RECONSIDERING SOCII IN ROMAN ARMIES
BEFORE THE PUNIC WARS

Patrick Kent*

1. Introduction

There are few topics in the military history of the Roman Republic that are as fundamental to our understanding as the importance of Italian soldiers marching across the peninsula in Roman armies. The exploitation of allied manpower was one of the keys to Roman military success from the wars in Italy long before the Punic War to the conquest of the Mediterranean Basin. However, for too long historians have relied on the authority of Polybius' description of the Roman army in the second century, without giving sufficient attention to other sources that focus on the period before the Punic Wars. The assumptions that have dictated the modern understanding of the role of allied soldiers in Roman armies warrant reconsideration and deeper investigation. This paper will explore some of the difficulties associated with military cooperation in early Italy, the place of the Italian allies in that system, and how it relates to later periods when Roman domination was far greater.

2. Sources and Historiography

The characterization of Rome’s use of their Italian allies has changed little since the days of Mommsen, and is mostly based on Roman accounts of the second century. In 1881 Mommsen said that “without a doubt the non-Latin allied communities…were registered on the list of contingent-furnishing Italians (formula togatorum)”. Rawlings, in 2007, stated that, based on the formula togatorum, “it is highly probable that at least 50 percent of any army that Rome raised [during the conquest of Italy] would have comprised of allies, especially after the settlement of 338 BC”.

* University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; pkent@email.unc.edu.
1 Mommsen (1881, 423): “ohne Zweifel [werden] auch die nichtlatinischen föderierten Gemeinden…in das Verzeichnis der zuzugpflichtigen Italiker (formula togatorum) eingetragen.”
2 Rawlings (2007, 52).
The nature of the *formula togatorum* has been debated, but it is usually linked to the treaties between the Romans and their allies.\(^3\) These treaties supposedly compelled Rome’s allies to provide military assistance when called upon. In part, the need to explain aggressive wars led to the idea of the *foedus iniquum*,\(^4\) although this has now largely been abandoned. Certainly in recent years the army has featured prominently in a number of studies of Roman-Italian relations, but always with these same underlying assumptions.\(^5\)

Ultimately, the modern characterization of Roman armies and their allies is intimately linked to the ancient sources, and they had no qualms about asserting Roman domination. The most complete account of the Republican army comes from Polybius in the mid-second century. After describing the levy of citizens, he says that “the consuls send word to the leaders of the allied cities of Italy, which they want to contribute allied soldiers for the campaign, declaring the number of men as well as the day and place at which those selected must present themselves”.\(^6\) In an earlier passage concerning the preparations for the Telamon campaign in 225, Polybius echoes the idea of Roman domination of the military resources of their Italian allies.\(^7\) He says that not only were large forces raised, but that the Romans gathered lists of men from their allies from which a comprehensive account of Italian manpower was put together.\(^8\) While not going so far as to describe Rome’s use of allied manpower as a formal treaty obligation, Polybius certainly seems to suggest such an arrangement. However, exactly how the Romans were supposed to have kept track of allied manpower numbers and determined obligation is a matter of debate.\(^9\)

---


5 E.g. Hantos (2003); Jehne (2006); Rosenstein (2006); Pfeilschifter (2007).

6 Plb. 6.21.4: κατὰ δὲ τοὺς αὐτούς καιροὺς οἱ τὰς ὑπάτους ἀρχὰς ἔχοντες παραγγέλλουσι τοῖς ἀδρόμους τοῖς ἄρχονται ἐκ τῶν συμμαχίων πόλεων τῶν ἐκ τῆς Ἰταλίας, ἐξ ὧν ἀνω μετομενοι συστρατεύειν τοὺς συμμάχους, διασαφούντες τὸ πλῆθος καὶ τὴν ἡμέραν καὶ τὸν ἥμεραν καὶ τὴν ἡμέραν, ἐφ᾽ ὧν βαθύτεροι παρείναι τοὺς κεκριμένους.

7 Plb. 2.23–4. Elsewhere (12.5.2), he says of Italian Locri that they were “required by the Romans to send support over the sea according to their treaty (κατὰ τὰς συνθήκας)”, although he does not mention fighting ships or men being demanded.

8 Brunt (1971, 545–8) argues that the *formula togatorum* was created because of the demands of the Telamon campaign.