


# HOW DID THEY DO THAT?

# ROMAN SIEGES

The military skill and engineering ingenuity that cultivated the mighty Roman Empire

 The Roman army was a ruthless war machine that built an empire and remains one of the most respected armed forces in history. Its disciplined, well-armed legions could win both on the battlefield or when laying siege to a fortification. But success in lengthy sieges depended not only on leadership or the soldiers' fighting abilities, but on the highly efficient – and deadly – siege apparatus.

## MINES AND TUNNELS

Most sieges attempted to get over the city walls, but mines could be dug to weaken them from underneath. Special Roman soldiers, known as sappers, would go into the tunnels and cause explosions to collapse the walls.

## ARTILLERY

The attacking Roman forces surrounded the city and would set up its array of artillery. With both short- and long-range weapons, the Romans aimed to breach the walls, take out as many of the defenders as they could, and dent enemy morale, as well as provide cover fire for the approaching siege towers.

## LENGTHY CAMPAIGNS

The besieged found it difficult to get supplies into the surrounded city, and the Romans would divert waterways. Sieges usually ended due to starvation rather than Roman offensives.

## SLOW BUT STEADY

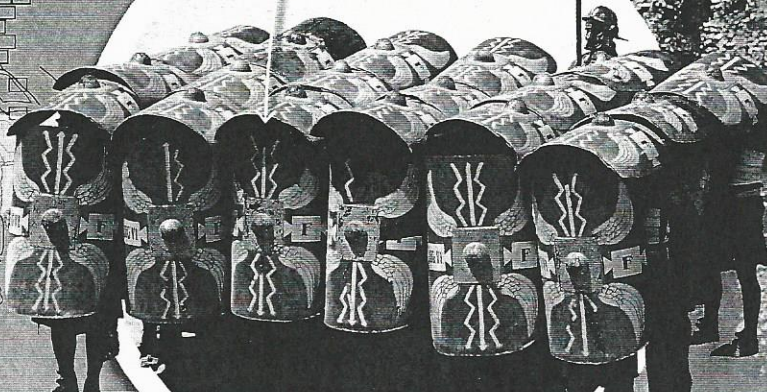
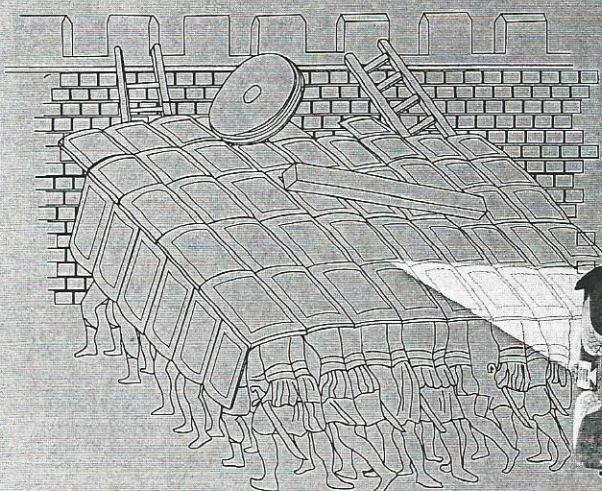
Speed and mobility was sacrificed with the 'testudo' as the soldiers had to move very slowly as a single unit, but the curved shape of Roman shields meant the front ranks could always see where they were going with little risk.

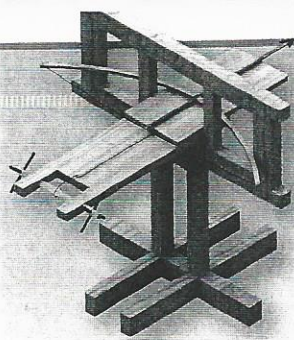
## A STONE'S THROW

The artillery weapons were deadly but high-maintenance. They needed particular projectiles to be effective, with stones from rivers being the best as they were round and smooth. Stones have been found with chisel marks to make them smoother.

## THE 'TESTUDO' FORMATION

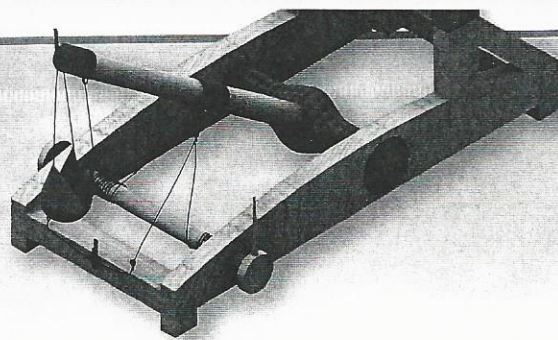
It wasn't just the weaponry that gave the Roman legions the edge in siege warfare, but the tactics too. The most effective was the 'testudo' formation (meaning 'tortoise'). The soldiers formed a closely-bunched group and aligned their shields on top and to the sides, forming an impenetrable shell. Slowly, they would march towards the walls, carrying ladders, while staying safe from arrows or falling stones.





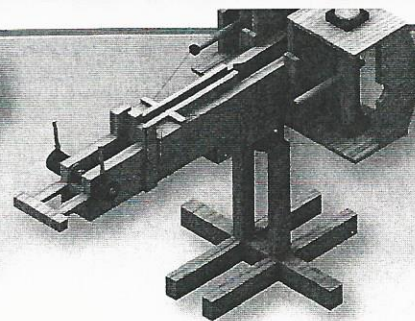
### SCORPIO

This crossbow-like weapon fired small arrows with pinpoint accuracy to a maximum range of 300 metres. Easy to handle, it could be operated by one man and could be mounted on the upper floors of siege towers.



### ONAGER

A powerful weapon in the Roman artillery, the onager catapulted massive stones or burning projectiles over the walls of a besieged city to cause havoc among the defenders. The catapult got its name – which means 'wild ass' – as after firing, the back of the frame would kick up in the air.



### BALLISTA

Ballistas fired rocks at the walls in order to break through, but they were also an accurate sniper weapon. Many reports from Roman sieges claimed they could pick off individual soldiers on the walls.

### INNOVATIONS

Although siege weapons were introduced from Greece, the Roman army advanced them. Julius Caesar was able to use siege catapults from the decks of his ships during his invasion of Britain.

### TOWERING WEAPONRY

Siege towers were so sturdy that they could support dozens of soldiers and artillery, including Scorpios and Ballistas.

### DEFENDING A CITY

Roman commanders always gave enemies a chance to surrender. Under law, defenders who didn't give up before the first ram hits the wall forfeited any rights regarding how they were treated.

### SIEGE TOWERS

There was no set design for these towers as they were built for the specific needs of each siege. Roman historian Josephus reported that the siege towers at Jotapata were 15-20 metres high.

### RESISTANCE

City defenders had few defences against siege towers, but there are accounts of tunnels being dug underneath an approaching tower in the hope of causing a collapse.

### BATTERING RAMS

Sometimes attached to siege towers, or covered by a 'testudo' formation, battering rams were massive logs used to break down city walls. They got the name from the iron ram's heads attached to the front.