CHAPTER 10

The Latin, Samnite and Pyrrhic Wars

1. The Establishment of Roman Ascendancy in Central Italy

In buying off the Gauls (p. 73), the Romans won a respite of 800 years for their city, until another Northman, Alaric the Goth, captured it in A.D. 410 (p. 551). But their defeat at the Allia so discredited them in the eyes of their neighbours that the Aequi, Volsci and Etruscans seized the opportunity to reopen war, while the Latins and the Hernici became doubtful or divided in their loyalty. The ascendancy acquired by Rome in 100 years was lost in a single campaign.

But the Romans with characteristic doggedness set to work to retrieve their losses; with equally characteristic sagacity they studied their own failure and drew profitable lessons from it. As in the case of Hannibal's invasion, a great disaster was the prelude to far-reaching victories. In anticipation of further Gallic inroads a solid stone wall some 12 feet thick and 24 feet high, backed in part by the earlier agger (p. 45) which was now raised to the same height, was constructed around the whole city, including the Aventine, a circuit of some 5½ miles; many impressive traces of this so-called Servian Wall survive (one greets the visitor to Rome as he leaves the main railway station). The masons' marks on the large blocks of tufa suggest that Rome may have employed a building staff of Greek contractors. The labour was supplied perhaps by the Roman army, although Veientine captives may have helped, since the stone was quarried from the Grotta Oscura near Veii.1

Walls alone, however, would not save Rome. The battle of the Allia had shown that a line of foot-soldiers armed in Greek fashion might be successfully rushed by a mobile enemy, and that a phalanx of pikemen, once broken, could not cope with swordsmen. Both arms and battle-formation required changing, and this was done by a fundamental reform of the Roman field forces. The date is unfortunately uncertain: possibly it was due to the wisdom of Camillus immediately after the withdrawal of the Gauls or else later in the century when the Romans were operating in the rough hill-country of Samnium.2 The heavy infantry was provided with a screen of slingers and javelin-throwers (velites). In the main body of the legions (since the establishment of the Republic the legion had probably been divided into two legions; if not, the division was made now) the men of the front rank (principes) were rearmed with two throwing-spears (pila) and a sword apiece. The middle and rear ranks (hastati and triarii) for the time being retained their thrusting-spears (hastae), but eventually the hastati were re-equipped on the pattern of the principes and the lines were rearranged so that the hastati formed the first line, the principes (despite their name) the second, and the triarii the third. They also exchanged the earlier round shield (clipeus) for the long scutum, which was four-cornered and slightly cylindrical.

A more important innovation than this change of armament was made in the internal grouping of the legions which led to the supersession of the phalanx by a manipular formation. The centuries in each of the three lines were constituted into separate tactical units which allowed a more open order of fighting. Each unit carried a field ensign consisting of a bundle of straw (manipulus), and at any rate in later times each maniple comprised two centuries and was commanded by the centurion of the right-hand century; the legion then comprised thirty
maniples, each of 120 men. On the field of battle the maniples of each of the three lines were drawn up with intervals between them; the maniples of the two rear lines each covered the gaps in the line in front. In the course of the action the maniples of the second line would be pushed up into the gaps of the first line, if necessary, and the maniples of the *triarii* would reinforce the front lines in the same way. These details have been mentioned at this point, but the time of their introduction, as well of the inception of the whole principle, remains obscure. Henceforth, however, the Roman legion combined compactness with elasticity in a remarkable degree. It could fight in loose order or in serried ranks, as occasion might require, and the tactical independence of the maniples ensured that if the legion as a whole lost its cohesion, it did not dissolve into dust, but could rally round the intact maniples. This finally gave Rome the victory over her enemies in the fourth century, but, as will be seen (p. 129), even greater elasticity was needed before she could defeat Hannibal later. Finally, the political reform of the year 367, by which the consulship was thrown open without reserve to plebeians (p. 77), provided the reorganised army with new leaders of ability and enterprise.

The new war-machine was not tested for a long time against the Gauls. Though they continued to make occasional inroads into peninsular Italy, extending their raids as far as Apulia, they mostly kept clear of Roman territory. In 360 the sudden irruption of a Gallic host into the Alban hill-country so unnerved the Romans that they tamely retired behind their new fortifications and there waited for the marauders to withdraw at their own leisure. In 349 they forestalled a further foray by calling up betimes the other Latins, and a second failure of nerve — this time on the part of the Gauls, who retired precipitately — ended the campaign without a battle. Meanwhile the Gauls, having completed their occupation of northern Italy, began to acquire settled habits. In 331 the Senones, who had headed the invasions into central Italy, made their peace with Rome. Under the impression of the foray of 360 a special reserve fund was set apart in the treasury (*aerarium sanctius*) for use in similar emergencies, but no actual call