

## Antony as an Ordinary Soldier in Plutarch's *Life*

It was common in the ancient world, as in today's world, for idle ordinary soldiers to revert to rampant mischief; and Plutarch unmistakably characterizes Antony as one of these ordinary soldiers in his *Life of Antony*. While not on campaign, Antony was prone to drinking binges, excessive luxury, womanizing, and gambling with actors and dancers (Plut. *Ant.* 6, 9, 21). A notable instance of this behavior occurs during his time as tribune in Caesar's dictatorship.

“... they (the masses) intensely disliked him, and were disgusted by his ill-timed bouts of drunkenness, his oppressive extravagance, his cavorting with women, and the way he spent the days asleep or wandering around in a daze with a hangover, and the nights at parties and shows, and amusing himself at weddings of actors and clowns...”

(Plutarch *Life of Antony* 9)

Yet these vices, according to Plutarch, were not in evidence during Antony's campaigns. His early military career was defined by loyal and effective service; he defeated his enemies despite disadvantages and performed significant personal acts of bravery, winning the *corona muralis* along with several other unnamed awards.

This depiction coincides with the view of soldiers held by aristocratic Romans, that labor keeps the ordinary Roman soldier disciplined; but, when armies are allowed to grow lax in their work, they quickly descend into chaotic mobs. We find this stereotype of the soldiery in several Roman historians, and it is repeated in some of Plutarch's other biographies. The general Metellus, during the Jugurthine War, discovered that the previous commander had allowed the army a large amount of leisure and they had grown unaccustomed to work or even to moving camp. This resulted in the dissolution of discipline (Sall. *Jug.* 44). Metellus reacquainted his men with discipline not through harsh punishments, but by subjecting them again to labor, diligent

castrametation, and the dismissal of all excess comforts, i.e. extra baggage animals, slaves, or pre-prepared food.

Both Sallust and Plutarch claimed that Marius subjected his men to similar trials (Sall. *Jug.* 88, Plut. *Mar.* 13); and during the war with the Cimbri and Teutones, when his soldiers were otherwise unoccupied, Marius charged them with building a great dam, a seemingly unsoldierly activity. Nevertheless, this served not only the practical purpose of supplying his army with necessities, but more importantly, it kept his men busy and thus restrained in the absence of the enemy (Plut. *Mar.* 15). To restore the efficiency of his army besieging Numantia, Scipio Aemilianus was also believed to have imposed on it an extraordinarily harsh exercise regimen. He also dismissed extra servants and baggage carriers, just as Metellus is said to have done. Shortly after the men were again schooled in discipline, the Romans defeated the Numantines in battle, and the city was reduced (Florus *Epit.* 1.34.7-17).

Exploiting this stereotype, Plutarch often pictures Antony as a typical soldier, well behaved if occupied, but victim to his baser nature when idle. Antony “never got closer to being a good man than when fortune was against him,” i.e. when he was forced to abandon his reprobate ways and endure physical hardship (Plut. *Ant.* 17). But *in otio*, Antony relapsed into his vices, for example: filling his Asian residence with an expensive menagerie of vulgar musicians, and dressing as a slave while insulting and even brawling with locals (Plut. *Ant.* 24, 29). His close relationship with his soldiers further underpins Antony’s typecasting. He was said to have wept while visiting wounded soldiers, trained alongside his men, and played dice (Plut. *Ant.* 43, 29). These formulaic attributions bring doubt upon the accuracy of Plutarch’s work. Rather, they served to further the general aim in his *Lives*, in which he wished to provide morals for his readers and use “history as a mirror and endeavoring in a manner to fashion and adorn my life in conformity with the virtues therein depicted.” (Plut. *Timol.* 1.1)

## Bibliography

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