

# GIANTS

# IN ANCIENT WARFARE

*The author considers a time when giants, long creatures of myth, did walk the land.*

by Adrienne Mayor



Out of the ranks of the Philistines strode the champion warrior Goliath of Gath, a mountain of a man standing almost ten feet tall. His bronze helmet, chain mail, and greaves weighed 150 pounds. He carried a javelin with a wooden shaft like a beam; the bronze spearhead alone weighed almost twenty pounds. For forty days Goliath spewed insults at the Israelites, defying them to send out their best warrior. No one stepped forward until the young shepherd David vowed to kill the giant of Gath. The Israelites piled a helmet and coat of mail on David and handed him a sword, but the armor was so heavy he could not move. Throwing off the armor, David selected five smooth stones and took up his sling. The skinny boy let fly a stone that struck the giant, and Goliath crashed down dead.

David and Goliath...Odysseus and the Cyclops...Jack the Giant-Killer. Powerful stories, but aren't they just symbolic fairy tales illustrating the triumph of the righteous underdog over

towering evil? What would happen if average men found themselves pitted against actual giants? Modern military thought generally ranks opposing forces in terms of numbers of combatants or technological superiority. Throughout much of history, however, there has been another important factor: stature differences among combatants.

Classic Greek mythology peopled the ancient world with giants. Homer's superheroes of the Trojan War supposedly averaged fifteen feet in height. And the heroes' enemies must have been even bigger. The heroic strongman Heracles wrestled the giant Libyan ogre Antaeus to the death, and the clever Homeric hero Odysseus figured out how to blind the oversized, one-eyed monster Polyphemus in his cave. An Egyptian text from the late Eighteenth dynasty (ca. 1580 B.C.) tomb of Horemhab at Saqqara, for example, reveals that the ancient Egyptians considered the people of Sudan and Libya to be much taller and more robust than themselves. A Nineteenth dynasty text

*After killing the most famous giant in military history, Goliath, the young David beheaded him (Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Russia, The Bridgeman Art Library, London/New York).*

describes Bedouins as terrifying enemies: "They are fierce of face, and some of them are 4 or 5 cubits [seven to nine feet] from their nose to their toes."

The Egyptians "sometimes exaggerated the size of their foreign foes," remarks Egyptologist Henry Fischer, but their assessments may not be wildly off the mark. Studies of more than two hundred Egyptian skeletons from ancient sites along the Nile River show that the males of the New Kingdom era had an average height of five feet two inches. Comparative data is lacking for the ancient people of Sudan and Libya, and in view of population movements since antiquity, average modern heights may not tell us much. But it's interesting to note that one of the tallest National Basketball Association players to ever play the game, Manute

Bol, stands seven feet seven inches tall and hails from Sudan. And the tallest player of all time was Sulaiman Ali Nashnush, an eight-foot-plus Libyan.

It seems possible that not all giants were the stuff of myth. Centuries after the Hebrew chronicler told how David overpowered Goliath in the tenth century B.C., Greek and Roman writers recounted historical battles with oversized adversaries from India to Great Britain. Their descriptions give a sense of what it was like for soldiers to confront enemies whose size and strength far exceeded their own. The Greeks and Romans were initially terrified when confronted with towering opponents, but they found that stature alone could not predict victory or defeat.

Because ancient history is a mixture of fact and legend, it is useful to know that the tallest man documented in the twentieth century measured just over eight feet, eleven inches and had a hand span of twelve inches. His height was due to a pathological condition, gigantism, which renders those affected weak and ill-coordinated. But the historical accounts gathered here deal with healthy strongmen who just happened to be much bigger than most people of their day or else belonged to genetically tall societies. They are not extremes on the scale of miniature Lilliputians versus the skyscraping Brobdingnagians as described in Jonathan Swift's fantasy, *Gulliver's Travels*. Instead, imagine today's tallest and heftiest basketball stars pitted against world-class soccer players in a life-and-death struggle. Visualize both sets of athletes as highly trained battle-hardened soldiers in peak condition, fitted out with bronze armor and shields and wielding swords and spears.

In the Old Testament, the people of most societies (such as the Hittites, Amorites, and Canaanites) were about the same size as the Israelites. However, Hebrew sources attributed intimidating stature to certain tribes such as the Anakim or Rephaim, the cave-dwelling Avvim, and the Philistines. People of

phenomenal height are described in Genesis, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Samuel, Chronicles, Amos, Baruch, Judith, and the Midrash. Other sources refer to the same groups: the *Ras Shamra Texts* (cuneiform writings from Ugarit, Syria, twelfth century B.C.), *Egyptian Execration Texts* (a series of curses from 1900–1700 B.C.), and the first-century A.D. historian Josephus. For example, Josephus said that in his day, the Jews around Hebron occasionally dug up huge human skeletons. Such bones were displayed as the remains of a race of giants wiped out by the children of Israel when they first arrived in the Holy Land. These giant people of the past, wrote Josephus, "had

bodies so large, and countenances so entirely different from other men, that they were surprising to the sight and terrible to the hearing."

In the Dead Sea Scrolls, Goliath was described as a warrior of six feet four inches, still an imposing opponent in the eyes of an average ancient man of five feet five inches. According to Israeli antiquities authority Joe Zias, biblical copyists added a cubit here and a span there, until Goliath towered ten feet tall. In Jericho, notes Zias, archaeologists discovered a casket containing the skeleton of a six-foot man buried in the first century B.C. or A.D. The casket was inscribed with the nickname "Goliath," demonstrating that



BIBLIOTHEQUE NATIONALE, PARIS; THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY, LONDON/NEW YORK

*The wily Greek hero Odysseus blinded the giant Cyclops Polyphemus, as depicted in The Epistle of Othea, written by Christine de Pisan.*

***Goliath, one of several gigantic warriors that the Israelites confronted in the Promised Land, was dealt a deadly blow from David.***

six-footers were considered giants in the time of Josephus.

By the time Moses led the twelve tribes of Israel out of Egypt (twelfth century B.C.), lore about giants was already established in Jewish tradition. When Moses sent out spies to gather intelligence about the inhabitants of the Promised Land, his scouts brought back sightings of warlike people of terrifying size. Their sobering report is found in Numbers, chapter thirteen: "We saw the sons of the Nephilim. We are like grasshoppers compared to them." The Nephilim, a composite species of primeval monsters and fallen angels who dwelt outside the Garden of Eden, were believed to have mated with mortal women and produced superhumans. It is not clear whether the spies had observed settlements of extratall people or encountered some very tall individual leaders. But fear of fighting giants may have been one of the things that kept the Israelites wandering in the desert for forty more years.

When the Israelites finally attacked the alleged sons of Nephilim, the formidable Og of Bashan was one of the first giants to fall. Og had few equals in height or might, and the historian Josephus noted that he was admirably proportioned and well coordinated. Og's stronghold was an impregnable subterranean city. The book of Joshua suggests that the Israelites routed Og's forces by releasing swarms of hornets into his underground fortress. After the victory, "people could get a sense of Og's strength and magnitude when they found his sleeping quarters," said Josephus. "His bed was 4 cubits wide and 9 cubits long!" (Deuteronomy, chapter three, gives the same figures.) Depending on how much leg and headroom the giant preferred, Og could have measured at least fifteen feet tall. Og's great iron bed was a popular attraction at Rabbah until the sixth century B.C., and an impressive relic of the Jews' crucial early victory in the Promised Land.

David became a folk hero for killing



Goliath, but for the Israelites there were more immense adversaries to come. A few years later, one of David's companions, Benaiah, killed two oversized warriors from Moab. Meanwhile, in the Philistine city of Gath, Goliath's enormous colleagues burned for revenge. Lahmi was just as mighty as his brother Goliath and carried a spear like a tree. Another unnamed giant of Gath was distinguished by six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot. Yet another, Ishbi-benob, wore a 150-pound suit of bronze armor.

On the battlefield at Gob, near Gezer, David's army confronted the Beelzebub-worshipping Philistine behemoths. In

the battle, Elhanan, son of Jaare-oregim, felled the towering Lahmi. Sibbecai the Hushathite destroyed the oversized Philistine Sippai. The Israelites then advanced to attack the city of Gath, and the fearsome six-fingered ogre came out to taunt them. David's nephew Jonathan took up his challenge to duel, and another Philistine giant was slain.

In a separate battle, David was pursuing the fleeing Philistines when Ishbi-benob suddenly recognized the killer of Goliath. The huge warrior wheeled around to face the flagging David. Too exhausted to fight, David dropped his shield and collapsed just as the giant rushed him. But David's companion

Abishai ran up to cover the fallen leader with his own shield and turned to face Ishbi-benob. He managed to slay the big Philistine, but the Israelite soldiers were so upset by David's narrow escape that they made him swear never to accompany them on the battlefield again. Fortunately, giants were no longer a significant threat in the land.

Thought to be vestiges of the huge humans of yore, individual giants still occasionally appeared in the Middle East during the Roman Empire. But they had moved from military threat to curiosity. Josephus wrote that in the first century A.D., a seven-cubit-tall (about 11½ feet) giant from Palestine named Eleazar was sent as a diplomatic gift from King Artabanus of Persia to the Roman emperor. Other emperors displayed living giants; Gabbaras, an Arabian giant almost nine feet tall, was a spectacle during the reign of Claudius.

The apocryphal Book of Baruch claims that the "famous giants from olden times, of great stature, expert in war," died out "for want of wisdom, doomed by their stupidity." This is an early example of the medieval stereotype of the giant as a clumsy oaf clad in animal skins and dragging a club. But the historical accounts of the Greeks and Romans suggest that the gargantuan warriors they met on the battlefield were nothing like the slow-witted, lumbering giants of fairy tales.

In 326 B.C., Alexander the Great encountered a memorable adversary in the last great conquest of his career. In one of the most audacious engagements in history, Alexander's men crossed the raging Hydaspes River (now the Jhelum) in a violent lightning storm to surprise the vast Indian army commanded by Porus. The Macedonians, already deeply impressed by Porus' two hundred war elephants, were awe-struck by the prodigious height of the Punjabi king. Plutarch says that Porus' "great size and huge physique made him appear as suitably mounted on an elephant as an ordinary man looks on a horse." Alexander was not tall, perhaps five feet. By most accounts, Porus was just below seven feet. The turbaned monarch's majestic bearing amplified the impression of grandeur, as did his seat on the back of an extra-large Indian elephant.

The Macedonian charge routed Indian soldiers on both flanks. Falling back on their panicked elephants in the center, the Indians rallied around Porus. "Stubborn hand-to-hand struggle ensued" for eight more hours, according to Plutarch. High on his elephant, Porus fought bravely. But by the end of the day Porus' troops were defeated. Out of thirty-five thousand men, Porus had lost a staggering twenty-three thousand; Macedonian losses were a few hundred. Alexander asked his king-sized prisoner how he wished to be treated. Porus' booming reply—"Like a king!"—was so full of pride that Alexander gave Porus command of his former kingdom (as a vassal) and threw in five thousand newly conquered towns for good measure.

The giant Porus may have been the inspiration for Alexander's psychological ruse after the Battle of the Hydaspes. "To impress the inhabitants of the region," said Plutarch: Alexander had his smiths forged weapons and gear, "which far exceeded the normal size and weight." He left these huge items scattered around the countryside to discourage potential attackers. But the country of India itself proved far vaster than the Macedonians had imagined. Not long after the defeat of Porus, they began the long march home.

Alexander was not unfamiliar with giants: he had already encountered them on the other side of the world. The Celts and Germani, a cultural array of tribes known variously as Gauls, Cimbri, Teutons, and Britons, occupied lands stretching from central Asia across northern Europe. Many ancient writers remarked on their uncommon height. The Greek historian Arrian wrote that in 335 B.C. Alexander established good relations with "these people of great stature and arrogant disposition" along the Danube River and Adriatic Sea. Hoping to hear his own name, Alexander asked the Celts what their greatest fear was. Their reply, that the sky might fall on their heads, sounded like an arrogant allusion to their own skyscraping height. Alexander went away muttering that the Celts thought too highly of themselves.

Not every Celt was a giant, but the average warrior probably stood a foot or

so taller than an ordinary Roman soldier, and a substantial number of them approached seven feet tall. A Celtic tomb near Milan excavated in 1977 contained the skeleton of a warrior measuring six feet five inches. Many other examples of surprisingly large skeletons, suitably proportioned armor, and very large weapons have come to light across northern Europe. According to Diodorus, a historian of the first century B.C., the Celtic warriors were "tall and terrifying, with very white skin and rippling muscles." During the next four centuries, the Romans would learn to dread these grim, blond Goliaths.

When Julius Caesar's men attacked the Gallic capital in 57 B.C., the Celts laughed at the sight; how could such little men do any harm? To Roman ears, the Gauls sounded harsh and beligerent. They were terse but loud, wrote Diodorus, always shouting "in superlatives extolling themselves and belittling all others." To Ammianus Marcellinus, Celtic voices were

powerful and threatening, whether they are in a good mood or angry. [Almost all of them] are of a lofty stature, fair-haired with ruddy complexions, and pale, stern eyes. They are proud and quarrelsome. The women are strong, too, with thick necks and huge white arms. When they gnash their teeth and rain punches and kicks like catapults no one can restrain them.

Diodorus was impressed by the wild hairstyles of these strapping men. In contrast to the Romans' military haircuts, the Celts yanked their hair into unruly topknots that slipped to the sides of their heads. Their locks were as coarse as a horse's mane and too flaxen to be believed—Diodorus assumed the color was achieved by bleaching with caustic lime. (Soon after the first contacts with Celts, dyed blond tresses became the rage in Rome.) The warriors' shaggy red and blond mustaches "strained whatever they drank and got entangled in their food." They thought nothing of fighting on a full stomach, unlike the Romans who liked to eat, sleep, and fight in regular intervals. Even during meals, the pugnacious Celts would "seize upon any trivial matter and recklessly challenge each other to single combat."

Julius Caesar described the Gauls' grisly human sacrifices. Their Druid priests "construct enormous wicker-work figures and fill them with living men. They set the huge straw images on fire, and the men trapped inside perish enveloped by flames." Diodorus told of an even more gruesome custom. Among Celtic soldiers it was an "age-old practice to plunge a dagger under someone's ribs and then stand around reading the future from the victim's gushing blood and twitching limbs."

When the Romans first faced armies of Celts, they were immediately struck by their superhuman height, exaggerated by frightening helmets shaped like the

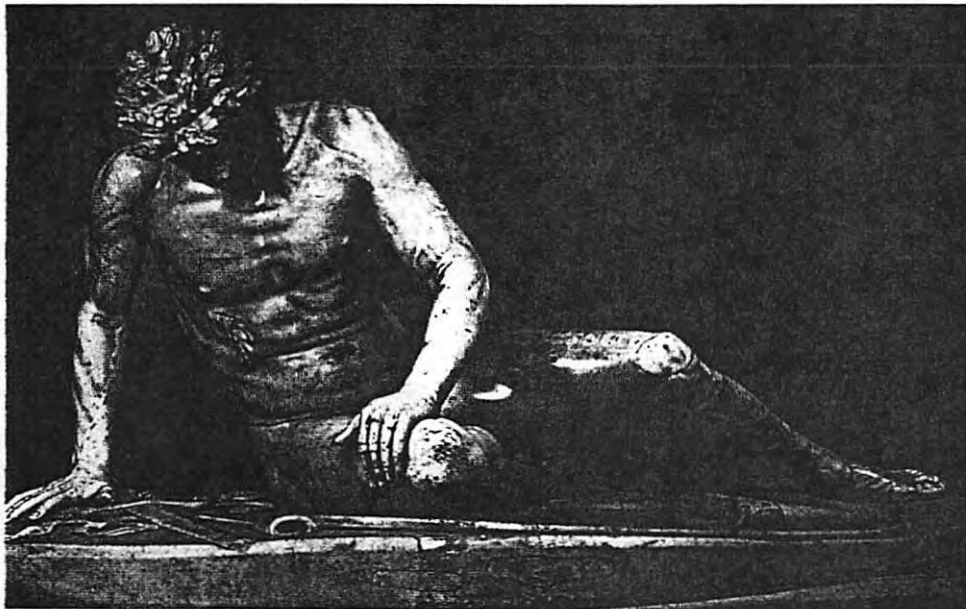
they originated in a land of deep forests and frigid shade where the whole year was divided into one long night and one short day. In a warm, sunny climate, the northerners gained weight because they drank and ate as if they were at home. Unaccustomed to heat and strong sun, they bolted for shade whenever possible. They were "superhuman in size, with the spirit of wild beasts," noted the historian Florus, but in the heat of battle, he compared them to "the snow of their own Alps." After the first attack, they "are no longer supermen, but break into a sweat and melt."

Julius Caesar discovered that the Celts' tendency to fight among them-

ians' impressive physical stature and strength, but they also capture the respect the Romans felt for their formidable enemy, the wild and noble giants.

In Britain, Caesar found warriors "taller and more gangly than the Celts." Mere lads towered a foot over the tallest Roman, marveled the geographer Strabo. Boudicca, the queen who led the British revolt against the Romans in 60 A.D., was described by Dio Cassius as "enormous of frame, with a terrifying visage, and a rough, shrill voice." Boudicca wore "a huge twisted torque of gold and a tunic of many colors, with a thick mantle held by a brooch. A great mass of brilliant red hair fell down to her knees." When this Amazon "grasps a spear, it strikes fear into all who see her." Tacitus told how multitudes of wild Britons torched Colchester, then stormed St. Albans and London, slaughtering some seventy thousand Roman garrison troops. In the end, Boudicca took poison after eighty thousand Britons fell to overwhelming Roman reinforcements. In 1712, a skeleton more than seven feet long was unearthed near the old Roman camp at St. Albans, apparently one of Boudicca's lanky warriors.

The Germanic Teutons and Cimbri were even "wilder and taller" than Gauls and Britons. The Gauls warned Caesar about the "enormous physique, incredible valor, and extraordinary military prowess" of the Germani, who believed that sexual abstinence was the secret of their great size and muscular development. Plutarch estimated that each German berserker could attack with the speed and force of five Romans. "Nature has made Germany remarkable for armies of very tall men," complained Columella, while Vegetius moaned, "What could our undersized men do against the exceedingly tall Germans?" Hegesippus declared that the Germani were "superior to other nations by the largeness of their bodies and their disdain for death." The ancient authors indicated that the Germani concurred with these sentiments. As many modern historians have noted, the early Latin descriptions of Teutonic tribes would later be used to justify an ideology of cultural and racial superiority in German nationalistic writings.



VANNIROME/ART RESOURCE, NEW YORK

***Many Gauls fought naked, their large swords and spiky, lime-stiffened hair enhancing their fearsome appearance. Even though they towered over their Roman enemies, the Gauls were eventually subdued. The Dying Gaul symbolizes their defeat.***

gaping jaws of monsters and decorated with horns, antlers, and feathered plumes. Around their necks Celts wore thick torques of twisted gold or silver, a habit verified by many archaeological finds in Celtic lands. The men's shirts and trousers were dyed in wild patterns and colors, and they fastened their plaid cloaks with heavy buckles. They carried mammoth swords and shields as tall as an ordinary Roman, and they seemed to have no fear of death.

But the giants were not invincible. The historians Tacitus and Livy remarked that the oversized northerners did not seem to know how to conserve their energy. Plutarch pointed out that

elves worked to his advantage during the bloody Gallic Wars of 58–51 B.C. And the Romans had learned how to breach the Gauls' lines with a barrage of javelins and then at close quarters chop and stab with their short swords around the bigger men's shields. The trick was to get close to the giants, inside the swinging range of their heavy, unwieldy swords. Even when they lost battles to the Celts, the disciplined and dogged Romans inflicted heavy casualties with their lighter, stubby machete-like swords.

Sculptures such as *The Dying Gaul* and *The Teutonic Prisoners* not only give a vivid impression of the barbar-

In 113 B.C., some three hundred thousand hulking Teuton, Ambrone, and Cimbri warriors and their families migrated across the Danube River. A Roman legion (about five thousand soldiers) sent to stop them was totally crushed. Four years later, another Roman army went out, only to be swatted away like a gnat. Four more years passed, and two more Roman legions faced the giants, this time at the Rhone River. The Romans were exterminated, with only twelve survivors to tell the tale.

The threat posed by the Germans mobilized Rome. The great general Gaius Marius realized that organization and discipline were essential if the Romans were to offset their stature deficit. Marius spent the next several years forging the Romans into a crack army. He made soldiers run miles and lug their own baggage. His soldiers came to be called, "Marius' mules." By 102 B.C. he was ready to march out to meet the Cimbri and Teutons in southern France. He ordered every Roman soldier to spend time on the walls getting used to the awesome size and savage yelling of the German brutes massed on the plain. "Their numbers appeared to be infinite," says Plutarch, "they were hideous to look at, and the din was outrageous." But soon the Romans became accustomed to their appearance and agitated to attack. The northerners presented bigger, less agile targets; they relied on their sheer size and valor to terrify and overpower enemies. The warriors did not pace themselves in battle and were not trained to fight in formation but threw themselves into disorganized, headlong rushes at the enemy. Tacitus remarked that they tended to "flee shamelessly with no concern for their commanders."

Intensive drill and discipline paid off for the shorter Romans. They were trained to fight in waves of thin lines in close order, which meant, "all available manpower could be brought into direct action along the line," commented Roman historian Arther Ferrill. Morale was high in Marius' army, wrote Plutarch, especially when the men spotted their two tame vultures with bronze collars soaring overhead. In the course of battle, soldiers would depend on reinforcements. Ferrill points out

that the Romans were "not expected to fight to the death"; they knew "in the depths of their souls that their comrades-in-arms would not leave them in the lurch." The psychological advantages of their system offset the reckless ferocity of the bigger Celtic and German berserkers as long as the Romans were not taken by surprise or forced to fight on unfavorable terrain.

Marius refused to be drawn out when the Ambrones thrice stormed the walls of his fortified camp; his men simply rained down missiles on the tall men below. After that, the multitude began to march. For six days they passed in a steady stream past the Roman camp, heading for the Alps. Relying on topography and surprise, Marius stalked the huge army with short marches and took a position above a riverbank at Aquae Sextiae (in southeastern France). The Romans watched patiently as the Ambrones feasted and cavorted in the hot springs by the river. Marius then provoked the Ambrones to attack. "Gorged with food and intoxicated with strong drink," the big men grabbed up their weapons and rushed up the riverbank. The Romans fell upon them from the higher ground and forced them back down into the stream, where the water soon ran red with blood. The soldiers pushed the Ambrones all the way back to their camp. Their women suddenly surged out like tall Valkyries, slashing with axes at the Romans and their own fleeing men alike.

**D**espite the great victory, the Romans passed a nervous night in a weak position, kept awake by the howling of thousands of dying Ambrones and the fear that the Teutons would attack. The next morning, Marius lured the Teutons into charging furiously uphill, where his men waited. Again, the Romans rushed down and drove the giant warriors back into an ambush, for more infantry waited in a wooded glen. The confused Teutons were forced to fight stumbling backward on broken terrain. Trying to strike upward with their weighty swords, they had little force against the Romans hurling javelins from above. As the infantry in the glen attacked from the rear, Marius and his men shoved the bigger Teutons with

their shields, thrusting and hacking with their trusty short blades.

The Romans took heavy casualties in the close fighting, but Plutarch says they slaughtered or captured one hundred thousand of the Germans. Plutarch remarked that the farmers of the region fenced their vineyards with the Teutons' huge bones and enjoyed extraordinarily rich vintages for years, their grapes having been fertilized with layers of rotting bodies.

Teutobochus, king of the Cimbri, was captured and taken to Rome for Marius' victory parade. A warrior of colossal height even among his own men, Teutobochus towered head and shoulders over the German trophies carried on spears in the triumph. Spectators were dazzled by his feat of leaping over the backs of six horses abreast.

Now only the dreaded Cimbri remained. In the Alps they had terrorized Catulus' pursuing legion with "quite unnecessary exhibits of strength and daring." The blond titans "pranced naked in blizzards and came tobogganing down snowy crags and crevasses on their shields." Then, "like giants from Greek myth, they tore up entire trees by the roots and great fragments of cliffs to dam a river." Plutarch says Catulus' troops were sorely demoralized by these antics.

But Marius arrived to meet them on the plain at Vercellae in northern Italy in the middle of August 101 A.D. He found 180,000 Cimbri warriors in a square formation almost four miles long on each side, with their families at the rear in wagons. The Germans commonly used what the Romans called *cuneus*, a wedge-shaped battle formation, but in practice it was far from a genuine wedge formation. It seems that the warriors simply massed in deep, roughly square columns, and then worked themselves into a frenzy, so that they resembled a roiling sea of bodies. They attacked en masse, with the wildest berserkers rushing ahead of the others.

With the wind and rising sun at his back, Marius approached confidently from the east. He had devised a secret weapon against the Cimbri. A weak wooden pin had replaced one of the iron nails that secured the point to the

shaft in every soldier's javelin. On impact with the enemy's shield, the weakened javelin's shaft would twist downward and drag on the ground. The javelins could not be hurled back, and they impeded the Cimbri's forward movement.

A great cloud of dust enveloped the two marching hosts. This was good for Roman morale, claimed Plutarch, since no soldier was able to see the enormity of the enemy ranks but simply focused on fighting whichever massive German loomed up before him. The day was stifling, and the fierce summer sun beat down on the Romans' backs and directly into the faces of the Cimbri. The denizens of "the ice-bound forests" were "disheartened by the heat, covered in sweat, and panting," while "not a single Roman was short of breath or perspiring." Choking and squinting in the heat, dust, and glare, the all-too-human giants instinctively lifted their shields to shade their eyes—and the Romans moved in for the kill.

The "best of the Cimbri were immediately cut to pieces," related Plutarch, "for they had linked themselves together with long iron chains passed through their belts in an attempt to preserve an unbroken front." Romans claim that more than 120,000 Cimbri died that day



**Julius Maximinus, whose great size and strength helped him to rise from his peasant birth to become Roman emperor, was a capable military commander until he was deposed and murdered.**



**The great Frankish Emperor Charlemagne was known for his size, strength, and intelligence. In Charlemagne Received at Paderborn, by Ary Scheffer, he accepts the surrender of Saxon chieftain Witikind in 785.**

and only sixty thousand survived as prisoners. Romans who pursued the fleeing remnants to their wagons witnessed "an appalling spectacle," as Cimbri women hacked down their own men, then killed their children and themselves amid the stampeding horses. In the words of historian J.V.P.D. Balsdon, "The carrion-crows [and Marius' lucky vultures] had never feasted on such gigantic corpses as when Marius defeated the Cimbri."

Centuries after Marius' annihilation of the Cimbri, men working near the battlefield unearthed some tremendous bones and a tooth weighing eleven pounds. The awesome remains were immediately hailed as those of Teutobochus, the towering king of the Cimbri. The bones became a traveling exhibit in 1613 and ended up in a museum in Paris. Teutobochus was huge but not quite as huge as his legend had grown. In the 1980s, the colossal remains were examined by a French paleontologist. They belonged to a *Deinotherium giganteum*, a fifteen-foot-tall prehistoric elephant and the second largest land mammal ever to walk the earth.

Three centuries after Marius defeated Teutobochus, a giant became the most powerful man in the Roman Empire. Maximinus was a rough shepherd of

eight feet six inches when the Roman emperor visited Thrace (Bulgaria) in 202 A.D. In a contest with the Romans, Maximinus outwrestled sixteen of the emperor's burliest soldiers and then, only slightly winded, raced the emperor's horse. After throwing seven more of the emperor's finest soldiers, Maximinus was inducted into the army on the spot.

Maximinus' shoes were a foot longer than regular army issue, and it was said that he devoured eighteen bottles of wine and forty pounds of meat at each meal. He wore his wife's bracelet on this thumb and is said to have out-pulled a team of horses, crushed rocks in his fists, and dropped a mule with one punch. According to the historians Herodian and Capitolinus, the soldiers were devoted to Maximinus because of his leadership style; he had the reputation of personally teaching military skills to individual recruits. Soon he assumed supreme command of the imperial forces.

As his popularity skyrocketed, the ratings of the timid Emperor Alexander Severus plunged, and Maximinus was proclaimed emperor by the army and the Senate. He led successful campaigns against the Germans. But like most rulers of the late empire, he grew

CHATEAU DE VERSAILLES, FRANCE. THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY, LONDON/NEW YORK

ALAMY/ART RESOURCE, NEW YORK

paranoid and brutal. The public turned against him, calling him the "Cyclops" and taunting him with ditties about exterminating rabid beasts. In 235 A.D., on campaign in Italy, his Praetorian guards assassinated Maximinus as he slept in his tent.

A century later, Jovian, a simple eight-footer of Celtic ancestry, was accidentally made emperor. The historian Ammianus Marcellinus, who was there on that day in 363, said there was a coup, and the soldiers took up a cry for a new emperor. According to Ammianus, the men were shouting "Julian," but the generals misunderstood and placed the purple mantle on Jovian's broad shoulders. His reign was brief, only seven months, but notorious in Roman annals because he was tricked by the Persians into abandoning all five Roman provinces beyond the Tigris River without lifting a sword.

Jovian was one of the last of the Celtic warrior-giants, although a few physically imposing individuals would rise to power in the old lands of the Gauls and Germani. Most prominent of these were Charlemagne (742–814) and the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I (1459–1519).

Medieval romances magnified Charlemagne's strength, claiming he could pull four welded horseshoes into a single iron bar, lift a man in full armor like a flour sack, and kill wild bulls single-handedly. According to contemporary biographers and portraits, the founder of the Holy Roman Empire was a tall, powerfully built man with a thick neck, hawk-like nose, pleasant expression, and a surprisingly soft voice. He was beloved even by the Saxons he conquered. If he was seven times as tall as the length of his foot, as his biographer and friend claimed, then Charlemagne probably stood nearly seven feet, a respectable height for the son of Pepin the Short.

In the Middle Ages, knights in shining armor were stock figures of romantic epics. In Carolingian lore, the Spanish giant Ferragus killed four of Charlemagne's knights before Sir Roland slew him in a duel. The knights of King Arthur's Round Table defeated their share of armored giants. The prodigy of valor, Sir Guy of Warwick, won a place

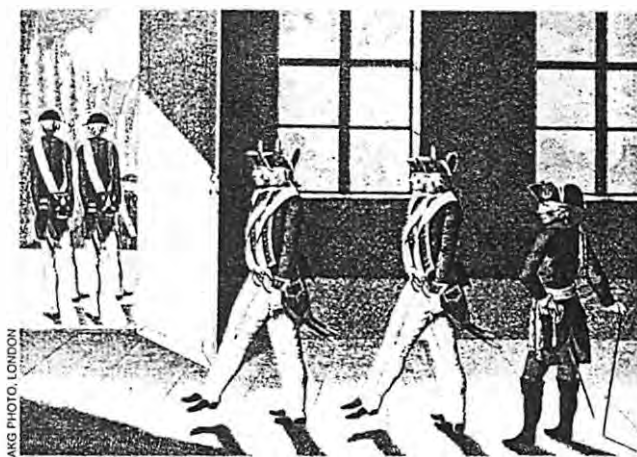
in legend when he overcame two mighty foes. First he slew what must have been the last giant left in the Holy Land, a bloodthirsty Saracen warrior called Amarant. Guy returned to England in 937 to find King Athelstan desperate for a champion to face the monstrous Danish knight Colbrand. Sir Guy took up the giant gauntlet and mowed down Colbrand at Winchester. Relics of Sir Guy and Colbrand were enshrined at Warwick Castle, and a special guard was paid two pence a day to polish Guy's twenty-pound sword and thirty-pound shield. A giant breastplate was also displayed, but modern historians have identified it as chest armor manufactured for a horse. The monumental three-hundred-pound bronze bowl said to be Colbrand's porridge pot turned out to be a caldron from a sixteenth-century mess hall.

The "Last of the Knights," Maximilian of Germany claimed direct descent from the Cimbri. The founder of the Hapsburg dynasty developed his eight-foot physique with constant exercise, and he delighted in cornering bears in their dens barehanded. Renowned for cunning strategies and rash valor in battles against the Italians, Maximilian forged his own king-sized armor and sword. He could always be seen marching ahead of his men with a colossal lance on his shoulder, only mounting his horse when battle was imminent. It was during Maximilian's reign that German political writers first articulated the belief in the superiority of the Aryan people as heirs of the ancient Cimbri and Teutons. But the era when entire armies of real giant warriors marched out against Roman legions was gone. The Cimbri and other larger-than-life peoples had been destroyed or assimilated into the Roman Empire.

The soldier-king Frederick William I of Prussia (1688–1740) was obsessed with trying to recapture the days when giant Germans stalked the earth. When he first began collecting live giants for his grand Potsdam Grenadiers, he started small, recruiting local tall men. But soon his agents were scouring the world for

really big men. Like maniacal basketball scouts, they cajoled and kidnapped one hundred giants a year for Frederick's three battalions of seven- and eight-foot grenadiers. The regiment was an enormous money pit; the king's agents paid thousands apiece for star giants, and their fancy uniforms, muskets, and rations were very costly. The grenadiers were made to marry tall women in the hope of breeding a race of giants. Frederick's son abolished his father's toy regiment of titans and for the same price established four regiments of ordinary-sized soldiers.

Basketball agents may harass today's athletic giants, but at least military recruiters leave them alone. Men the size



*Agents of King Frederick William I of Prussia scoured the world for giants to serve in the king's Potsdam Grenadiers, seen here.*

of the Potsdam giants, Teutobochus, or Maximinus would be too tall to serve in most armed forces. The maximum height for a U.S. Army soldier today is six feet ten inches. According to Army recruiter Sgt. 1st Class Cletis Kirkpatrick, the rationale is standardization of equipment and physical training; the average American man is five feet, eight inches tall. In this world, where armies of children carry automatic weapons, mobs with machetes attack unarmed civilians, and technology deals swift death, mere physical size is of dubious value in warfare.

ADRIENNE MAYOR is a classical folklorist who specializes in historical legends about natural history. She is currently writing a book about the lost history of ancient paleontology.