

FIGHTING FOR ROME. SOME CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING THE SOLDIER'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS ROME¹

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ABSTRACT

WHEN WE SPEAK OF THE HISTORY OF THE ROMAN WORLD WE SPEAK OF CONQUERORS, OF VICTORIES AND DEFEATS, AND IMPLICITLY OF SOLDIERS. SINCE THE BEGINNINGS OF ROME THE SOLDIER APPEARS AS A POWERFUL "ENTITY" THAT FOUGHT TO ENSURE THE ETERNITY OF THE STATE, EMBRACING A GLORIOUS DEATH. WHAT MADE THE ROMAN SOLDIER READY TO GIVE HIS LIFE FOR THE WELFARE OF THE STATE? THIS STUDY OFFERS POSSIBLE ANSWERS TO THIS MYSTERY BY ANALYZING SOME OF THE LITERARY SOURCES OF THE PERIOD. I WILL UNDERLINE HOW THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CHANGES THAT TRANSFORMED THE REPUBLIC INTO THE ROMAN EMPIRE ALSO CHANGED THE SOLDIER'S ATTITUDE AND HIS "PATRIOTISM" TOWARDS THE ROMAN STATE.

KEYWORDS: *ROMAN SOLDIER, "PATRIOTISM", MILITARY COMMUNITY, DONATIVA, SACRAMENTUM MILITARE, REPUBLIC-ROMAN EMPIRE*

INTRODUCTION

In the last decades we can observe a new direction that separates the studies concerning the Roman army from the greater area of analyses of the Roman Empire. Even more, researchers emphasized the existence of distinct methods of analysis. R. Alston³ recalls a famous speech of M. P. Speidel, honoring E. Birley, on the subject of the analyses of the Roman Empire: "Where is the unifying thread? I believe we do have such a thread

¹ This work was supported by the the European Social Fund in Romania, under the responsibility of the Managing Authority for the Sectoral Operational Programme for Human Resources Development 2007-2013 [grant POSDRU/CPP 107/DMI 1.5/S/78342].

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³ Richard Alston, *Soldiers and society in Roman Egypt* (London: Routledge, 1995).

and a clear overall vision in what we are doing, and that is the past itself, which of course is just another way of saying that our sources are rich and clear, that our methods are mostly sound, that our accounts of the Roman army are informed by our various lives' experiences rather than by ideology or outside forces"⁴.

Although there are many unifying elements impossible to overview there are also specific elements that differentiate the provinces and implicitly the armies stationed here⁵. Finally, from my point of view, the Roman army is the perfect definition of the paradigm *diversity in unity*.

Bellicose people, the Romans considered *pax* the result of victories and not of peace treaties. This attitude is better described by Cicero in one of his discourses as follows: *victoria pax non pactione parienda est*⁶. In this framework M. P. Speidel's assertion that the fundamental problem of the Empire was controlling the army, doesn't seem so intriguing⁷.

REPUBLICAN AND IMPERIAL POLICY

Emperor Claudius inaugurates a new phase in the history of the Roman Empire (even though preliminary elements appear starting with Augustus), when three different institutions fight for power: the Senate, the Roman people and the army. Even more, it is noticeable that the army gains the primary spot, for example the Senate without the army was isolated and lacking the ability to act. All that remained was elocution⁸.

The preliminary elements of this tripartite view of the Roman Empire can be observed during the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius. For both emperors the soldiers were

⁴ Alston, *Soldiers and society*, 3.

⁵ Ian. Haynes, „Introduction: the Roman army as a community,” *Journal of Roman Archaeology, Supplementary series* 34 (1999):10. Mid second century AD, the soldiers stationed in Birrens have built three altars, one dedicated to Mars and Victoria Augusta by the soldiers from Raetia, one for the goddess Ricagambeda built by the men from the Velleavian district in Germania and last but not the least an altar for Viradecthis dedicated by *pagus conductis militans* from the cohorts. Through these dedications these groups of people were commemorating their differences in the military community.

⁶ David Roy Shackleton Bailey, trans., *Cicero Epistulae ad Familiares* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 10.5.

⁷ Michael P. Speidel, *Riding for Caesar. The Roman emperors' horse Guards* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1994), 146.

⁸ Brian Campbell, *The Emperor and the Roman Army, 31 B.C.-A.D. 235* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 169.

already separated from the civilian life. This separation is described by Suetonius when he presents Augustus' testament⁹.

Starting with Claudius' nomination as emperor by the armies the power shifted from the civilian to the military sphere, establishing a new ratio of forces. Also, extremely important is the order of the army's meetings, illustrated by the same author Suetonius: hailing the new emperor on the Palatin, followed by the deposition of the *sacramentum militare* and the promise of *donativa*¹⁰.

These being said some interesting questions appear: Why did the Roman soldiers fight? What exactly made them ready to give their lives to Rome? Was there a moral or abstract ideal that would justify risking their lives?¹¹ If we can speak of "Roman patriotism", did it change when the Republic turned into Empire? Can we consider that the Romans that fought under Marius against the Cimbri when they invaded the Italian Peninsula had a more profound "patriotism" than the Roman soldiers that invaded Britannia in 43 p. Chr.?¹²

M. A. Speidel in one of his studies underlines a vital element. Now, it is impossible to know the sentiments of a simple soldier; instead we can analyze the official attempts to change and influence his attitude¹³.

In order to discover the source of this "patriotism" we must look into Rome's beginnings, where the soldier's image as a conqueror of others is bound to the success of the eternal city. The Roman society during the Republic recognized the importance of the soldier as a conqueror and not as a survivor. And so, Kathryn H. Milne's assertion that in a practical analysis in the Republican Rome a citizen was more likely to fight as a legionary than to vote is not so surprising¹⁴.

The emblematic image of the Republican Roman soldier is illustrated by Titus Livius in the story of Marcus Curtius¹⁵. In 362 a. Chr. an earthquake created an abyss in

⁹ Gheorghe Ceaușescu, trans., *Viețile celor doisprezece Cezari* (București: RAO, 1998), Aug.101, 2. In his testament the Emperor gives 40 million sestertii to the Roman people, 3 million to the tribes, 500 thousands to the praetorians, 1000 sestertii to each person in the urban cohorts and 500 to each soldier of the legions.

¹⁰ Ceaușescu, *Viețile, Claud.*, 10.4.

¹¹ Michael A. Speidel, "Pro patria mori... La doctrine du patriotisme romain dans l'armée impérial," *Cahiers Gustave Glotz* 21 (2010): 141.

¹² Adrian K. Goldsworthy, *The Roman army at war 100 BC – AD 200* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 251.

¹³ Speidel, *Pro patria*, 141.

¹⁴ Kathryn H. Milne, "The Republican soldier: historiographical representations and human realities," (Phd diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2009), 13.

¹⁵ Arcadiu Marinescu-Nour, trans., *Ab Urbe Condita* (București: Minerva, 1976), 7.6.

the Forum. When the oracle was seen they were told that the Gods were asking the sacrifice of Rome's greatest power. With this sacrifice Rome would be eternal – *perpetuus*. Marcus Curtius, a young soldier, said that Rome's greatest power was her warrior sons, and so he mounts his horse and jumps in the abyss, which closes behind him.

The Roman Republic is the time of dual life, civilian and military. It was considered that owning a property was the supreme connection between the soldier and the state and implicitly the soldier's motivation to fight. This was the ideal for which Tiberius Gracchus fought. The "patriotism" of the Republican soldier was based on the emotional side of his connection to the state, where being a soldier was a citizen's duty to protect and help his *patria* to bloom. Picturing this duty the same Titus Livius presents the story of Cincinnatus, consul in 460 a. Chr¹⁶. The consular army from 458 a. Chr. under the leadership of Lucius Minucius was blocked in its own camp by an invading army from Aequins. So, the Senate decides to name a dictator to solve the crisis. When the delegation arrives at Cincinnatus' house to announce his new command, he was ploughing his field (emphasizing his civilian side, preoccupied with his land and family). Becoming dictator his interests pass from his family welfare to the welfare of the Republic. However, he renounced at his new title in just a few days wanting to return to his family. Yet again it is underlined the temporary duty of the citizen to fight.

Starting with Marius new changes take place, being a soldier was no longer a duty but a career. And so he changed the character of the army¹⁷. As I already said, the Republic offered a double identity to the soldier; he was able to establish strong bonds with his companions-in-arms, followed by the return to the gentle enclosure of his family. But when fighting became a career, the family disappeared, and the only connection was with others like him. Maybe this is the moment when a new community appeared, when the soldier gained a new identity and stopped being unadapted.

Therefore the soldier of the Roman Empire appears as part of a new military community. Is it possible that the sentimental connection of the Republican soldier to the state has survived the political and social changes and passed unchanged in the new imperial era?

As I said, the political changes were followed by social ones and one can presume that the soldiers have known the feeling of social dislocation. Furthermore the character of

¹⁶ Marinescu-Nour, *Ab urbe*, 3.26.

¹⁷ Milne, *Republican soldier*, 40. Even more, the same author claims that Rome was built on the soldiers' willpower and self sacrifice, 193.

the new military community had a certain impact on the way the individual saw himself¹⁸. Describing this new community B. Campbell asserts that from Euphrates to the Tyne, soldiers celebrated the same festivals and had the same oaths¹⁹. These were some of the elements that held the army united all over the Empire. The smallest unity in a legion and maybe the one where the feeling of community originated was *contubernium*, describing the soldiers that slept in the same tent²⁰.

The new vision presents the army as a community with its own dynamics. And so R. MacMullen sees the legion as a society and not just as a fighting machine²¹. However, B. Shaw adopts a different perspective considering the legion and its garrison as social and cultural communities totally separated from the civilian population²². Belonging to a community is evidently followed by the existence of a collective identity, retrieved for example in the weapons they used, like the sword. For as long as a man wore a sword he was perceived as a soldier, losing it and he was no longer part of the military community²³. When they joined the army the new recruits gained a new identity. A papyrus discovered in Fayum, Egypt presents a young soldier, a sailor who writes to his father announcing his new name, Antonius Maximus (he received a proper official Roman name upon recruitment)²⁴.

The military service appeared in the official language of the legal advisers as a service brought to *res publica*²⁵. The altar from Adamclisi, dedicated by Emperor Trajan to the fallen soldiers is a proof of this imperial policy; according to the inscription the soldiers lost their lives for the state²⁶. The fact is that the common purpose of the soldiers was illustrated by the oath – *sacramentum*, deposited upon recruitment²⁷.

¹⁸ Ian Haynes, "Military service and cultural identity in the auxilia," *Journal of Roman Archaeology, Supplementary series* 34 (1999): 165. Haynes, "Introduction," 12.

¹⁹ Campbell, *Emperor*, 19-32.

²⁰ Brian Campbell, *War and Society in Imperial Rome: 31 BC – AD 284* (London: Routledge, 2002), 36.

²¹ Ramsay MacMullen, "The legion as society," *Historia* 33 (1984): 440-56.

²² Brent D. Shaw, "Soldiers and society, the army in Numidia," *Opus* 2 (1983): 133-59.

²³ Goldsworthy, *Roman army*, 251. Dressed in the same uniform, determined to respect the rules as a group and live as a group, the feeling of civilian identity is replaced by a corporate identity.

²⁴ Brian Campbell, *The Roman army a sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 1994), 11.

²⁵ Speidel, "Pro patria," 144.

²⁶ *CIL*, III, 14214.

²⁷ James Frank Gilliam, "Enrollment in the Roman imperial army," *Eos* 48 (1957): 207-16. Roy Davies, *Service in the Roman army* (Edinburgh: Columbia University Press, 1989), 47. The oath was renewed every year on 3rd of January or maybe even daily, being a constant reminder of the soldier's purpose in society.

Vegetius describes an important element of the *sacramentum* and precisely the soldier's pledge to serve and be ready to die for the *res publica*²⁸. According to the same oath, the soldiers swore to listen and protect the emperor, the latter being the military leader par excellence. As M. P. Speidel showed controlling the army was fundamental for the Empire and implicitly for the emperor. In order to survive the leader required the support of the army. For instance, to emphasize this dual nature, emperors started their letter to the Senate with a specific formula: I and the legions are in health. The profundity of the oath is demonstrated by the existence of a *Genius sacramenti* that appears on an altar in Syria²⁹. The same *Genius sacramenti* is mentioned in *Asinus Aureus*³⁰. In Apuleius' writing a soldier is described as being terrified by *Genius sacramenti* because he lost his sword.

CONCLUSION

When evoking the soldiers' affiliation to the military community it is important to notice that there were *Genii* for almost every division of the Roman army. The most outstanding seems to be *Genius centuriae*. Apparently the *centuria* offered soldiers a sense of identity and belonging³¹.

Maybe the soldiers fought because of an excessive feeling of loyalty towards the emperor, towards the military community. For the army the emperor appears as fighting for Rome, and so if the soldier fought for the emperor they also fought for Rome³². But Oliver Hekster underlines a fundamental question: "When fighting for Rome and fighting for the emperor were no longer overlapping whom did soldiers fight for?"³³.

In the first years of the Empire, Horace will use against the outside enemies the image of the young Roman soldier ready to die fighting for his *patria* and even more such

²⁸ N. P. Milner, trans., *Vegetius: Epitome of Military Science* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), 2.5: *iurant autem milites...nec mortem recusatorus pro Romana re publica*.

²⁹ *AnnÉp* 1924, 135, *genio sacramenti veterani*.

³⁰ E. J. Kennedy, trans., *The golden ass* (London: Penguin, 1998), 9.14.

³¹ Michael P. Speidel and Alexandra Dimitrova-Milčeva, "The cult of the Genii in the Roman army and a new military deity," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II.2 (1978):1546.

³² Ghenele Wolf, trans., *Istoria războiului iudeilor împotriva romanilor* (București: Hasefer, 1997), VI.1.6. Near the gates of Jerusalem when the emperor Titus was calling his soldiers a certain Sabinus answered: I readily surrender up myself to thee, Oh Caesar!

³³ Olivier Hekster, "Fighting for Rome. The Emperor as a military leader," *The impact of the Roman army (200 BC – AD 476)* ed. Lukas de Blois (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 94. Olivier Hekster, "The army and propaganda," *The Blackwell companion to the Roman army* ed. P. P. M. Erdkamp (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 339-58.

a death was sweet and glorious³⁴. The same glorious death appears at Flavius Josephus in Titus's speech. And so, according to the Roman emperor, "for what man of virtue is there who does not know, that those souls which are severed from their fleshly bodies in battles by the sword are received by the ether, that purest of elements³⁵". But this "patriotism" was not sufficient to motivate soldiers. Let us not forget two other elements, both equally important, rewards and punishments. The pledge of *donativa* was a driving force, clearly not the only aspect that gained the army but a major influence. The reward is described also by Josephus when Titus promised to the bravest soldier that the emperor will make him an envied man.

The Republican soldier was a sentimental soldier, for him the self-sacrifice was a way of ensuring that Rome will become *perpetuus*. It's a man with two worlds, a civilian sphere where he protects his family and fights for its welfare. On the other side, the duty towards the Republic moves him in the military sphere, where the family micro cosmos is replaced by the Republican macro cosmos. This utopian "patriotism" will disappear once the soldier-civilian "entity" will. Starting with the Empire we can see the career soldier as part of a military community, soldier that through the oath he pledges upon recruitment swears to fight and die for the *res publica*. But still, completely separated from the civilian life, having no connection to the Roman state, what exactly made him surrender his life? Was it the glorious death? Was it the promise of *donativa* and other rewards? But, as M. A. Speidel said we do not know the thoughts and ideals of a simple Roman soldier.

³⁴ Traian Costa, trans., *Horatius-Opera Omnia, Carm.* (București: Minerva, 1980), 3.2, 1-4, 13.

³⁵ Wolf, *Istoria războiului*, VI.1.5.

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