus, and Julius Caesar, who banded together to circumvent the norms of the res publica. Caesar was appointed dictator for life and subsequently assassinated in 44 BCE by conspirators led by another Brutus, descendant of the aforenamed[11]. He left his fortune to and, more importantly, posthumously adopted his nephew, Octavius Thurinus (known thereafter as

[9] Dionysus, *Roman Antiquities*, bk. 4 chs. 72–75, 84; Livius, *Ab Urbe Condita Libri*, bk. 1 chs. 58–59; Matysak, *Chronicle of the Roman Republic*, p. 44.

[10] Cornell, *The Beginnings of Rome*, pp. 226–228.

[11] Dio, *Roman History*, bks. 24–25, bks. 30-35 pp. 473–497, bk. 44 chs. 8, 12, 19; Suetonius, *Twelve Caesars*, bk. 1 chs. 76–82; Wasson, "Roman Republic".

"Gaius Julius Caesar" by his contemporaries and "Octavian" by historians)[12]. Over a dozen years, Octavian would fight alongside Marcus Antonius, a powerful Caesarian, to eliminate the conspirators, crush a pirate revolt by Pompey's son, and finally turn on Antonius, besting him at the battle of Actium and precipitating his and his lover, Cleopatra's, suicide in 30 BCE[13]. At this point, the Republic had become untenable. Factionalism, the ambitions of great men, and normalized political violence had profoundly destabilized the state. Reform could no longer save the Republic, but it could replace its corpse. Octavian accrued executive power under the guise of restoring the res publica, ultimately taking the name "Augustus" and becoming the first Roman Emperor, although he was always careful to avoid connotations of monarchy, ruling as *princeps* ("first citizen")[14]. This wasn't a negative. The Republic had long been on life support; Augustus' refashioning merely ensured that its heir would be functional autocracy instead of terrible anarchy. His reign greatly expanded Roman territory and famously, 'left Rome a city of marble'[15]. Augustus' transformed Principate would initiate the *Pax Romana*, a prolonged period of order, prosperity, hegemony, and expansion.

The Empire would, however, begin to unravel during the Crisis of the 3rd Century, a period that would see the deaths of over 20 emperors in barely twice as many years. Sustained civil wars, plague, inflation, and foreign offensives climaxed with the breakaway of the western

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[12] Suetonius, *Twelve Caesars*, bk. 2 ch. 7.

[13] Dio, *Roman History*, bk. 46 chs. 50–56, bk. 47 chs. 37–49, bk. 48 chs. 45–52, bk. 49 chs. 1–11, bk. 50, bk. 51 chs. 1–10; Paterculus, *The Roman History*, bk. 2 chs. 59, 65, 79; Goldsworthy, *Augustus*, pp. 125–142, 157–169, 184–192; Eck and Takács, *The Age of Augustus*, pp. 30–39; Cartwright, "The Battle of Philippi".

[14] Dio, *Roman History*, bk. 53 chs. 1–2, 11–12, 16–18, 32; Eck and Takács, *The Age of Augustus*, pp. 45–59; Gruen, *Making of the Principate*, pp. 34–39.

[15] Dio, *Roman History*, bk. 53 chs. 19–22, 27, bk. 54 chs. 20–24; Suetonius, *12 Caesars*, bk. 2 chs. 22, 26–33.

and eastern thirds of the realm[16]. Aurelian's campaigns would territorially mend Rome, but Diocletian would be the one to address the deeper issues. He undertook 4 key econo-political reforms. First, Diocletian rightfully surmised that the Senate had devolved into ineffectuality, useless as an ally but capable of stirring opposition, and ignored the old men to reduce their influence[17]. Diocletian also reorganized the Empire's provinces, doubling their number to lessen the power bases of local governors and grouping them into 12 dioceses, administered by equestrian *vicarii* ("counts") loyal to the Emperor instead of senators[18]. Furthermore, he split administrative and martial functions among different posts, giving the former to the vicarii and the latter to *duces* ("dukes")[19], impeding potential usurpers from gathering the parallel political and military power prerequisite for a coup. Having lost most of its value to continuous, heavy inflation, Roman currency was replaced with physical goods as the vehicle of tax collection, refilling the imperial coffers[20]. Most majorly, the Empire was split into 4 quadrants, ruled autonomously by 2 senior Augusti and 2 junior Caesars[21]. This division, although transitory, sated ambitious men and empowered the imperial regime to tackle multiple threats on different frontiers at once. Lastly, Diocletian rid himself of both republican and stratocratic pretenses by establishing the openly monarchical Dominate, taking the address '*Dominus*' ("master") and legitimizing himself through mass propaganda, regal splendour, and identification with the god

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[16] Mark, "Crisis of the Third Century".

[17] Williams, *Roman Recovery*, p. 41.

[18] Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, pp. 9–10; Wasson, "Diocletian"; Williams, *Roman Recovery*, p. 57.

[19] Williams, *Roman Recovery*, p. 107; Wasson, "Diocletian".

[20] Treagold, *Byzantine State and Society*, p. 20; Southern, *Severus to Constantine*, pp. 159–160.

[21] Eutropius, *Brevarium*, bk. 9 ch. 22; Williams, *Roman Recovery*, pp. 64–65, 67, 73–74; Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, pp. 8–9; Wasson, "Diocletian".

Jupiter, rather than via armed support or dynastic claims[22]. Though they would still occur, Diocletian's remodelling made usurpations less of a threat, and provided a measure of stability and security to the Empire.

One of the few black marks against Diocletian was his maltreatment of the Christians. The Romans, as with other things, borrowed their religious customs. They based their gods on the Greco-Etruscan pantheons, and incorporated the local deities of those places they conquered, aiding with integration[23]. The monotheistic Christians, however, would not countenance their Abrahamic God being placed as subordinate to other divinities, creating tension with the newly-deified sovereigns. Diocletian and Galerius viewed the Christ-followers as a threat. They burned down churches and demanded animal sacrifices to the emperor, sacrileges that provoked widespread discord and reprisals[24]. Constantine the Great would remedy this error in the early 300s AD, when he ended the persecutions and personally converted[25]. Later, Theodosius would make Nicene Christianity the state religion[26]. Cementing its legacy among future Christian kingdoms, this timely reorientation co-opted, instead of opposing, the growing influence of the ascendant Christians, turning Rome into God's Empire.

Rome's history of martial innovation, meanwhile, extends even further back into its Regal Era, where, until the mid-6th century BCE, fighting forces consisted mainly of

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[22] Eutropius, *Brevarium*, bk. 9 ch. 26; Southern, *Severus to Constantine*, pp. 153–154, 162–163; Potter, *Rome at Bay*, pp. 290, 294–298.

[23] Rüpke, *Companion to Roman Religion.*

[24] Eusebius, *Church History*, bk. 8 chs. 1–13; Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, pp. 21–24.

[25] Eusebius, *Church History*, bk. 9 chs. 9–11, bk. 10 chs. 1–7; Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, pp. 48–49, 208–213; Bowder, *Age of Constantine*, p. 28.

[26] Potter, "Theodosius Makes Christianity Official Faith".

unarmoured war bands from individual Roman gentes[27], who remained active until 479 BCE, when the gens Fabii prosecuted a private war against the Etruscan city of Veii[28]. Had Rome's militia remained in this primitive condition, they would never have been logistically capable of pursuing, much less winning, major wars of conquest. Fortunately, however, the principles of the phalanx, developed by the Sumerians and popularized by the Ancient Greeks, made their way to Rome via Etruria. The Romans, ever quick to apprehend the utility of foreign practices, quickly adopted the configuration. The phalanx, composed of a single line of heavily armoured hoplites carrying an *aspis* (round shield) and a *dory* (3-metre spear) arrayed 8-16 men deep, functioned by creating an interlocking, forward-moving shield wall, from within which the hoplites would stab at the enemy. In its day, the phalanx was near-unstoppable contra anything except another phalanx[29]. Alongside this structural reworking, the first Roman censuses allowed citizens' property to be recorded, letting the government enlist eligible male citizens off the census rolls en masse. Moreover, in lieu of the non-existent state armoury, the census provided a convenient mechanism for determining equipment requirements by delineating between asset-based classes; the very richest citizens, *equites*, served as cavalry, providing their own horses. Those conscripted from the rank of propertied citizens just below, the '1st class', were compelled to supply a sword, spear, and a full set of armour, whilst the poorest, *capiti censi* ("headcount"), were exempted from service entirely, with 4 other classes of gradient wealth and obligation in between[30]. These 'Servian Reforms', named after Rome's supposed contemporary king, empowered Rome to muster a large, centralized, well-armed fighting force, capable of steamrolling her less advanced neighbours.

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[27] Cornell, *The Beginnings of Rome,* p. 189.

[28] Livius, *Ab Urbe Condita Libri*, bk. 2 chs. 47–49.

[29] Lendering, "Phalanx".

[30] Jasiński, "Roman Army During Kingdom Period"; Goldsworthy, *Roman Warfare*, pp. 7–9.

But as Rome expanded into the hilly country of central Italy, the weaknesses of the phalanx became apparent. The spears of the hoplites were unidirectional, and their tremendous encumberment and intertwined spears and shields rendered them sluggish, leaving the phalanx vulnerable to flanking, an inadequacy compounded by the lacking Roman cavalry. Additionally, phalanxes had a tendency to deform when traversing rough terrain, breaking up the solid line crucial to the formation's success and leaving individual hoplites perilously unshielded[31]. It is easy to imagine these shortcomings permanently restricting the Romans to the flatlands of Latium. But, succeeding a string of losses to the upland Samnites in the late 300s BCE, the Romans realized their army's shortfalls and astutely discarded the static, single-line phalanx in favour of novel, Samnite-style, 120-men *maniples* ("handfuls")[32]. These new units were arranged in a checkerboard formation able to flex over uneven ground and to be independently directed on the battlefield to intercept enemy manoeuvres and hold strategic points, negating the aforementioned flaws. The manipular legion was composed of three battle lines: 10 maniples of juvenile *hastati* in front, 10 of seasoned *principes* in the middle, and 10 half-strength maniples of veteran *triarii* at the back[33]. Rome drew on allied Latins to provide a disproportionate share of cavalry, covering Rome's equine deficiency. The hastati and principes came to be armed with the gladius, a sword borrowed from the superior weapon smithies of Hispania, and the pilum, a javelin well-suited to damaging a phalanx without suffering its spears[34]. Triarii continued to fight as hoplites. As the Romans intended, the maniple system excelled in the alpine environments of

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[31] Lendering, "Phalanx"; Polybius, *The Histories*, bk. 18 chs. 28–32.

[32] Sekunda, Northwood, and Hook, *Early Roman Armies*, pp. 14, 37–41.

[33] Sanrosuosso, *Storming the Heavens*, pp. 18-19; Polybius, *The Histories*, bk. 6 chs. 20–23, 29; Connolly, *Greece and Rome at War*, pp. 125–129.

[34] Walbank, *A Historical Commentary on Polybius*, pp. 703–705.

Italy and Greece, granting Rome victory in the Samnite Wars, and then over the less flexible

phalangeal Macedonian army at the 197 and 168 BCE Battles of Cynoscephalae and Pydna[35].

Besides formations, the Romans were experts at altering their strategy and tactics to fit

the geo-military situations they found themselves in. The First Punic War, fought from 264-261

BCE, quickly devolved into a stalemate, with the Romans dominant on the field and Carthage

holed up in fortresses[36]. The Carthaginians invested little into their ground forces, remaining

hesitant to do battle on dry soil for the entirety of the conflict, even after a terrestrial victory at

the Battle of Bagradas River[37]. The Romans, meanwhile, refused to allow their complete lack of

seafaring experience to deter them. Using the blueprint of a beached Carthaginian quinquereme,

they constructed a copycat armada of 200 ships in 2 months[38]. Then, after an ambush at Lipara

displayed the inferiority of Roman seamanship, they added their own spin on the design: the

corvus, an eleven-metre-long spiked bridge designed to attach to enemy vessels so that the

Romans could board them. This device compensated for the Roman sailors' lack of manoeuvring

skill by obviating the need for traditional ramming, and it contributed to victories at the Battles

of Mylae and Sulci[39]. Rome built upon these successes by invading North Africa, defeating a

Carthaginian interception fleet at the Battle of Cape Ecnomus, still among the largest naval

battles of all time[40]. That invasion would fail, and, with almost comic misfortune, the Romans

would see their flotillas wrecked 3 times, twice to storms and once to Carthaginian warships.

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[35] Eckstein and Čašule, *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, pp. 3843, 5676–77.

[36] Goldsworthy, *The Fall of Carthage*, pp. 97, 182.

[37] Goldsworthy, *The Fall of Carthage*, pp. 88–90; Lazenby, *The First Punic War*, pp. 104–106.

[38] Polybius, *The Histories*, bk. 1 ch. 20; Goldsworthy, *The Fall of Carthage*, pp. 97, 99–100.

[39] Polybius, *The Histories*, bk. 1 ch. 20; Casson, *Ships and Seamanship in the Ancient World*, pp. 121, 278–280; Miles, *Carthage Must Be Destroyed*, p. 178; Bebber, "The First Punic War".

[40] Polybius, *The Histories*, bk. 1 ch. 20; Tipps, "The Battle of Ecnomus", pp. 435–436.

But, unfazed at the mounting casualties and nearing bankruptcy, Rome started afresh each time[41]. Their final fleet beat its Carthaginian counterpart at the Battle of Aegates Islands, and, with Carthage exhausted, peace was concluded in Rome's favour[42]. 23 years later, Carthaginian resentment and expansion in Iberia would lead to the outbreak of a Second Punic War, which saw Hannibal cross the Alps and inflict devastating defeats at the Battle of Trasimene River and Lake Trebia, sending Rome into a panic[43]. They appointed as dictator one Quintus Fabius 'Cunctator' ("Delayor"), who, recognizing Hannibal's superior generalship, declined to meet him in the field, instead shadowing Hannibal to reverse Carthaginian gains whenever they materialized[44]. Although it prevented another serious trouncing, factions within the Senate found Fabius' strategy un-Roman and cowardly. They elevated the general Varro… who promptly led Rome into its single worst-ever defeat, Cannae[45]. The Romans learnt their lesson and employed Fabius' ideas, still used today in "Fabian Tactics"[46], for the remainder of the struggle, preventing Hannibal from making any progress[47] and buying time for Scipio Africannus to triumph in Spain and then Africa, deciding the war for Rome. Innovation, commitment to employing whatever methods necessary, even when they stood counter to existing predispositions, and willingness to learn and rebuild in the face of innumerable, crushing setbacks, all aspects of their unique adaptability, won Rome undisputed supremacy over the Western Mediterranean.

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[41] Goldsworthy, *The Fall of Carthage*, pp. 117–112; Miles, *Carthage Must Be Destroyed*, pp. 189–190, 195.

[42] Miles, *Carthage Must Be Destroyed*, p. 196.

[43] Polybius, *The Histories*, bk. 3 chs. 9–10, 20, 35, 73–74, 84–86; Goldsworthy, *The Fall of Carthage*, pp. 181, 190; Bagnall, *The Punic Wars*, pp. 161–162, 175.

[44] Polybius, *The Histories*, bk. 3 chs. 87–89; Goldsworthy, *The Fall of Carthage*, pp. 184–188; Miles, *Carthage Must Be Destroyed*, p. 279.

[45] Zimmerman, *Roman Strategy and Aims*, pp. 285–286; Goldsworthy, *The Fall of Carthage*, pp. 195–196, 198–199; Miles, *Carthage Must Be Destroyed*, p. 279; Bagnall, *The Punic Wars*, pp. 191–195.

[46] Holmes, "Fabian Strategies".

[47] Daly, *Cannae*.

But as Rome became a transcontinental power with the conquest of Carthage and later Greece, the manipular legion presented growing inefficiencies. The eponymously-named 'Marian' Reforms that proceeded were most likely a piecemeal process of modernization driven by various figures between the 2nd Punic War and late 100s BCE[48]. The maniple gave way to the cohort, a much larger grouping of 480 heavy infantrymen, as the basic unit of manoeuvre, reflecting the increased scale of Rome's armies. These were supplemented by light infantry *auxilia* units. The distinctions between the hastati, principes, and triarii were done away with, as was the chequered pattern, considered too fragile against the mass frontal assaults of Rome's enlarged opponents. To facilitate delegation and interchangeability across frontiers, the state began to provide soldier's equipment and legions became fully standardized[49]. Previously unfilled specialist roles were taken up by allied and mercenary units of Balearic slingers, Cretan archers, and Numidian light cavalry[50]. Each legion was also given 120-300 mounted messenger-scouts and a small artillery core of ballistae and onagers for increasingly prevalent siegecraft[51]. This period also saw the proletarization of the army, as increasing legionnaire pay attracted poor career soldiers, who slowly supplanted short-term conscripts as property qualifications were loosened and then abolished, opening up great reserves of manpower and enabling long-term garrisons and campaigns into foreign territory.[52] This fine-tuning of the legion kept Rome militarily dominant well into late Antiquity, capacitating it to protect, expand, and consolidate its empire.

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[48] Taylor, *Tactical Reform*, p. 78-79.

[49] Taylor, *Tactical Reform*, p. 76-82; Mathew, "Marian Reforms"; Jasiński, "Marian Reforms".

[50] Sage, *The Republican Roman Army*, p. 205; Campbell, "Auxiliary Units".

[51] Vegetius, *De Re Militari*; Goldsworthy, *Complete Roman Army*, pp. 95-99.

[52] Goldsworthy, *Complete Roman Army*; Mathew, "Marian Reforms"; Jasiński, "Marian Reforms".

By the 3rd century AD, though, the Empire became plagued by Germanic invasions and dangerously short on manpower. It solved both problems simultaneously by settling some of those Germani as *foederati*, client-tribes given land and benefits within the Empire in exchange for their military assistance. Foreign soldiers and officers increasingly superseded the dwindling stock of Roman warriors[53]. The failure to properly integrate these elements, resulting in disloyal troops, has oft been criticized as a cause of West's fall[54], but this view disregards the extreme expedience of the foederati at the time; if the army hadn't been barbarized, it would have disintegrated. The foederati provided a critical buffer against other barbarian incursions and were instrumental in turning back Attila the Hun in 451 AD[55]. Following the Crisis of the Third Century, Rome, grasping the infeasibility of adequately defending their entire border at once, turned to a doctrine of defence in depth, a layered approach to security that limited the damage of breakthroughs. The emperor Gallienus utilized a host of cavalry to rapidly reinforce trouble spots[56], and Diocletian would elaborate on this by dividing the legions into *comitatenses*, highly mobile interior armies, and *limitanei*, miniature border forces used to guard versus small-scale raids and bog down larger threats until the comitatenses could arrive[57]. These fresh systems kept the Northern frontier largely secure against constant, massive barbarian onslaughts, prolonging the lifespan of the West.

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[53] Goldsworthy, *The Complete Roman Army*, p. 204; Jones, *The Later Roman Empire*, pp. 611-620.

[54] Goldsworthy, *The Complete Roman Army*, p. 208.

[55] Schultheis, *Battle of Catalaunian Fields*; Mark, "Battle of Catalaunian Fields"

[56] Tomlin, *Army of the Late Empire*, p. 108.

[57] Elton, *Warfare in Roman Europe*, pp. 204-210; MacDowall, *The Franks*; Schultheis, *Battle of Catalaunian Fields*.

The Eastern Roman Empire is often neglected when discussing the military history of Rome, but it managed to remain a great power for several centuries as a result of its continued adaptation. Presciently, Theodocius' advisors acknowledged that Rome was no longer unbeatable in the field and constructed the Theodosian Walls, a series of fortifications that rendered Constantinople impenetrable until the advent of the canon, even when facing superior armies[58]. The Byzantines employed the *thémata*, giving away land in exchange for armed service, creating loyal, self-equipped soldier-farmers, and the *tagmata*, elite imperial guard units, like the illustrious Varangian Guard of Norsemen[59]. The introduction of Greek Fire, a napalm-like substance[60], the *kataphraktoi*, uber-heavy cavalry, and the *sôlênarion*, a rapid dart-shooter[61], among others, further compensated for declining Byzantine resources and manpower, keeping them militarily competitive in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Given these radical reworkings, the question of how the Romans maintained the world's single best army for so long becomes clear: they didn't. Rather, the Romans fielded 4 of the world's greatest armies in succession. The phalanx, maniple, cohort, and theme were utterly divergent in their compositions, formations, approaches, and purposes, connected only by their remarkable success. The Romans tailor-made each to match the necessities of their particular period, dispassionately discarding old, outdated systems. This adaptability, combined with the Roman flexibility in adopting new strategies, such as those of Fabian and Diocletian, constant change to ameliorate minor deficiencies, as during the Marian Reforms, and willingness to

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[58] Cartwright, "Theodosian Walls"; Hendrix, "Theodosian Walls".

[59] Treagold, *Byzantium and its Army*, pp. 23-24, 28–29, 71, 99, 162, 210.

[60] Pryor and Jeffreys, *The Age of the ΔPOMΩNI*, pp. 26–27, 31–32, 607-609.

[61] Dennis, *Flies, Mice, and the Byzantine Crossbow*, pp. 1-5.

appropriate the useful innovations of other cultures, like the phalanx, maniple, gladius, and quinquereme, is what kept Rome a military superpower for well on 2 millennia.

Permit me to end with a comparison. In the 6th century BCE, both Rome and the Greek city of Sparta were regionally dominant land powers, sporting phalangeal militaries and populations of around 35, 000[62]. The Romans, as I have related, relentlessly tinkered with and remodelled their government, army, and society to address emergent challenges, accelerating their rise from local player to regional hegemon to continental superpower. The Spartans, conversely, structured their institutions to foster hyper-conservatism. Failing to adjust to shifting realities, they withered to little more than a backward village. Sparta was still clinging to its archaic, antiquated customs when the Romans effortlessly conquered them in 146 BCE[63]. The lesson is clear. Those who embrace reform survive and thrive. Those who do not stagnate and succumb. As we face economic, political, and military issues and setbacks now, like the Russo-Ukrainian War[64] or skyrocketing cost of living[65], and in the future, we should look to the Roman example and be willing to implement sweeping, and perhaps unconventional, but necessary reforms. If our civilizations are to continue as long as the Roman one, we must adopt Rome's outlook. The ancient Romans had a world-class military, fantastic engineering skills, and legendary statesmen, but their success was principally a factor of their eternal ability to adapt, innovate, borrow, and overcome.

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[62] Boatwright, *From Village to Empire*, p. 36; Nielsen, *Ancient Greek Polis*, p. 22.

[63] Lambrecht, "Decline of Sparta".

[64] Leonhardt, "War in Ukraine".

[65] Lock et al., "Cost of Living Crisis".

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