



Marcomannic Wars AD 165–180

Barbarian Warrior

VERSUS

Roman Legionary

Murray Dahm

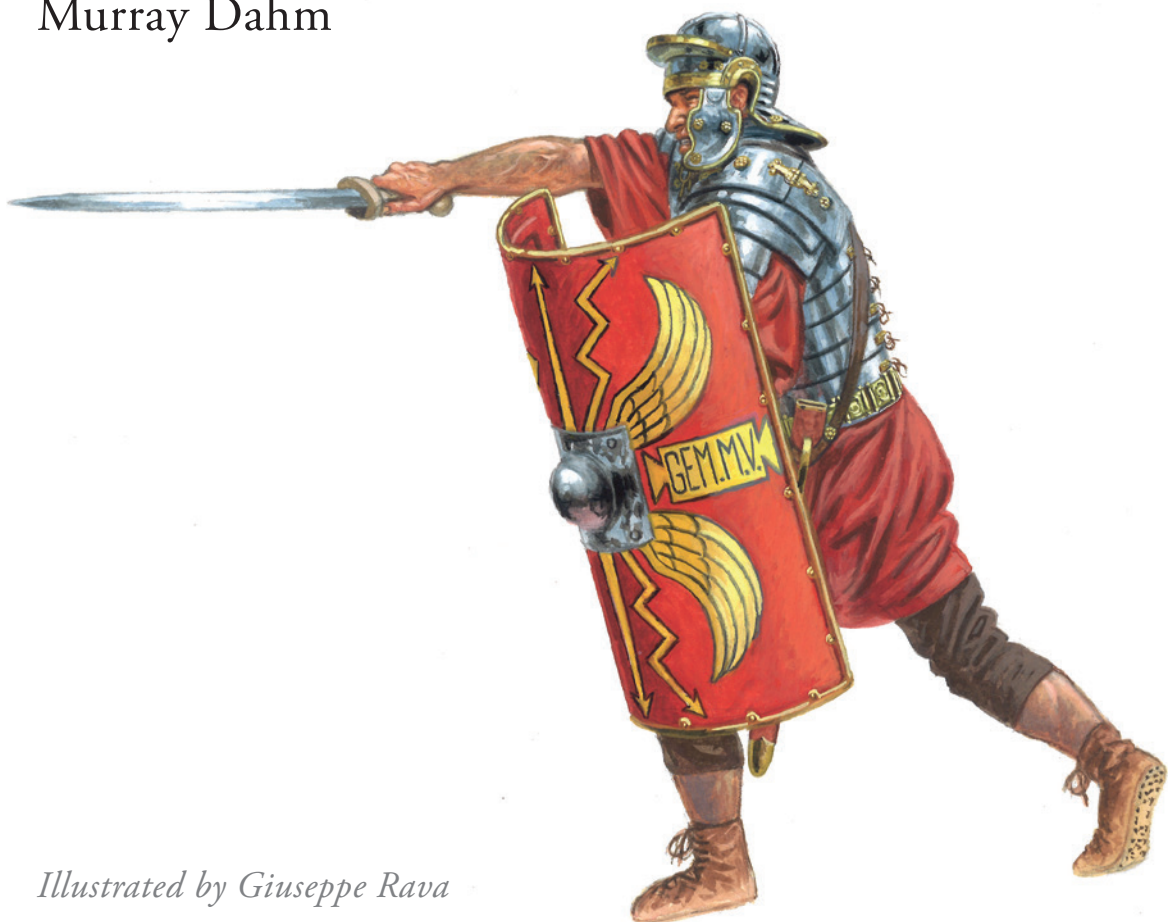
COMBAT



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Illustrated by Giuseppe Rava

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Introduction

This bronze figurine of a bound Germanic tribesman dates from the 2nd century AD. He wears his hair in a Suebian knot; the Suebi were the northern neighbours of the Marcomanni, although some warriors are depicted on contemporary monuments with similar knots. (Gryffindor/Wikimedia/CC BY-SA 3.0)



Almost as soon as the brother emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus came to power in March AD 161, the Roman Empire was racked by a series of military crises. War was threatening in Britain, the Parthians invaded Armenia and the Germanic tribes of the Chatti and the Chauci invaded Germania Superior and Raetia. The British threat was dealt with by subordinates and the Parthian War (161–66) was prosecuted successfully by Verus. The German frontier would, however, require greater effort. Compounding the problem was the fact that several garrisons on the Rhine and Danube were weakened by sending troops to fight in the Parthian War, making those provinces appear even more tempting. In 166, war was again threatening and several peoples posed threats – especially the Germanic Marcomanni and Quadi, as well as the Sarmatian Iazyges. In Latin the war to subdue them was known as the *bellum Germanicum et Sarmaticum* (German and Sarmatian War). The conflict would occupy Marcus Aurelius and his subordinates until the emperor's death in 180.

The first invasions by the Chatti and Chauci continued until 165, but were not the priority for the Romans; the Parthian War was still under way that year. In October 166, a Triumph was celebrated for the Parthian War, but new invaders in the north were already running amok. It would take some 13 months for the legions and vexillations seconded for the Parthian campaign to return to their home bases. In 166 or 167 new tribes, the Langobardi and Obii, invaded Pannonia. This invasion was repulsed by Roman forces and a truce was arranged, harnessing the skills of the Marcomannic king, Ballomar (or Ballomarius). At the same time or soon after, the Lacringi invaded and an invasion of Dacia was undertaken by a tribe of the Vandals – the Astingi – and the Iazyges. This invasion succeeded in defeating the Roman garrison and killing the governor. In the spring of 168 both emperors, Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, advanced to Aquileia (near modern-day Trieste, Italy) to prepare for an expedition, including the raising of two new legions. Another



A near-contemporary battle sarcophagus shows Roman cavalry fighting Germanic barbarian enemies (both infantry and cavalry). Inscriptions reveal the deployment of several cavalry units in the Marcomannic Wars, although our literary sources do not give us any detail of their actions. In common with other Roman depictions, the barbarians fight mostly naked and have torques. All the Romans wear muscled cuirasses. Tacitus tells us (*Germania* 24) that naked German youths practised sports with swords and lances. This gave them both skill and experience. Such 'noble savage' descriptions may have been part of the reason why tribesmen are often shown naked on reliefs. (CM Dixon/Print Collector/Getty Images)

invasion, this time by the Marcomanni and the Victuali (aka Victohali and several other spellings), invaded Pannonia.

In January 169, Lucius Verus died and Marcus Aurelius was left to conduct the war alone. He returned to Rome to bury his brother and set out later in the year intending first to subdue the Iazyges, but they defeated the governor of Moesia Inferior and more tribes took the opportunity of this distraction to invade into Germania Superior. Having formed a coalition of tribes, Ballomar ravaged Pannonia and Noricum, defeating the *legio XIII Gemina Martia Victrix* at Carnuntum (near Petronell-Carnuntum and Bad Deutsch-Altenburg, Austria) and then moved to invade Italy, sacking Opitergium (modern-day Oderzo) and putting Aquileia under siege.

Marcus appointed several new commands and organized the defence of Italy. The siege of Aquileia was raised and the invasion was entirely repulsed by 171. In early 172 another expedition was made against the Iazyges, which saw the dramatic 'Battle on the Ice' on the frozen Danube River that persuaded them to sue for peace – an offer that was rejected by the Romans. Diplomatic efforts saw peace treaties made with other former enemies and some tribes were even enrolled as Roman allies for the forthcoming expedition across the Danube. Later in 172, a Roman invasion across the Danube into Marcomannic territory was conducted, which defeated the Germanic tribe and their allies. From this date, Marcus began using the title *Germanicus* and issuing coins with the legend *Germania Capta* ('Germany captured').

The invasion continued in 173 and 174 against the Quadi, allies of the Marcomanni. During this invasion, one of Marcus' legions, the *legio XII Fulminata*, was surrounded but rescued by the 'Miracle of the Rain', which allowed the Romans to gain the victory. Another Roman invasion of Quadi territory followed in 174 or 175 and the Quadi sued for peace, even ousting their king, Furtius, and installing another. The subjugation was almost complete by the end of the year. The Marcomanni, Quadi and others were enlisted in the Roman Army as auxiliaries. In 175, peace was also made with the Iazyges.

The Marcomannic Wars, AD 165–80

The 160s saw a series of invasions of Roman territory along the Danube River frontier. Several, such as incursions by the Chatti and the Chauci into Germania Superior and Raetia, were not deemed serious enough by the Romans to warrant personal imperial attention. All that changed in 166, however, when the Langobardi and Obii invaded Pannonia Superior. A truce was organized with 11 tribes and Ballomar (or Ballomarius) of the Marcomanni was chosen to represent the Germanic peoples. Another invasion was undertaken, this time by the Lacringi and Astingi, and the lazyges invaded the province of Dacia, killing the governor.

Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus determined to go to the front and departed for Aquileia (near modern-day Trieste, Italy) in 168. The Marcomanni and the Victuali then invaded Pannonia again, but turned about at the approach of the Roman forces. The death of Verus in January 169 gave more tribes the opportunity to invade, crossing into Germania Superior, and the lazyges invaded Moesia Inferior, killing the governor.

In 170, the Marcomanni and their allies invaded and advanced to Aquileia and Opitergium (modern-day Oderzo, Italy), sacking the latter, the first invasion of Italy in almost 300 years. The Roman garrison at Carnuntum (near Petronell-Carnuntum and Bad Deutsch-Altenburg, Austria) was severely defeated. The same year may also have seen an invasion by the Costoboci, ravaging the Balkans, and reaching the provinces of Moesia, Macedonia and even Achaea (getting as far as Athens itself). In fact, we have multiple invasions listed in the sources by all manner of tribes, on some of which we have only vague information. The Roman response eventually came, probably from Sirmium (modern-day Sremska Mitrovica, Serbia) on the

Save (or Sava) River or from Singidunum (modern-day Belgrade, Serbia). Elsewhere, several governors were killed in their attempts to repulse the invasions.

With the raiders expelled, in early 172, a raid by the lazyges was defeated on the frozen Danube River, probably near Aquincum (modern-day Budapest, Hungary) or perhaps near the Granua River (the modern-day Hron, Slovakia). In the campaigning season of 172, Marcus crossed the Danube into the territory of the Marcomanni and Quadi and, by the end of the year had earned the title *Germanicus*.

Further Roman punitive invasions continued in 173 and 174 against allies of the Marcomanni, the Naristi (or Narisci, or Varisci) and the Quadi. Peace was made and the lazyges followed suit in 175 after a Roman expedition into their heartland. The Lacringi and Astingi became Roman allies and contingents from the Marcomanni, Quadi and Sarmatian lazyges were made auxiliaries. In those years there were other invasions too: the Chatti and Hermunduri attempted to cross the Rhine River, but were repulsed, and the Chauci raided the coast of Belgica, bypassing Germania Inferior.

Marcus may have intended to turn the territory of the Marcomanni, Quadi and lazyges into Roman provinces, but he was distracted in 175 by news of a usurper in the East (the governor and general Avidius Cassius) and marched his army to quell the rebellion. When he returned to the West in late 176, the northern frontier was soon again in turmoil. In 177 the Quadi rebelled, followed by the Marcomanni, and new Roman expeditions were sent to punish them; this time, garrisons were installed in their territory. Marcus was still waging this war when he died in March 180.

Before the newly pacified regions could be made into provinces, however, an urgent distraction occurred in the East. The trusted governor and general Avidius Cassius usurped the throne and Marcus marched to defeat him, even taking the new Marcomannic, Quadi and Iazygian auxiliaries with him to do so. Avidius Cassius was quickly defeated, but Marcus needed to be seen in the East so took his time to head back to Italy and returned to Rome only in late 176. Despite this victory, war would erupt again on the Danube frontier and require further campaigns from August 178 until Marcus' death on the frontier in March 180.

Although our surviving written sources are less plentiful and reliable than we would hope, we also have a remarkable visual record of the war presented on the Column of Marcus Aurelius in the Piazza Colonna, Rome. Less famous than Trajan's Column, Marcus' column nevertheless offers intricate and remarkable detail of uniforms, weapons and narratives of events of the war (for instance the Miracle of the Rain is unmistakable). Using this and other sources from a wide (and sometimes unusual) spectrum, the Marcomannic Wars of Marcus Aurelius can be illuminated in remarkable and vivid detail.

The Opposing Sides

A fight between Roman and enemy cavalry on the Piccolo Ludovisi Sarcophagus. Now in the Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Altemps, the sarcophagus dates from the late 2nd century AD. This scene is usually dated to between 170 and 180, so is perhaps the earliest of those depicted in this book and exactly contemporary with the Marcomannic Wars. Here, the enemy cavalry fight naked and the Romans wear muscled cuirasses; the central barbarian figure wields a *sica*, the curved sword known to have been used by Dacians. (Sailko/Wikimedia/CC BY-SA 3.0)

ARMY COMPOSITION, RECRUITMENT AND MOTIVATION

Barbarian

In perhaps the most important and influential passage of his ethnographical treatise on *Germania* written in AD 98, Tacitus gives a description of the Germanic way of making war:

When they go into battle, it is a disgrace for the chief to be surpassed in valour, a disgrace for his followers not to equal the valour of the chief. And it is an infamy and a reproach for life to have survived the chief, and returned from the field. To defend, to protect him, to ascribe one's own brave deeds to his renown, is the height of loyalty. The chief fights for victory; his vassals fight for their chief. (*Germania* 14)

In a broad sense, this description can be used of the tribesmen of the Marcomanni, Quadi and other peoples. Although the overall accuracy of this description has been questioned, we do find later Germanic cultures following





A view of one of the side panels of the Piccolo Ludovisi Sarcophagus, showing a Roman cavalryman fighting against three naked barbarians. Again, there is the detail (unnecessary if this is a purely idealized scene) of the curved *sica* blade; the enemy shields are geometrically varied, as they are in more 'trustworthy' depictions. The details of the interior of the enemy shield may also be useful (and can be seen on other depictions too). The idea of the Romans' opponents massively outnumbering the imperial forces is also suggested here, more so than on the front panel. (Sailko/Wikimedia/CC BY-SA 3.0)

this very practice, known as the *comitatus* warrior code. Tacitus also surmises a broad organization of tribal warfare: warriors fought for a chief and they, in turn, provided men for a higher chief, all the way to the king.

We do not have any other knowledge of the organization of Germanic armies save for the description of 74 dragon standards (*dracones*) in the (spurious) letter appended to *The First Apology of Justin Martyr* for the Miracle of the Rain in 174. That letter might suggest 74 tribes or subdivisions within an army, although not how they were organized; this letter is discussed in detail below. Usually, however, we are told only of peoples or a horde (sometimes identified in our sources by a single tribe name even when a polyglot alliance) who invaded and plundered before returning across the Danube.



The other side panel of the Piccolo Ludovisi Sarcophagus also depicts naked tribesmen, with accurate details of weapons and shields. We can also note the combined infantry and cavalry action against the Roman cavalryman; here, he is only outnumbered two to one. Unlike his Roman counterpart, the tribesman rides bareback, perhaps reinforcing the idea in the surviving literary accounts that barbarian cavalry were lighter on the ice. Note the quiver hanging from the tree at far left. (Sailko/Wikimedia/CC BY-SA 3.0)