

Was the Roman Imperial Army Small? A Comparative Study of Ancient Imperial Military Forces

At its greatest extent the Roman Empire incorporated about 2.5 million square miles. This makes it one of the largest empires in the world in antiquity.¹ To help protect this massive empire, Augustus implemented a permanent, professional army. He originally established twenty-eight legions throughout the empire. After the complete annihilation of Publius Quinctilius Varus in the Teutoburg Forest in 9 CE, the number of legions dropped to twenty-five.² Successive emperors maintained this force, making limited modifications over the next two centuries.³ Unfortunately there are no surviving records that indicate the exact strength of the Roman army as a whole or the exact strength of the Roman imperial legion or auxiliaries. Historians have attempted to reconstruct the military strength of imperial Rome through a mixture of imperfect literary and material evidence, available unit statistics, and speculation. Yet the estimates have ranged from 200,000 to 1,000,000 soldiers.⁴ This paper will first attempt to settle upon an acceptable army figure for the Principate and the Dominate; it then will address the judgment of whether or not the Roman imperial army was small. It will accomplish this task through a comparative analysis of the Roman imperial army with the armies of the other great imperial powers of antiquity: the Persians, the Macedonians, the Parthians, and the Chinese. It will demonstrate that the Roman imperial army was in fact quite massive and that Roman expenditure on the army was immense.

¹ Only the Achaemenid Empire, the Sassanid Empire, and the Rashidun, the Umayyad, and the Abbasid Caliphates were larger.

² Lawrence Keppie, *The Making of the Roman Army: From Republic to Empire* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 169.

³ The number of legions expanded to thirty-four by the end of the reign of Septimius Severus. Pat Southern and Karen Ramsey Dixon, *The Late Roman Army* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 31.

⁴ See Ramsay MacMullen, "How Big was the Roman Imperial Army," *Klio* 62:2 (1980): 451-2.