



Rome at War. Farms, Families, and Death in the Middle Republic, N. Rosenstein. University of North Carolina Press, 2004). ISBN 0-8078-2839-4. Pp 312.

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In this book Rosenstein (hereafter R.) makes an important contribution to the debate on the effects of military service on the social and economic life of the rural smallholders in the Roman Republic, a subject that is central to the understanding of the history and political development of Rome and the turbulent tribunates of the Gracchi brothers. R. has a radical approach, seeking to cast doubt on long-established points of view, and deploys a wealth of statistical data, demographic analysis, and sophisticated comparative models from pre-industrial societies. The main text is notably well written and R. gives contrary views full treatment as he attempts to refute them point by point. Many detailed calculations are confined to the numerous footnotes. There are seven appendices dealing with various technical matters, the number of slaves, the accuracy of the Roman calendar before 218 BC, tenancy, the minimum age of military service, the proportion of *assidui* in the Roman population, the duration of military service in the second century, and citizen deaths as a result of military service.

Warfare was part of life in the Roman Republic and the command of armies provided the arena in which Roman aristocrats could display their *virtus* and enhance their *dignitas* and authority. It was in the interests of the aristocracy to engage in war frequently so that as many as possible had opportunities for advancement. The army that sustained

campaigns in Italy and overseas was recruited from Roman citizens; the soldiers were conscripts who were normally called up to serve for up to 16 seasons between the ages of 17 and 46. Since there was a property qualification the burden fell mainly upon rural smallholders. Rome's Italian allies were also required to contribute soldiers. The traditional view is that the social and political turmoil of the Roman Republic's last hundred years had its origins in the impact of the wars of the second century on these small farmers. Long wars abroad meant that soldiers could not be discharged at the end of the campaigning season since military logic required armies to be kept in service overseas. So, peasants were unable to return to their farms, which therefore suffered neglect with insufficient labour at home to work them effectively. Therefore they declined, debts accumulated and this was part of the process by which smallholders left or were forced off their land by the rich. Simultaneously, the Roman upper classes were increasing their wealth by the foreign conquests and tended to invest it in land. Therefore they were ready to buy up the land of the poor, creating large estate often tilled by slaves.

R. starts (chapter 2) by noting doubts about some aspects of the traditional view, especially in respect of the number of slaves in Italy in the second century BC and the development of large estates. He then makes the important point that the traditional balance between agriculture and warfare began to change in the fourth century when longer campaigns were fought further from Rome. Also more military training was required by the manipular system. So legions were left in service for long periods and not sent home in the autumn. He argues for a basic disjunction in the late fourth and third centuries between the rhythms of republican warfare and the requirements of subsistence farmers to plough and sow their field in the autumn (p. 35). He doubts that soldiers had leave to go home to work their farms in the autumn and winter. He is probably right in this though some of the evidence is uncertain, e.g. at p. 43 n. 102 the point of senatorial criticism is the *excessive* granting of leave not the granting of leave itself. Furthermore, he perhaps makes too much of the supposed difficulties of ploughing and planting while on leave (pp. 46-7). Presumably the soldiers would simply try to make the best of the opportunity and in many cases they might be able to do enough to keep their farm in business or at least organize some rescue expedient. In any case R.'s argument is that the conflict between military service and farming practice c. 200 BC was not much different from that c. 300 or earlier, and that continuities rather than change mark

the relationship between war and agriculture from fourth century down to second (p. 52). Now, in the earlier period there is no evidence that the viability of small farmers was undermined. Therefore we should be careful about making such a connection in the later period.

These considerations raise the question to what extent mid-republic warfare and subsistence agriculture were in conflict. In chapter 3 R. examines war and the life cycles of families in an attempt to find a different model of the relationship between year round military service and small scale farming. His first contention is that typical subsistence farmers could have spared the labour of one son or even two sons in dealing with farming tasks and producing enough food for the family. There are of course several assumptions in this kind of approach, most notably a yield of 3:1. Also what happened if the father of the family died or if the children suffered from ill health? R. thinks that the absence in the army of another mouth to feed could have been beneficial. 'Far from causing a labour deficit, we can expect that in at least some and perhaps many cases, warfare mitigated the threat to the survival of small farming families arising out of the scarcity of land' (p. 79). He then considers the scenario of a husband and wife and small children. What if the husband has to serve for several years in the army? He thinks that the conscription of fathers with young children would have been rare given the normal age of marriage in Rome, which was around thirty. R. argues that the key to understanding Rome's manpower potential lies in patterns of family formation in that young men normally deferred marriage well beyond the age of eligibility for the draft (17) so that there was a long period in a young man's life where his labour was superfluous on his natal family's farm but not yet required to support a family of his own.

R. then deals with problem of life expectancy – many young men conscripted at 17 would not have had a father alive to work the farm. He thinks that the state's requirement for troops was such that they could take only those whose fathers survived or who had male relatives able to help on the farm. I have serious doubts about this. Was the state bureaucracy really this sophisticated? Who would hold this kind of information? And, more importantly, was there the will to use it? R. goes on to make the point that in cases where soldiers were recruited, there were potential alternative source of man-power for the farm, e.g. younger sons, reciprocal arrangements with nearby farms, kinsmen, women, and daughters' husbands. Another model suggests that a mother and daughter could muster sufficient labour to run a farm. Interestingly he uses comparative material from life in the Confederacy in the American Civil

War. Finally he considers a case where those left on farm died or grew weak and returning soldiers faced a farm sunk in decline and neglect. He is hopeful that a returning soldier might have money in his pocket to support himself while restoring his farm and also (given the number of available women) be able to make an advantageous match. It seems to me that in this section R. is too optimistic – a farm left under the control of a woman and her daughter was surely likely to be a prey to a rich buy out. Again I doubt that it was rare for a poor neglected farm to be absorbed into a rich man's farm. Finally, the contrast he sets out at pp. 105-6 is too clear cut; the argument is that warfare ruined *some* of Italy's small-holders, enough to undermine army recruitment.

In chapters 4 and 5 R. considers mortality in war and tries to answer two questions. What were the consequences of removing so many young men from civilian life and exposing them to the risks of war? What effect did it have on their farms and families, even if those farms were not overwhelmed? He generally tends to accept the accuracy of figures for battle casualties in Roman annalistic sources, although this is vigorously disputed and numbers in ancient texts are notoriously problematic. R also takes into account the effects of wounds and disease, comparing events in the American Civil War. He guesses at a ratio of killed to wounded of 1:2. Dysentery and typhoid will have been the main epidemic diseases, though he thinks that hygiene and sanitary conditions were quite good in Roman camps. This largely hypothetical reasoning brings him to the striking conclusion that up to 40% or more of all Romans and Italians who fought in the army may have perished (pp. 136-7).

Finally R. considers the effect of this high mortality rate on the farms and families of soldiers and how it related to the agrarian crisis of the late second century. Military service had the potential to diminish greatly the wealth of smallholders and was part therefore of the Gracchan crisis. In many cases the death of a conscript meant the death of a farm's immediate heir, though there were opportunities for others to inherit. Now, according to census figures the population was increasing in the period from c. 203 to 125/4. Arguing against Peter Brunt (*Italian Manpower*, 1971), who held that the increase was due largely to the manumission of slaves, R. believes that the bulk of the increase was among the class of rural smallholders, and that couples were perhaps producing more children. The population increase may have been in the order of 0.9-1.5% every year. Most conscripts were unmarried young men, while older soldiers, who were more likely to be married, served in

the *triarii*, who generally were held in reserve and had a lower death rate. Therefore to some extent family structures could remain intact.

In R's view the increasing population in the countryside and practice of partible inheritance meant that the class of smallholders was unable to maintain an economically successful development. He goes on to argue that the Gracchan crisis was the result of too many people attempting to start out in life with too little land; they had not been forced from their farms under the twin pressures of conscription and competition from slave-run estates. Of course he accepts that other factors were involved as well and that war did have a profound economic and social impact on the smallholders in Italy and reduced their opportunities to improve their lot.

One major problem here, which R. admits, is that the ancient writers did not see things this way, and it is difficult to understand how they got things so wrong. Contemporaries believed that the population was declining and that there were serious military consequences. R. argues that ancient perceptions of the census were fallacious and that there was probably serious under-recording of the population (p. 157). But the problem was surely wider than this and the recurrent difficulty with the levy suggests that what worried Roman senators was precisely finding sufficient suitable citizens able and willing to serve in the army because of the injurious effects of military service. Plutarch reports a speech made by Tiberius Gracchus (*Tiberius Gracchus* 9.5) in which he said that men who fought for Rome wandered homeless and unsettled with their wives and children and had nothing to call their own. R. says that this cannot be literally true since Rome still insisted on a property qualification (p. 156). But Gracchus was probably suggesting (in emotive terms) that service in the army undermined family life and reduced men to this pass.

The main problem with R.'s approach, as he is fully aware, is that the conclusions are based on a series of hypotheses, models and constructs that cannot be proved or disproved because of the shortage of evidence, especially for the social conditions and way life in small rural Italian communities. Furthermore, at times I think that he is excessively sanguine about subsistence survival on a small farm in second century Italy. None of this detracts from his achievement in presenting a complicated analysis so clearly and effectively. This excellent book, which is produced to a very high standard, offers a fascinating and challenging thesis, which will encourage further debate and analysis, and the author's refreshingly innovative approach deserves a large audience.

Rome at War will stimulate and provoke scholars, and also inspire all students of the Roman Republic and those interested in the effects of war on society.