



Nathan Rosenstein. *Rome at War: Farms, Families and Death in the Middle Republic.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. x + 339 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2839-7.



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New Perspectives on Rome's Farmer-Soldiers

Rome at War is a traditional monograph, which is very much a good thing. In this age of obfuscating post-modernizing, it is refreshing to see a scholar challenge a generally accepted thesis, systematically and creatively question the evidence and reason supporting it, and then propose a more viable model. Rosenstein's work is characterized by clear writing and an insistence on engaging all the evidence, even (in fact, especially) that which might undermine his own thesis. More historians need to get back to this tried and true method. However, that is not to say *Rome at War* is old-fashioned. The core of the argument revolves around a sophisticated use of recent advances in demographics, and although a background in statistics is useful, Rosenstein does an excellent job of making the discussion clear.

The book focuses on the relationship between Rome's small holding farmers and the increasing rate and burden of warfare in the third and second centuries BCE. This association went both ways—the Roman military system depended on the conscription of these farmers and, of course their military service affected the farms themselves. The traditional view of this relationship was that the small farmers found it more and more difficult to survive economically because of long absences due to military service during the Second Punic War. This led to smallholdings being increasingly replaced by large, slave-run plantations. The reliance on slavery supposedly made conscription more difficult, and swelled the ranks of landless proletarians.

Archaeological evidence, primarily large-scale surveys, have thrown doubt on this view, though such evidence is ill-suited for following economic and social changes over a period spanning a few decades. Therefore, Rosenstein uses contemporary demographic theory models as well as the latest in archaeology to skillfully interpret the literary sources. Clearly some guess work is involved in this sort of approach. For example, casualty lists apply almost exclusively to major battles. The casualty rate for smaller engagements and skirmishes is a mere guess, as is the rate of death from disease. Fighting was not equal among all units—some did not fight at all. Rosenstein's careful critique, however, raises confidence in his method, and using numbers, as opposed to "many" or "some," allows him to use statistical modeling to great effect. In addition, he makes good use of comparative material throughout, drawing on important studies of the Prussian military and of conscription in the Confederate South, one of the only slave societies to go through the sort of military mobilization that Rome did during the Second Punic War.

Rosenstein is scrupulous in making clear that his numbers are approximate and generally meant to refer to the order of magnitude, but his model does ultimately depend on the reliability of the numbers we get in ancient sources, especially Livy. While this is, in the final analysis, unverifiable, Rosenstein presents a powerful case that such numbers are more reliable than is generally thought. There were accurate sources available to the ancient historian, for example pay lists and records of triumphs, and

Rosenstein notes that Livy, despite his poor reputation, at times seems to have been more critical of numbers than Polybius. It does seem that especially high and low figures are the most remembered and are over-represented in the sources, but the sort of conventional figures that Walter Scheidel found in economic inscriptions do not appear in casualty figures.[1] Differences in numbers reflected in our sources may have other explanations than inaccuracy, for example they could reflect differences in the status of casualties (citizen vs. non-citizen). One element that comes through strongly is that we should not be hypercritical of Livy's account of fourth and third century Rome.

The book's powerful arguments undermine the traditional explanations of Rome's agrarian crisis. In the first place, conscription did not lead to the abandonment of farms due to lack of labor because ancient farms suffered from chronic over-employment and could afford to send young men into service. A key element in Rosenstein's argument is the effect of late marriage on Roman warfare. During the Republican period (and later) Roman men normally married in their late twenties and early thirties to women in their late teens. This meant that Roman men normally married, and established farms, after their military service was over. The importance of slave-run plantations in the second century is also analyzed. Rosenstein advances a number of compelling critiques of the traditional view. For example, it is clear that Rome's slave population did not grow as rapidly as had been thought by P. A. Brunt.[2] Rome was already a slave society before 200 B.C.E, with widespread use of slaves on relatively small farms. Large-scale plantation slavery, however, relied on the sort of Mediterranean wide market for Italian goods that did not exist until the first century B.C.E. There are certainly references to enormous numbers of slaves being brought in by second century wars (e.g. 150,000 from Epirus) but Rosenstein's in-depth analysis shows that the overall numbers were much smaller than such passages suggest.

If the traditional view, that the economic and social problems of the late Roman Republic are incorrect, then what does Rosenstein propose? His model is complex and nuanced, but compelling. Rosenstein's demographic modeling is very convincing, showing, for example, that a post-Punic War baby boom likely occurred. He does not rely completely on modeling, however, and always looks to both the literary and archaeological evidence, to see if it is in congruence with his theories. He notes, for example, that many colonies were established in the years after the Second Punic War ended—consistent with

the idea of a rising citizen population. It is not that constant war had no effect, but that counter-intuitively, the normal societal limits to population growth were “turned off” by the Punic Wars. Thus there was a rapid growth of population, a post-war “baby boom” that led to too many young men competing for too little land. The effect of this was that smallholdings were subdivided too much to be sustainable—thus forcing population into the cities, increasing the proletariat. Roman writers attributed the crisis to under population caused by conscription, but the very real rural crisis was caused by overpopulation. Thus the Gracchan solution of distributing land was doomed to failure; there was simply no surplus land to distribute. The problem, Rosenstein concludes, was only solved by the massive population losses in the Civil War and the subsequent overseas migration.

In the course of his arguments, Rosenstein makes many points important to the military historian. His discussion of casualties and death rates is valuable to anyone wanting to reconstruct the ancient battle. He considers the effect of legionary armor in reducing wounds, that many diseases that affected later armies (such as measles, plague, cholera and smallpox) probably did not exist in Roman times. In addition, the infection rate of wounds was lower than in gunpowder warfare. Rosenstein makes the valuable point that the high age for men and low age of women for marriage resulted in the Romans being able to conscript an enormous number of small-holding farmers without negatively affecting the agricultural economy. This was a major, if not the major, factor in their imperial success. This remained the case even when the Romans were conscripting up to 70 percent of the free adult population for war, a number not equaled until the experience of the Confederate States in the American Civil War.

Although the focus of the book is military history, it is also valuable for a more general reader. In particular, the discussions of the patterns of agriculture are illuminating. It is remarkable that so little attention is paid to the mechanics of ancient farming, considering that it was not only the principal activity of the vast majority of the population, but also drove the economy of ancient states. Rosenstein is focused on this issue for a specific reason, that is, to investigate the impact of military conscription and service on the Roman family farm. In doing so, however, he presents an extraordinarily clear and concise model of the ancient farm. Students of ancient history (and others) would greatly benefit from reading this section. Rosenstein discusses, for example, Roman law of wills and inheritance; the agricultural calendar; and, the

point—made clearer by mathematical modeling—that ancient family economics suffered from underemployment. Rosenstein explores other non-military issues, for example, the ratio of marriageable men to women in the Roman population, the types of crops planted, and the function of both paid and unpaid labor in the ancient farm economy. Non-paid labor was vital to the ancient farmstead and included both relatives and neighbors. Indeed a “neighbor-helping-neighbor” labor exchange system existed, which relied both on custom and on the exchange of gifts and services among local farmers. Also thought provoking was the importance of public land (*ager publicus*) to small farmers.

The traditional monograph uses appendices to present in-depth discussions of issues relevant to the subject, but which would interfere with the flow of the argument if included in the text. The serious student often finds these short studies to be gems, and particularly good ones are often cited in their own right. These appendices are generally as useful, or more so, than short articles, and Rosenstein’s are no exception. Since appendices are not separately listed in bibliographies and databases, they are sometimes overlooked. *Rome at War* has seven. “The Number of Roman Slaves in 168 B.C.,” argues that the slave population at this time was smaller than is generally assumed, namely fewer than 10 percent. “The Accuracy of the Roman Calendar before 218 B.C.,” argues that the Romans regularly intercalated the lunar calendar to keep it in line with the seasons. “Tenancy” is a remarkable mini-essay on the unusual nature of the Greco-Roman citizen republic and how it effected the institution of tenant farmers. Unlike the more normal monarchical systems of the Mediterranean region, Rosenstein argues, there was little tenancy in Republican Rome. “The Minimum Age for Military Service” slices through the confusion over “inclusive counting” and shows that, for all intents and purposes, the Romans calculated age exactly as we do. “The Proportion of *Assidui* in the Roman Population” shows that Brunt’s es-

timate of only 50 percent of the Roman adult males being *assidui*, with the rest being proletarians, is way off. According to Rosenstein, 90 percent of Romans qualified for military service. Here I have to take some issue—Rosenstein’s figure seems too high as Brunt’s is too low. If so many qualified for service, why even have a category of proletarians? Nevertheless, his arguments need to be considered by anyone dealing with this issue. “The Duration of Military Service in the Second Century B.C.” is an argument that Polybius’s figure of sixteen years of service was indeed normal, as is generally accepted, but has recently been challenged. “The Number of Citizen Deaths as a Result of Military Service between 203 and 168 B.C.” concludes that, as a rule, generals tried to spare Roman citizens and use Italian allies whenever possible. These appendices are truly gems of scholarship. The reader also should not neglect to consult Rosenstein’s excellent notes, which also serve up mini-essays on important points. The bibliography is comprehensive and up-to-date, something that cannot always be taken for granted nowadays.

I cannot recommend this book highly enough. Rosenstein is the finest practitioner of the “New Military History” in the United States. He shows brilliantly in this, and his other books, the sorts of insights that a fresh and open approach to Roman warfare can bring to all aspects of ancient societies. I wish that more Romanists would abandon the sterile acrobatics of postmodernism and return to the tried and true methods of rigorous analysis and creative thinking that Rosenstein so ably practices. While aimed at the scholar, *Rome at War* is certainly appropriate, and very useful, for graduate and upper division undergraduate courses.

Notes

[1]. Walter Scheidel, “Finances, Figures and Fiction,” *Classical Quarterly* 46 (1996): pp. 222-38.

[2]. P.A. Brunt, *Italian Manpower* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 91-130.

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