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Terror, Attrition, and Revenge in Roman Warfare, Third and Second Centuries BC

The Roman Republic's dazzling expansion of power and influence in the third and second centuries BC was undergirded by more than good commanders and disciplined legionaries, and the undeniably dark nature of Roman warfare should not escape us: indeed, Roman armies in this period repeatedly committed acts that would earn the unambiguous label "atrocity" in the modern world. As testament to the frequency of this violence, the fragmentary historical sources for this period record over sixty episodes in which the Romans enslaved or massacred enemy populations—or destroyed their cities entirely—in theaters across the Mediterranean. Historians have proposed a number of explanations for the apparent rapacity of Roman warfare, such as material motivations or the never-ending pressure on Roman aristocrats to earn glory and renown. However, our sources suggest that a ruthless strategic calculus may have encouraged much of this mass violence. I propose to examine the use of atrocity in Roman warfare in order to determine both its strategic role and the reason such violence was considered more serviceable for Rome's military goals than moderate alternatives.

Ancient sources frequently report that the Romans utilized mass violence to frighten the enemy and force submission through terror. The historians Livy and Polybius explicitly state that displays of violence were used to inspire fear and encourage surrender, and Sallust's account of the Jugurthine War highlights the Roman commanders' systematic use of destruction and violence for the same reasons. It must be noted that some instances of violence do not seem to have served an immediate strategic function: for example, the horrendous enslavement of seventy Epirote towns in 167, or the obliteration of Corinth and Carthage in 146, occurred at the end of wars after the enemy's defeat. Revenge for perceived betrayals or in response to a particularly difficult siege may explain some episodes such as these—but even in these cases, post-war violence seems to have been carefully calculated to leave a terrible expression of Roman power. Terror was thus employed *during and after* wars to break the resolve of both current and potential enemies.

It is, of course, remarkable that the Romans relied so heavily upon methods which might alienate potential allies or encourage solidarity and determined resistance among enemies. However, Rome's overwhelming resources allowed them to persist with brutal attrition and terror with little fear of exhausting themselves; the sheer pressure of these tactics, moreover, meant that weaker opponents were faced with annihilation (whether they resisted more determinedly or not), while relatively strong enemies usually lacked the resources to withstand the Roman onslaught or retaliate in kind. Perhaps most importantly, the Romans often extended the hand of friendship before offering the sword, making it clear that the path to safety was through alliance with Rome. In short, Roman commanders repeatedly utilized mass violence because they saw it as strategically effective. Such strategic motivations should not be entirely overlooked in favor of material, economic, or political explanations for Roman military conduct.