Rational Brutality: Extreme Violence as an Instrument of Policy in Roman Warfare

Scholars of Roman warfare have traditionally focused on great leaders and important battles even though much of the work of the Roman military, especially during the empire, was not to fight pitched battles, but rather to engage in duties that today we describe with terms such as occupation, pacification and especially counter-insurgency. In recent years scholars have begun to look at Roman efforts along those lines and have begun to make connections between strategies that the Romans pursued and the approaches that armies still take today to accomplish the same ends. Although the Romans employed many different means in their efforts to gain control over hostile populations, one aspect that needs to be discussed in more detail is the role of brutality. It is certainly not a revelation that the Roman army was capable of extraordinary brutality, even by ancient standards, but the role of brutality as an instrument of Roman policy needs to be explored. Even in antiquity the Romans were renowned for their ability to destroy with frightening efficiency, but upon inspection one can see that the choice in place and type of destruction wrought begins to fit a pattern that plays into the larger strategy of pacification and counter-insurgency that the Romans followed for much of their history. It is the purpose of this paper to explore that pattern and show how the Romans used utter and terrifying brutality ultimately to end conflict and bring peace.