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Iberians as Enemies

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The Iron Age cultures of the Iberian Peninsula reached different stages of development but shared a basically limited, seasonal, predatory concept of warfare. The Iberians to the south and east (the Mediterranean seaboard) came into earlier and closer contact with Phoenician, Punic, and Greek colonists and merchants, while the peoples further inland (Celtiberians, Lusitani, etc.) were in frequent contact with both Mediterranean and Celtic influences. Northern peoples (Astures, Cantabri, Vascones) had less-developed military institutions. The size and composition of armies, tactics, and weaponry during the Roman conquest (*c.*218–*c.*19 BCE) varied greatly depending on the traditions of the different cultures. Iberians and Celtiberians could field large armies and routinely offered pitched battle; Lusitanians and northern peoples relied more on irregular tactics. The Spaniards' allegedly typical "guerrilla warfare" was greatly exaggerated by 19th- and 20th-century scholarship.

During the 5th century BCE, armies in Iberia consisted of a nucleus of heavily armed aristocrats and their military followers, probably backed by a larger but archaeologically almost invisible number of lesser-armed light troops. Burials and iconography (Porcuna and Elche monuments) show elaborate defensive armor and heavy spears and swords, but no bows or slings. Evidence points to "champion warfare" in which skirmishing preceded more decisive single duels between well-armed warriors. This pattern seems common both to the Mediterranean coast and the central plateau (Meseta). Traces of archaic institutions (*devotio*, single duel, military *clientelae*) were still in evidence during the Roman conquest centuries later (Strabo 3.4.18; App. *Iber.* 53; Livy 26.50).

This "archaic" military and social model changed abruptly in *c.*400 BCE, with the appearance of cemeteries with many hundreds of burials containing a high proportion of graves with weapons (between 30 and 60 percent). The Iberians were developing complex political structures, and by the mid-3rd century BCE kingdoms that controlled many *oppida* (fortified towns with their own territory) existed, capable of fielding large armies. These had a client element, but also a civic base of militiamen, farmers, and artisans that could be mobilized, as attested by archaeology and later literary sources that emphasize free men's identification with their weapons (Livy 34,17; Diod. Sic. 33.25; Justin. *Epit.* 44.2). Some cities, such as Arse-Saguntum, even had a Senate and a military magistrate that Livy refers to as a *praetor* (Livy 21.12). In the Indo-European areas of the peninsula the institution of *ver sacrum* – in which a bellicose *iuventus* had to prove itself by war (App. *Iber.* 94) – coexisted with large contingents of military clients.

By *c.*375 BCE, a simpler and more standardized panoply had replaced the heavy defensive bronze armor of the earlier period. It consisted of a sword (*falcata* in the Iberian area, straight antennae swords in the Meseta), a heavy thrusting spear, and a throwing spear (*soliferrea*, *pila*, javelin). Round wooden shields about 60 centimeters in diameter (*caetrae*), felt or leather body armor, and leather helmets were the typical defensive weapons. Although there are no explicit literary sources for this period, it seems clear from the archaeological record that real armies became common, with light and line infantry fighting in formation, although they were small (hundreds or a few thousand men). The Celtiberians apparently developed an authentic cavalry during the 4th century BCE, and the Iberians did so in the late 3rd century BCE.

Iberian and Celtiberian military institutions, tactics, and weapons developed from the 4th century BCE onwards were basically those encountered by the Romans in 218 BCE when they disembarked in Emporion to cut the communication lines of Hannibal's army in Italy and seize the main Carthaginian rearguard logistical base.

Hannibal used Balearic slingers and Spanish cavalry and light infantrymen, but many of his Spaniards were line infantry organized in *speirai* (i.e., units similar to maniples), quite capable of fighting Roman legionaries in pitched battle, as at Cannae (Polyb. 3.113–114). Carthaginian generals in Iberia used local recruits to fight in close formation, supported by light infantry, fighting "just like a legion" (Livy 28.2; in 207 BCE). Short of troops, the Romans in Iberia soon began recruiting local mercenaries and allies (Livy 24.49; for 213 BCE) as an important part of their army (Polyb. 11.22). Increasingly involved as subjects, allies, or mercenaries in this "world war" between great powers and of a much higher intensity than earlier local wars, the peninsular peoples adopted a new generation of cheap, mass-produced defensive weapons: oval shields or *scuta* and bronze Montefortino-type helmets.

When the Carthaginians were expelled from the peninsula in 206 BCE, many Iberians (particularly the Ilergetes to the northeast) fought on alone when they realized that the Romans intended to stay and conquer (Livy 30.26). Although Livy (34.17) and Strabo (3.2) say the Iberians/Turdetanians were less warlike than the Cantabri in the far north, we should remember that these authors were writing in the Augustan period when the first had been subjects for almost two centuries, while the second were waging a desperate war against Octavius. In fact, the Ilergetes, in coalition with other lesser peoples, had two hard-fought pitched battles against the Romans in 206–205 BCE. Their armies numbered well over 20,000 men, including line and light infantry and cavalry, deployed in formal battle line by nationalities, guided by military standards (Polyb. 11.32–33; Livy 28.33; 29.1–2). They also slept in fortified camps, as they did before the Battle of Emporion in 195 BCE against Cato (Livy 34.14).

The Celtiberians, Vettones, and Vaccaei fought many pitched battles against the Romans between 204 and 133 BCE, winning some of them. At least fourteen such battles are recorded, many in some detail (e.g., Livy 39.30–31; 40.30–32; App. *Iber.* 45). However, Iberian and Celtiberian fortifications could never withstand Roman assaults or formal sieges for long. Only at Numantia did Scipio refuse to fight the battle the Arevaci were offering (App. *Iber.* 90–91; 97) and chose instead to win victory by siege and starvation.

Although various sources describe the "natives" as lightly armed and adept at irregular, hit-and-run tactics, we must remember that these sources are later, Imperial-era authors aiming to justify

Rome's right to conquer and rule uncivilized barbarians, and they tended to downplay the more civilized traits of local warfare. They were also talking about Lusitanians and Celtiberians (Diod. Sic. 5.34; Strabo 3.3–4; App. *Iber.* 73) rather than Iberians. And they compared local armor and shields with later legionary weapons and even the Greek hoplite *aspis* (Strabo 3.3.6). Even Livy concedes that Spanish cavalry and light infantry were much more reliable in open combat than Moorish troops (23.26). In fact, many other sources speak of pitched battles, and testify that even Viriathus's so-called brigands were organized in companies and squadrons (App. *Iber.* 75). Sources regularly refer to Celtiberians as *peltasts*, a type of dual-purpose infantry capable of close and open order fighting, but only exceptionally as *psiloi* (App. *Iber.* 51). In fact, during this period (218–133 BCE), Roman and Spanish weapons and armor were remarkably similar, as were their small-unit tactics. Both sides employed a heavy javelin (*pilum, soliferreum, falarica*) followed by the sword. Romans would even copy their enemies' so-called *gladius hispaniensis*, precisely because this type of sword was well suited to their style of fighting (Polyb. 3.114; *Suda* s.v. *machaira*). The difference between Romans and Iberians/Celtiberians lay not in weapons or tactics (as between Romans and Macedonians, for example), but in the presence or absence of a formal chain of command, organization, numbers, logistics, and unity of purpose (Quesada Sanz 2006). In fact, the Iberians and Celtiberians were defeated in part precisely because they insisted in fighting in the open, where Roman organization, discipline, and probably numbers gave them the advantage.

The absence of any sense of common, "national" unity among the peninsular peoples meant that the Romans could often defeat them in detail, routinely using local *auxilia* against their kinsmen. Also, the tendency of Iberian leaders to conceive military responsibilities in seasonal, local, and personal terms meant that they were basically powerless against the ruthlessness of the Roman Senate.

In the next phase of the conquest, during the civil wars of the 1st century BCE, local troops were quite often recruited to help the Roman legions. Apart from the *vernacular* legions of heavy soldiers recruited in Spain, Sertorians, Pompeians, and Caesarians made use of many "native" troops. By this time, however, the Romans had no use for line soldiers, since professional legions – heavily armed and protected with iron mail – were available, but desperately needed lighter units. Now we find more references to cavalry and light infantry units, both *cohortes caetratae*, used as pure light infantry, from the Provincia Citerior, and *cohortes scutatae*, armed with the big oval shield and capable of more sustained fighting, from the Ulterior (Caes. *BCiv.* 1.39; 48; 70).

Primary sources and archaeology provide a different picture of western (Lusitanians) and northern peoples (Galaici, Astures, Cantabri). Although capable of open battle in mountainous terrain, Viriathus the Lusitanian and other gifted leaders of the Cantrabri seem to have favored more irregular, guerrilla-type tactics (Cass. Dio 53.25). But even then Octavius had to employ an extremely big army of at least seven legions plus *auxilia* to complete the conquest in the far north (27–19 BCE).

See also HISPANI: REPUBLIC; HISPANI: PRINCIPATE; IBERIAN PENINSULA; IBERIANS: REPUBLIC.

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