

Studies

ANCIENT HISTORY

THE SOLDIERS' MORALE IN THE ROMAN ARMY

Abstract: The studies concerning the Roman army highlights mainly the training and organisation as defining elements for the success in battle. However, besides the training and organisation, there are other things that influence the soldier's behavior in battle. The aim of this article is to emphasize that the soldiers' morale, closely linked with training and organization, can make the difference on battlefield. There will be presented both the intimidation techniques used on battlefield and the elements that lead to strengthening morale.

Keywords: morale, intimidation techniques, visual impression, the benefits of the roman soldiers

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The resounding success of the Roman army in battle is due to constant training and excellent organization, however – though often ignored in studies of the army – of particular importance in winning battles is the morale of the soldiers¹. This was first understood by historians-military, such as Du Picq, who learned this from their own experience, but studies on soldier morale began to make its substantial presence especially after the publication of John Keegan's book - *The Face of Battle*. Although, ancient battles do not have enough resources for a detailed analysis, as it can be done for the most recent ones, the data taken from both literary sources and from other types of sources gives us an insight into the importance that the military leaders of that era gave to the morale and also into the impact that the morale of the soldiers has on the deployment of a fight.

The Roman soldier trusted his own superiority and that of the army he belonged to, being supported psychologically by the fact that the Roman army was always on the offensive. The courage of soldiers, the training, the obedience and loyalty to comrades could result in winning a victory even when the commander failed². However, these soldiers were people before being anything else, who during combat were extremely tense, being tested by extreme emotions, mostly by fear, and because of that they did not always act as they were ordered and trained to do³, fear and self-preservation overcoming aggressive impulses⁴.

Suetonius recommended that a war or a battle take place only when the hope to win is greater than the fear of being defeated, comparing the situation to that of fishing with a pin of gold, the loss of which cannot be matched by any other possible capture⁵.

¹ LEE 1996, 199; DU PICQ 1914, 1-2; MONTAGU 2006, 36.

² CAMPBELL 2002, 71.

³ GOLDSWORTHY 1996, 174.

⁴ GOLDSWORTHY 1996, 248.

⁵ Suetonius, *Caes., Augustus* 25.4.

The image that we have about the war of the eras before using firearms, namely that of a chivalrous war, does not match the instructions in military manuals, which place great emphasis on surprise attacks, ambushes, raids and other actions by role in handling enemy morale⁶. The generals tried to raise the morale of their troops and at the same time to demoralize the opponent. An important factor, which helped to achieve an easy victory, was the tactics of intimidation. The visual impression that the army gave their opponents by its appearance and that of its soldiers' was crucial, Tacitus saying: *The eyes are the first defeated in all battles*⁷. This fact was acknowledged by both the soldiers and the generals, who actively participated in combat, as well as by the historians and authors of tactical manuals⁸.

The military aspect was important for the morale and for the spirit of cohesion of its members, as well as for the intimidation of the enemy, ending up in winning battles without bloodshed⁹. An army equipped in full armour was a terrifying image for the opponents¹⁰. The movement of the armies with metal shining, colours, sounds, could offer a spectacular view which encouraged its members and intimidated or frightened the enemy¹¹. Onasander recommends that the soldiers keep their swords over their heads in the sun to create along with the tips of spears and the polished armours a lightning effect¹². The equipment and the weapons had to be cleaned and maintained regularly to be effective both in battle and to impress by gloss¹³. Cleaning the weapons before the battle had other advantages in addition to the intimidation of the opponent, as this way there would be identified and repaired possible faults in the equipment while at the same time they reminded the soldiers that they had responsibilities to their comrades in arms¹⁴.

To the enemy's disappointment various subterfuges were used. They would usually try to create a false impression on the number of soldiers¹⁵. Different techniques were used to give the enemy the impression of a greater number of soldiers than there actually was. Keeping far away from the opponent was very important, as it was more difficult to assess the number of soldiers from the distance. Also, as far as the infantry troops were concerned, in order to create the impression of a larger number of troops they needed to be aligned, and the successive rows to keep the spears on their shoulders alternatively (e.g. the first row on the right shoulder, the second row on the left one and so on ...)¹⁶. A troop placed on lots of rows heading inward could frighten the enemy through the dense appearance, but in case of contact that would not be very successful because few soldiers could use their weapons in battle¹⁷.

Riders of the cavalry troops had to stay in groups, and

so, due to the dimensions of the horses, they would seem to be many more¹⁸. If they were dispersed it would be easier to count them. Another method was that of placing among the riders the light infantry¹⁹ or the grooms, armed with real spears or counterfeited ones, so the troop seemed more numerous and denser. To give the impression of a larger cavalry force, Marcellus ordered that there be put saddle blankets on pack animals²⁰. There were situations when they created the impression of a smaller force, by hiding a part of the cavalry²¹, to convince the enemy to enter the battle.

The crest of the helmet is an important element, because using it the soldier seemed taller and more imposing²². It was worn in battle in the 2nd century BC and confirmed to be existing in the time of Caesar²³. The fact that in the 2nd century AC it does not appear in the depictions on Trajan's Column and *Tropaeum Traiani*, but it appears on the ones of the tombstones indicates that the role of helmet in this period was purely ceremonial²⁴. The ceremonial role is confirmed by the fact that within the *hippica gymnasia* the riders were wearing a crest²⁵.

After creating the visual impression, the second phase of intimidation they used was connected to the hearing sense. Noise was created using various tools used by armies for signs in battles, but also by shouting, kicking the shields with their weapons or the walking of hundreds of people²⁶. This type of going forward noise was used by the Roman army in the time of Polybius, being a technique used by other populations as well²⁷. Bullying could be achieved, however, through a slow, silent going forward, suggesting imperturbability, even if it was just a facade²⁸. This relentless closeness usually created a stronger effect than the noise. It was first used in Caesar's time and it involved a discipline of high standards, that being the only way of preserving the troops as a dense mass, despite the soldiers' natural instinct to scream and run towards the enemy line. The only army of that period which was disciplined and organized enough for this type of advancement on a battle field was the Roman one. The implacable closeness ended at a distance of less than 15 meters from the enemy, it being a double shock: a physical one by *pila* volley and a psychological one by the battle shouts that are released at this particular moment²⁹. Both the noisy advancement and the quiet one were effective methods of demoralizing the enemy³⁰.

The Romans, but other populations as well, used various musical instruments to scare the opponent. The Parthians used in battle bronze drums and bells to make noise because of all the senses, hearing has the most disturbing effect, arousing emotions and clouding the judgement³¹. The

⁶ CAMPBELL 1987, 27; WHETHAM 2007, 12.

⁷ Tacitus, *Germ.* 43.5.

⁸ GILLIVER 2007, 11.

⁹ GILLIVER 2007, 11.

¹⁰ Flavius Josephus, *BJ* 5.351; Vegetius 2.14.8; Onasander 28.

¹¹ Vegetius 2.14; Titus Livius 26.51.4, 44.34; GILLIVER 2007, 6.

¹² Onasander 29.

¹³ Titus Livius 44.34; Vegetius 2.12, 2.14; HA, *Hadrianus* 10.6, *Avidius Cassius* 6, *Maximinus* 1.6, *Aurelianus* 7; Onasander 28.

¹⁴ GILLIVER 2007, 7.

¹⁵ Xenophon, *Com.* 5.5-5.6, 5.9-5.11.

¹⁶ VAN CREVELD 2000, 42.

¹⁷ GOLDSWORTHY 1996, 181.

¹⁸ Xenophon, *Com.* 5.9-5.11

¹⁹ Caesar, *De Bello Civ.*, 3.84.

²⁰ Frontinus 2.4.6.

²¹ Xenophon, *Com.* 5.6

²² Polybius 6.23.12-6.23.14; GOLDSWORTHY 2008a, 184.

²³ Caesar, *De Bello Gall.*, 2.21.

²⁴ BISHOP 1990, 24.

²⁵ Arrian, *Tactica* 34.4.

²⁶ GOLDSWORTHY 1996, 195-197.

²⁷ GOLDSWORTHY 2007, 134.

²⁸ Arrian, *Alani* 25; GOLDSWORTHY 1996, 197.

²⁹ Arrian, *Alani* 25; STEPHENSON 1999, 57; GOLDSWORTHY 2007, 134.

³⁰ GOLDSWORTHY 1996, 196-197; COWAN 2007, 117.

³¹ Plutarch, *Crassus* 23.6; GOLDSWORTHY 1996, 195-196.

Germans howled out battle sounds called *baritus* which they amplified holding their shields in front of their mouths³². The Roman soldiers performed a rousing war shout all together, which meant to frighten the enemy and stimulate their own soldiers as well³³. The battle cry shouted all at the same time also proved the group spirit and the high morale of the troops³⁴. The intense noise on the battlefield was an important stress factor for a soldier, even if it was partly generated to scare the enemy³⁵. It joined the dust created by the movement of the armies³⁶ and by the heat during the summer, which affected particularly heavy armed troops.

Another way of misleading the enemy was that of stimulating the fear or the escape, so that the opponents become extremely self-confident and reduce their vigilance³⁷.

Probably the most important factor that could demoralize the soldier was the possibility of dying or being injured in combat. Despite the military protection equipment (the shields and the *lorica*), there were certain vulnerable places where the soldier could be hit. One of the most exposed areas of a soldier's body was the face and most certainly the eyes. We learn from ancient sources that the soldiers were often hit in the face by sling projectiles and arrows which, because of their speed and size, the soldier could not dodge in time. Wounds on the face could also be produced by the *gladius*³⁸.

If in the case of the infantry, the presence of the comrades around encouraged and prevented breaking the lines, the riders' morale was essential. If a rider was discouraged, that was transmitted to the horse too, an obedient and confident horse becoming that way a threat to the rest of the troop, as a panicked horse would panic the others as well. A horse will not be brave if its rider is afraid. On the other hand, a horse that panics can regain its confidence with a strong and self-reliant rider. One of the most difficult parts of training a horse was just that, trusting the rider first and then itself³⁹.

Besides the intimidation techniques, there still was a crucial component that influenced the Roman soldier's morale. We are speaking about the benefits he was given for being part of a well-developed military system.

Roman soldiers were regularly paid for their work, even if the salary was not very high, it would come regularly⁴⁰. In addition to that he also received several donations from the emperor.

Being employed in the army, the soldier also benefited from an adequate medical service. The Roman army was concerned about taking care of wounded soldiers⁴¹, abandoning them being considered dishonourable for a general. This was extremely important for the morale of the

soldier, as a man participated more actively in the fight if he had the confidence that he would be cared for if he got hurt⁴². Also, if the soldier was discharged because of injuries or disease, he was sure that the benefits would be directly proportional with the nature of his problem and the number of years of military service⁴³.

When being discharged, the veteran received a pension equivalent to his salary for more than 10 years or a piece of land⁴⁴, and from the mid-first century BC, soldiers who served in auxiliary troops received on discharge the Roman citizenship for themselves, for the wife and children and all rights that derived from it⁴⁵, thus being integrated into the Roman lifestyle⁴⁶.

So that the soldiers could engage together in battles and campaigns, it was crucial not only to maintain the discipline, but also to support the spirit of camaraderie, respect and mutual trust. They would develop the soldier's sense of duty and would illuminate both the desire not to embarrass themselves in front of his comrades and not to let them down⁴⁷. The sense of belonging to the troop would trigger the soldier's loyalty to it and to its symbols, especially flags, badges and other insignia⁴⁸. Even more, the terms *commilitium/commilito* used in addressing both amongst the soldiers and amongst the soldiers and the officers developed camaraderie⁴⁹.

The smallest group in the Roman army was the *contubernium*, consisting of eight soldiers sharing the same tent or the same barracks, sleeping, cooking and eating together, and of course engage in battle together. Referring to *centuria*, the 10 *contubernia* which made it, camped together in the marching camp and lived in the same row of barracks, in the permanent ones. Each six-centuria that were side by side formed a cohort that was small enough to give the soldiers a sense of their identity and sufficiently large to operate independently when needed⁵⁰. This practice of living together connected the soldiers in the cohort, encouraging them to fight⁵¹. Belonging to a troop and identifying with it was formed and maintained through training and daily life in the camp⁵². Loyalty to comrades and honour were the reasons why the soldier continued to fight instead of running⁵³.

The supreme symbol of each legion was the eagle, which symbolized the continuity of the troop. The eagle was moved only when the whole legion left the camp. Since losing the eagle in battle was considered the ultimate disgrace, it was sometimes used by the commander for a tactical situation, he deliberately put it in danger in order to

³² Tacitus, *Germ.* 3; Ammianus Marcellinus 16.12.36.

³³ Caesar, *De Bello Civ.*, 3.92-3.94; CAMPBELL 2002, 59.

³⁴ Titus Livius 30.34.1-30.34.2.

³⁵ Plutarch, *Crassus* 23.6; Ammianus Marcellinus 16.12.36; GOLDSWORTHY 1996, 195-196; LEE 1996, 201.

³⁶ Plutarch, *Marius* 26, *Sulla* 19; Ammianus Marcellinus 16.12.37.

³⁷ Caesar, *De Bello Gall.*, 5.57.

³⁸ Caesar, *De Bello Gall.*, 5.35.6-5.35.8, BC 3.53, 3.99.1; Titus Livius 22.49.1; Plutarch, *Sertorius* 4.

³⁹ HYLAND 1990, 69.

⁴⁰ CAMPBELL 2002, 34.

⁴¹ Caesar, *De Bello Gall.*, 1.26; Appian, BC 3.70; Plutarch, *Antonius* 43; Cassius Dio 68.8.2, *HA, Hadrianus* 10.

⁴² GOLDSWORTHY 1996, 167; CAMPBELL 2002, 76.

⁴³ CAMPBELL 1984, 311-314; CAMPBELL 2002, 76, N. 164.

⁴⁴ Cassius Dio.23.1; CAMPBELL 2002, 34.

⁴⁵ HOLDER 1980, 29-39; CAMPBELL 2002, 151; SCHEIDEL 2007, 419; RÜGER 2008, 502.

⁴⁶ CHEESMAN 1914, 31-32; CAMPBELL 2002, 35.

⁴⁷ CAMPBELL 2002, 36.

⁴⁸ STOLL 1995, 107-118; CAMPBELL 2002, 36

⁴⁹ CAMPBELL 1984, 32-39; CAMPBELL 2002, 36, N. 109, MCNABB 2010, 155.

⁵⁰ CAMPBELL 2002, 37.

⁵¹ GOLDSWORTHY 1996, 252-257; CAMPBELL 2002, 37; MCNABB 2010, 155.

⁵² CAMPBELL 2002, 38.

⁵³ LEE 1996, 209.

force the soldiers to advance on the battle field and save it⁵⁴. The same kind of loyalty to the symbols of the comrades and the troop existed for auxiliary forces, too.

Once the troops were settled in the camps on the *limes* and local recruiting was initiated, soldiers experienced a strong emotional connection to the area and thus, it was normal for them to fight with more enthusiasm for the land and the people to whom they felt they belonged⁵⁵. That, however, represented a disadvantage as well, moving the troops became extremely difficult because of the ties with the local population⁵⁶.

The soldiers' morale in battle depended more on the officers who led them. Those who earned the soldiers' trust and respect for their skills in combat, for their discipline, for their permanent and remarkable presence both in camp and in battle, for the courage and the example they were, they could obtain the best results from their troops even in difficult times⁵⁷. Repeated refusal of a leader to fight could demoralize the troops and encourage the enemy⁵⁸.

Since the reign of Domitian, emperors increasingly participated in campaigns, thus being closely associated with their soldiers and becoming more and more responsible for the success or failure of the campaign. Thus, we come to believe that an emperor should be an effective and efficient military leader⁵⁹. Personal intervention of the Commander in combat was extremely important for the morale of the soldiers⁶⁰. This had to be done carefully, however, because if the commander was injured, the result could be fatal to his troops, amongst them there would be panic, while the opponent would take courage⁶¹. There were different styles of taking part in combat. Thus, Caesar, Agricola and later Septimius Severus dismounted and sent their horse behind the front, suggesting to their soldiers that, if needed, they would die with them⁶². This act increased the morale of the soldiers, but also had disadvantages, as the general did not see everything that happened on the battlefield, and he was not seen in the battle but only by a small number of soldiers⁶³. Vespasian was placed close enough to the line of battle too, in order to give orders and encourage the soldiers, but without taking part effectively in combat⁶⁴. This was the best position to observe what was happening on the battlefield without the risk of confusion to arise. Also, from this place the reserves could be directed to where needed⁶⁵. Titus sometimes used that position to observe the battlefield⁶⁶, but other times he was very close to the front line or even actively participated in battle, being the head of his troops⁶⁷.

⁵⁴ LEE 1996, 208; CAMPBELL 2002, 37-38.

⁵⁵ Herodian 6.7.3.

⁵⁶ CHEESMAN 1914, 123; SCHEIDEL 2007, 421.

⁵⁷ CAMPBELL 2002, 40.

⁵⁸ Caesar, *De Bello Gall.*, 3.17; GOLDSWORTHY 1996, 145; SABIN 2007, 8.

⁵⁹ MATTERN 2002, 13; CAMPBELL 2008, 110.

⁶⁰ Caesar, *De Bello Gall.*, 1.25.1; Onasander 33.6.

⁶¹ Flavius Josephus, *BJ*, 3.236-3.238; Tacitus, *Hist.* 4.34; Titus Livius 22.6, 25.34; Ammianus Marcellinus 16.12.38, 25.3.1-25.3.24; Onasander 33.1; MAXFIELD 1981, 56; MONTAGU 2006, 37.

⁶² Caesar, *De Bello Gall.*, 1.25; Tacitus *Agr.* 35-37; Herodian 3.7.3.

⁶³ GOLDSWORTHY 1996, 151.

⁶⁴ Flavius Josephus, *BJ* 3.236, 4.372-4.373.

⁶⁵ GOLDSWORTHY 1996, 152-153.

⁶⁶ Flavius Josephus, *BJ* 6.133-6.134, 6.245.

⁶⁷ Flavius Josephus, *BJ* 3.236, 3.462-3.502, 5.82-84, 5.287-289, 5.311-316, 5.486-487, 6.70.

It was unusual for an army to travel a long distance and then fight without resting before. It was also highly unusual for a Roman army to enter a battle without having a marching camp nearby⁶⁸, and if so were the conditions, it was being built right during the Battle by the uncommitted troops or the withdrawn ones from the last rows for this very purpose. The presence of a camp helped maintaining the morale of the troops⁶⁹, which was particularly important because in the Roman era, the success in battle depended more on moral grounds than on anything else⁷⁰.

A well-trained troop with a high morale, made on the battlefield a formation in which rows were spaced. Also, the formation adopted by a troop with a good morale would expand more in width than in depth. A formation with many rows in depth was usually a sign that the troops were poorly trained and with a low morale. By their mere physical presence, the back rows prevented those in the first row, who were actually fighting, to flee⁷¹.

The Roman Empire adopted a strategy of discouraging the opponent, doing everything in its power to strengthen the perception of military power at its disposal, in order to win wars quickly and prevent attacks which could exceed the ability to respond accordingly. This way, the Roman army was highly effective against attacks from a small scale, but was outnumbered and powerless before the great invasions of the second half of the III century BC⁷².

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⁶⁸ Tacitus, *Hist.* 4.34; GILLIVER 2008, 126.

⁶⁹ PHANG 2008, 69.

⁷⁰ GOLDSWORTHY 2008b, 86.

⁷¹ GOLDSWORTHY 1996, 177-178.

⁷² ROSENSTEIN 2007, 228-229.

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