

Event of the Century or How not to fall off a Roman horse

Simon James

What did Roman soldiers really look like? How did the legions fight? In addition to studying Classical texts, examining ancient depictions, and digging up archaeological remains, we have another tool: reconstruction. On 2 August 1997, for the first time in over 1,600 years, a full century of Roman legionaries took the field. The place was Kirby Hall in Northamptonshire, a ruined stately home managed by English Heritage, who used it as the venue for their biggest public event of 1997, 'History in Action II'. Following the success of the first event in 1996, the second was even bigger, with over 1,000 re-enactors, mostly representing armies across the ages.

It was the Romans who began the show, fielding more than a dozen auxiliaries and a full century of eighty legionaries. (No-one really knows why there were eighty men to a century in an imperial legion, rather than the literal 100.) Presenting the display were members of no less than seven Roman re-enactment groups. Senior partners were the Ermine Street Guard (who have just celebrated their 25th birthday). They were accompanied by contingents from other British groups including *Legio VIII Augusta*, *Vexillatio Legionis Geminae*, the Colchester Roman Society, and the Antonine Guard (there are more legions in Britain today than in Roman times – although they are now somewhat smaller!), plus the Gemina Project from Holland and *Legio XIV Gemina Martia Victrix* from Germany (including some expatriate Americans for good measure).

For the first time the Ermine Street Guard's centurion, Gaius Flavius Aper (alias Chris Haines), really got to command a full century. Chris is one of several members of the guard who have been there from the beginning, and who can claim to be true *veterani*. He put the century through its paces, of drill, training, battlefield formations, and tactics. (The Guard don't usually engage in mock battles with other groups, though; unlike the 'blunts' used by battle re-enactment societies, the Guard's weapons have real edges ...) They demonstrated the *testudo* ('tortoise') of interlocked shields for siege attacks, and charged the crowd in *cuneus* ('wedge') formation. All this was rounded off with a spectacular artillery demonstration, and a salutation of the image of the emperor (Vespasian).

The Guard and its sister groups try out all sorts of things, from cooking Roman dishes to replicating craft activities like clothes-making and metalworking, and produce elaborate and expensive items such as leather tents and even replica catapults. Many of these activities could be seen at the static displays, where people could talk to the soldiers and their womenfolk (apart from centurions, early imperial soldiers couldn't *officially* marry, but they were only human ...).

Experimental Archaeology

For me, as for everyone there, it was a wonderful spectacle and a fun day out. But there is also a serious side. Archaeologists and Classical historians all produce their interpretations of how Roman soldiers looked, lived, and operated. But how can we test our conclusions? One check is to make reconstructions of artefacts like armour, and try them out, to see if they *could* have worked as proposed. This is 'experimental archaeology'. Some practically-minded archaeologists and groups like the Guard possess formidable knowledge of the physical and technical realities of the Roman period. Their skills in making replica artefacts are impressive, and their experiences of using them provide very valuable feedback to scholars.

For example, one of the most important developments in recent years has been in understanding the functioning of the Roman saddle. Stirrups were unknown in antiquity, and it was widely assumed that horsemen could not have had a very stable seat. We have never found a complete Roman saddle, but we do have a few unclear pictures of them, and some references in texts. We know that they had four 'horns' or projecting pommels; metal fittings from these have survived, as have water-logged fragments of leather saddle-coverings. Peter Connolly, an illustrator and archaeologist whose beautifully illustrated books on the Classical world are well-known, studied this material to try to work out what the saddle had been like. He consulted closely with Carol van Driel-Murray, a Dutch expert on ancient leatherwork. Peter cracked the problem by making experimental versions, until the result reproduced exactly the highly characteristic patterns of stitching holes, creases, and stretching seen on the leather fragments. The result was a surprise; the four tall pommels were carefully arranged to lock the rider in place. But how effective was it for actual riding?

Road Testing

Peter had conducted his own successful trials, but the reconstruction needed a more thorough testing. He made two saddles for the Guard, who produced two magnificent sets of replica decorated harness to go with them. For several years now, two cavalrymen have been a regular feature of the Guard's displays, and Peter and Carol both came with me to Kirby Hall to inspect the saddles, to talk to the men who used them and see them put through their paces. The cavalry display was as spectacular as the drill of the legionaries. The cavalrymen galloped full tilt at targets with lance, sword, and javelin, and bowled over infantrymen with blunted spears. The horses pranced and wheeled, but both riders stayed firmly in the saddle. Peter's reconstructions, then, correspond to all the evidence and work well. Surely Roman saddles were indeed just like these. The problem with them is not falling off, it's *getting* off (and on) without injuring yourself! But again, experiment shows it just takes a little practice ...

I, too, learned a lot from the weekend, both from watching the legionaries in action, and from talking to them afterwards. It clearly showed that the elaborate and regular formations which the Romans used cannot have been achieved without a great deal of careful training and practice. Centurion Chris Haines remarked on how much ground even a single century occupies, especially when on the move, making the officer's task in controlling them a real challenge. You could also see that, to keep its careful formation, the double line of advancing legionaries had to march slowly and carefully, needing constant slight adjustments to avoid bunches and gaps appearing in the ranks.

The Crunch

Stunning indeed was the appearance of bright shields, plumes, standards, and armour flashing gold and silver in the sunlight. but unexpected, and subliminally just as impressive, was the *sound* of the marching soldiers. Those funny little aprons legionaries wore are not groin protection – they are useless for that! – but they made a characteristic jangling as soldiers walked which, with the crunch of their iron hobnails, formed an important part of the visual and audible signals which marked the approach of a Roman soldier, to both his friends and enemies ...

For those who missed it, it now seems that there will be a 'History in Action III' next year.

Simon James is a Research Fellow in the Department of Archaeology at Durham University. His main areas of interest are the Roman army and the provinces, and neighbouring societies, particularly the Celts and the peoples of Syria.