

BRIDGE TOO FAR? MILITARY PSYCHOLOGY AND ROMAN REPUBLICAN WARFARE¹

Abstract:

The aim of my article is to present validity of psychological approaches for studies on Roman Republican military. Application of military psychology to ancient warfare seems simply impossible without embedding psychological data in cultural context, that emphasize soldiers' needs and motivations. The Roman collectivist way of perceiving social relations in addition to methods of gaining political support resulted in the awareness that effective command depends not only on training and proper organization, but also on strengthening soldiers' morale through emotional interaction. The first Polish historian who drew attention to such a way of building internal unit cohesion in the Roman Republican army was Adam Ziółkowski.

Keywords:

Roman Republic, Roman warfare, military psychology, cultural history

After the publication of John Keegan's groundbreaking work (Keegan 1976), the nascent field of battle studies has since attracted numerous scholars examining systemic and individual psychological responses to organised violence, some of these studies concentrating on Roman warfare (e.g. Goldsworthy 1996; Lee 1996; Sabin 2000; Gilliver 2007; Ward 2016). Initially, the research on Roman military psychology prioritised battles and their effects, including serious mental disorders (Melchior 2011; Lommel 2013). In contrast, very little attention has been devoted to socialising raw recruits in the new environment, fostering intra-group relations

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and asserting commanders' authority. Active and effective combat engagement, the capstone of all military training, heavily relies on quotidian operational conditioning and automatised soldier reactions. Consequently, military historians of Rome, preferentially engaging with battle studies, would also benefit from exploring non-combat aspects of military psychology (Richardson 1978: 41–48; Holmes 2003: 47, 136).

A part of Roman warfare that elicited strong emotional responses from troops was taking and sharing spoils. Adam Ziółkowski has studied in detail how the Roman army treated subjugated settlements depending on the level of violence necessary to subdue them, ranging from peaceful surrender to conquest by the assault (Ziółkowski 1980: 23–62; Ziółkowski 1988; Ziółkowski 1993). A commander allowing his troops to plunder could raise the morale and inspire greater loyalty, but such an act could also set the conquered peoples firmly against Rome and foment future rebellions. Knowing when to strengthen flagging spirits with spoils contributed to a Roman commander's popularity, but such a treat could only be granted when no subsequent repercussions would be felt, requiring flexible leadership skills.

How Roman soldiers reacted to being allowed or denied spoils depended on a commander's personality and his willingness to fraternise with his troops. For example, the bloody and exceedingly violent plunder of Valentia in 75 BC by the army of Gnaeus Pompey the Great apparently improved the morale of legionaries (Plu. *Pomp.* 18.3; Ribera, Calvo 1995). In contrast, Lucius Licinius Lucullus in 69 BC provoked his soldiers' anger when, waging a war against the king of Pontus Mithridates VI, he accepted bribes from some cities of Asia Minor to ensure they would not be ransacked (Plu. *Luc.* 33.3–4, 34.3, 35.4–5; D.C. 36.2.1–2). Although Lucullus' troops had been given other occasions to take spoils (Ziółkowski 1980: 220–221), Lucullus' aristocratic arrogance in face of crisis convinced the soldiers that he profited at their expense (Plu. *Luc.* 33.2; D.C. 36.16.2–3). Indeed, Lucullus' lack of discernment concerning his subordinates' spirit and his poor interpersonal skills contributed to his dismissal from the commandship in 67 BC in the atmosphere of scandal (on the forms of social communication with Republican Roman soldiers see especially Flaig 2003: 110–115).

Nonetheless, the central topic of military psychology is neither incentivising spoils as morale boosters nor emotional responses to combat trauma but rather, as Charles Ardant du Picq (1880: 77–78) formerly noted, interpersonal relations of soldiers in combat units, since they directly influence cohesion and their willingness to follow orders. For the Roman era, such interpersonal relationships are depicted mostly in textual accounts, difficult to interpret due to their palpable literariness and conceptual foreignness (Messer 1920: 161–162; Nicolet 2001: 301).

Modern scholars studying these accounts out of necessity divorce themselves from their postmodern individualistic perspectives, attempting to approximate mental paradigms of ancient collective societies.

The case in point, the society of the Roman Republic depended on networks of social interdependencies, established social hierarchies, categorised citizens and non-citizens into distinctive classes and effectively controlled and conflated their private and public lives. Accordingly, the army of the Roman Republic, drawing its troops from general conscription, emulated the hierarchical structure and patronage relationships present in society at large. As among the civilians, so in the military the Republic was a consummately collective society, with most Roman customs developed to foster ties of reciprocity (Veyne 1976: 385–390; Nicolet 1980: 3–10; Nicolet 1989: 12, 14–15; Nicolet 2001: 431; Dupont 2000: 9–10, 19).

Bearing in mind the totality of Roman social collectivity, any study on Roman military psychology will by necessity draw from works on the Roman socio-cultural history. In result, scholars such as Everett L. Wheeler (1998: 644–650) questioned the validity of psychological approaches, arguing that surviving sources do not allow one to distinguish between psychology and sociology. In a similar vein, Jon E. Lendon (2005; 2007) convincingly recast strategies of ancient warfare as outgrowths of cultural paradigms, de-emphasizing individual soldiers' needs and motivations. In the recently published *Encyclopedia of the Roman Army*, the entry 'Face of Battle for Soldiers' preeminently draws from Lendon's observations, omitting any contributions by scholars working within the military psychology framework (Le Bohec 2015). At face value, it could appear that the psychology-based approaches to Roman warfare cannot yield expected dividends in hard data.

Despite their inherent limitations, studies on ancient armies that utilise psychological approaches do open up previously unexplored avenues of research. Military psychology and cultural history don't have to be mutually exclusive. Granted, data and observations pertaining to psychology of warfare in the 20th and 21st centuries may bear little relevance to research on ancient militaries. Nevertheless, studies stressing cross-cultural and cross-temporal universals in human behaviour under stress (f. e. in combat) may inspire to approach the well-worn material in an original manner. To recast Roman soldiers as actual human beings with values, motivations and experiences (and not as mindless extensions of their commanders' will) is to see them as active agents of history, whose whims and fears shaped the course of events. Ziółkowski's research on taking spoils by the Republican Roman army addressed problems at the centre of military psychology, even if the said scholar has never formally associated himself with that school of thought.

As I alluded to before, indiscriminate application of military psychology to ancient material may lead to false assumptions, one of the most prevalent yet erroneous ones holding that all humans behave in a universal, fairly predictable manner, since human behaviour always arises at the intersection of nature and nurture. To employ findings of cultural historians embeds psychological data in cultural contexts: to give but one example, studies on cultural history of Roman masculinities will help one understand literary testimonies on behaviours expected of Roman soldiers in combat, highlighting what was Roman custom, what was universal human inclination, and what was literary fabrication (Eisenhut 1973: 40–43; Lendon 1999: 304–322; McDonnell 2006: 181–205, 242–247). In such cases, cultural history and military psychology supplement each other. Cultural historians may explain how the Romans as a culture defined cowardice, but they will not explain why a particular Roman soldier ran from battle, whereas military psychologists are uniquely equipped to explain decisions of individuals.

In fact, it appears that the Roman-times military writers have attached great weight to what we could today define as ‘crowd psychology’, noting that only men of certain character can win over and inspire their troops. Onosander (or Onasander), a 1st-century AD writer, advised his audience on how to boost morale of one’s troops in and out of battle (e.g. *Onos.* 2.2–5, 13.1–3, 23.1–3, 24, 28, 34.1–5). Similarly, Sextus Julius Frontinus, a seasoned soldier, exhorted military commanders to take care of their soldiers mental well-being (e.g. *Fron. Str.* 1.11.1–21, 2.6.1a–10, 2.7.1–14). In other words, at least several military theorists and ‘tacticians’ drew their readers’ attention to mental conditioning of troops, advising commanders how to best shield their soldiers from panic-inducing stimuli. Similar way of writing about the military was formerly characteristic of Xenophon (Lendon 1999: 290–295, 303). Giving this type of advice in the ancient literature supports Keegan’s observations and demonstrates that psychological approaches to ancient warfare need not read modern sensibilities into ancient sources. It remains uncertain, however, if ancient military treatises enjoyed popularity and reflected actual combat practice. The analysis of Roman literary sources suggests that the answer to this question may be positive (Lammert 1931; Gilliver 2001).

Already in the 19th century Ardant du Picq noted that Hannibal won the battle of Cannae in 216 BC not thanks to sheer numbers of Romans his army slew but rather thanks to breaking the Roman will to fight (Ardant du Picq 1880: 27–45, cf. Daly 2002: 155–199). Hannibal’s encirclement of the Roman army in one of the earliest known examples of a pincer movement succeeded due to the terror it inspired in the Romans. Interestingly, this psychological effect of encirclement was well known in the antiquity: Onosander instructs military commanders to envelop enemy troops as often as possible, since to do so tends to break the enemy’s fighting spirit (*Onos.* 22.1–4).

Gaius Julius Caesar, often seen as an ‘instinctive genius’ (see Goldsworthy 1998), knew of and frequently employed what we would call psychological persuasion with his subordinates. In the heat of battle, Caesar used to overtly take up arms or send his steed back to the supply lines, letting his soldiers know he would not desert his position, willing to lay down his life with them (Caes. *Gall.* 1.25.1, 2.25.2; Vell. 2.55.3; Fron. *Str.* 2.8.13; Suet. *Jul.* 60.1–2; Plu. *Caes.* 18.3, 56.2; Poly-aen. 8.23.16; App. *BC* 2.104.431). In result, Caesar’s troops universally admired him and followed him into every fray, some of them of his doing and some of them not. Caesar’s sensitivity to his troops’ morale comes to the forefront in the crisis of 47 BC, when he had won over mutineering legionaries simply by calling them ‘Quirites’ (Suet. *Jul.* 70.1–2; Plu. *Caes.* 51.1; Poly-aen. 8.23.15; App. *BC* 2.93.392–94.394; D.C. 42.53.3–5). In his *Commentarii*, Caesar offered constructive general advice on boosting soldier morale: e. g. his description of the battle of Pharsalus of 48 BC contains a suggestion that a leader should inspire his troops with rousing war cries (Caes. *Civ.* 3.92.2–3). Caesar’s arsenal of military persuasion included means such as turning a blind eye to minor acts of insubordination (Suet. *Jul.* 67.1; Poly-aen. 8.23.21) in order to win soldiers’ approval on the eve of oncoming civil war. The achievements of this arguably greatest military commander of the Roman army showcases the crucial significance of military psychology skills to charismatic leadership (Lendon 1999: 290, 295–296, 298–301).

Roman soldiers cruelly pillaging settlements (Ziółkowski 1980; Ziółkowski 1988; Ziółkowski 1993) could have been seeking to release tension brought about by the trauma of combat, an interpretation suggested by historians and psychiatrists concerned with battle studies (Keegan 1976: 107–112, 195–203; Grossman 1995: 195–216; Gray 1998: 132–154). One such an egregious plunder happened in New Carthage in 209 BC, looted by the army under Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus the Elder (Plb. 10.15.4–16.9). Caesar also occasionally allowed his troops to plunder settlements to raise their spirits: after the defeat of Dyrrachium in 48 BC, Caesar’s army ransacked the Thessalian city of Gomphi, a settlement of no strategic importance (Caes. *Civ.* 3.80.1–6).

Anachronistically labelling such practices as war crimes by some scholars or making statements that ancient societies were simply more cruel than modern ones does not explain why ancient commanders allowed or forbade looting in the first place. Ziółkowski’s important contribution to the matter concerned circumstances in which city sacking was seen as permissible (Ziółkowski 1980: 30–62; Ziółkowski 1988; Ziółkowski 1993). The Roman practice of *direptio* gave the army control over the conquered settlement: its commanders had no authority to stay their soldiers’ hands, but they could attempt to persuade them to be merciful, making use of both psychological tactics and personal charisma.

In the light of preceding remarks, to investigate other methods of releasing combat tension could yield information on daily lives of Roman soldiers: their religiosity, relationships with local civilians, anger management issues, and (ab) use of alcohol (see Richardson 1978: 41–46, 171–172; Nash 1997: 18–29; Holmes 2003: 241–254). Up to this day, historians studying ancient warfare have frequently disregarded perspectives of individual soldiers – ostensibly, obedient executioners of their commanders' orders. Sources relating stories of Roman soldiers who disrupted public order perpetuate ancient stereotypes and depict military men as drunken brutes unable to distinguish between times of war and peace (Faszczka 2018: 7–21).

Nevertheless, it is not an aggressive disposition but a permanent sense of fear that characterises people habitually risking their lives for the sake of their profession, e.g. soldiers. If we consider that military training and command systems revolve around mitigating negative effects of fear (Ardant du Picq 1880: 7–19; Lord Moran 1966: 5, 18, 27, 154–157; Keegan 1976: 18; Marshall 2000: 37, 41–43, 65, 71; Grossman 1995: 51–66), then one may envision promising opportunities for research on ancient methods of fostering internal unit cohesion to counteract the often crippling sense of social isolation soldiers experience on the battlefield. Modern scholars of battle studies stress that strong social support networks in the military enhance combat effectiveness, improve military discipline and encourage soldiers to take the initiative and share their burdens (Kellett 1982: 97–101; Marshall 2000: 22, 148–150; Holmes 2003: 283–285, 291). The *contubernia* system present in the Roman army already in the Republican times, in many aspects resembling the buddy system in the American military, served to foster interpersonal ties between soldiers who made up basic battle units (Goldsworthy 1996: 252–256; cf. MacMullen 1984, but also note: Lendon 2006: 270–271, 276). Almost two thousand years before the birth of the modern psychology, the Roman military commanders came to understand basic principles of human social conditioning and employed them to boost morale of their troops. The extant literary sources on the Roman army and studies on cultural history testify how Roman war leaders employed their intuitive understanding of psychology to bolster the *esprit de corps*, foster unit cohesion and reward commendable behaviours in hope of encouraging subsequent acts of courage (*virtus*). One could not even consider this cluster of research topics without contributions made by modern studies of military psychologists: to look for psychological underpinnings in the behaviour of the ancient Roman troops is to acknowledge how our increased understanding of these complex topics in the modern context sensitised us to complexities present in the ancient material.

In other words, findings of modern military psychologists allow us to humanise Roman soldiers: not just 'elements of the Roman war machine', but as people

dealing with extreme emotions in daily uncertainties of the combat (Goldsworthy 1996: 7–8; James 2011: 22). Psychologically-informed studies on the army of the Roman Republic focus on interpersonal relationships in the subordinate (commander-soldier) and peer (soldier-soldier) aspects. Early studies of Ziółkowski have convincingly demonstrated the significance of looting to psychological wellbeing of the embattled Roman troops. Today, after more than forty years, the subfield of Roman military psychology still awaits curious researchers who will continue Ziółkowski's work and expose that the early modern (18th–19th century) scholars who praised uncannily rigid discipline and rigour of Roman soldiers did it at the expense of psychological realism. The publication of Ziółkowski's PhD dissertation would be a step in the right direction in this context.

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