

A “Local Model” of Roman Courage

In this paper, I analyze two classic examples of courage in Roman legend – Horatius Cocles’ defense of the Sublician Bridge (as told in Liv. *AUC.* 2.10; Florus 1.4.4; Val. Max. 3.2.1; Serv. in Aen. 8.646; Plut. *Publ.* 16; Front. 2.13.5; Sen. *Ep. mor.* 20.3.7; Dion. *Ant. Rom.* 5.23–26) and Gaius Mucius Scaevola’s failed assassination attempt of Lars Porsenna (Liv. *AUC.* 2.12.1–2.13.5; Florus 1.10; Plut. *Publ.* 17.1–5; Dion. *Ant. Rom.* 5.27–5.30) – to highlight the need to attend to “local models” in interpreting cultural (including literary) artifacts. Both episodes have been read under a presumed “one-against-many” understanding of courage in Roman society (e.g., Rosenstein 1990, 130–31; McDonnell 2006), where the mark of an individual’s “manliness” (*virtus*) was his willingness to, in the words of Polybius (6.54.3), “undergo every suffering . . . for the sake of gaining the glory that attends brave men” and perform extraordinary feats (cf. Sall. *Iug.* 2.2, *egregia facinora*). This treats Roman culture’s notion of courage essentially a calque on Greek culture’s “heroic code” – a model in which (as has been demonstrated by, e.g., Finley 1954; Tejara 1971, 37–38; and Schofield 1986), individual excellence (*ἀρετή*) is valued above all and where the individual’s aim is “always to be the best and superior to others” (*αἰὲν ἀριστεύειν καὶ ὑπείροχον ἔμμεναι ἄλλων*: Hom. *Il.* 11.784). Such readings largely miss the point, however.

A folkloric analysis of the symbolism condensing around Horatius and Mucius in these stories reveals that these figures embody many of the features metaphorically characterizing cowardice in Latin. For instance, the names Cocles (“One-Eyed”) and Scaevola (“Left-Handed”) present an image of bodily “deficiency” that would have been interpreted by Latin speakers as markers of cowardliness, as their language consistently represents cowardliness in precisely these terms: For example, “to act cowardly” is *animo deficere* (literally, “break down in *animus*”)

or *animo fractum esse* (“be broken in *animus*”) – whereas *animus* (*altum et erectum*) *gerere* (literally, “bear (up) a (high and upright) *animus*”) means “to be brave” (cf. [Caes.] *Bell. Afr.* 10.4). For the same reason, *exaedificare* and *adrigere* (*redintegrare, excitare, crescere*) *animus* have the sense of “make brave” (cf. Plaut. *Trin.* 132). A coward is “mutilated”: cf. *mur(i)c(id)us* in this sense, referring to amputation of the thumb; Augustine also mentions a goddess Murcia (< **mulca* = *mutilata*?), patron deity of cowards. Similarly, Cocles in his jumping from the bridge (e.g., Liv. *AUC.* 2.10.11, *in Tiberim desiluit*), and Scaevola in his Etruscan disguise (Dion. *Ant. Rom.* 5.28; Val. Max. 3.3.1) manifest images that correspond to Latin’s metaphors of cowardliness as being “down” and “hidden”: for example, *cadere animo* (literally, “fall in *animus*”) means “lose courage”; the *animus* of a cowardly person is also said to be “cast down (*perculsus, demissus, abiectus*)”, “low (*humilis*)”, or “lying flat (*iacens*)”. A coward is *insegnis* (“unnoticeable”) or *cussiluris* (an archaic word meaning “covered”).

But if Horatius and Mucius are symbolically characterized as cowards, how, then, do they constitute *exempla* of courage? I suggest that by undermining expectations of culturally determined “signs” of courage, these Roman legends encourage the construction of an alternative understanding, in which, contrary to the individualistic Greek model, it is in fact in having a common identity – in being a member of the group that can say: “I am a Roman citizen”, as Scaevola explicitly declares – that courage rests. The sage of the Manlii offers telling parallels. What marks the *virtus* of T. Manlius, the future Torquatus, is his speed (a typical metaphor for courage: cf. *alacer* “lively” > “brave”), rather than – as for the Gaul – overbearing ostentation. Later, Torquatus punishes his own son for breaking ranks – a scene that has been read in the context of the “severity” of the father/son relationship in Rome (cf. Bettini 1991), but that equally evokes a vision of courage as resting not in personal distinction, but in group belonging.

- Bettini, M. 1991. *Anthropology and Roman Culture*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Finley, M. 1954. *The World of Odysseus*. New York: Viking Press.
- McDonnell, M. 2006. *Roman Manliness: Virtus and the Roman Republic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Roller, M. 2004. "Exemplarity in Roman Culture". *Classical Philology* 99 (1): 1–56.
- Rosenstein, N. S. 1990. *Imperatores Victi: Military Defeat and Aristocratic Competition in the Middle Late Republic*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Schofield, M. 1986. "Euboulia in the *Iliad*". *Classical Quarterly* 36: 6–31.
- Tejara, V. 1971. *Modes of Greek Thought*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.