TRAUMA IN ANCIENT ROME

Thinking with Combat Trauma in Roman Law and Literature

MASTER THESIS ANCIENT HISTORY

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the representation—and conspicuous absence—of psychological combat trauma in ancient Roman literature. While Greek sources occasionally acknowledge the mental toll of warfare, Roman texts appear largely silent on the subject, even in genres where one might reasonably expect its presence, such as military treatises and epic poetry. This literary analysis examines a range of Roman authors, including Caesar, Vergil, and Ammianus Marcellinus, to explore what their works reveal about Roman societal attitudes toward psychological trauma resulting from combat. The study's central argument is that the scarcity of explicit references to such trauma is itself a meaningful phenomenon, reflecting cultural values and ideological constructs rather than a lack of psychological impact. The thesis concludes with a threefold observation: first, that references to combat trauma are notably rare; second, that this absence is striking given the nature of the sources; and third, that this silence points to a deliberate cultural suppression or reframing of psychological vulnerability within Roman martial discourse. Ultimately, the project asks what ancient literary sources can—and cannot—tell us about the awareness and articulation of combat-related trauma in Roman society.

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Introduction

Did the average Roman soldier experience combat trauma? This question lies at the heart of this thesis and is its main inspiration. Over time, various historical figures have been used to introduce the concept of combat trauma into the study of ancient history. As we will explore later in this thesis, figures like Achilles and Ajax from Greek mythology can be seen as early representations of trauma caused by their war experiences.

However, ancient Greek authors seemed more focused on the psychological impact of war in their works compared to their Roman counterparts. This thesis primarily examines the world of republican and imperial Rome, a period for which there appears to be less developed historiography on the topic of trauma compared to ancient Greece. While this results in fewer direct sources for research, it does not diminish the significance of this subject. On the contrary, it suggests that the phenomenon of trauma may have been just as prevalent in the Roman context, though less explicitly discussed.

At first glance, the relatively obscure interest in Roman military history combined with psychological afflictions may seem like a niche topic. However, upon deeper examination, it will hopefully become evident that this subject connects to broader, more universal questions about the human condition. Can we apply modern terminology and psychological diagnoses to historical figures? What does the presence—or absence—of sources on a given historical topic reveal about its prevalence? Has the human mind changed fundamentally over the last two thousand years?

These questions not only address universal aspects of the human psyche and the world we live in, but also align with a growing field of study. In recent decades, there has been a rise in the study of emotions and narrative in historiography. The history of emotion, in particular, has become an established field of research, gaining even more traction in recent years as a subject in its own right.

This field, of course, has its limitations—at least for now—because it is not possible to diagnose any historical group or individual with a specific psychological affliction based solely on literary analysis. However, these very limitations are what make the field exciting, as many areas remain unexplored. This thesis aims to contribute to this field by bridging the gap between the better-researched ancient Greek perspective on trauma and the lesser-explored Roman perspective.

Within existing scholarship on the topic, the book *On killing: The psychological cost of learning to kill in war and society* by Grossman stands out as one of the most influential works on the psychological impact of war.[1] Based on studies conducted during World War II, the book examines the peculiar results yielded by these studies. The key argument it presents is that most soldiers have an inherent aversion to killing. It also explores the various methods used to make killing more psychologically acceptable to combatants.[2] This theory emerged from the observation that riflemen's firing and hit rates were relatively low during the war. However, this theory has been critiqued by other researchers due to the specific methods used in the study and the way it attempts to universalize its findings.

For example, many soldiers in the Vietnam War were unprepared for the specific conditions and the type of combat they would face. This, combined with the growing disillusionment with the US's involvement in the conflict, raises questions about the general applicability of Grossman's theory. Throughout history, there have always been soldiers who can kill and those who cannot. This is why, in this thesis, I will adopt the view that while most individuals are psychologically resistant to killing, the ease or difficulty of killing is shaped by the circumstances surrounding the conflict.

Grossman also suggests that the relatively low number of recorded cases of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in ancient sources can be explained through two theories. First, he argues that people in the ancient world were much more accustomed to violence and death than modern humans. Second, he claims that pre-industrial warfare is less likely to cause trauma than the industrialized warfare that emerged later. Both of these theories, however, are challenged by other research, and they will be critically examined later in this thesis.

The most common starting point for research on this topic is classical Greek history. There are several reasons for this preference, but a major factor is the abundance of well-known ancient Greek literature that addresses the mental state of the warrior, with the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* serving as prime examples. In contrast, Roman literature lacks such direct sources dealing with mental health, but this gap does not make Roman history any less interesting or deserving of exploration. As will be shown in this thesis, the absence of sources on trauma in Roman

[1] Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (New York: Open Road Media, 2014).
[2] Grossman, *On Killing*, 34.

literature is, in itself, a topic worth exploring. In fact, this absence might tell us just as much about the ancient world as a wealth of sources would.

This thesis will be structured broadly, incorporating a wide range of genres and spanning several centuries. The reasons for this approach will be explained, and while it requires a number of preliminary remarks and descriptions before diving into the core research, the goal is to provide a fresh perspective on the ancient history of trauma.

Historiography and Literature

The overarching focus of this thesis is trauma in a historical context, with a specific emphasis on ancient Roman society—and even more precisely, the Roman military. It seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on trauma in the ancient world. In addition, this thesis aims to provide a broad, cohesive overview of Roman literature on the subject, while also including relevant Greek sources. This is in contrast to most existing studies, which often concentrate on a single event, source, or historical figure.

A wide range of sources and theories—drawn from the work of historians, anthropologists, and psychologists—will be discussed and combined in new ways, with the goal of offering fresh insights made possible by this interdisciplinary approach. Furthermore, several passages from primary sources that have not yet been analyzed within the context of trauma research will be introduced as part of the core argument.

Jonathan Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, published in 1994, provides the historiographical foundation for much of the research on trauma in the context of ancient history.[3] Shay, a psychiatrist, worked with American combat veterans who returned from the Vietnam War, struggling with the mental aftermath of their combat experiences. Drawing on the epic poem *The Iliad*, Shay sought to help these soldiers make sense of their experiences and find their place in a world that seemed alien after witnessing such horrors. By examining the narratives in *The Iliad*, Shay was able to help his patients address some of the psychological challenges they faced. For instance, the symbolic beginning and end of war, as well as the individual role a soldier plays in it, can help establish boundaries around traumatic events, which in turn allows soldiers to prevent those traumas from interfering with their everyday lives.

[3] Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010).

Although Shay's work was primarily aimed at providing psychological relief for his patients, his ability to draw connections between ancient literature and modern psychological phenomena inspired many researchers to pursue similar inquiries. This influence led to a number of studies, such as *Caesar in Vietnam* by Aislinn Melchior[4] and *From Melos to My Lai* by Lawrence Tritle.[5] These works also engage with ancient sources but differ in methodology and research goals. Many of these studies, inspired by *Achilles in Vietnam*, have shifted from Shay's psychological focus to a more historical interest. Nevertheless, Shay's methodology, with its emphasis on narrative in literature, continues to inspire historiographical research in this sub-field, as it remains applicable to many research questions.

In addition to analyzing the premises of modern scholarship and the many scholarly works that have contributed to current views on combat trauma, this thesis will also scrutinize the ancient sources, from a wide array of genres, produced and read during the enduring dominance of republican and imperial Rome

Military manuals, historical texts, legal documents, philosophical and medical works, as well as mythical epics, will all be utilized in conjunction. While this broad approach weakens the direct connections between these individual pieces of writing, it is necessary for addressing a complex and specific phenomenon like trauma. Given the nature of the subject, few alternatives exist to explain such a broad concept through multiple, diverse sources.

As previously noted, literature on trauma in the ancient world is scarce, though it has been gaining popularity. Jonathan Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam*, published in 1994, marked a significant contribution to the field. While this work is relatively modern in the context of historiography, it seems surprising that no other seminal work has emerged in the thirty years since its publication, especially given the rapid increase in scholarly publications during the twenty-first century. Although the field of memory studies has expanded significantly, research focused on the ancient world appears to be lagging behind within this broader field.[6]

[4] Aislinn Melchior, "Caesar in Vietnam: Did Roman Soldiers Suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder?" *Greece & Rome* 58, no. 2 (2011): 209–23.
[5] Lawrence A. Tritle, *From Melos to My Lai: A Study in Violence, Culture and Social Survival* (London: Routledge, 2000).
[6] Marek Tamm, "Beyond History and Memory: New Perspectives in Memory Studies," *History Compass* 11, no. 6 (2013): 458–73.

As one scholar puts it, "Unlike history proper, mnemohistory is concerned not with the past as such, but only with the past as it is remembered. It surveys the storylines of tradition, the webs of intertextuality, and the diachronic continuities and discontinuities of reading the past."[7]

As previously mentioned, Jonathan Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam* serves as the starting point for this niche area of historiographical research. This book, along with many similar works published since its release—such as *From Melos to My Lai* by Lawrence Tritle and *Combat Trauma and the Ancient Greeks* by Meineck and Konstan—primarily focuses on ancient Greek literature.[8] [9] This is a logical starting point due to the themes and depictions found in the epics of the *Iliad* and tragedies like the story of the hero Ajax. The Greeks wrote about the personal impact of violence, with individuals in these stories often having mythological or godlike backgrounds, yet being depicted as deeply human in their emotions and behaviors. Themes such as wrath, grief, homesickness, and depression are all explored—if not literally, at least in a metaphorical sense. The concept of a soldier's homecoming is another recurring theme, with the *Odyssey* standing out as a stark example. Figures like Achilles and Ajax provide valuable case studies for researching ancient perspectives on trauma, war, and loss.

In contrast, the Romans seem to have largely avoided these themes. While Roman foundational mythology also features larger-than-life characters like Romulus and early kings such as Numa, these figures serve a different purpose. Romulus, for instance, is credited with giving his name to the city and inspiring its warlike spirit, while Numa is traditionally credited with establishing Rome's religious institutions, including the Vestal Virgins. Each subsequent king contributed specific attributes to Roman society, whether as warlords or statesmen. Livius, in his foundational history, likely wrote about these figures to legitimize the divine character of the Romans and, by extension, the current emperor, Augustus.

The notion that these kings were singularly responsible for shaping Roman character traits or religious ideas is highly improbable. Such developments occur over long periods of time and are often the result of generational change. In short, while the Romans did have mythological figures, the focus on these characters was very different from the Greek approach. Roman heroes were often celebrated for their accomplishments or their value to society as a whole. While Achilles was revered as a hero, he was also portrayed as wrathful, vengeful, and lustful—

[7] Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 9.
[8] Tritle, *From Melos to My Lai*, 45.
[9] Peter Meineck and David Konstan, eds., *Combat Trauma and the Ancient Greeks* (New York: Springer, 2014).

traits that intrigued the Greeks. However, Roman literature seems to have shown little interest in exploring these more complex, human aspects of their heroes.

This focus on Greek literature has led many modern scholars to concentrate on the Greek world as a whole when researching ancient conceptions of mental illness. As a result, there remains a significant gap in modern literature regarding the Roman perspective on these topics. While some works, such as *Caesar in Vietnam* and others, have addressed the subject, the body of research is much smaller, and comprehensive studies on the topic in Roman literature are still lacking. While this thesis does not aim to fill that gap entirely or become a definitive work on combat trauma in Roman literature, the approach will be to utilize and compare as many different primary sources from the period as possible. The goal is to develop a theory on the general Roman attitude toward trauma, PTSD, and related themes.

Context and defining concepts

Before delving into the main content of this research, it is important to clarify a few key concepts that are essential to understanding the arguments presented in this thesis. The issue of how Roman society viewed topics such as medicine, philosophy, suicide, and related issues will be discussed briefly here. These concepts are complex and deserving of individual research papers in their own right. Given that scholars often disagree on various aspects of these topics, it is crucial to present one clear explanation here, which will serve as the foundation for the analysis that follows.

Soldier: When discussing Roman warriors throughout history, it could be argued that it is important to refer to soldiers by their specific classification, such as hoplite, hastate, legionary, etc. However, for the sake of simplicity and clarity in this thesis, and because the distinctions in rank or combat style will be addressed before the main argument, the term "soldier" will be used most frequently. While the differences between, for example, a fourth-century *tagmata* horseman and a first-century centurion are significant, these distinctions are less relevant when considering the onset of PTSD in soldiers. The traumatic realities of war, as explored in this thesis, are viewed as universal. Although close-combat soldiers may be exposed to more directly frightening images than archers or generals, all soldiers, regardless of era or role, who experience combat in any form, are found to be vulnerable to such afflictions. MacMullen defines the legionary as the "core and reason for its being" of the Roman army.[10] The members

[10] Ramsay MacMullen, "The Legion as a Society," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, no. 4 (1984): 440–56.

of a Roman legion were often recruited from various groups of people, but these soldiers were initially organized based on factors such as their place of birth. However, as the army expanded, this method of grouping soldiers became increasingly impractical, and recruits were selected more randomly. Ultimately, this shift weakened the bonds between legionaries within a single legion and eroded the sense of community within the army as a whole.

In this thesis, terms such as Roman army, Roman military, Roman warriors, and Roman soldiers will be used interchangeably. However, it is important to note that our modern understanding of terms like "warrior" and "army" may be anachronistic. Instead of viewing the Roman military as a monolithic or machine-like entity, it is more accurate to conceptualize it in plural terms—thinking of "soldiers" and "Roman armies" as distinct groups. This perspective aligns more closely with ancient views of the military, where it was seen as a social entity rather than simply a state institution.[11]

PTSD has been and continues to be quite a difficult subject to place a specific definition unto. The psychological criteria for its diagnosis have continually shifted since its inception and there is still so much we do not know about trauma.[12] For the purposes of this thesis however, we do not have to be so concerned with the specifics of these criteria. One of the most general and vague definitions is the one that is also most commonly used: “Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a psychiatric disorder that may occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event, series of events or set of circumstances.[13] An individual may experience this as emotionally or physically harmful or life-threatening and may affect mental, physical, social, and/or spiritual well-being. Examples include natural disasters, serious accidents, terrorist acts, war/combat, rape/sexual assault, historical trauma, intimate partner violence and bullying.”[14] The most important criteria by which modern psychiatrists define PTSD is the DSM 5, which is described as follows:

Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence in one (or more) of the following ways: 1) directly experiencing the traumatic event(s), 2) witnessing, in person, the event(s) as it occurred to others, 3) learning that the traumatic event(s) occurred to a close

[11] Simon James, “The Community of Soldiers: A Major Identity and Centre of Power in the Roman Empire,” *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Journal* 1998 (1999).
[12] Casey L. May and Blair E. Wisco, “Defining Trauma: How Level of Exposure and Proximity Affect Risk for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder,” *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 8, no. 2 (2016): 233–40.
[13] May and Wisco, “Defining Trauma,” 233.
[14] American Psychiatric Association, “What Is PTSD?” *American Psychiatric Association*, 2025, https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/ptsd/what-is-ptsd.

family member or close friend (in cases of actual or threatened death of a family member or friend, the event(s) must have been violent or accidental), or 4) experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s) (e.g., first responders collecting human remains; police officers repeatedly exposed to details of child abuse). Note: Criterion A4 does not apply to exposure through electronic media, television, movies, or pictures, unless this exposure is work-related. [15]

This definition a quite broad one. Point three and four in this DSM 5 definition are definitely the more modern additions to the more traditional and more narrow view on trauma, which states that the trauma is directly perceived or experienced by the traumatized individual. While these last two criteria are definitely interesting to research in their own right, it would be quite difficult to use these in this thesis. As we shall see later, the source material on trauma and traumatic experience is already limited and when we try to introduce these extra criteria, it would only muddy the waters because most evidence would have to be speculative.

The diagnosis of PTSD is a fairly new one within modern medicine. The term was first used in 1980 and its definition has been prone to shifts in the following decades. Many factors contribute to the lateness of this diagnosis as compared to other mental illnesses such as bipolarism. The role of the symptoms, causes, and criteria are not set in stone and discussion around these factors have created different conclusions on the affliction. The 'Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders' is the seminal work from which basically all diagnostic criteria are drawn. In the first two editions of this manual, abbreviated do DSM-I and DSM-II did describe symptoms that were attributed to highly stressful situations, but it was not until DSM-III, published in 1980, that we find the first mention of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. In DSM-III and DSM-IV, PTSD was classified under anxiety disorders, but in the latest DSM-V, it was moved to a newly created category dedicated to trauma. While the existence of a traumatic event is a constant throughout the definitions in DSM III, IV and V, the criteria for this event to be defined as traumatic did change.

DSM-IV/TR and DSM-5 text described the qualifying event objectively as "traumatic," defining it as involving "actual or threatened death," "serious injury," or "sexual violence.

While a strong argument can be made that this definition of a traumatic event excludes quite a few instances where one could evolve a traumatic response, since this thesis deals mostly with

[15] American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

war, soldiery, conquest, etc., this definition works well as injury, violence and death are all of course present in these events. The definition of the symptoms associated with PTSD has also shifted throughout the different editions of the DSM. Avoidance, numbing, arousal, amnesia are all examples of symptoms which were presented in some or all editions of the DSM. In the latest version, twenty symptoms in total were attributed to PTSD.

The opening statement of the text accompanying PTSD criteria from DSM-III onward states that the "essential feature" of PTSD "is the development of characteristic symptoms following" trauma. In the definition of PTSD conditionally requiring the temporal association of trauma preceding the posttraumatic stress syndrome, etiologic assumptions (symptoms caused by trauma exposure) are not included. However, DSM-III17 and DSM-III-R18 each introduced causal language in a single instance, describing the "stressor producing this syndrome," and DSM-IV/-TR described symptoms "resulting from the exposure" to trauma. DSM-5 avoided causal language altogether. In all editions of the DSM, trauma exposure by definition precedes onset (or exacerbation, in DSM-5) of criterion symptoms, which begin (or worsen, in DSM-5) after the event or are related to it contextually and could not have occurred before it. Symptoms observed after trauma cannot be attributed to PTSD if they were preexisting also and thus do not count toward the diagnosis; DSM-IV/-TR19,20 recommended consideration of other diagnoses for such symptoms.[16]

	DSM-IV (1994)[19] and DSM-IV-TR (2000)[20a]	**DSM-5 (2013)[21]**
	A1. Traumatic event involving actual or threatened death or serious injury or a threat to physical integrity A2. Intense fear, helplessness, or horror (in children, may be expressed by disorganized or agitated behavior)	Traumatic event involving actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence (Text): Emotional reactions to the traumatic event (eg, fear, helplessness, horror) no longer in Criterion A
	(Experienced directly): Military combat, violent personal assault, (sexual assault, physical attack, robbery, mugging), being kidnapped, being taken hostage, terrorist attack, torture, incarceration as prisoner of war or in concentration camp, natural or man-made disaster, severe automobile accident; also being diagnosed with life-threatening illness (*DSM-IV* only) (Witnessed): Violent assault, accident, war, or disaster, or unexpectedly witnessing a dead body or body parts (Via close relative/friend): Violent personal assault, serious accident, serious injury; sudden, unexpected death; life-threatening disease of one's child	(Experienced directly): Military combat, violent personal assault, (sexual assault, physical attack, robbery, mugging), being kidnapped, being taken hostage, terrorist attack, torture, incarceration as prisoner of war or in a concentration camp, natural or man-made disaster, severe automobile accident, sudden and catastrophic medical incident (eg, waking during surgery, anaphylactic shock) (Witnessed): Threatened or serious injury, unnatural death, physical or sexual abuse of another person, medical catastrophe (eg, life- threatening hemorrhage) (Via close relative/friend): Incidents that are violent or accidental: assault, suicide, serious accident or injury, unnatural death (Repeated/extreme trauma): First responder collecting human remains; police officer repeatedly exposed to details of child abuse

[16] Carol S. North et al., "The Evolution of PTSD Criteria across Editions of DSM," *Annals of Clinical Psychiatry* 28, no. 3 (2016): 197–208.

	Experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with trauma to self or others. (Text): • Direct exposure: Direct personal experience • Witnessed: Trauma to another person • Indirect exposure through others: Learning of exposure to family member or other close associate/close friend	• Direct exposure: To self • Witnessed: Eyewitness of trauma to others • Indirect exposure through others: Learning of exposure to close family member or close friend • Repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of trauma (exposure through electronic media, television, movies, or pictures, applies only if work-related)

	DSM-IV (1994)[19] and DSM-IV-TR (2000)[20]	**DSM-5 (2013)[21]**
	17 symptoms in 3 groups: **B:** Re-experience: ≥1 of 5 symptoms (physiological reactivity to reminders moved from D to B; both psychological distress and physiological reactivity prompted by exposure to "internal or external cues" rather than to "events" that symbolize or resemble the traumatic event; fearful dreams in children do not require recognizable content; acting or feeling as though traumatic event is recurring in children may present as trauma-specific re-enactment) **C:** Avoidance/numbing: ≥3 of 7 symptoms (conversations added to thoughts and feelings avoided; "places or people" replaces "situations in activities avoided; "psychogenic amnesia" dropped from inability to remember important aspect of trauma, described simply as "amnesia" in text; "participation" added to diminished interest in activities; and child specifier dropped) **D:** Hyperarousal: ≥2 of 5 symptoms (physiological reactivity to reminders moved to B)	**20 symptoms in 4 groups:** **B:** Intrusion: ≥1 of 5 symptoms ("dissociative reactions" wording describes flashbacks; "involuntary" added to memories; dreams no longer "of the event" but "content and/or affect are related to the event;" "prolonged" added to psychological distress; "marked" added to physiological reactions) **C:** Avoidance of reminders: ≥1 of 2 symptoms for avoidance of reminders (1 for internal reminders and 1 for external reminders) **D:** Altered cognitions and mood: ≥2 of 7 symptoms (1 amnesia, 2 cognitions, 1 mood, 3 numbing; negative beliefs about self/world added; blame of self/others based on cognitive distortions added; persistent negative emotional state added, specifically including guilt, fear, and horror, and anger; foreshortened future deleted; "dissociative amnesia" added to inability to remember important aspects of trauma, with specific exclusion added for physical causes for amnesia) **E:** Altered arousal and reactivity: ≥2 of 6 symptoms (reckless or self-destructive behavior added; verbal and physical aggression, with no provocation, added to irritability/anger outbursts)
	E. >1 month	**F.** >1 month

From these excerpts and tables, we can draw several conclusions that will guide this thesis in defining traumatic experiences and PTSD. The causes of PTSD are almost always linked to the experience or witnessing of violent acts. As such, we can expect to find many instances in the primary sources of ancient Romans experiencing such events. Regarding symptoms, it is important to remember that the twenty symptoms listed are possibilities, and not all must be present in every case of PTSD. At the same time, we should avoid hastily diagnosing PTSD based on a single symptom description from a historical figure. However, when we encounter characters displaying a combination of symptoms—such as flashbacks, mood swings,

aggression, and self-destructive behavior—it is reasonable to suggest that PTSD might be present. That said, it is important to note that the current version of the DSM is not the final authority on PTSD's definition. The fact that the symptoms and causes have shifted considerably over the past forty years suggests that this understanding may continue to evolve in the future. With this working definition in mind, we can proceed with researching PTSD and trauma in a historical context.

The face of Roman battle

Before proceeding with arguments later in this thesis regarding the specific circumstances of the Roman soldier, it is necessary to first establish a model of ancient Roman warfare. Despite its prominence in the historical imagination, there remains significant scholarly debate about how battles were actually fought. One common belief is that the numbers of soldiers in ancient armies were often exaggerated. The odds were typically presented as heavily in favor of the opponent, making their eventual defeat seem even more impressive. As a result, many details about actual combat are difficult to extract from ancient sources. Given the ongoing debates about how the Romans fought, it is crucial to select a specific model that will guide the discussion in this thesis.

While battle descriptions in Roman warfare are relatively common, with historians such as Livius, Ammianus Marcellinus, and Polybius providing detailed accounts of numerous engagements, these descriptions are often limited in several ways. First, as with Livius, many of these historical works were written with personal agendas in mind. Additionally, authors were often, though not always, physically and temporally distant from the battlefield, and may not have experienced combat firsthand. This is significant for our understanding of the actual combat that took place during these battles. Although no consensus has yet been reached among modern scholars regarding the nature of Roman battles, Philip Sabin has proposed a likely scenario in his article on the "face of Roman battle."[17]

In his article on roman combat, Sabin argues that two of the most popular models of infantry engagement are insufficient in explaining Roman combat. The first is the *othismos* model, which is inspired by the Greek combat method employed by hoplites. In this model, the two sides would collide and engage in a type of shoving match, where the weight and depth of the ranks played a decisive role in determining the victor. In hoplite battles, the right flank of each side usually held the strongest contingent of fighters, and this often led to that flank

[17] Philip Sabin, “The Face of Roman Battle,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 90 (2000): 1–17.

overpowering its opponent. This would result in both sides attempting to envelop each other, either breaking the enemy or engaging in direct combat with their own flanks. When battles with tens of thousands of soldiers result in only hundreds of casualties on one or both sides, the *othismos* model seems to provide a plausible explanation, as morale often broke before significant casualties were inflicted, due to exhaustion or recognition of the enemy's superior strength. While this model appears valid for Roman combat up until the Samnite Wars, it does not apply well to the maniple system, the post-Marian reforms, or the cavalry-focused armies of later antiquity. Since the Romans only used the Greek phalanx in the early centuries of their history—an era for which we have limited written sources—the *othismos* model does not suffice for the purposes of this thesis.

The second model is what could be described as the "Hollywood" model, where individual soldiers engage in prolonged hand-to-hand duels with a single opponent, with ample room for maneuvering. However, this model fails to account for the relatively low casualty numbers on the winning side, as well as the physical and emotional toll it would take to remain engaged in such combat for extended periods.[18] While there is evidence, particularly in the Greek world, that duels between representatives of opposing armies did occur, this scenario—despite its dramatic nature—could resemble the scenes often depicted in movies, where two heroes battle in front of their respective armies to decide the fate of their men. Such "champion warfare" would have spared the lives of many combatants, particularly in city-states like the Greek poleis, where soldiers were often part of the citizen body. This would also explain the prominence of these hero duels in literature, with the battle between Achilles and Hector in the *Iliad* being the most famous example in the Western tradition.

In ancient Rome, however, the idea of single combat is more contentious. While the typical image of Roman warfare evokes large-scale battles with cohorts cutting down waves of barbarians or clashing in civil wars, there is evidence suggesting that single combat did take place occasionally, particularly during the Republican and pre-Republican periods. Although we can find instances in the historical sources where duels occurred, there is far more evidence indicating that such encounters were the exception rather than the rule in ancient warfare.

Sabin proposes an intermediary model: one or both lines of infantry would charge at each other as a unit, with some individual hand-to-hand combat taking place. This close-quarters combat would mostly be carried out by the more skilled or aggressive fighters within the ranks, while

[18] Sabin, “The Face of Roman Battle,” 10.

the majority of soldiers would primarily focus on survival. As the physical strain of combat took its toll, the lines would break and create distance between the forces. During this interval, insults and missiles might be exchanged, but more importantly, this moment allowed the combatants time to recover, move injured or fatigued soldiers away from the frontline, and replace them with fresh reserves. This ability to rotate troops is often cited as one of the key strengths of the Roman military, and it helps explain why deep ranks—common in other battle formations—were not as essential. This model will be used in this thesis. This model is supported by modern data and military theory as well. It seems that even in modern conflicts such as the Vietnam war, only a small percentage of soldiers were expected to do the actual fighting and killing:

Out of an entire platoon of soldiers, you have perhaps two men who qualify as genuine killers. Men who actually see enemy troops, put the front sight blade on them, and blow them away. These guys are usually the squad leader and the platoon sergeant. Genuine killers are not to be confused with guys who simply spray an area and happen to kill someone.[19]

There is, however, a different perspective from the universal one described here. Crowley, in his work *Beyond the Universal Soldier*, argues that specific socio-historical contexts create unique circumstances in which soldiers become either more or less susceptible to combat stress. He points to the Athenian hoplite as one such example. Crowley contends that this warrior was conditioned from a young age by religious and social norms to neither lament the killing of an enemy nor fear death in battle. To die for one's country was considered one of the greatest honors a man could achieve, and these fallen soldiers were highly revered in Athenian society. State funerals, inscriptions, and yearly ceremonies honoring the dead soldiers conditioned the hoplite to not so much fear death in battle, but to almost long for it. The same holds true for the act of killing; the slaughter of a particularly high number of enemies was often regarded as a divine gift, not as a damned act or a lamentable tragedy. These conditions helped shield the ancient hoplite from the psychological trauma that might otherwise result from the violence of war, effectively protecting him from PTSD.[20]

Crowley argues in favor of the notion that the Romans were simply not equipped to articulate something they did not understand—specifically, the concept of combat trauma. This thesis

[19] S. L. A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), 58–59.
[20] Jason Crowley, "Beyond the Universal Soldier: Combat Trauma in Classical Antiquity," in *Combat Trauma and the Ancient Greeks*, ed. Peter Meineck and David Konstan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014), 105–30.

will argue against this perspective by first showing that Roman views on medicine and psychology should have enabled them to explore the idea of combat trauma. Additionally, it will contend that a lack of intimate knowledge about a subject does not necessarily prevent people from discussing it or recognizing its existence.

One possible explanation, and perhaps the first that comes to mind when considering whether the ancient Romans were aware of PTSD, is that they simply did not possess enough knowledge about the condition to understand it, either in terms of its existence or its connection to traumatic events such as combat. However, as demonstrated in Chapter One, several sources suggest that at least some Romans were aware of a relationship, if not direct causation, between violent acts—whether committed or endured—and symptoms resembling those we now attribute to PTSD. These sources do not necessarily describe PTSD in modern terms, but they do suggest a connection between the psychological consequences of violence and the behavior or emotional state of individuals who experienced it.

Stoics on mental illness

When discussing the availability of specific medical or psychological knowledge regarding trauma in ancient Rome, it becomes clear that the sources directly addressing these topics are extremely limited. In antiquity, mental illness was typically understood in one of two ways: either as stemming from a physical imbalance, such as an excess of bile in the system, or as a flaw in one's character. This view was especially prevalent in philosophical texts, where it was most commonly associated with the philosophical paradigm of Stoicism. For much of Roman history, Stoicism was the dominant philosophical framework, particularly among the elite, and thus it is useful to examine how the Stoics approached the concept of trauma and mental disturbance.

Stoic philosophy, which originated in Greece with the philosopher Zeno, became the prevailing philosophical outlook in Rome until it was gradually supplanted by Christian thought. The Stoics believed that all humans, except for the wise, were essentially subject to madness in some form. However, they made a distinction between two kinds of mental disturbance: medical madness and the more philosophical form of madness to which all humans were prone. The Stoics themselves were concerned with a distinction in the way they categorized madness, often differentiating between the "insanity" of illness and the "frenzy" of intense emotional states. As Cicero explains:

Where the Greeks got the word mania from, I cannot easily say; we, however, distinguish this concept better than they do, because we separate that madness (insania), which is closely akin to stupidity (insipientia) and a wider term, from frenzy (furor). The Greeks, too, wish to do this, but cannot with their vocabulary; they call melankholia that which we call 'frenzy,' as if it were that the mind could be disturbed only by black bile and not often, too, by grave anger or fear or sorrow, which kind of madness we attribute to Athamas, Alcmaeon, Ajax, and Orestes... Though this (i.e., frenzy) appears to be worse than madness, the fact is, however, that frenzy can afflict a sage whereas madness cannot.[21]

In the Stoic framework, the concepts of **frenzy** (*furor*) and **melancholia** play a significant role in understanding psychological disturbances, particularly in relation to intense emotional states. For the Stoics, **frenzy** was a condition that could even afflict the wise—those individuals who, in Stoic thought, ideally possess reason and virtue. This suggests that the Stoics acknowledged the potential for powerful emotions, such as anger, fear, and sorrow, to cause psychological upheaval, even in those who are rational and virtuous. In this sense, the Stoics recognized that intense emotional experiences could disrupt the mind, an insight that resonates with modern concepts of psychological trauma, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

While the Stoics did not possess the clinical language that we use today, such as the term PTSD, they did acknowledge that overwhelming emotions could lead to mental disturbance. The Stoic notion of **melancholia** and **furor** can be understood as forms of emotional turmoil that disrupt one's rational faculties, somewhat analogous to what we now understand as *combat stress* or the psychological consequences of violent experiences. From this perspective, Stoic thought provides an ancient framework for conceptualizing the psychological effects of trauma, particularly in the context of battle or other traumatic events, even if they lacked the modern terminology.

Regarding the Stoic concept of **insania**, it was closely linked to a deficiency in wisdom. Unlike our modern understanding of insanity, the Stoics did not view insania as a clinical mental disorder, but rather as a lack of reason or a failure to live according to virtue. In this sense, they considered someone "insane" not because of a psychological affliction but due to their irrational behavior or failure to align with Stoic ideals.

[21] Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Divinatione*, trans. Charles Duke Yonge (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1856), 3.11.

Therefore, while the Romans did not have the clinical vocabulary to describe PTSD, their recognition of emotional disturbances such as *furor* and *melancholia* suggests that they had an awareness of the psychological consequences of trauma. These disturbances could be seen as a form of emotional turmoil that might arise in response to traumatic experiences, such as those faced by soldiers in battle. Though they could not define it in the terms we use today, the Stoics' recognition of these emotional states demonstrates a conceptual understanding of the psychological impact of intense trauma.

For the purposes of this research, **medical madness** is the most relevant concept. The key distinction lies in the fact that **frenzy** (*furor*) is a state that anyone—regardless of their wisdom—can experience, whereas **insania**, the madness of a lack of wisdom, is something that only those lacking reason may fall prey to. Therefore, *furor* can be understood as a mental disturbance brought on by external influences or intense emotional stimuli, rather than by an inherent flaw in character. While the Stoics do not frequently explore the details of *furor*, they appear to adopt the prevailing medical understanding of their time, which attributes such madness to an imbalance in the four humours of the body. The exact origins of this imbalance, however, are often left vague. Extreme emotional experiences, such as the loss of a loved one or the trauma of combat, could plausibly be considered events capable of disrupting the bodily humours and triggering such psychological disturbances.

In Roman law, individuals suffering from *furor* or *madness* were legally incapacitated and prohibited from managing their own property, in contrast to those afflicted by the philosophical concept of madness, such as **insania**, who were not necessarily considered unfit to handle personal affairs. This distinction suggests that the Romans were aware of mental illness as a medical condition, one that could affect an individual's practical functioning. Some Stoics even specifically attributed medical madness to an excess of black bile in the body, a notion rooted in the ancient understanding of bodily fluids and their impact on mental health. Cicero, for instance, refers to **melancholia** as a potential cause of madness, further reinforcing the association between emotional disturbances and physical imbalance.

Medicine

The common medical model in Roman society was rooted in the *Corpus Hippocraticum*.[22] Although these texts were written in the 5th century BCE, their influence only reached the Roman world by the 3rd century BCE, with Greek physicians spreading throughout the empire.

[22] *Corpus Hippocraticum,* trans. W. H. S. Jones (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923).

This medical model was based primarily on the theory of the four humours, which posited that the human body consisted of four bodily fluids: blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm. The balance of these humours was thought to be essential for maintaining both physical health and mental well-being. Disruptions in the balance of the humours were believed to result in a range of physical and psychological impairments.

The connection between physical health and mental health, as determined by the balance of the humours, is an important feature of this medical model. Though mental illnesses were not identified in the modern sense, the fact that mental conditions were distinguished as separate from physical illness—though still related to bodily imbalances—provides further evidence of Roman awareness of mental health issues, however rudimentary.

In Roman medicine, mental illness was not formally recognized as a distinct category. While conditions such as madness and melancholy were acknowledged, they were often described as "illnesses of the soul" and thus fell under the domain of philosophers, particularly those focused on the study of the soul and ethics. The philosophers, rather than physicians, were often the ones to address the mental and emotional disturbances of individuals, placing these issues within the broader context of moral or psychological disorders rather than strictly medical ones.[23]

Some ancient practices can be seen as having parallels with contemporary forms of psychotherapy. These similarities are primarily observed in methods that focus on the physical release of emotions, such as through muscular relaxation or vocal expressions like screaming. However, it is important to note that treatments for what were termed "diseases of the soul" seldom included verbal exchanges between doctor and patient—an element that, in modern times, forms the foundation of psychotherapy. There appeared to be a distinction between different types of mental illnesses in ancient Roman thought. Melancholy was considered a chronic condition, believed to be caused by an excess of black bile. In contrast, phrenitis was seen as an acute, delirious condition, characterized by sudden onset and marked by intense mental disturbance.[24] Most mental illnesses, as understood in ancient times, were categorized by physicians and philosophers into one of two groups: phrenitic or melancholic. Phrenitis referred to conditions involving acute delirium or confusion, while melancholy was associated

[23] Thomas J. Papadimos, "Stoicism, the Physician, and Care of Medical Outliers," *BMC Medical Ethics* 5, no. 1 (2004), article 8, https://doi.org/10.1186/1472-6939-5-8.
[24] Christopher Gill, "Ancient Psychotherapy," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 46, no. 3 (July–September 1985): 307–25.

with chronic states of sadness, despair, or depression, often attributed to an imbalance of black bile. These classifications reflect the early attempts to categorize mental disturbances, though they were not as nuanced or specific as modern diagnostic criteria.

Philosophy was often recommended as part of the treatment for mental afflictions such as melancholy. As stated, "for philosophers remove fear, sadness, and anger by their words, and this helps to provide a considerable improvement in the bodily condition." This reflects the ancient view that mental distress, while linked to emotional and intellectual states, was still primarily understood as having physical origins. The goal of treatment was, therefore, to restore balance to both the body and the soul. This perspective illustrates an early form of the body-mind connection that is central to modern psychology.

In antiquity, "neurotic behavior" was interpreted in two distinct ways: physicians viewed it as a symptom of the physical condition of melancholy, while philosophers considered it a manifestation of intellectual or moral weakness. Although these two approaches to "neurosis" existed side by side, they were not integrated or synthesized during this period. This division reflects the lack of a unified understanding of mental health in Greco-Roman thought, where the physical and philosophical explanations for mental afflictions remained separate and distinct.

In his work *On the Sacred Disease*, Hippocrates posits that epilepsy shares a similar cause with madness, both being the result of an imbalanced state of the brain.[25] He suggests that an excess of one of the four humours—specifically phlegm—disrupts the brain's ability to function properly, leading to the involuntary convulsions characteristic of epilepsy. This concept of the four humours remained dominant in Western medicine for centuries.

Through the brain, in particular, we think, consider, see, hear, and distinguish the ugly from the beautiful, the bad from the good, the pleasant from the unpleasant … It is the same thing which makes us mad or delirious, inspires us with dread and fear, whether by night or by day, brings dreams, inopportune mistakes, aimless anxieties, absent-mindedness, and acts that are contrary to habit. These things that we suffer all come from the brain, when it is not healthy, but becomes abnormally hot, cold, moist, or dry … Madness comes from its moistness. When the brain is abnormally moist, of necessity it moves, and when it moves

[25] Hippocrates, *On the Sacred Disease*, trans. W. H. S. Jones (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923).

neither sight nor hearing are still, but we see or hear now one thing and now another, and the tongue speaks in accordance with the things seen and heard on any occasion.[26]

As evidenced in this passage, Hippocrates does not incorporate emotional factors into his explanation of madness; rather, he emphasizes the brain's physical and philosophical attributes. He posits that madness arises from an excess of moisture, a tangible physical quality, and that this imbalance results in the physical manifestations of madness. In addition to moisture, the states of hot, cold, and dry are also considered essential parameters for assessing the brain's health. These qualities must be in balance—both hot and cold, as well as dry and moist. Notably, Hippocrates does not provide specific remedies for restoring balance to these humours in this passage, and there is scant information on how ancient physicians addressed mental illnesses in general.

Religious practices, such as praying to a deity associated with a particular affliction, were often proposed as part of the therapeutic process. If a Roman physician believed that an imbalance in the brain's heat was responsible for a disorder, it would be reasonable to infer that increasing the heat could be seen as a potential remedy. Historical evidence shows that wealthy Romans sometimes relocated to different parts of the Mediterranean in pursuit of better health, which may suggest the belief that environmental factors, such as temperature, played a role in their treatment and recovery.

Universalism versus relativism

The first issue that must be addressed is whether modern diagnoses and terminology can be applied to cultures as distinct from our own as ancient Roman or Greek societies. There are two primary approaches to this dilemma: the universalist and the relativist approaches. The universalist perspective answers this question with a straightforward 'yes.' According to this view, regardless of the society—past or present, or whether in the East or West—there would always be individuals who suffer mentally due to direct or vicarious exposure to traumatic experiences. Proponents of this approach base their arguments on source material spanning various periods of history, employing a methodology similar to the one used in this thesis. While universalists face significant challenges in justifying their stance, their approach opens up intriguing avenues for further research. The central argument of the universalist perspective

[26] Hippocrates, *On the Sacred Disease*, 14.2–5.

is grounded in the belief in the universality of the human condition, which, they argue, also extends to how the mind processes and responds to trauma.

Relativists, on the other hand, would argue—rightly—that there are numerous external and internal factors that shape both the prevalence of trauma in specific societies and the intensity of the affliction experienced by individuals. For instance, individuals raised in societies where violence is a more frequent part of daily life may perceive violence as more natural and less traumatic than those who have never encountered it. Such cultural and contextual factors influence how people understand, respond to, and cope with traumatic experiences, leading relativists to emphasize the role of societal norms, historical context, and personal experiences in shaping the psychological impact of trauma.[27]

The nature of the experiences a victimized individual endures also plays a significant role in determining the outcomes of trauma. For instance, research has shown that individuals interned at the Auschwitz concentration camp who were tattooed during their imprisonment were more likely to develop PTSD compared to those who were not tattooed. This finding suggests that specific circumstances can have a profound impact on the severity and prevalence of trauma. Such evidence implies that the emergence of trauma could, to a certain extent, be dependent on these situational factors. One could even argue that an individual placed in a particular set of circumstances might not suffer from trauma, despite encountering otherwise traumatic experiences. This highlights the complex interplay between individual experiences and broader contextual factors in shaping the psychological consequences of trauma.

The two approaches, universalist and relativist, do not appear to be mutually exclusive. In fact, they can complement each other in understanding the complexities of trauma. While this thesis may lean more towards a universalist perspective, the arguments presented by the relativist approach are equally compelling. Both perspectives offer valuable insights into how trauma is experienced and understood, emphasizing different but interconnected factors such as shared human experiences and the influence of cultural and contextual variables. The balance between these approaches can enrich our understanding of how trauma manifests across diverse societies and historical contexts.[28]

[27] Andrea Burri and Andreas Maercker, "Differences in Prevalence Rates of PTSD in Various European Countries Explained by War Exposure, Other Trauma and Cultural Value Orientation," *BMC Research Notes* 7 (2014): 1–11.
[28] Burri and Maercker, "Differences in Prevalence Rates of PTSD," 1-11.

While numerous factors influence the development of mental disorders such as PTSD, the fundamental link between combat, violence, and trauma appears to be so universal that denying it would seem disingenuous. The primary concern, however, remains the issue of absolute relativism. As previously discussed, it is conceivable that altering certain circumstances could potentially nullify the experience of trauma. While this theory seems plausible, there are no concrete examples of societies that definitively fit this description. Therefore, it seems equally likely that such a society either does not exist or cannot exist, suggesting that the relationship between violence and trauma remains a fundamental aspect of the human experience across different contexts.

Suicide in Ancient Rome

In the chapter following the introduction of this thesis, a number of legal texts concerning soldier suicide will be examined to illustrate the concept of trauma within the Roman military. To contextualize these texts, it is essential to provide a brief overview of the status of suicide within Roman society as a whole. This is important because the Roman perspective on suicide was notably different from our modern view, and it is crucial to understand these texts in their historical context when exploring their relevance to trauma.

A comprehensive history of suicide throughout the entire Roman Empire would be far beyond the scope of this thesis, as such a topic could easily fill entire volumes. For the purposes of this study, it is sufficient to offer a concise overview of the Roman attitudes towards suicide, highlighting both the negative and positive perceptions that shaped these attitudes. While a detailed account is not necessary, understanding these differing views is crucial for interpreting the sources referenced.

Roman attitudes towards suicide were complex and varied. At times, suicide was demanded by circumstances or even celebrated, while at other times, it was condemned. One example of this is the suicide of Emperor Otho, which, as described in historical accounts, inspired his soldiers to follow suit and take their own lives in solidarity with their fallen leader. This particular instance reflects the emotional and social factors that influenced Roman attitudes toward suicide and its connection to concepts of honor, duty, and personal agency within the context of Roman military culture.

The Praetorian cohorts carried his body with praises and tears, covering his wound and his hands with kisses. Some of the soldiers killed themselves near the funeral pile, not moved by remorse or by fear, but by the desire to emulate his glory, and by love of their Prince.

Afterwards this kind of death became a common practice among all ranks at Bedriacum, at Placentia, and in the other camps. Over Otho was built a tomb unpretending and therefore likely to stand.[29]

It appears that the historical record reveals a complex and nuanced view of suicide within Roman society, where its moral or ethical judgment was not fixed but rather contingent on the circumstances. The rate of suicide, coupled with the lack of pervasive negative connotations, suggests that suicide was not inherently considered either good or bad; rather, its value was determined by the situation in which it occurred. For example, suicide might be seen as honorable in the case of a fallen leader, or as a necessity in certain tragic or heroic contexts, while in other instances, it might be viewed with condemnation or as an act of desperation.

With this understanding in place, we can proceed with the argument that the phenomenon of suicide among soldiers and, more specifically, among veterans, plays a significant role in the broader discussion of trauma within the Roman military. The prevalence and societal reception of suicide in Roman culture are essential for understanding how soldiers' psychological distress, particularly after experiencing battle or war, was perceived and responded to within Roman society. As this thesis will demonstrate, the rates of suicide among soldiers may offer insight into the mental toll of military service and how trauma manifested in the lives of veterans.[30]

Triumph in Defeat

A final concept requiring clarification before entering the main body of this thesis is that of *"triumph in defeat."* Coined by Jessica H. Clark in her 2014 book *Triumph in Defeat: Military Loss and the Roman Republic*, the term refers to the idea that military victory was not solely determined on the battlefield but was often constructed and legitimized by political actors and institutions. In this view, the perception of victory—or even of noble failure—was shaped through rhetoric, public commemoration, and political maneuvering, rather than by objective military outcomes alone. This reframing of defeat into a form of triumph played a significant

[29] Tacitus, *Histories*, book 2, in *The Complete Works of Tacitus*, trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb (New York: Random House, 1942).
[30] Miriam Griffin, "Philosophy, Cato, and Roman Suicide: II," *Greece & Rome* 33, no. 2 (October 1986): 192–202.

role in Roman political culture and has implications for understanding how soldiers, commanders, and the broader public interpreted the emotional and psychological consequences of warfare.[31]

While there were certainly occasions in which Roman forces achieved decisive victories on the battlefield, many more instances exist in which military superiority alone did not clearly determine the outcome. Jessica Clark argues that in numerous cases, especially in more ambiguous or drawn-out conflicts, the Roman Senate played a central role in shaping public perception by constructing narratives that framed these wars as ultimately favorable to the Roman state. This often involved exaggerating the significance of minor victories, downplaying or omitting defeats, and emphasizing Roman resilience and virtue. Over time, as Rome expanded and came to dominate much of the Mediterranean world, its elites were in a position to write and preserve history. As such, even if an enemy had repeatedly defeated Roman forces, the eventual Roman conquest could retroactively reframe those prior losses as irrelevant setbacks. The deliberate construction of these narratives—wherein defeat could be reimagined as part of a larger story of Roman triumph—is at the heart of what Clark defines as the concept of *triumph in defeat*.

Research question, methodology and structure

The aims and goals of this thesis have hopefully been made clear by now. The question to which this thesis seeks to find an answer however, may require some further explaining. The main goal is to paint a picture of the mindset of the historical Roman on the issue of trauma. Since the amount of sources are limited and the field of literary research is limited in its capacity to draw set conclusions on historical figures, the main research question will therefore be framed somewhat narrowly. It will only focus on the conclusions which can be drawn from the literary sources. The central research question guiding this thesis is:

"What can ancient literary sources tell us about the awareness of combat-related trauma in Roman society?"

This question will be explored over the course of three chapters. The first chapter investigates the presence and prevalence of psychological trauma in the Roman world, drawing on a range of primary sources and situating them within relevant secondary literature. Establishing that

[31] Jessica Homan Clark, *Triumph in Defeat: Military Loss and the Roman Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1.

trauma—or afflictions comparable to modern PTSD—was both present and at least partially recognized in Roman society is essential for the broader argument of this thesis.

The second chapter shifts focus to literary genres where one would logically expect such trauma to be addressed, such as military manuals, historical works, and biographical texts. It examines not only whether these sources include references to trauma, but also whether they avoid or obscure the topic. A key claim here is that although trauma-related phenomena are evident in Roman history, they are strikingly absent from texts where one might reasonably anticipate deliberate engagement with the subject.

The third chapter brings these strands together. It considers why there is such a disparity between the apparent presence of trauma and its omission in relevant literary contexts. Several theoretical frameworks will be explored to explain this silence, leading to the presentation of the most persuasive interpretation. This chapter is primarily conceptual and interpretive, drawing on broader cultural analyses and secondary scholarship. The thesis concludes with a reflection on its findings, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

While the thesis employs differing approaches across chapters, its methodology remains rooted in close analysis of primary sources. In the first chapter, sources are examined for direct evidence of trauma. In the second, attention turns to the absence of such evidence where it would be expected, requiring particular care in interpreting authorial intent and genre conventions. The third chapter builds a theoretical explanation for this pattern.

One of the core case studies used to frame this discussion is a set of legal texts concerning soldier suicide. These provide rare, explicit indications of psychological strain within the military. From this starting point, the thesis argues that trauma was acknowledged to some extent, yet consistently underrepresented in Roman literature. The aim is not merely to identify instances of trauma, but to understand how and why ancient texts shaped—or avoided—their portrayal of psychological suffering.

Ultimately, this thesis seeks to contribute to the broader scholarly debate on the historicity of PTSD. Whether the evidence supports or challenges the idea that trauma has universal features across time, the goal is to offer a nuanced interpretation of how the Roman world engaged with the mental consequences of warfare.

Chapter I: The evidence for the existence of combat related psychological trauma in the Roman world

This chapter examines textual evidence for the existence of psychological trauma in ancient literature. A range of genres and authors will be considered, with particular attention given to passages in which trauma—whether explicitly or implicitly—emerges as a narrative or thematic concern.

The discussion will proceed chronologically, beginning with a selection of Greek texts in which trauma features as a significant element of the story. The second section will turn to Roman authors who, directly or indirectly, depict psychological distress in ways that may be interpreted as indicative of trauma. The final section focuses on legal sources, where some of the clearest references to psychological suffering—particularly within military contexts—can be found.

Taken together, these three sections form the literary foundation upon which the arguments in the subsequent chapters will be built. By establishing the presence and character of trauma in ancient texts, this chapter provides the evidentiary framework necessary for assessing broader claims about Roman awareness and representation of combat-related psychological afflictions.

The Greeks and trauma

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is one of several forms of combat-related trauma recognized in the modern era. The formal identification of this condition can be traced back to the First World War, when returning soldiers exhibited severe psychological disturbances. At the time, the term *shell shock* was introduced, reflecting the belief that these symptoms were the result of prolonged exposure to artillery bombardments. As the scale and duration of modern warfare expanded, so too did the medical and psychological understanding of trauma related to combat.

Importantly, PTSD is not limited to individuals who have experienced extended periods of combat or unusually intense battlefield conditions. While such factors do increase the likelihood of developing trauma-related disorders, a single traumatic event can be sufficient to trigger a psychological breakdown. Acute symptoms may emerge during active service, but more commonly, they manifest after the soldier has returned from the battlefield, either temporarily or permanently. In many cases, the immediate stress of combat may suppress emotional and psychological responses, allowing the individual to function in life-threatening

situations. However, once the immediate danger subsides, repressed trauma and emotional distress often surface.[32]

Combat trauma manifests in various forms, and the circumstances under which it arises can differ significantly. Numerous accounts exist of soldiers experiencing acute psychological symptoms while still engaged in battle. A notable example comes from the Battle of Marathon, where a Greek soldier is reported to have been struck blind after witnessing a comrade killed by a Persian axe—an episode that illustrates the immediate psychological shock that combat can inflict. Similarly, the image of a World War I soldier succumbing to mental collapse amid relentless artillery fire has become emblematic of modern combat stress.

When drawing historical comparisons to the Roman world, ancient Greece presents the most logical point of reference. The two societies share considerable similarities in terms of geography, historical period, religion, military structures, societal organization, and philosophical traditions. Roman thought in both medicine and philosophy was deeply influenced by Greek precedents, making such comparisons not only plausible but methodologically sound.[33]

The early Roman military was heavily influenced by the Greek phalanx system, which remained the dominant style of warfare until the adaptation of the maniple system during the Samnite Wars. While, as I will demonstrate in this first chapter, many aspects of Greek thought and practice were adopted by the Romans, it is equally important to note the areas in which Roman society diverged from their Greek predecessors.

It is often asserted that the Romans were culturally, philosophically, architecturally, and in many other respects, derivative rather than innovative. Historians, sculptors, philosophers, and medical practitioners largely followed Greek models, and, in many cases, they were themselves Greeks or deeply influenced by Greek thought. The Romans, it is claimed, did not aspire to surpass the achievements of Greek art, literature, or intellectual endeavors but instead sought to emulate them.

One notable example of this phenomenon is the prominence of Stoicism and Epicureanism among the Roman elite during both the Republican and Imperial periods. Figures such as

[32] Mary C. Vance and Joel D. Howell, "Shell Shock and PTSD: A Tale of Two Diagnoses," *Mayo Clinic Proceedings* 95, no. 9 (2020): 3–4.
[33] Ann Hanson, "Roman Medicine," in *A Companion to the Roman Empire*, ed. David S. Potter (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 492.

Cicero and Marcus Aurelius were instrumental in promoting these philosophical schools, yet their contributions rarely sought to expand or build upon these doctrines, perhaps out of reverence for Greek intellectual tradition or due to perceived limitations within their own cultural framework.

Medicine, too, is a field in which the Romans were largely reliant on Greek knowledge. For much of Roman history, there was minimal advancement in medical theory beyond the contributions made by Greek physicians centuries earlier. However, this reliance on Greek thought should not be viewed as a weakness but rather as a strategic strength of the Roman state. The Romans excelled in practical matters such as logistics, warfare, and construction, making significant strides in these fields. These technological innovations were foundational to the expansion and maintenance of the Roman Empire.[34]

The Greeks, however, appeared to show a notable interest in the mental and emotional states of soldiers. Numerous Greek texts delve into themes of homecoming and the aftermath of warfare, with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* standing as some of the most famous examples. These epics illustrate not only the heroism and valor associated with warfare but also the emotional and psychological toll it takes on the individuals involved. The concept of *nostos*—the Greek term for "homecoming"—emerges as a recurring theme in Greek literature, often depicting the struggles soldiers face upon their return home. These stories emphasize the lasting impact of war on the psyche, suggesting that the Greeks were at least somewhat concerned with the psychological aftermath of combat.[35]

This focus on homecoming stories did not emerge in isolation; it reflected the realities of life for the Greeks of the time. Soldiers went off to war for extended periods, athletes participated in distant games, colonists ventured out to establish new cities, and traders embarked on long journeys to seek profit. For many Greeks, long absences from home were commonplace. While it could be argued that the Romans made the Mediterranean world smaller through their creation of common culture, institutions, and infrastructure, the physical separation from and return to home was just as prevalent in Roman society as it had been in Greece. It remains curious, then, that Greek literature engages with this theme far more extensively than its Roman counterpart. Firstly, we will examine several Greek stories of homecoming and other examples

[34] Jonathan Roth, *The Logistics of the Roman Army at War: 264 BC–AD 235*, vol. 23 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 5.
[35] Marigo Alexopoulou, *The Homecoming (Nóstos) Pattern in Greek Tragedy* (PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 2003).

of emotional turmoil experienced by soldiers, offering a glimpse into how Greek literature treated these psychological and emotional challenges.

I: Achilles, Ajax and Epizelus.

Three literary examples will be highlighted here to illuminate the difference in how the Greek and Roman societies approached the state of mind of the warrior. These examples will illustrate the influence of Greek culture on Rome, yet reveal the absence of a similar focus on the psychological impact of warfare in Roman literature. By exploring these examples, we can better understand the unusual lack of attention to trauma in a society as militarized as Rome. First, we will examine *The Iliad*, the most well-known depiction of trauma in Western literature, with a particular emphasis on Jonathan Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam*. Second, the tragedy of *Ajax* will offer a closer look at combat trauma, focusing on soldier suicide and the societal perceptions of trauma. Lastly, we will discuss a historical instance of acute combat stress through the example of Epizelus. While lesser known than the figures in the previous two examples, Epizelus provides a more tangible example of trauma in ancient Greek civilization, completing the trio of characters potentially affected by combat-related psychological distress.

Achilles

The Iliad is likely the most read and researched work of ancient literature, so it is unsurprising that it has been analyzed from numerous perspectives, including trauma studies. This angle of inquiry is not simply a result of its fame, but also because the epic grapples with complex themes such as anger, grief, duty, and more, all from the perspective of soldiers—albeit often divine soldiers of royal blood. The protagonist, Achilles, is so devastated by the death of his cousin and lover Patroclus that he refuses to eat, pulls out his hair, and ultimately descends into a rage-filled frenzy in his quest for revenge.

One of the most influential works in the field of emotional historical research is Jonathan Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam*. Shay offers a framework for comparing the experiences of ancient soldiers with those of modern-day veterans suffering from PTSD. Although Shay's primary goal was not to establish direct parallels between ancient and modern trauma, his work has nonetheless highlighted significant similarities in how soldiers from both periods cope with the psychological aftermath of war. In *The Iliad*, Achilles's overwhelming grief and fury following Patroclus's death serve as a striking example of the emotional toll war takes on soldiers, one that resonates across time and cultures.

A black stormcloud of pain shrouded Akhilleus. On his bowed head he scattered dust and ash in handfuls and befouled his beautiful face, letting black ash sift on his fragrant khiton. Then in the dust he stretched his giant length and tore his hair with both hands.[36]

Jonathan Shay draws attention to the striking similarity in the language used by Vietnam veterans and the language Homer employs in *The Iliad*. Achilles, for example, is described as already dead, a sentiment echoed by many of Shay's patients, who often claim that they "already died" in Vietnam. There are numerous instances in *The Iliad* that can be used to draw comparisons to modern traumatic experiences—such as the comfort Achilles receives from his mother, or the intervention of his friend who stops him from committing suicide. Shay's key point is that the Greeks, or at least the author of *The Iliad*, possessed a vocabulary capable of describing trauma in a way that resonates with modern American veterans. The fact that so many veterans have found solace in reading *The Iliad* further supports Shay's argument that Greek authors were deeply attuned to the psyche of the soldier.[37]

Ajax

Sophocles' *Ajax* is one of the most renowned tragedies in ancient literature. Written in the fifth century BCE, this play was likely performed in Athenian theaters during Sophocles' lifetime (496 BCE to 406 BCE). The play centers on the mythical hero Ajax, a prominent figure in the Trojan War depicted in *The Iliad*. The events of *Ajax* occur after those described in *The Iliad*, but while the war is still ongoing. In the play, Ajax returns from battle only to be driven into a fit of madness by the goddess Athena. Under her influence, he believes that livestock are his enemies and proceeds to kill them in a blind rage. When the madness passes, Ajax awakens to the shame of his actions, overwhelmed by the realization that he has slaughtered innocent animals instead of enemies. Consumed by grief and dishonor, he ultimately takes his own life.

I know of none, but in his misery I pity him all the same, even though he hates me, because he is bound fast by a ruinous delusion— when I see him like this I think of my own possible fate. For I see that all of us who live are nothing more than phantoms or fleeting shadows.[38]

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[36] Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. A. T. Murray, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1924), 18.25.
[37] Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, 49–51.
[38] Sophocles, *The Ajax of Sophocles*, ed. Richard Jebb (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1893).

And now a new struggle awaits me, a match with Ajax, hard to cure, living with a madness of divine origin. It is he whom in fact you sent out before as a man who was most dominant in bold war. But now he is changed; he shepherds his thoughts in isolated places and has found deep mourning for his friends. The former achievements of his own two hands, the most supreme accomplishments of his excellence, they have fallen, they have fallen, meaningless, without friends, before the miserable sons of Atreus.[39]

In this passage, Odysseus reflects on the condition Ajax finds himself in. Despite their enmity on the battlefield, Odysseus feels pity for Ajax, who is consumed by madness. He contemplates what Ajax's fate could mean for him and for all the warriors who have survived the Trojan War up to this point. In her analysis and translation of *Ajax*, Charlotte Simon argues that the symptoms Ajax exhibits can be interpreted as indicative of what we now recognize as PTSD.[40] Although Charlotte Simon acknowledges the difficulty of retroactively applying modern diagnoses to ancient literary figures, the symptoms Ajax exhibits—such as increased aggression, trouble sleeping, and a general sense of disorientation—align quite well with a modern PTSD diagnosis. Ajax's eventual suicide also suggests that the problem of veterans taking their own lives after returning from war is a timeless issue that transcends both time and culture.

What is particularly interesting is why Sophocles would choose to write a tragedy centered around a "shameful" hero like Ajax. Sophocles was a well-known Athenian playwright who had himself held a high military office, and his plays likely attracted a wide audience from Athenian society. This suggests two possible motivations for writing *Ajax*: either the story of madness, shame, and suicide was so unique and compelling that it was worth telling, or Sophocles believed it would resonate deeply with his fellow warriors in Athens. If the latter is true, it would suggest a certain relatability for contemporary Greeks; however, if the former is true, it might indicate the opposite.

The reactions of the chorus and other characters in the play suggest that Ajax's condition is seen as both uniquely horrific and shameful. This would seem to point to the idea that this was not a situation to be easily related to, but rather one to be pitied or criticized. The Greeks' depiction of combat-induced madness as shameful does not, however, negate its prevalence. In fact, combined with the examples that follow, the very existence of such a play written by a

[39] Sophocles, *Ajax*, ed. Jebb.
[40] Charlotte Simon, *Signs in Sophocles: Modern Approaches to PTSD in the Ajax* (Honors thesis, University of Glasgow, 2022).

respected member of society implies that the effects of combat on soldiers were a topic of concern for at least some ancient Greeks.

Epizelus

One of the most well-known historical examples of combat-related trauma is that of Epizelus, a figure mentioned in Herodotus' *Histories*. While it is difficult to verify the historical existence of Epizelus, his story serves as important evidence that Greek historians were at least aware of the phenomenon of trauma resulting from combat. According to Herodotus, Epizelus fought in the Battle of Marathon, and upon witnessing a fellow soldier being nearly cleaved in half by a large, bearded Persian wielding an axe, he was suddenly struck blind.

In his contribution to *A Companion to Greek Warfare*, Lawrence Tritle argues that Epizelus, along with other historical figures, demonstrates that the trauma experienced by ancient soldiers was not fundamentally different from that experienced by modern combatants. Tritle even compiles a list of ancient Greek soldiers who appear to have suffered from PTSD or conversion disorders as a result of battle, with at least nine individuals fitting these descriptions. As a representative example, Epizelus stands as the key historical figure through which we can assess the Greek literary tradition's recognition of combat trauma.[41]

Today, we know that acute blindness can manifest as a psychological phenomenon, often occurring in response to extreme stress. It appears to serve as a defense mechanism, where the mind and body shield themselves from the traumatic events being witnessed. In psychiatric terms, this type of blindness is classified as a form of conversion disorder. Conversion disorder has a long history of misinterpretation, with the term "hysteria" once being the most commonly used label for such conditions, though it has only recently fallen out of use. Conversion disorder is characterized by neurologic symptoms that cannot be fully explained by any underlying neurological disease.[42]

Herodotus describes the event in his *Histories* as follows:

In this fight at Marathon there were slain of the Barbarians about six thousand four hundred men, and of the Athenians a hundred and ninety and two. Such was the number which fell on both sides; and it happened also that a marvel occurred there of this kind:—an Athenian, Epizelos the son of Cuphagoras, while fighting in the close combat and proving himself a good

[41] Waldemar Heckel et al., eds., *A Companion to Greek Warfare* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2021), 311.
[42] Anthony Feinstein, "Conversion Disorder: Advances in Our Understanding," *CMAJ* 183, no. 8 (2011): 915–20.

man, was deprived of the sight of his eyes, neither having received a blow in any part of his body nor having been hit with a missile, and for the rest of his life from this time he continued to be blind: and I was informed that he used to tell about that which had happened to him a tale of this kind, namely that it seemed to him that a tall man in full armour stood against him, whose beard overshadowed his whole shield; and this apparition passed him by, but killed his comrade who stood next to him. Thus, as I was informed, Epizelos told the tale.[43]

These three examples—two from epic literature and one from historical records—serve to illustrate that while it remains difficult to precisely determine the Greeks' understanding of combat trauma and its psychological causes, we can confidently assert that Greek authors were at least aware of, and concerned with, the impact that war, combat, atrocities, and death had on those who participated in and endured them. This insight sets the stage for the argument in the following sections, where we will explore the peculiar absence of similar reflections in Roman literature and historiography. This absence becomes especially striking given the Romans' deep reverence for Greek thought, particularly in the realms of philosophy and medicine. The lack of Roman interest in combat trauma is thus not only strange but may also be purposeful, contributing to the broader thesis of this study.

II: Vergilius and Ammianus Marcellinus

Vergilius

Vergilius, in his foundational epic of the Roman people, narrates the journey of the Trojan hero Aeneas, who flees the burning city of Troy and eventually makes his way to the shores of Italy. Virgil himself was a Cisalpine Gallic man of Celtic descent, born in 70 BCE in Mantua. In this region, he would likely have interacted with many Italic veterans who had fought against Rome during the Social Wars, a context that may have influenced his perspectives on war and its aftermath.[44] This is significant because Virgil would likely have been exposed to stories and witnessed the physical and psychological scars borne by veterans of the previous generation, survivors of warfare. As a result, Virgil probably had a deeper understanding of the soldier's lifestyle and mindset than most of his contemporaries. This context helps dispel any claims that the authors discussed in this thesis were unaware of the effects of combat. Virgil wrote the *Aeneid* under the patronage of Emperor Augustus, who, as many historians suggest, sought to legitimize his divine rule by aligning it with the mythic heroism of Aeneas, a figure of divine

[43] Herodotus, *Histories*, book 6, sec. 117, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt, rev. John Marincola (London: Penguin Classics, 2003).
[44] Francesco Sforza, "The Problem of Virgil," *The Classical Review* 49, no. 3 (1935): 97–108.

descent. The *Aeneid* follows the structure and themes of earlier Greek epics, such as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The twelve books of the *Aeneid* are divided into two halves: the first six focus on Aeneas's journey to Italy, while the final six describe the wars he and his people fought upon their arrival. Although the form and subject matter of the *Aeneid* are heavily influenced by its Greek predecessors, some scholars have argued that its tone is less one of celebration and glory, and more one of pessimism and implicit criticism of the current authoritarian regime in Rome.[45] While the *Aeneid* itself is a subject of extensive analysis, with countless articles and books dedicated to its themes and narrative, for now, a brief overview of its contents and author will suffice. The focus here is not on the grand narrative or its overarching themes, but rather on specific passages that deal with trauma.

This renowned epic contains several references that can be interpreted as relating to trauma. For example, when Aeneas reaches the shores of Carthage and meets Queen Dido, he experiences nightmarish delusions and intense emotional turmoil. Additionally, it has been suggested that the protagonist of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas, may have suffered from forms of trauma, particularly survivor's guilt, as he grapples with the loss of his homeland and his people.[46]

Aeneas, having survived the Trojan War, exhibits behaviors throughout his journey that align with symptoms of PTSD and conversion disorder. In a particularly harrowing passage, Vergil describes a vision in which Aeneas recounts the horrors of the Trojan War. As he weeps, he sees before him the fallen heroes of both the Trojans and the Greeks, locked in battle around the burning city of Troy. The language Vergil uses is deeply dramatic, with words such as *woes*, *trembling*, *the slain*, *grief*, and *cruel* evoking the profound psychological toll the war has had on Aeneas.

Aeneas first meets queen Dido in Carthage and is having flashbacks of the war in Troy:

For while, expecting there the queen, he rais'd His wond'ring eyes, and round the temple gaz'd, Admir'd the fortune of the rising town, The striving artists, and their arts' renown; He saw, in order painted on the wall, Whatever did unhappy Troy befall: The wars that fame around the world had blown, All to the life, and ev'ry leader known. There Agamemnon, Priam here, he spies, And fierce Achilles, who both kings defies. He stopp'd, and weeping said: "O friend! ev'n here The monuments of Trojan woes appear! Our known disasters fill ev'n foreign

[45] Sforza, "Problem of Virgil," 97.
[46] Andromache Karanika and Vassiliki Panoussi, eds., *Emotional Trauma in Greece and Rome: Representations and Reactions* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 49.

lands: See there, where old unhappy Priam stands! Ev'n the mute walls relate the warrior's fame, And Trojan griefs the Tyrians' pity claim." He said (his tears a ready passage find), Devouring what he saw so well design'd, And with an empty picture fed his mind: For there he saw the fainting Grecians yield, And here the trembling Trojans quit the field, Pursued by fierce Achilles thro' the plain, On his high chariot driving o'er the slain. The tents of Rhesus next his grief renew, By their white sails betray'd to nightly view; And wakeful Diomede, whose cruel sword The sentries slew, nor spar'd their slumb'ring lord, Then took the fiery steeds, ere yet the food Of Troy they taste, or drink the Xanthian flood. Elsewhere he saw where Troilus defied Achilles, and unequal combat tried; Then, where the boy disarm'd, with loosen'd reins, Was by his horses hurried o'er the plains, Hung by the neck and hair, and dragg'd around: The hostile spear, yet sticking in his wound, With tracks of blood inscrib'd the dusty ground. Meantime the Trojan dames, oppress'd with woe, To Pallas' fane in long procession go, In hopes to reconcile their heav'nly foe. They weep, they beat their breasts, they rend their hair, And rich embroider'd vests for presents bear; But the stern goddess stands unmov'd with pray'r. Thrice round the Trojan walls Achilles drew The corpse of Hector, whom in fight he slew. Here Priam sues; and there, for sums of gold, The lifeless body of his son is sold. So sad an object, and so well express'd, Drew sighs and groans from the griev'd hero's breast, To see the figure of his lifeless friend, And his old sire his helpless hand extend. Himself he saw amidst the Grecian train, Mix'd in the bloody battle on the plain; And swarthy Memnon in his arms he knew, His pompous ensigns, and his Indian crew. Penthisilea there, with haughty grace, Leads to the wars an Amazonian race: In their right hands a pointed dart they wield; The left, forward, sustains the lunar shield. Athwart her breast a golden belt she throws, Amidst the press alone provokes a thousand foes, And dares her maiden arms to manly force oppose.[47]

It is evident from this passage that Vergilius was not uninterested in the psychological state of his characters, whether mythical or historical. He dramatically portrays Aeneas' grief as he witnesses the bodies of his fallen comrades, lamenting their tragic fate. Unlike many other passages we will examine later, Vergilius dedicates literary attention to the emotional turmoil of the characters he describes. While we should not expect a poem that tells the mythical story of Rome's founding to offer a clinical definition of trauma, this passage suggests that some Romans were indeed concerned with the mental wellbeing of their literary figures. However, if we were to use this example as evidence of Roman awareness of trauma, we run into some

[47] Vergil, *Aeneid*, book 1, lines 453–493, in *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fagles (London: Penguin Classics, 2006).

complications. For one, Vergilius was specifically emulating Greek works, such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. These epic poems served as blueprints for the *Aeneid* in terms of form, language, and themes. It is possible that Vergilius' focus was more on replicating the style and themes of these Greek epics than on independently exploring the psychological impact of war and trauma.

Ammianus Marcellinus' Res Gestae

While Vergilius' *Aeneid* likely had a significant historical impact on Roman society, its implications are somewhat difficult to assess definitively due to its literary genre and the author's intentions. On the other hand, the historical works of Ammianus Marcellinus provide a more straightforward glimpse into the presence of trauma in Roman writings.

Ammianus Marcellinus was a Roman historian and military officer who chronicled nearly three centuries of late imperial history, covering the period from 96 CE to 378 CE in his work *Res Gestae* (literally, "Things Done"). Though only the latter sections of the work—those detailing the final twenty-five years—have survived, *Res Gestae* is highly regarded by historians and remains a key source on various subjects and events. Ammianus' accounts of battle are particularly vivid, offering a direct and personal perspective on military life and combat, which makes his writings especially valuable for this thesis.[48]

As a former soldier himself, Ammianus Marcellinus may have felt compelled to convey the personal experiences of the warriors who fought on the frontlines. While some historians, such as Kimberley Kagan, critique his style for lacking broader theoretical frameworks and the ability to contextualize battles within larger strategic or political narratives, for this thesis, his deeply personal descriptions offer a rare and invaluable glimpse into the experience of violent conflict in a highly militarized society. The Roman world that Ammianus portrays is one of moral decay and the fading of former glory. As a pagan writing in an increasingly Christian society, Ammianus often critiques the rising influence of Christianity and its adherents throughout his work. The surviving portions of *Res Gestae* begin with the ascension of Emperor Nerva and conclude with the famous Battle of Adrianople.[49]

[48] Kimberly Kagan, *The Eye of Command* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 22.
[49] Eleazer D. Hunt, "Christians and Christianity in Ammianus Marcellinus," *The Classical Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (1985): 186–200.

Ammianus writes from the perspective of the soldier and proclaims as much when writing "*ut miles quondam et Graecus*", as a soldier and a Greek.[50] Ammianus Marcellinus recounts numerous battles and political events in which he was directly involved, leading one to believe he serves as an excellent eyewitness to these historical episodes. However, Ammianus has been criticized for intentionally misrepresenting certain events, influenced by his political biases. For instance, he tends to favor certain figures, such as Emperor Julian, in his accounts, even though other sources sometimes present a different perspective on these individuals and events. Fortunately, for the purposes of this thesis, these political biases do not interfere with his descriptions of fear, cruelty, and death in the context of violence. A few selected passages from his work will be presented here, as they offer insight into the extent to which Roman writers, particularly Ammianus, were aware of the connection between violence and trauma.

The Caesar Constantius Gallus is sent for by Emperor Constantius, and beheaded:

And amid all these circumstances, in moments when exhausted nature sought repose in sleep, his senses were kept in a state of agitation by dreadful spectres making unseemly noises about him; and crowds of those whom he had slain, led on by Domitianus and Montius, seemed to seize and torture him with all the torments of the Furies. For the mind, when freed by sleep from its connection with the body, is nevertheless active, and being full of the thoughts, and anxieties of mortal pursuits, engenders mighty visions which we call phantoms.[51]

Ammianus Marcellinus provides a vivid description of Caesar Constantius Gallus, heir to Emperor Constantius II, in his work. Gallus is portrayed as a man who schemed, tortured, and murdered his way into a position of power, only for his worst tendencies to intensify once he attained it. When Emperor Constantius II learned of his heir's actions, he summoned Gallus to the imperial court under the pretext of promoting him to the rank of Augustus. However, just as Gallus neared his destination in Italy, he was arrested and executed for his crimes. This passage occurs during Gallus' journey, when he is reportedly plagued by nightmares and visions of specters, as described by Ammianus.

This passage has yet to be widely discussed in relation to trauma or PTSD, but it seems to present a rare instance where a Roman author acknowledges a correlation between symptoms

[50] C. P. T. Naudé, "Battles and Sieges in Ammianus Marcellinus," *Acta Classica: Proceedings of the Classical Association of South Africa* 1, no. 1 (1958): 92–105, at 93.
[51] Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae*, book 14, chapter 17, trans. J. C. Rolfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1939), *Loeb Classical Library*.

such as night terrors and the act of murder. In the first part of the passage, Ammianus uses fantastical language, describing furies and specters tormenting Gallus. However, in the second part, it becomes clear that Ammianus does not believe these are literal supernatural manifestations. Instead, he seems to understand the mind's ability to process traumatic experiences during sleep, suggesting that Gallus's nightly terrors are the result of the horrific deeds he committed. Ammianus's insight into the mind's response to trauma—expressed through dreams—reveals an understanding of psychological distress that aligns with modern concepts of trauma.

Night terrors are a well-known symptom of those afflicted with PTSD.[52] Research on Holocaust survivors has shown that 96% of those surveyed experienced disturbed sleep, and 83% reported recurring nightmares. Among the 17 symptoms investigated in this study, these two—sleep disturbance and recurring nightmares—were the most prevalent. This suggests that, while the specific symptoms may vary depending on the individual's circumstances, sleep disturbance and nightmares are common among PTSD patients. Of course, the situations of Caesar Gallus and Holocaust survivors differ significantly. While the survivors are victims of atrocities, Gallus is presented as a perpetrator. However, research suggests that guilt can play a significant role in the development of PTSD. A meta-analysis on this subject indicates a strong correlation between guilt and PTSD symptoms, suggesting that the mental anguish caused by Gallus's actions may contribute to the trauma he experiences.[53]

It seems that Ammianus intends to project a sense of guilt onto Gallus through these spectral visions, which may serve as a form of retribution for his actions. However, in the second passage, Ammianus appears to differentiate between actual spectres—if he believes in them at all—and the phantoms that our minds create during nightmares. This suggests that, while the imagery of the spectres may be symbolic of Gallus's guilt, Ammianus recognizes that such visions are ultimately psychological, rather than supernatural.

A 1999 meta-analysis on criminals convicted of homicide concluded that around forty six percent of the subjects met the criteria for a full PTSD diagnosis.[54] It should not be assumed

[52] Klaus Kuch and Brian J. Cox, "Symptoms of PTSD in 124 Survivors of the Holocaust," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 149, no. 3 (1992): 337–40.
[53] Alexander Kip, Janine Diele, Heinz Holling, and Naser Morina, "The Relationship of Trauma-Related Guilt with PTSD Symptoms in Adult Trauma Survivors: A Meta-Analysis," *Psychological Medicine* 52, no. 12 (2022): 2201–11.
[54] Laura Badenes-Ribera et al., "Homicide as a Source of Posttraumatic Stress?: A Meta-Analysis of the Prevalence of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder after Committing Homicide," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 34, no. 2 (2021): 345–56.

that trauma is reserved solely for the victims of violent acts. Witnessing violence can, in many cases, be sufficient to trigger trauma, but when individuals are directly involved in acts of violence—whether as victims or perpetrators—the likelihood of developing trauma seems significantly higher. This can be seen in the case of Vietnam War veterans, who not only witnessed violence but also inflicted it. This ties into the correlation between guilt and PTSD that was discussed earlier. Gallus, for example, is described as a killer, having wrongfully executed a significant number of people. While it is debatable whether he personally wielded the blade, Ammianus clearly links Gallus's actions with his subsequent trauma.

Although Ammianus wrote in the 4th century AD, it seems that, as both a soldier and historian, he possessed a rudimentary understanding of the cause-and-effect relationship between committing violent acts and the night terrors that plagued Gallus. For the purposes of this thesis, the key point is that, while we can debate how rare or incomplete this knowledge was, some highly educated Romans were at least aware of the connection between violent actions, such as Gallus's murders, and symptoms that align with our modern understanding of PTSD or emotional trauma.

In the following passage, which builds on this description, Ammianus takes a more philosophical approach. He attributes these evil deeds and their consequences to the will of a divine being, explaining how she has always been the one to punish wrongdoers and reward the virtuous.

These and innumerable other instances of the kind are sometimes (and would that it were always so!) the work of Adrastia, the chastiser of evil deeds and the rewarder of good actions, whom we also call by the second name of Nemesis. She is, as it were, the sublime jurisdiction of an efficient divine power, dwelling, as men think, above the orbit of the moon; or as others define her, an actual guardian presiding with universal sway over the destinies of individual men. The ancient theologians, regarding her as the daughter of Justice, say that from an unknown eternity she looks down upon all the creatures of earth. She, as queen of causes and arbiter and judge of events, controls the urn with its lots and causes the changes of fortune, and sometimes she gives our plans a different result than that at which we aimed, changing and confounding many actions. She too, binding the vainly swelling pride of mortals with the indissoluble bond of fate, and tilting changeably, as she knows how to do, the balance of gain and loss, now bends and weakens the uplifted necks of the proud, and now, raising the

good from the lowest estate, lifts them to a happy life. Moreover, the storied past has given her wings in order that she might be thought to come to all with swift speed; and it has given her a helm to hold and has put a wheel beneath her feet, in order that none may fail to know that she runs through all the elements and rules the universe.[55]

Ammianus seems to reveal his understanding of the connection between violent acts and symptoms of trauma, though it is important to examine how he does so. This second passage suggests that his recognition of this correlation may have been somewhat incidental. In it, he writes that Adrastia, the "chastiser of evil deeds," is responsible for punishing Gallus. She is depicted as a divine figure capable of seeing and judging all who commit acts of either evil or good. Adrastia's reach is said to be so vast that she rules the universe, acting swiftly and universally to maintain cosmic balance.

It is worth noting that Adrastia is a Greek deity, not a Roman one. Given that Ammianus was a pagan with Greek origins, it is plausible that he adhered to, or at least accepted, the belief in such divine figures. Whether Ammianus genuinely believed in the goddess's power or was merely using her as a literary device is uncertain. However, the fact that he attributes Gallus's suffering and the consequences of his deeds to divine intervention suggests that Ammianus intended to frame his historical narrative through a lens of divine justice. This may not be a direct acknowledgment of trauma in the modern sense, but it does show how violent acts and their aftermath were understood, at least in part, as part of a cosmic order, with the implication that the mind and spirit can be punished by forces beyond human control.

III: Legal evidence for PTSD

The final part of this first chapter will focus on some legal texts from the Roman world. At first glance, it might seem somewhat odd to include legal documents alongside the literary genres explored earlier in this thesis. However, it is in the realm of Roman legislation that we may find some of the most compelling evidence for at least a degree of awareness of combat trauma within Roman elite circles and, perhaps, within the military as well. While the literary works discussed so far can certainly be critiqued for potentially serving an authorial agenda or reflecting personal biases, laws are less susceptible to such criticisms. Laws are designed to address specific needs or issues within society, and as such, they provide a unique lens through which we can examine the realities of the culture they emerged from. If these laws address

[55] Ammianus Marcellinus, *History*, book 14, chap. 11, sec. 25, vol. 1, trans. J. C. Rolfe, *Loeb Classical Library* 300 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935).

trauma or related symptoms, it suggests that such issues were significant enough to warrant legal attention and regulation, offering us insight into the extent to which Roman society may have recognized and dealt with combat-related psychological suffering.

The *Digesta Iustiani*, or Justinian digest, is a compilation of laws written by legal experts written mainly in the first and second century AD.[56] This vast compilation, larger than the Bible, was created to preserve the legal legacy of ancient Roman law. The *Digest*, or *Digesta Iustiana*, contains purely legal texts, making it less vulnerable to the critiques that can be directed at other genres, which are often influenced by the specific agendas of their authors. While the *Digest* itself dates from the sixth century CE, it draws heavily from judicial discussions that span as far back as the third century. As such, it provides a valuable window into the continuity of Roman legal thought. While there were earlier legal compilations, such as the *Institutes* by Gaius, upon reviewing that work, it becomes apparent that very little attention is given to issues like the military, suicide, or mental illness within the four surviving books.[57]

In the *Digesta Iustiana*, a significant legal development took place during the reign of Emperor Justinian, specifically regarding the issue of soldier suicide. The law introduced or amended at this time allowed for exonerating circumstances surrounding suicide when committed by a soldier in the Roman military. Prior to this change, suicide among soldiers was regarded as a criminal act against the state. This was due to the Roman view that soldiers were, in effect, considered state property during their service, and the act of suicide or self-harm was analogous to damaging or destroying state assets.

If a soldier attempted suicide but failed, he was often sentenced to death as a result. Should the soldier succeed in taking his own life, his will would be declared invalid, and his property would be forfeited to the state, leaving his family without any inheritance or resources. The introduction of this law marked a significant shift, reflecting, at the very least, a recognition of the circumstances surrounding soldier suicide, even if the implications for mental health or trauma were not fully articulated in modern terms.

[56] Peter Stein, "Justinian's Compilation: Classical Legacy and Legal Source," *Tulane European and Civil Law Forum* 8 (1993): 1–14.
[57] Gaius, *Institutiones*, ed. and trans. Edward Poste, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1904).

Andrew Fear's "*Legal Evidence for Roman PTSD"* also deals with Roman sources on this subject of trauma.[58] He advocates for a universalist approach to PTSD, which suggests that across time and space, the human reaction to combat stress remains largely the same. He identifies three main challenges in researching ancient PTSD, as discussed in this thesis. First, he notes that our current understanding of PTSD is not fixed and continues to evolve. Second, he highlights the problem of anachronism—applying modern terminology to historical figures, which can obscure the historical context. Third, he points out the scarcity and limited quality of contemporary sources addressing mental health in ancient times. This third challenge is, of course, the primary focus of this research.

Despite these difficulties, Fear argues that PTSD undoubtedly existed, even though it is not explicitly documented in many ancient texts. He approaches the phenomenon through one of the few areas that offer tangible evidence: legal texts. Fear examines the *Digesta Iustiani* and identifies several sections that provide clear indications of an acknowledgment of mental impairment in Roman soldiers, possibly related to PTSD. Another article that will be referenced in this thesis is Korneel van Lommel's "The Recognition of Roman Soldiers' Mental Impairment," which further explores this issue.[59]

In the following passage from the *Digesta*, suicide and attempted suicide within the military are discussed. It becomes clear that emperor Hadrian has decided that the previous laws surrounding these circumstances were deemed too harsh and it had become necessary to revise them. This demonstrates an enduring engagement with the subject of suicide and trauma within the Roman legal authorities.

Concerning one who has wounded himself or tried to kill himself in another way, the Emperor Hadrian has written that the circumstances must be clarified so that if he chose to die from inability to endure suffering (impatientia doloris), weariness of life (taedium vitae), disease (morbus), madness (furor), or shame (pudor) action should not be taken against him, but he should be discharged with ignominy. If nothing of the sort occurred, he should be executed. The death penalty should be remitted from those who have offended through wine or debauchery (lascivia) and they should be demoted.[60]

[58] Andrew Fear, "Legal Evidence for Roman PTSD?" in *Combat Stress in Pre-modern Europe*, ed. Owen Rees (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 83–100.
[59] Korneel Van Lommel, "The Recognition of Roman Soldiers' Mental Impairment," *Acta Classica: Proceedings of the Classical Association of South Africa* 56, no. 1 (2013).
[60] Macer, *Digest* 49.16.6.7, in The Digest of Justinian, ed. Theodor Mommsen and Paul Krüger, trans. Alan Watson, vol. 4 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

This text provides us with useful insights into trauma by presenting laws and discussions surrounding honourable and dishonourable discharge. There were three forms of discharge in the Roman military at this point in history. *Missio honesta, missio ignominosa and missio causaria*, respectively these can be translated as honourable discharge, dishonourable discharge and discharge on medical grounds.[61] Honourable discharge would take place after the mandatory twenty to twenty-five years of service and dishonourable discharge could be applied when the soldier had broken the rules of the military. The idea *missio causaria* however, is where the most interesting implications lie. The medical grounds for discharge could be mental as well as physical ailments. An inspection of the body and mind was performed on the soldier by doctors whose diagnosis would be looked over by a judge. This inspection was introduced by emperor Gordian in the third century AD.[62]

Another section of Roman law where we can find evidence for mental illness in the Roman military is book 49.16.6 of the *Digesta*. Here crimes against military discipline are described:

Concerning one who has wounded himself or tried to kill himself in another way, the Emperor Hadrian has written that the circumstances must be clarified so that if he chose to die from inability to endure suffering (impatientia doloris), weariness of life (taedium vitae), disease (morbus), madness (furor), or shame (pudor) action should not be taken against him, but he should be discharged with ignominy. If nothing of the sort occurred, he should be executed. The death penalty should be remitted from those who have offended through wine or debauchery (lascivia) and they should be demoted.

The deified Hadrian stated in a rescript that the will of a soldier who chose to die because he could no longer stand his pain or is weary of life is valid.

A soldier who turns his hand against himself, but with no success, unless he did this from inability to bear his suffering (impatentia doloris), disease (morbus), some other form of grief (luctus) or other cause (alia causa), shall be executed. Otherwise he is to be dismissed in ignomin.

For constitutiones make invalid the wills of those who have chosen to die rather than be condemned, on account of their consciousness of having committed a crime, although they die still citizens; but if someone [chooses to die] because they are tired of life (taedium vitae)

[61] Macer, Digest 49.16.13.3.
[62] Ulpian, *Digest* 3.2.2.2, in The Digest of Justinian, ed. Theodor Mommsen and Paul Krüger, trans. Alan Watson, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

or unable to bear illhealth (valetudinis adversae impatientia) or as a gesture (iactatio), like some philosophers, their situation is such that their wills are valid. And in a letter to Pomponius [Pompeius] Falco, the deified Hadrian laid down that this distinction applied to a soldier's will also.[63]

The passages make it clear that the emperor introduced new exonerating circumstances for soldier suicide. These circumstances included reasons such as shame, fear, madness, weariness of life, suffering, and sickness. Five of these can be understood as mental afflictions, with madness, shame, and weariness of life being the most obvious indicators of trauma.

There has been some debate about whether the existence of such laws implies that soldier suicide was as widespread as we might assume. It is crucial to consider the context in which this judicial amendment was enacted. Emperor Hadrian's goal seems not to have been to introduce entirely new legislation, but rather to simplify and clarify existing Roman law. If we accept this argument, it would not necessarily suggest that soldiers were becoming more suicidal during Hadrian's reign compared to previous times. Instead, it could imply that the phenomenon of soldier suicide had been an ongoing issue for some time, and the amendment may have been an attempt to address the legal and social realities that had already been in place for many years. The fact that Hadrian's clarification did not introduce entirely new circumstances but merely codified the existing understanding supports this notion.

Andrew Fear argues that Hadrian may not have specifically been thinking about the military when introducing these exonerating circumstances. However, even if this were the case, the legal clarification would still add weight to the argument that soldier suicide was a relatively common issue, and that Roman law had developed mechanisms to address this persistent problem.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that psychological trauma resulting from combat or other forms of violence was at least partially recognized by some Roman elites. The Greek literary tradition, which was heavily emulated by the Romans, played a significant role in shaping Roman awareness of trauma, particularly in the context of warriors and soldiers. While Greek authors, such as Homer, clearly expressed an understanding of the emotional and psychological toll of war,

[63] Ulpian, *Digest* 28.3.6.2.

Roman authors, particularly Vergilius and Ammianus Marcellinus, provide further evidence of this awareness.

Vergilius, writing in the Greek epic tradition, was undoubtedly influenced by works like the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. His portrayal of Aeneas and his emotional struggles in the *Aeneid* suggests that Vergilius was not just imitating language or form, but also grappling with themes of loss, trauma, and the psychological consequences of war. However, due to Vergilius' deliberate emulation of Greek themes, it remains unclear whether these references were meant to reflect real psychological phenomena or simply serve as literary devices.

In contrast, Ammianus Marcellinus, a soldier and historian, appears to offer a more direct and potentially intentional reflection on the mental anguish experienced by those involved in violence. Ammianus' writing, especially in his description of Caesar Gallus, inadvertently reveals an understanding of the psychological toll of violent actions, such as the night terrors Gallus suffers as a result of his brutal deeds. Ammianus' use of divine punishment to explain these psychological symptoms may reflect a lack of modern psychological frameworks, but it also suggests that he recognized the link between violent actions and subsequent mental distress.

Finally, the legal texts from the *Digesta Iustiani* provide the clearest evidence of Roman awareness of trauma, particularly in the context of soldiers and veterans. The amendments made to laws regarding soldier suicide suggest that the Romans were beginning to acknowledge the psychological consequences of combat, and the shift in legal treatment—from viewing suicide as damaging state property to considering it a result of mental distress—reflects a growing recognition that trauma affects individuals, not just their roles in society.

With these examples in mind, the argument in this chapter sets the stage for the next chapter, where the discussion will turn to the curious lack of extensive literature on the subject of trauma in a society so deeply engaged in the study and execution of warfare. Despite the evident recognition of trauma in legal and literary texts, Roman society seems to have shown little interest in systematically studying or addressing these psychological issues. This gap in Roman literature and thought is an intriguing aspect of the broader historical context of trauma, and it will be explored further in the subsequent chapter.

Chapter II: The lack of trauma descriptions in Roman literature

The initial premises of the thesis assert that combat trauma did, in fact, manifest within Roman society, but the sources that explicitly address this phenomenon are few and far between. Therefore, this chapter will be structured into three subchapters, each dedicated to one of the literary genres most likely to contain passages dealing with combat-related trauma. The selection of these genres, as well as the specific works within each genre, will be explained and defended at the start of each subchapter.

Had the task been to compile every instance in Roman literature where PTSD, mental illness, or psychological trauma in soldiers is directly mentioned, the undertaking would have been far simpler. However, the reality is that such a collection would be virtually impossible to compile, given the limited and scattered nature of references to this theme. Instead, the goal of this chapter is to demonstrate that while there may be a significant dearth of sources on this subject, the few that do exist are the most promising candidates for studying how the Romans may have understood or alluded to the psychological effects of combat.

One of the challenges here is that the range of works which could potentially offer relevant material is vast, and thus the scope is necessarily limited by the primary texts that can be examined. For the purposes of this thesis, the focus will be on those works where the likelihood of finding references to combat trauma is highest.

To draw the most meaningful conclusions from this approach, the rationale behind the choice of primary sources will be explained. Additionally, the inherent limitations of this method will be recognized, along with the fact that a comprehensive study of all Roman literature related to combat trauma would be both impractical and outside the scope of this thesis. By doing so, a clearer understanding of the challenges inherent in researching combat trauma in Roman society and the limited, but important, textual evidence available on this subject will be provided.

Korneel van Lommel's article from 2013 titled "The recognition of Roman soldiers' mental impairment", is an excellent backdrop against which this chapter can be presented.[64] As is the case in this thesis, Van Lommel begins by acknowledging the strong evidence for an awareness of mental strain in Roman soldiers. He refers to sources that support this theory, such as the legal texts examined in the previous chapter. However, from this point onward, his article and

[64] Van Lommel, "Roman Soldiers' Mental Impairment," 155.

this thesis take divergent paths. Van Lommel presents a number of sources that, in his view, provide evidence of mental impairment within the Roman military. These sources, including Livy's histories, will also be discussed in the following chapter.

Where Van Lommel uses these sources to strengthen his theory of Roman awareness, this thesis will instead use them to suggest that Roman authors consciously or subconsciously chose not to address mental impairment. Passages such as those cited by Van Lommel in his article will be examined here to argue that, despite the potential recognition of trauma or psychological strain, Roman literature and historiography largely refrained from discussing these issues directly. This contrast in interpretations will form a key aspect of the analysis in the coming sections.

After the minds of the soldiers were refreshed and restored, nobody other than his colleague (Scipio) wanted to delay the battle. He (Tiberius Sempronius Longus) believed that Scipio was more sick in mind than in body, and that the recollection of his wound made him afraid of the battle and its missiles.[65]

These passages are exactly the type of sources that will be explored in the following chapter. Battle descriptions and individual character portrayals are some of the most likely places where evidence of an awareness of combat trauma might be found, making them valuable sources for both Van Lommel and this thesis. However, when examining a passage such as the one mentioned above, the conclusions drawn from it stand in stark contrast between Van Lommel's interpretation and the one presented here.

Paraphrasing Van Lommel, he argues that these excerpts from ancient texts provide evidence supporting his previously established theory. However, in this thesis, the interpretation is different. This passage does not seem to reflect a Roman author writing about mental impairment as a result of combat; rather, it seems to indicate that Livius, like many other Roman authors, addresses the topic only in a sporadic and brief manner. Van Lommel himself remarks on this tendency in ancient writings. The brevity and occasional nature of such references suggest that, even if awareness of combat trauma existed, it was not consistently or fully explored in Roman literary tradition.

What is more, the war frightened him and he showed signs of some sort of battle fatigue. In addition to this, it is striking that Livy mentions that Scipio's physical injury was of

[65] Livy, *The History of Rome*, book 21, chap. 53, sec. 2, vol. 9, trans. B. O. Foster et al., *Loeb Classical Library* 295 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

secondary importance in comparison with his mental suffering (animo magis quam corpore aegrum). This reaction of Scipio to his wounding and his subsequent anxiety contrast sharply with the initially brave and nearly reckless attitude of the besieged Galateans in the previous episode. The memory of his wound and the turmoil of battle made Scipio shudder with fear (memoria volneris aciem ac tela horrere). Once again, Livy has the ability to pin down the complexity of warfare's mental impact on a soldier in just a few words.[66]

This final sentence encapsulates the crux of the differing conclusions drawn from the same source material. Both Van Lommel and this thesis agree that the Romans were aware of and engaged with the effects combat had on the mind of the soldier. We both point to the limited number of sources that address this issue. However, this thesis asserts that the quantity and quality of these sources are much more restricted than what Van Lommel suggests.

To distill the argument into a classical logical structure, it might look something like this:

Korneel van Lommel:

- **Premise 1:** The Romans were very aware of the prevalence of combat trauma.
- **Premise 2:** Here are a few sources which could be interpreted as examples of this awareness.
- **Conclusion:** Since there are in general only limited sources available to us, these imperfect sources still point toward an overall awareness of combat trauma in Roman literature.

This thesis:

- **Premise 1:** The Romans were very aware of the prevalence of combat trauma.
- **Premise 2:** Here are a few sources which could be interpreted as examples of this awareness.
- **Conclusion:** If the Romans were indeed aware of this, and they were a society obsessed with the organization of their military, we should expect to find more evidence in their writing than these few sources. Therefore, there must be something happening which explains this relative lack of sources.

[66] Van Lommel, "Roman Soldiers' Mental Impairment," 169.

Both conclusions are valid, but they lead to significantly different implications. Neither approach is inherently better than the other, but it is crucial to note that the line of argumentation presented here is not the only possible explanation for the questions raised. The scarcity of direct references to combat trauma in Roman literature can be viewed in various ways, and different interpretations offer different perspectives on Roman awareness and engagement with the psychological effects of war.

I: Military manuals

Military manuals are a logical starting point for research into Roman combat trauma. While the Roman world was deeply focused on military matters such as logistics and tactics, only a limited number of sources remain that delve into the human aspects of warfare. Though some other works may have existed but are now lost to time, even accounting for this, it seems that manuals focused specifically on the psychological effects of warfare were not a particularly common genre. In this chapter, two of the surviving handbooks will be analyzed: *De Re Militari* by Vegetius, dating from the late fourth or early fifth century, and *Strategikon* by Maurice. The military manual genre itself dates back to the Roman Republic, with the earliest surviving works originating from the fourth century BCE. However, there is a noticeable lack of detailed records regarding the practical use of such manuals during the republican and imperial periods, which makes it difficult to assess how commonly this genre was employed.

The genre did experience an increase in popularity during the later stages of Roman history, particularly in the Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire. In fact, many military manuals were produced during this period, used by generals to enhance their military strategies and intellect. Some might argue that these later Byzantine manuals do not reflect the same worldview or military style as those produced in the early days of the Roman Empire. However, it is important to note that the Eastern Roman Empire considered itself distinctly Roman, not Byzantine. The inhabitants of the Eastern Roman Empire saw themselves as heirs to the Roman legacy, including its military practices.

Although military practices evolved significantly after 370 AD, with shifts from legions to mobile cavalry, it is crucial to recognize that the Roman military was always adapting to new challenges. The Roman military underwent a number of transformations, from the phalanx to maniples and the Marian reforms, and even in the Western Roman Empire, the focus had already begun shifting away from traditional legionary forces toward more mobile cavalry. These changes in military structure and strategy do not diminish the relevance of these later

manuals to the research; in fact, they reinforce the notion that while the methods of combat may have changed, the emotional experiences associated with warfare remained remarkably consistent across time. As such, the historical distance between sources actually serves to strengthen the argument that the emotional and psychological effects of combat were a persistent and recognizable element of Roman warfare, regardless of the specific time period.

Other military manuals could also be relevant to this discussion. The earliest surviving military manual, *Peri Poliorcetikis* by Aeneas Tacticus, is primarily focused on siege warfare. Although a single passage discussing panic in siege situations could provide interesting insights, the highly specific nature of this work, dealing in detail with the technicalities of siege warfare, does not lend itself directly to the exploration of combat trauma. In one of the passages from Tacticus, he describes what to do when a city under siege is engulfed by panic. His advice is practical: soldiers should sit up in their beds with their arms ready, but they should not stand fully, in order to avoid confusion about who is the enemy. While one might expect an introductory statement to explore the emotional state of soldiers under siege—perhaps discussing how fear and stress might impact their decision-making—the passage is instead presented as a matter-of-fact guide for managing the panic itself. "The panic" is noted, but it is never explained or explored in any depth.

This omission highlights a key issue in the Roman approach to combat trauma: while certain emotional responses to warfare were acknowledged, they were not often discussed in terms of their psychological impact. Manuals like those by Aeneas Tacticus were written with the assumption that soldiers and commanders were familiar with the emotional strain of war, but this knowledge was not often articulated or explored in depth. This raises the question of whether there was a broader cultural awareness of combat trauma in the Roman military, or if it was simply understood as an inevitable, if unspoken, part of the experience of war. The lack of exploration of psychological trauma in these texts can be seen as a symptom of the Roman military's focus on practical solutions and tactical management rather than a comprehensive understanding of the human mind under stress.

In the following sections of this chapter, the focus will shift to *De Re Militari* by Vegetius and *Strategikon* by Maurice. These texts will be examined to determine whether they offer any insights into the emotional and psychological aspects of warfare, and whether they demonstrate a more developed understanding of combat trauma compared to earlier works like that of Tacticus.

For dealing with sudden alarms or attacks of terror occurring by day or night in the city or camps, sometimes called panics (a Peloponnesian word, especially common in Arcadia), the following measures have been recommended. Signals should be pre-arranged which the troops in the city will recognize, and perceive that a panic has occurred; there should also be a beacon-fire, in accordance with a pre-concerted plan, and on a spot visible, as far as may be, from all quarters of the city. It is best to have issued orders in advance that wherever the alarm takes place, all troops are to remain at their posts and raise a paean, or pass the word round from man to man that it is only a panic. If in any part of the force the paean is not raised in answer, you may assume that the panic has occurred there. If the general sees some real ground for apprehension, the bugle should be sounded: this should be the recognized alarm-signal. Panics generally take place after a defeat in battle, occasionally in the day time, at night frequently. To prevent their occurring so often, all the troops should have orders for the night to remain by their arms as far as possible, in readiness for emergencies: this warning will probably prevent them, when emergency does arise, from being taken by surprise and thrown into confusion by a sudden panic, with disastrous results. Euphratas, the Spartan governor in Thrace, finding night alarms of very frequent occurrence in his army, and being unable to stop them in any other way, issued the following orders for the night. In the event of an alarm, the men were to sit up at once on their beds and to reach for their arms, but no-one was to stand up. Anyone standing upright he publicly ordered them to treat as an enemy. Everyone, he thought, would take care to remember this order from fear of the consequences. And to show that he really meant what he said, when a panic did occur, one of his best men was struck down, though not killed, and some of the less valuable men actually lost their lives. After this the men obeyed orders, and took care to have no more panics, and never again to leave their beds in a fright. Another way of stopping a panic was this. While the camp was in an uproar one night, the herald called for silence and made the following proclamation: 'Whosoever reports the person who let loose the horse which has caused this commotion…' If an army is subject to this sort of thing at night, men of each company or regiment should in each watch be posted on the flanks and in the center, so that if anyone is seen waking in a fright or otherwise beginning to make a disturbance, one of them will be immediately at hand to check and restrain him. One man from each mess in the rest of the army should also be on guard to look out for groundless alarms and check panics in his own section. You yourself should alarm

the enemy's forces at night by giving your heifers or other beasts wine to drink, and then driving them into the enemy's camp with bells round their necks.[67]

Similarly, in Frontinus' *Stratagems*, another manual on tactics, only the final chapter on "*Dispelling the fears inspired in soldiers by adverse omens"* could give us any insight into the subject of trauma. After reviewing this work however, it seems clear that Frontinus was not focused on the emotional aspects of the soldier at all and, along with its relatively small size, this led me to the conclusion this work was not worthy of devoting a whole chapter to. Polyaenus' *Stratagems* does refer to some interesting points on cowardice and punishments, but this work reads more like a list of exploits by certain peoples and individuals than as a manual for warfare.[68] These precursory comments on the selected literature and those works not selected, hopefully reveals that the two works which will in fact be looked at, provide the highest chance of containing information pertaining to the emotional state of soldiers. Which in turn will hopefully strengthen the subsequent conclusion on the lack of source material covering soldiers' mental wellbeing.

Vegetius' De Re Militari

Military handbooks, such as Vegetius' *De Re Militari*, are expected to contain extensive references to the wellbeing of the common soldier. This work addresses nearly every aspect of soldiering, offering particular emphasis on the ideal behavior of soldiers, which is portrayed as the ancient Roman way of life. Among its many sections, *De Re Militari* includes a chapter on the health of soldiers, yet there is no mention of mental health in this context. However, the work is deeply concerned with the soldier's state of mind, both before and during battle.

In the section on the levying of new recruits, Vegetius outlines the characteristics of both a good and a bad soldier. Written as a guide for the current emperor, the work reflects a period of military decline in the Roman Empire, during which defeats in battle were becoming increasingly frequent. Vegetius looks back to the earlier days of Rome, when generals and soldiers were characterized by absolute discipline and rigorous training. He highlights episodes such as the relative peace between the Punic Wars, when training was scaled back, allowing Hannibal to penetrate deeply into Italy. Vegetius asserts that the success of the Roman army rested almost entirely on the valor and discipline of its legions.

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[67] Aeneas Tacticus, *How to Survive under Siege*, trans. David Whitehead (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), sec. 27.1.
[68] Polyaenus, *Stratagems of War*, book 8, chap. 24, on Augustus, trans. R. Shepherd (London, 1793).

This focus on soldiers' morale and discipline suggests that the Roman military elite was acutely aware of the mental state of its soldiers. However, the inclusion of mutiny, low morale, and retreat during battle as negative phenomena further complicates the issue. It appears that mental illness was not considered a significant enough concern to warrant mention in this military handbook. This raises two possibilities: either mental illness was not a prevalent issue, which would contradict the existence of laws regarding soldier suicide, or there was another reason for its omission in the text.

Several chapters of *De Re Militari* appear to hold potential for uncovering measures or remedies for soldiers affected by trauma. The following list outlines these chapters where such passages are likely to be found.

'The Selection of Recruits', 'Signs of Desirable Qualities', 'Initial Training', 'Means of Preserving it in Health', 'Methods to Prevent Mutiny in an Army', 'How to Manage Raw and Undisciplined Troops', and 'The Sentiments of the Troops should be Determined before Battle'.[69]

The following passage from the chapter on the selection of recruits addresses the question of where new soldiers should be sourced—from the city or the countryside. Vegetius argues that rural citizens, being more accustomed to hardship, would be better suited to the demands of military life. He contrasts this with the luxuries of urban living, suggesting that not only does city life weaken a man, but it also provides him with more to live for. This implies that individuals with fewer material possessions, and consequently fewer attachments, would be more inclined to enlist in such a perilous profession.

I realize that in the first ages of the Republic, the Romans always raised their armies in the city itself, but this was at a time when there were no pleasures, no luxuries to enervate them. The Tiber was then their only bath, and in it they refreshed themselves after their exercises and fatigues in the field by swimming. In those days the same man was both soldier and farmer, but a farmer who, when occasion arose, laid aside his tools and put on the sword. The truth of this is confirmed by the instance of Quintius Cincinnatus, who was following the plow when they came to offer him the dictatorship. The chief strength of our armies, then, should be recruited from the country. For it is certain that the less a man is acquainted with the sweets of life, the less reason he has to be afraid of death.[70]

[69] Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, trans. N. P. Milner (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), contents.
[70] Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, 16.

It is evident that Vegetius reflects on a time when all Romans endured a life of hardship, a condition he believes contributed to the strength of both the army and the state. As will be a recurring theme in these excerpts, however, there is regrettably no indication that Vegetius acknowledges the potential impact of these circumstances—such as a rural background—on a soldier's susceptibility to trauma or PTSD.

In the subsequent chapter, which addresses the value of certain professions for recruits, Vegetius makes a point regarding cowardice. He stresses that the army must not admit cowardly soldiers, as their inclusion could prove disastrous for the military.

But what good can be expected from a man by nature a coward, though ever so well disciplined or though he has served ever so many campaigns? An army raised without proper regard to the choice of its recruits was never yet made good by length of time; and we are now convinced by fatal experience that this is the source of all our misfortunes. So many defeats can only be imputed to the effects of a long peace which has made us negligent and careless in the choice of our levies and to the inclination so prevalent among the better sort in preferring the civil posts of the government to the profession of arms and to the shameful conduct of the superintendents, who, through interest or connivance, accept many men which those who are obliged to furnish substitutes for the army choose to send, and admit such men into the service as the masters themselves would not even keep for servants. Thus it appears that a trust of such importance should be committed to none but men of merit and integrity.[71]

In this passage, Vegetius suggests that a man's character is determined by his inherent nature. A person is either a coward, seemingly from birth, or fit to be a soldier. Once enlisted, a soldier does not appear to have the capacity to change from one category to the other, as recruitment is the point at which such men should be excluded. If bravery cannot be instilled through military service, it follows that cowardice cannot be either, making it reasonable to assume that Vegetius does not believe the violent nature of the soldier's profession has any significant psychological impact. According to his view, a soldier is either brave and fit for service, or weak and unfit, with no potential for transitioning from one to the other.

The final chapter of *De Re Militari* that will be examined here addresses the overall health of the army and how it should be preserved. In this section, Vegetius emphasizes the numerous factors a commander must consider to ensure the well-being of his soldiers. As highlighted in

[71] Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, 18.

the excerpt, attention is given to the weather, water sources, fatigue, clothing, and other such factors. Though this is only a brief passage, and each of these topics is discussed in greater detail elsewhere, one notable aspect of health is conspicuously absent from the list: mental health.

The next article is of the greatest importance: the means of preserving the health of the troops. This depends on the choice of situation and water, on the season of the year, medicine, and exercise. As to the situation, the army should never continue in the neighborhood of unwholesome marshes any length of time, or on dry plains or eminences without some sort of shade or shelter. In the summer, the troops should never encamp without tents. And their marches, in that season of the year when the heat is excessive, should begin by break of day so that they may arrive at the place of destination in good time. Otherwise they will contract diseases from the heat of the weather and the fatigue of the march. In severe winter they should never march in the night in frost and snow, or be exposed to want of wood or clothes. A soldier, starved with cold, can neither be healthy nor fit for service. The water must be wholesome and not marshy. Bad water is a kind of poison and the cause of epidemic distempers.[72]

This final passage, along with the previous ones, underscores the apparent disinterest of Roman military writers in addressing the psychological impact of warfare, despite the fact that their works were intended for use by actual commanders in the field. While the text is replete with detailed instructions on a wide range of topics, including many that seem less critical than the potential psychological toll on soldiers—such as trauma that could impair their effectiveness as combatants—there is little attention paid to the mental health of the troops.

These excerpts were selected not because they lack any mention of mental illness in the military, but rather because they represent the very places where one might most reasonably expect to find evidence of such awareness. The absence of such references in these sections is telling, highlighting a significant gap in the military discourse of the time.

Maurice's Strategikon

The *Strategikon¸* written by or at least commissioned by the Byzantine emperor Maurice, was issued to reinstate a focus on strategy and tactics in his generals on the frontlines.[73] The military leadership had proven inadequate in previous years, and this handbook was to meant to change

[72] Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, 67.
[73] Maurice, *The Strategikon of Maurice*, trans. George T. Dennis (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 10–14.

that fact. It was written in Greek and served as the basic handbook for military leaders for the next three centuries.

In one of the first chapters, twenty rules and punishments are described for various crimes committed by soldiers in active duty. A few examples:

(5) If any soldiers dare, for any reason whatsoever, to enter into a conspiracy, sedition, or mutiny against their commanding officer, they shall undergo capital punishment, in particular the ringleaders of any such conspiracy or mutiny.

(6) If anyone who has been entrusted with the defence of a city or fortress shall betray the same or shall desert his post against the orders of his commanding officer, he shall undergo the extreme penalty.

(7) IF anyone be found guilty of wanting to desert to the enemy, he shall undergo the extreme penalty, not only he but also anyone who knew of it, because he knew yet did not report it to the commanding officer.

(15) If anyone who is entrusted with the defence of the city or a fortress should surrender it or evacuate it while still able to defend it, unless compelled by danger to life, he shall undergo capital punishment.

After these regulations on crimes have been read, the tagmas should be drawn up in battle formation, and the punishments for offenses during combat made known to the assembled troops.

(16) If during the time when the battle lines are being formed and during combat a soldier shall abandon his post or his standard and flee, or if he charges out ahead of the place where he has been stationed, or if he plunders the dead, or races off to pursue the enemy, or attacks the baggage train or camp of the enemy, we order that he be executed, and that all the loot he may have taken be confiscated and given in to the common fund of his tagma, inasmuch as he has broken ranks and has betrayed his comrades.

(17) If during a general action or battle the troops who had formed for combat should turn back-may this never happen- without a good and manifest cause, we order that the soldiers of the tagma which first took to flight and turned back from the line of battle or from their own meros be shot down and decimated by the other tagmas, inasmuch as they broke their ranks

and were to blame for the rout of the entire meros. But if it should happen that some of them were wounded in the battle itself, they shall be exempt from such a judgment.[74]

It is evident from these examples that considerable attention was paid to individual crimes and the soldiers who committed them. Notably, we also find references to fleeing or routing from the enemy as a punishable offense, often accompanied by the death penalty. This is a passage where one might reasonably expect to encounter mention of the psychological distress that could result from combat. In the previous chapter, we discussed how certain exonerating circumstances for soldier suicide helped contemporaries understand the act. Similarly, one could argue that a comparable attitude might have been applied in cases of psychological distress, such as conversion disorder, where fleeing or freezing during combat might have been seen as a justifiable response.

In Maurice's *Strategikon*, we encounter a similar lack of direct acknowledgment of combat trauma. The military handbook provides extensive details on matters such as which formations to use in various situations, and the training of individual soldiers. However, the mental wellbeing of the soldier is conspicuously absent from these discussions. The only time Maurice touches on the mental state of soldiers is when addressing morale. Since this handbook was written for generals and higher-ranking officers, it is logical that the primary focus would be on how to maintain morale within the army. Maurice describes circumstances that could foster fear within the ranks and offers instructions on how to prevent them. While this could suggest some awareness of how combat situations might affect a soldier's psychological state, it remains the sole instance in which Maurice shows any attention to this issue. For instance, he notes that commanders should permit the burial of the dead, as it would benefit the soldiers' morale. This suggests an understanding of how the death of comrades could affect a soldier and acknowledges the potential healing power of burial rites. However, as with many of the previous passages, Maurice does not delve into the actual emotions of the soldiers involved. He merely states in broad terms that having the corpses of allied soldiers left unburied would harm morale.

While there are numerous references to morale and its maintenance during difficult situations, I disagree with the assumption that these references are strongly linked to combat trauma or mental illness. Morale is often used to describe the collective mood of a large group of soldiers and does not seem to reflect the individual psychological experiences of the soldiers

[74] Maurice, *Strategikon*, 19-20.

themselves. The factors contributing to low morale are generally described in clear terms: delays in wages, poor living conditions, lack of faith in a commander, among others. While these conditions undoubtedly influence the wellbeing of soldiers and affect their state of mind, the connection to trauma is too vague to be meaningful in this context. A soldier recounting a traumatic experience is unlikely to attribute his psychological distress to poor wages or other logistical issues. These circumstances are not unique to the military and can affect civilians in similar ways—such as a harsh winter or a poor harvest—which complicates using such factors as indicators of trauma. The nature of combat trauma, as distinguished by its intensity and other unique factors, sets it apart from these more general causes of distress. The reality of battle is often incomprehensible to those who have not experienced it, and this difference is underscored by the exceptionally high number of soldiers returning with severe mental afflictions following their exposure to combat.

II: *De Bello Gallico* and the *Res Gestae*

This chapter aims to provide insight into how Romans, particularly high-ranking men in Roman society such as Ammianus Marcellinus and Julius Caesar, perceived violent acts. By examining various descriptions of battles and other violent events, it is possible to address questions regarding the Roman disposition toward violence, trauma, and death, as well as whether attitudes toward these subjects evolved over time. The primary sources under examination will be *Res Gestae* by Ammianus Marcellinus and *De Bello Gallico* by Julius Caesar, which will serve as a contrasting pair in terms of writing style and approach to historical events. While translations of these works will primarily be used, direct references to the original Latin texts will be made when necessary.

A examination of Ammianus' *Res Gestae* and its descriptions of violence, followed by a comparison with Julius Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* will be presented here. Subsequently, the broader context of violence in the Roman Empire will be explored. The chapter will conclude with preliminary answers to the questions posed, as well as suggestions for further research. Given the constraints of space, certain topics—such as Christianity, domestic abuse, and sexual violence—will be addressed only briefly.

Two types of violence can be distinguished within the writing of Ammianus which we shall look at: “warfare” and “private acts”. These categories are not set in stone and simply serve to separate the violent acts in more manageable groups. When describing the emperor Maximinius he describes him as *Maximini truculenti*, or the savage and when describing the Caesar Gallus’

acts as *flagitium grave,* or shameful deed, these can be considered among the private acts of violence.[75] Many times does Ammianus describe the highest officials of Rome, including a late emperor, as criminal, unjust etc. He often describes Gallus as a bloodthirsty tyrant and a monster.[76] In his famous digressions he ridicules and scrutinizes the senators who parade around in outrageous fashion while succumbing to moral decay. The common folk however are not to be praised either for they enjoy base pleasure as much as the wealthy.[77]

Another plain and obvious indication of his cruel nature was the pleasure which he took in gladiatorial shows; he sometimes watched as many as six or seven fights with fascinated attention, and was as happy at the sight of boxers killing one another in bloody combat as if he had made a great financial coup.[78]

The following episode describes riots in the town of Iconium, where the local population reacted to the wrongful execution of an official—an unprecedented outrage.[79] The townspeople massacred them all, their natural ferocity inflamed by greed.[80] The language Ammianus uses in this episode, along with his portrayal of Gallus, Maximinius, and others, paints a distinctly moralistic picture. The text is replete with Latin phrases that translate to terms such as "crimes," "shameful deeds," "cruelty," "impiety," "injustice," and "evils."

One advantage Ammianus had in describing these political events and figures is that he was writing about a span of three hundred years. Most of those he might have offended with such language were long dead and thus unable to punish him. However, this does not fully explain the tone of his account. The portion of the *Res Gestae* that survives largely reflects Ammianus' own lifetime, and his relationship with his military patron, Ursicinus, and Emperor Julian may have afforded him a position in which he could freely describe violent acts in graphic detail, as long as this did not undermine the authority of the regime he supported.

In writing about warfare, Ammianus is equally as descriptive as he is when discussing other types of violence.

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[75] Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Later Roman Empire (A.D. 354–378)*, trans. Walter Hamilton (London: Penguin Classics, 1986), 14.1.8-14.1.9.
[76] E. A. Thompson, "Ammianus' Account of Gallus Caesar," *The American Journal of Philology* 64, no. 3 (1943): 302–15.
[77] David Rohrbacher, "Ammianus' Roman Digressions and the Audience of the *Res Gestae*," in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Historiography*, ed. John Marincola, vol. 2 (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 468.
[78] Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Later Roman Empire*, 14.7.6
[79] Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Later Roman Empire*, 14.1.1-14.2.2
[80] Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Later Roman Empire*, 14.2.2

On every side armour and weapons clashed, and Bellona, raging with more than usual madness for the destruction of the Romans, blew her lamentable war-trumpets; our soldiers who were giving way rallied, exchanging many encouraging shouts, but the battle, spreading like flames, filled their hearts with terror, as numbers of them were pierced by strokes of whirling spears and arrows.[81]

In describing the omens of defeat by the Goths, Ammianus again uses words such as terror, fear and madness. He writes from a very horizontal perspective as opposed to the more classic top down view of a battle.[82] He writes as if the soldiers are dying around him and attention is given to the experiences of the combatants. This style of writing has its advantages and disadvantages because what is gained in personal experience is lost in the tactical scale of battle.

Where Ammianus describes battles from the perspective of the soldiers involved, Caesar adopts a distinctly top-down perspective, writing primarily from the viewpoint of a commander. These two authors differ greatly in terms of style, which is unsurprising given their vastly different times, backgrounds, and positions within Roman society. Despite these differences, comparing the two texts offers an insightful backdrop for understanding the descriptions found in the *Res Gestae*.

These, having too eagerly pursued the enemy's rear, come to a battle with the cavalry of the Helvetii in a disadvantageous place, and a few of our men fall. The Helvetii, elated with this battle, because they had with five hundred horse repulsed so large a body of horse, began to face us more boldly, sometimes too from their rear to provoke our men by an attack. Caesar [however] restrained his men from battle, deeming it sufficient for the present to prevent the enemy from rapine, forage, and depredation.[83]

His soldiers hurling their javelins from the higher ground, easily broke the enemy's phalanx. That being dispersed, they made a charge on them with drawn swords. It was a great hinderance to the Gauls in fighting, that, when several of their bucklers had been by one stroke of the (Roman) javelins pierced through and pinned fast together, as the point of the iron had bent itself, they could neither pluck it out, nor, with their left hand entangled, fight with sufficient ease; so that many, after having long tossed their arm about, chose rather to cast

[81] Ammianus, *Res Gestae*, 31.13.10.
[82] Kagan, *The Eye of Command*, 8.
[83] Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War* (Commentarii de Bello Gallico), 1.15, trans. W. A. MacDevitt (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853).

away the buckler from their hand, and to fight with their person unprotected. At length, worn out with wounds, they began to give way, and, as there was in the neighborhood a mountain about a mile off, to betake themselves thither.[84]

These excerpts from the *Rolfe* translation of *De Bello Gallico* illustrate the matter-of-fact writing style Caesar employs when describing battle and violence. The phrase "And a few of our men fall" reflects the detached tone of a battle commander, rather than the perspective of a soldier witnessing the deaths of comrades. Javelins are described as piercing the Gallic soldiers, but there is no mention of pain, screaming, or horror—emotions that would likely have arisen in such circumstances.

An important distinction between Caesar and Ammianus should be made in terms of the goals of their respective works. Julius Caesar was both a politician and a commander, and his account of the Gallic Wars served a political purpose: to promote both himself and his military campaign to the people of Rome. Visceral descriptions of fallen Roman soldiers and the gruesome realities of battle would not serve his propagandistic aims. While Ammianus may also have had his own political agenda, these did not prevent him from portraying violence and battle as horrifying, or at least deserving of detailed description. It is unlikely that Ammianus, who had personally fought in numerous campaigns, harbored any general distaste for violence.

Ammianus Marcellinus wrote in a highly descriptive style, not only when recounting warfare—of which he had firsthand knowledge as a former soldier—but also in depicting private acts of violence. These acts, often perpetrated by high-ranking Roman officials, were used by Ammianus to highlight the moral decay within the empire. This moral degradation extended to the populace, who were more interested in spectacles like races and theater than the affairs of state. While the exact reasons for his approach are hard to pinpoint, it is clear that Ammianus diverged significantly from a writer like Julius Caesar, who offered more impersonal descriptions of what would have been gruesome conflicts. The differences in their writing reflect the distinct agendas, times, and backgrounds of the two authors.

While we can pinpoint some changes in Roman society which indicate a move away from violence in day to day life, such as the ban of gladiatorial games, violence was still very common, not only in the many wars of the time but this could be seen in the continuous

[84] Caesar, *Gallic War*, 1.25.

presence of urban violence as well.[85] It is therefore unfair to conclude that the Romans became progressively desensitized to violence over time. Christianity may have played a significant role in this shift. Under a Christian emperor, the gladiatorial games were banned, and the moral teachings of Christianity, particularly the Ten Commandments, emphasized that killing should not be glorified but condemned within society. The influence of Christianity on Roman views of violence could be explored more fully in another paper, along with several other aspects that have been insufficiently explained or entirely omitted in this analysis.

A comprehensive study comparing the writings of various Roman historians and authors on violent acts would be invaluable for understanding the Roman citizen's perception of violence, death, combat trauma, and PTSD. Such a work would provide deeper insights into the evolution of Roman attitudes toward these themes.

III: *Urbs Capta, Urbs Direpta*

The "*urbs capta"* or "capture of a city" is a literary motive in classical and medieval literature.[86] In brief, this motif describes the lamentations, wailing, and overall horror that often accompany the conquest of a city, whether by the Romans or their enemies. In G.M. Paul's analysis of the motif, he suggests that most, if not all, ancient authors were familiar with this motif, owing to the prominent role of rhetoric in Roman education. He argues that Livius, one of the most renowned Roman historians, does not employ this motif as strongly as might be expected, for several reasons. According to Paul, the horrors of conquest may have been presumed to be well-known to the reader, or the absence of the motif might have been a deliberate choice on Livius's part, designed to heighten the emotional impact on the reader by making its absence all the more conspicuous. While it is indeed striking that Livius refrains from using this motif, the reasons behind its omission might be explained in a different light.

Paul explains that the motif of *Urbs Capta* has its origins in Greek epic literature, likely stemming from, or at least popularized in, the *Iliad*. This classical Greek heritage is evident in a number of Greek historical works, such as Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian Wars. Paul argues that, 1) all ancient writers would have been aware of this tradition and its use, and 2) that Livius's failure to employ this motif suggests it was a deliberate choice. According to

[85] Thomas W. Africa, "Urban Violence in Imperial Rome," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2, no. 1 (1971): 3–21.
[86] G. M. Paul, "'Urbs Capta': Sketch of an Ancient Literary Motif," *Phoenix* 36, no. 2 (1982): 144–55.

Paul, Livius likely intended to convey the tone of the *Urbs Capta* motif without using it literally.

In contrast to Paul's interpretation, I would argue—consistent with the main argument of this thesis—that, while it is impossible to definitively determine whether this omission was intentional or subconscious, there are alternative reasons for Livius's avoidance of such motifs.

The *Urbs Capta*, in its traditional use, involves vivid descriptions of wailing women exposing their breasts, burning buildings, and other horrific scenes typically associated with the capture of a city in the ancient world. While this thesis has focused on the soldier and his experience of trauma, it is easy to see how a civilian caught in such an event would also be prone to developing PTSD. The horrors of a city's sack or capture bear significant overlap with the experiences of soldiers during active combat. Indeed, the citizen often suffers these traumas at the hands of soldiers. Thus, both soldiers and civilians could share in the trauma stemming from the same event, albeit from opposing sides of the experience.

It can therefore be argued that, as in other chapters and descriptions within Roman literature, the absence of deep emotional exploration of trauma is not an oversight but rather a defining characteristic. Unlike Greek literature, where the focus often includes an exploration of individual trauma and its aftermath, Roman texts tend to describe the fate of a city—or a battle—matter-of-factly. The tragedy, lamentation, and horror of an event are acknowledged, but there is little interest in the psychological consequences for those experiencing these traumatic events. This mirrors other descriptions of traumatic occurrences, such as battle narratives or soldiers' lives after service, where one might expect a deeper inquiry into the psychological impact of trauma, yet such explorations remain conspicuously absent.

Romans capture a city

The Romans are widely recognized by both modern readers and their contemporaries as a conquering people. Some scholars even suggest that one of the primary factors contributing to the fall of the Roman Empire was the cessation of their territorial expansion. As conquerors, the Romans were also notorious for sacking the cities they defeated. While it is well documented that this occurred frequently, both in ancient literary sources and corroborated by the archaeological record, the specific details of how these sacks took place remain notably rare.

Adam Ziolkowski argues that the scarcity of source material concerning the Roman practice of sacking cities likely indicates that the instances we do have must have been exceptional

cases.[87] This, however, would suggest that the Romans considered other instances of city sackings to be either insignificant or unworthy of documentation. While this is a plausible explanation, the broader evidence explored in this thesis points to another possible interpretation. It appears that the Romans were generally less inclined to write about the darker aspects of warfare, such as the terror and trauma it entailed.

Furthermore, the fact that Roman writers did, in fact, write extensively about the sack of their own cities may serve as a critique of their overall disinterest in exploring similar events when they occurred outside the empire. Notably, instances of aggression on the part of the Roman war machine seem to have been seldom documented, suggesting a reluctance to portray Roman conquest and violence in a negative light.

The word *diripio* is literally translated as 'tearing apart', with the word slowly devolving into the meaning of sacking or looting in later years.

When Scipio thought that a sufficient number of troops had entered he sent most of them, as is the Roman custom, against the inhabitants of the city with orders to kill all they encountered, sparing none, and not to start pillaging until the signal was given. They do this, I think, to inspire terror, so that when towns are taken by the Romans one may often see not only the corpses of human beings, but dogs cut in half and the dismembered limbs of other animals, and on this occasion such scenes were very many owing to the number of those in the place. ...After this [the surrender of the citadel], upon the signal being given, the massacre ceased and they began pillaging. At nightfall such of the Romans as had received orders to that effect, remained in the camp, while Scipio with his thousand men bivouacked in the citadel, and recalling the rest from the houses ordered them, through the tribunes, to collect the booty in the market, each maniple separately, and sleep there, keeping guard over it…. Next day the booty, both the baggage of the troops in the Carthaginian service and the household stuff of the townsmen and workers, having been collected in the market, was divided by the tribunes among the legions on the usual system. The Romans after the capture of a city manage matters more or less as follows: according to the size of the town sometimes a certain number of men from each maniple, at other times certain whole maniples are told off to collect booty, but they never thus employ more than half their total force, the rest remaining in their ranks at times outside and at times inside the city, ready for the occasion…. All those who are told off to spoil

[87] Adam Ziolkowski, "Urbs Direpta, or How the Romans Sacked Cities," in *War and Society in the Roman World*, ed. John Rich and Graham Shipley (London: Routledge, 2020), 69–91.

bring the booty back, each man to his own legion, and, after this has been done, the tribunes distribute the profits equally among all, including not only those who were left behind in the protecting force, but the men who are guarding the tents, the sick, and those absent on any special service. I have already stated at some length in my chapters on the Roman state how it is that no one appropriates any part of the loot, but that all keep the oath they make when first assembled in camp on setting out for a campaign. So that when half of the army disperse to pillage and the other half keep their ranks and afford protection, there is never any chance of the Romans suffering disaster owing to individual covetousness. For as all, both the spoilers and those who remain to safeguard them, have equal confidence that they will get their share of the booty, no one leaves the ranks, a thing that usually does injury to other armies.[88]

What becomes clear from this passage is that, while descriptions of the sacking cities were indeed present, the language used in this text is lacking in emotional descriptors. This piece of text is mainly concerned with the practical matters associated with the capture of a city, not so much concerned with the psychological impact this sack would have on those involved. While it is true that words such as *terror* are used, these do not seem to point to a sense of empathy in the author, but in fact only serve to describe in detail the perceived situation in which the combatants and citizens found themselves.

Roman cities getting sacked

Romans did not only find themselves as the aggressors in situations of siege warfare and its consequences, of course. During its lifetime, the Roman state often found itself in a situation, whether from within or without, where its own citizens were subject to the trepidations and horrors associated with warfare, and in particular, the outcome of siege warfare. A few passages shall be presented here which shall serve to illuminate the fact that the literary tendency to use a practical and non-emotional writing style extended past the topic of non-Romans. When Roman cities, or at least cities inhabited by perceived Romans, were subject to such horrors, writers still maintained a writing style which did not seem to include the psychological toll these situations would place on those involved.

Two descriptions by Livius stand out in its description of actual sacking of a city:

The next day they surrendered and received a garrison within their walls. Being commanded to give up their arms they complied: whereupon a signal was suddenly given to

[88] Polybius, *Histories*, 15.4–16.9.4.

the victors to sack the town, as if they had taken it by storm (ut tamquam vi captam urbem diriperent). Nor was any cruelty omitted which historians generally deem worth noting on such an occasion; but every species of lust and outrage and inhuman insolence was visited upon the wretched inhabitants.[89]

They all rob, plunder, beat, wound, slay; they defile matrons, maidens and freeborn boys, dragged from the embrace of parents. Every day our city is captured, every day it is being plundered (cotidie capitur urbs nostra, cotidie diripitur).[90]

The first of these passages describes the sack of a Roman city aptly named Victumulae by Hannibal in 218 BCE. Tacitus in his *Histories* describes the following:

Forty thousand armed men burst into the town; the number of camp followers and servants was even greater, and they were more ready to indulge in lust and cruelty. Neither rank nor years protected anyone; their assailants debauched and killed without distinction. Aged men and women near the end of life, despised as booty, were dragged off to be the soldiers' sport. Whenever a young woman or a handsome youth fell into their hands, they were torn to pieces by the violent struggles of those who tried to secure them, and this in the end drove the despoilers (direptores) to kill one another. Individuals tried to carry off for themselves money or the masses of gold dedicated in the temples, but they were assailed by others stronger than themselves. Some, scorning the booty before their eyes, flogged and tortured the owners to discover hidden wealth and dug up buried treasure. They carried firebrands in their hands, and when they had secured their loot, in utter wantonness they threw these into the vacant houses and empty temples.[91]

With the number of civil wars the Roman empire going through being particularly high, it is no surprise that instances of Roman on Roman atrocities related to the concept of *urbs capta* can be found. Especially in Tacitus' histories we see examples of this motif: [92]

When Vitellius was dead, the war had indeed come to an end, but peace had yet to begin. Sword in hand, throughout the capital, the conquerors hunted down the conquered with merciless hatred. The streets were choked with carnage, the squares and temples reeked with blood, for men were massacred everywhere as chance threw them in the way. Soon, as their

[89] Livy, *History of Rome*, 21.57.13–14.
[90] Livy, *History of Rome*, 29.17.15–16.
[91] Tacitus, *Histories*, 3.33.1–3.
[92] Elizabeth Keitel, "Principate and Civil War in the *Annals* of Tacitus," *The American Journal of Philology* 105, no. 3 (1984): 306–25.

license increased, they began to search for and drag forth hidden foes. Whenever they saw a man tall and young they cut him down, making no distinction between soldiers and civilians. But the ferocity, which in the first impulse of hatred could be gratified only by blood, soon passed into the greed of gain. They let nothing be kept secret, nothing be closed; Vitellianists, they pretended, might be thus concealed. Here was the first step to breaking open private houses; here, if resistance were made, a pretext for slaughter. The most needy of the populace and the most worthless of the slaves did not fail to come forward and betray their wealthy masters; others were denounced by friends. Everywhere were lamentations, and wailings, and all the miseries of a captured city, till the license of the Vitellianist and Othonianist soldiery, once so odious, was remembered with regret. The leaders of the party, so energetic in kindling civil strife, were incapable of checking the abuse of victory. In stirring up tumult and strife the worst men can do the most, but peace and quiet cannot be established without virtue.[93]

This passage offers a comprehensive summary of the violence that erupted within Roman cities when they were attacked by Roman forces. Acts of retribution against those aligned with the defeated enemy were carried out, often escalating into increasingly indiscriminate violence, with no clear distinction made between soldiers and civilians. It is also apparent from this passage that, in many cases, the leaders in charge were not able to control the men who perpetrated these acts of violence.

The examples of Roman-on-foreign, foreign-on-Roman, and Roman-on-Roman atrocities reveal the extreme levels of violence that could be inflicted upon urban centers. A city under siege or facing a sack could expect widespread destruction, with its inhabitants subjected to rape, murder, and enslavement. The fact that such violence occurred even when Romans themselves were the victims highlights its universality—such horrors were not confined to foreign cities but were an inherent part of the Roman military tradition. Any foreign city within reach of the Roman military could expect to become the target of extreme violence.

The sack of Rome by the Gauls in the fourth century BCE serves as an early example of how even Roman citizens were not immune to such violence. While Roman frontier settlements were especially vulnerable to attack, as civil war became increasingly common in the Roman world, any urban center within the empire could be targeted by a Roman force seeking to assert control and claim supremacy over the state.

[93] Tacitus, *Histories*, 4.1.1.

However, what is strikingly absent from the descriptions of these events is any mention of the psychological impact of such sackings on either the soldiers or the inhabitants involved. Even when the sack of a city is described in dramatic terms, no attention is given to the aftermath in terms of trauma or PTSD. The cities are depicted as being destroyed, burned, and devastated, with their inhabitants killed, raped, or enslaved. Yet, rarely do we read about the lasting effects of these experiences on those who lived through them—one of the most traumatic events imaginable.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have examined a diverse range of ancient texts, aiming to explore the likely sources where we might expect to find references to combat-related trauma within Roman literature. Our primary focus was on the military manuals written and utilized by the Romans, as these texts serve as a key point of reference for understanding what knowledge about the life of a soldier was considered important to document—not only for contemporary audiences but for future generations as well.

While these manuals reveal a clear interest in the character and qualities of the soldier, there is little evidence of an awareness regarding the long-term psychological impact of military life once a soldier has enlisted. These texts discuss the importance of certain professions and backgrounds in producing effective soldiers, particularly in terms of physical strength and work ethic. They provide guidance on how soldiers should be punished for abandoning their duties or displaying cowardice, and they offer strategies for maintaining order and cohesion in battle, even in the face of panic or overwhelming odds. However, what is conspicuously absent is any consideration of cowardice or panic as the result of a mental process that could be understood and described. Soldiers are categorized as either brave or cowardly, without acknowledging the psychological or emotional factors that might contribute to these outcomes. This oversight disregards the universality of trauma—namely, the potential for any soldier, regardless of temperament, to be pushed to a breaking point under extreme stress.

Following our examination of military manuals, we turned to Roman historiography, specifically the works of Julius Caesar and Ammianus Marcellinus. Despite their firsthand experiences of war, both authors focus on the violent aspects of warfare without exploring the psychological impact on the soldiers involved. Their accounts, though filled with gruesome descriptions of battle, show no interest in delving into the internal experiences of the soldiers.

The omission of such details could be intentional, reflecting a broader cultural reluctance to acknowledge the psychological toll of warfare.

Finally, we analyzed Roman depictions of the sacking of cities—among the most extreme forms of violence in antiquity. These descriptions often include acts of rape, pillage, and murder, yet, once again, there is no mention of the psychological damage inflicted on the inhabitants of these cities or on the soldiers who carried out the violence. Even in the most brutal and devastating events, the psychological aftermath is notably absent.

Through these examples, we can see that when we look at the literary sources where one would expect to find some acknowledgment of the link between violence and trauma, we find none. In the next chapter, we will explore potential reasons for this omission and discuss why Roman writers, despite their vivid depictions of physical violence, did not seem to recognize the mental and emotional consequences of such acts.

Chapter III: Seeing the Wounds, Missing the Words: The Absence of PTSD in Historical Sources

I: The violent society of the Romans

In this chapter, we will explore the relativist argument, examining the specific aspects of Roman society that could have enabled the Roman people to cope with traumatic violence "better" than modern individuals. We will begin by discussing the overall nature of Roman society and whether the levels of violence during the Roman era were significantly higher than those found in modern societies. Once this comparison has been established, we will then assess whether this exposure to violence may have fostered greater tolerance for the traumatic effects caused by such experiences.

Our first focus will be on the violence that occurred in urban areas, examining the ways in which every day Roman citizens were exposed to violence in both public and private contexts. The second section of this chapter will take a more theoretical approach, exploring the physical distance between combatants in ancient warfare. We will consider whether this lack of physical separation during battle had a unique psychological impact on the warriors involved, potentially influencing their experience of violence and trauma.

Finally, we will examine the role of ritual and narrative in Roman society, particularly as they relate to war and trauma. Like many other cultures, the Romans developed ways of creating narratives, supported by rituals, in which the violence they witnessed could be framed within a larger context. This process of narrativization likely helped individuals, both soldiers and civilians, make sense of their experiences and cope with the trauma they encountered. Through this, we gain insight into how the Romans practically managed violence and trauma in their cultural framework.

Taken together, these sections will help build a comprehensive picture of how the Romans viewed violence. By comparing this view with our modern understanding of violence and its psychological effects, we will be able to assess whether these cultural differences may explain the Roman reluctance to address trauma in their written accounts of warfare.

Urban violence in ancient Rome

Violence in the Roman world was not limited to the battlefield. The way in which a large number of the inhabitants of the Roman state were exposed to violence was in everyday life. Criminality, riots and gladiator games were all common occurrences and for the common

Roman it was far more likely to witness or participate in violence in these settings than on a distant battlefield within a context of organized violence. Roman aristocrats often described the people, that is the common citizen, as greedy, violent, simple and base. At the height of Roman imperium, the city of Rome housed around a million inhabitants and it was supposedly a rowdy, crowded and generally unsafe place. Due to a lack of urban planning, as opposed to the well-organized grid system so well-known of the Romans, the capital was haphazardly built and organically grew into the shape it would naturally assume. Ramshackle housing was prone to collapsing and fires and crime was commonplace.[94] At night the city was apparently extremely dangerous as the cramped streets and lack of light made it easy for organized and unorganized criminals to run rampant.[95] Gangs ran whole districts of the city and being found in the wrong place at the wrong time could easily get you robbed or killed.

Alongside this criminality which was likely part of everyday life, the arena provided the public with extra violence for those who had not had their fill. Almost all games in Rome were free of cost as part of the so called 'bread and circuses' policy. At its height in the third century, almost half of the days in a year were dedicated to public spectacle of some sort.[96] While the gladiatorial games are the most though provoking, it was actually the racing in the circus maximus that drew the largest crowds. This stadium housed some 250000 spectators as opposed to the 50000 of the Colosseum and was one of the first buildings in Rome. The fans of the races were divided into supporter groups who each supported a color. The confrontations between these groups, similar to modern day football hooligans could turn violent very easily. This violence of the chariot racing was of course nothing compared to the scenes which took place in the arena. While gladiatorial matches rarely ended in actual death, blood would have often flowed. The gladiators were not the only ones who bled in the arena of course. Criminals would have been put on display to be put to death in increasingly convoluted and degrading manners. Animals were slaughtered by the thousands in mock hunts and in combat.

Political violence was also part of city life in Rome, especially during the late republican era.[97] Since the Romans did not have an official police force, most Romans had to rely on friends, family and their patron for security.

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[94] Africa, "Urban Violence," 3.
[95] Juvenal, *Satires*, Sat. 3.268–308, trans. Susanna Morton Braund, *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
[96] Jérôme Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome: The People and the City at the Height of the Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 205–6..
[97] Andrew Lintott, *Violence in Republican Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 6–16, 66.

Herodian describes the following riots from the third century AD. This was a particularly tumultuous century of Roman history, often coined the crisis of the third century. External and internal issues threatened the empire and this often led to cases of unrest.

As a result of the recent revolt and disorder, all the senators were armed with daggers, openly or secretly, claiming that they were carrying them for protection against possible enemy plots.[98]

Politicians in ancient Rome who ventured into the streets often had to carry weapons for self-defense, as they were vulnerable to attack by rioters. The Praetorian Guards themselves were not immune to assault from civilians, highlighting the volatile nature of urban violence in the city. This example demonstrates how political violence could intertwine with more random, criminal acts within the urban environment. While mobs were frequently mobilized by politicians to target rival factions, there were instances where the violence became uncontrollable and seemingly disconnected from political motives. In these situations, people took to the streets to loot and pillage from the wealthy, expressing their dissatisfaction with the socio-political conditions they found themselves in.

Ammianus Marcellinus, who we have looked at in this thesis previously, describes popular riots in his *Res Gestae* as well.

However, long before this happened, Apronianus was succeeded by Symmachus, a man worthy to be classed among the conspicuous examples of learning and moderation, through whose efforts the sacred city enjoyed an unusual period of quiet and prosperity, and prides itself on a handsome bridge, which Symmachus himself, by the decision of our mighty emperors, dedicated, and to the great joy of the citizens, who proved ungrateful, as the result most clearly showed. For after some years had passed, they set fire to Symmachus' beautiful house in the Transtiberine district, spurred on by the fact that a common fellow among the plebeians had alleged, without any informant or witness, that the prefect had said that he would rather use his own wine for quenching lime-kiln than sell it at the price which the people hoped for.[99]

This instance of urban violence appears to be more isolated in nature. The citizens were disillusioned with a prefect who allegedly squandered wine rather than selling it at a reasonable

[98] Herodian, *History of the Empire from the Death of Marcus*, book 7, chap. 11, trans. C. R. Whittaker, *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).
[99] Ammianus, *Later Roman Empire*, 27.3.4.

price. The violence seems to have been directed solely at Symmachus' house, and while still senseless, it was motivated by a specific grievance against a single individual. In contrast, other examples of urban violence were more widespread, resulting in large-scale riots fueled by general unrest. The crisis of the third century saw such periods of social turmoil becoming more frequent, suggesting that in certain urban centers, during certain times, violence was an integral part of everyday life for the inhabitants.

The military and the distance of killing

The Roman military has been discussed extensively in this thesis, but there are still a few aspects of ancient combat that warrant further attention, particularly those specific circumstances where we might uncover insights into the psychological impact of warfare. Ancient combat was primarily characterized by close-quarters, hand-to-hand fighting. While archery, artillery, and throwing weapons were also common, the Romans were intimately familiar with the grim spectacle of two opposing lines of infantry clashing on the battlefield. As outlined in the introduction, the model upon which this thesis is based suggests that these lines would charge toward one another, maintaining some distance to hurl projectiles before engaging in direct combat. The most valiant or bloodthirsty soldiers would enter into close combat, while many others might remain on the periphery, observing the fight. Casualties would be heaviest once one army broke and began its retreat, with many soldiers being cut down as they fled.

This method of combat was central to Roman military tactics and the structure of their legions. The discipline of the Roman legions allowed them to conquer the Mediterranean world, and they did so primarily through direct, close-contact warfare. To understand this form of combat more deeply, it is useful to contrast it with modern reports on warfare, such as the following quote from a report delivered to the United Nations by the Human Rights Committee:

> *Because operators are based thousands of miles away from the battlefield, and undertake operations entirely through computer screens and remote audiofeed, there is a risk of developing a 'Playstation' mentality to killing.*[100]

[100] Philip Alston, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions: Study on Targeted Killings*, Human Rights Council, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/14/24/Add.6 (28 May 2010), ¶ 84, http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/14session/A.HRC.14.24.Add6.pdf (accessed 30 March 2025).

The modern soldier often times has such a huge literal distance between himself and his target that there is an apparent risk of dehumanization and developing a game like mentality to killing.

Ritual and narrative

A thesis by Arjan van Lil, a fellow student at Utrecht University, also served as an inspiration for the research question explored in this thesis. Van Lil's work addressed similar questions, but from the perspective of ritual and narrative.[101] The focus on martial rituals in Roman society provides an insightful entry point into these questions, as these rituals were heavily described and provide an alternative avenue for understanding the impact of combat. Additionally, this approach helps to circumvent the challenges of researching the psychological states of ancient peoples.

While martial rituals are not the primary focus of this thesis, they offer valuable insight into the possible reasons why Roman authors may have been reluctant to write about combat trauma. Drawing on Crowley's arguments, we can consider the role of socio-historical contexts in influencing the extent to which individuals are susceptible to mental afflictions like PTSD. Crowley, using the example of the Athenian hoplite, suggests that the narratives surrounding war, life, death, and trauma helped soldiers frame their experiences in ways that facilitated coping with the emotional toll of combat. The Roman world, with its distinct socio-historical context, provides its own framework. As a highly militarized society, where martial values were paramount and the destruction of the enemy for the glory of Rome was seen as a noble pursuit, Roman soldiers may have been equipped with a mindset that helped them process their actions in battle.

However, while this explanation seems plausible, there are several aspects of it that both fit well with the research question and present challenges. First, it is widely accepted that PTSD is relative. Some individuals experience it more severely than others, either due to natural susceptibility or because their specific situation alleviates its effects. I will not delve into the nature versus nurture debate here, but it is important to note that individual circumstances—whether situational or genetic—play a role in determining how trauma affects someone. This means that even without detailed knowledge of how Roman society handled combat trauma,

[101] A. J. van Lil, *Ritual, Narrative, and Trauma: Considering the Socio-Psychological Significance of Roman Martial Rituals* (Master's thesis, Utrecht University, 2019), https://studenttheses.uu.nl/handle/20.500.12932/34053 (accessed 23 March 2025).

we can reasonably hypothesize that the Roman soldier, within the context of their society, might have been less vulnerable to PTSD than a modern soldier.

With this premise in mind, we can explore whether the militarized Roman society effectively mitigated the effects of combat trauma. The martial rituals described by Arjan van Lil provide three important purposes in shaping a Roman soldier's experience of combat. First, these rituals helped soldiers narrate their experiences, framing battle in a clear beginning-to-end narrative. Second, the rituals reinforced the belief that the gods were on their side if performed correctly, further aligning soldiers with a sense of divine favor. Third, these rituals fostered a sense of camaraderie, strengthening the shared experience within the Roman military.

If we accept these three propositions, it would logically follow that Roman soldiers were, on average, less susceptible to combat trauma due to these rituals. However, there are counterbalancing factors that suggest otherwise. The first is the concept of "the distance of killing," which I mentioned earlier. This theory posits that the closer the physical distance between killer and victim, the greater the psychological impact on the killer. In ancient combat, where close-quarter, hand-to-hand fighting was the norm, soldiers would have had to confront this proximity, which likely increased the psychological toll of killing. This factor alone could have counteracted the positive effects of martial rituals.

Additionally, the sheer horror and terror of ancient warfare may have been more incomprehensible to Roman soldiers than to modern ones. Today, we are exposed to images and stories of violence on an almost daily basis through media, which can desensitize us to certain aspects of war. A Roman soldier, however, might have been shocked or overwhelmed by witnessing unfamiliar horrors, such as encounters with elephants on the battlefield or the gruesome effects of battle that were more visceral and close. Such encounters might have had a psychological impact that could not be easily mitigated by ritual or narrative.

Moreover, even if we assume that Roman rituals provided some degree of protection against trauma, it is difficult to evaluate the degree of trauma experienced by soldiers because we lack a clear benchmark for comparison. In modern times, we have a better understanding of PTSD, and we generally agree that only individuals with psychopathic traits are immune to the psychological effects of combat. Should we consider it a positive outcome if more soldiers showed signs of psychopathy as a way to avoid trauma? On the opposite end of the spectrum, the most severe consequence of untreated trauma in any society is often suicide, which was a prevalent issue within the Roman military as well.

Finally, while modern PTSD is widely recognized and studied, we must acknowledge that ancient Romans did not have the psychological tools and medical advancements available today. If narrativizing one's experiences could help soldiers cope with trauma, then it is reasonable to ask why such an approach could not benefit modern soldiers as well. The comparison between ancient Roman soldiers and modern veterans—such as those from the Vietnam or Iraq wars—can also be drawn. Roman soldiers who felt disillusioned by wars of conquest or civil conflicts might have faced similar feelings of betrayal or trauma, akin to soldiers in more recent conflicts.

In conclusion, comparing the Roman world with modern counterparts is intriguing, but it offers little concrete evidence to determine whether ancient soldiers experienced more or less trauma. Even if we assume that Roman society was designed to help soldiers cope with combat, the evidence suggests that these efforts were not sufficient to entirely alleviate the psychological impact of warfare. Furthermore, as I argued earlier, the lack of substantial literary evidence of trauma in Roman texts complicates our understanding. The Roman military's martial society, while perhaps beneficial in some respects, ultimately fails to explain the absence of references to PTSD or its effects in Roman literature.

The ennobling of the warrior

Another way in which violence was contextualized in Roman society, was through the acknowledgement of the warrior as a noble profession. Someone who enacts violence in our modern society is also praised in certain situations. We still attribute great value to modern soldiers and sports such as rugby and mixed martial arts could be viewed as modern day equivalents to the Roman gladiator games. The way in which violence was legitimized in the figure of the warrior helps to understand the ways in which the warrior could place himself and his actions within a context in which violence was not only legitimate, but also noble. This could have helped alleviate some of the inherent stress and trauma associated with combat and enacting violence upon another person. In "*The middle republican soldier and systems of social distinction"*, Kathryn Milne describes a few ways in which personal military activity was praised in the republican era of Roman society. the widespread societal ennoblement of violent acts.[102] The first manner in which a Roman could distinguish himself on the battlefield, as seen in the work of Polybius, is through a disregard of safety and bravery in the face of danger.

[102] Kathryn H. Milne, "The Middle Republican Soldier and Systems of Social Distinction," in *Romans at War*, ed. Jeremy Armstrong and Matthew Trundle (London: Routledge, 2019), 134–53.

But though the leaders of the escalade had begun mounting the walls with great spirit, they found the operation accompanied by some danger: not so much from the number of the defenders, as from the height of the walls. The defenders accordingly plucked up courage considerably when they saw the distress of the assailants: for some of the ladders were breaking under the weight of the numbers which, owing to their length, were on them at the same time; while on others the first to mount turned giddy owing to their great height, and without requiring much resistance from the defenders threw themselves from the ladders: and when beams, or anything of that sort, were hurled upon them from the battlements, they were swept off en masse and fell to the ground. In spite however of these difficulties nothing could check the zeal and fury of the Roman attack; but as the first fell their place was always taken at once by the next in order. And now, as the day was far advanced, and the soldiers were worn out with fatigue, Scipio sounded a recall for the assaulting party,[103]

In Polybius's account, the men storming the walls with ladders are described as literally turning giddy with excitement, and this portrayal is echoed by other ancient authors. While there are certainly passages that describe the fear and anxiety soldiers experienced when assaulting a walled settlement, examples of excitement and even exhilaration are just as common. This duality of emotions—fear and excitement—reflects the complexity of human reactions to warfare. Similarly, in pitched battles, there would always be soldiers who were more cautious and others who were more reckless. It is often those who are the most reckless that are highly praised in military contexts. This praise of boldness and disregard for personal safety in the face of danger is not unique to ancient Rome. It has been suggested that this phenomenon is common throughout history, with certain individuals being naturally inclined to become warriors or killers—whether due to temperament, training, or inherent nature.[104]

A second, more institutionalized way in which a warrior gained social status in Rome was through the Roman triumph. While the triumph would later become a tool of imperial power—where all military victories had to be dedicated to the emperor, even when he had not participated in the campaign—it seems that this was not always the case in the early days of Rome. In its origins, the triumph was likely a more organic phenomenon. Soldiers returning from a victory would eventually come back to Rome, where they were greeted with the jubilations of the citizens they had left behind. In this early context, the triumph was not

[103] Polybius, *Histories*, 10.13.6.
[104] Paul Pierson, *Politics in Time: History, Institutions, and Social Analysis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 64.

primarily intended to honor the general, but rather to celebrate all the soldiers who had participated in the war. Several sources point to the fact that in these early triumphs, it was the soldiers themselves who were celebrated and honored.[105]

Not only were the soldiers celebrated with a lavish reception, gifts and jubilations. It seems that the entire goal of the triumph was in some way to glorify the violence committed by these soldiers.[106] Representations or actual pieces of the towns they had destroyed or the people they had vanquished were often displayed during these parades. Prisoners of war were often dragged through the streets with some famous examples even parading kings and queens around the city. What these soldiers had done during these campaigns were often horrendous deeds. Not only did the legions fight battles, they sacked cities and slaughtered civilians. These acts had to be narrativized in some way to become palatable to the soldiers as well as the public at large. "The whole endeavor facilitated collective and individual narratives of soldiers' experiences in a detailed and exacting manner."

Awards were also given to soldiers who had displayed those attributes which the Romans deemed valuable.

The behaviors which gained awards in the middle Republican legions relate not simply to duty but eager, proactive engagement in military activity. They were decorations that rewarded the habitual behaviors of the "natural killers" – or the Dentati of this world – that most people will not do instinctively but can be induced to, given the right motivation. Polybius gives us a list of various articles of war given as awards and the set feats necessary to win them. Soldiers who had wounded an enemy earned the hasta pura, a type of spear. Those who killed and stripped an enemy earned phalera (horse-trappings) if he was in the cavalry and patella (a shallow dish) if he were infantry.64 Polybius is clear that these acts would not win decorations if done in the normal course of a battle, but were given to a man "who, faced with no compulsion, in skirmishing or any other opportunities voluntarily and deliberately endangered himself." Similarly, there was the corona muralis, already mentioned, and its sister award the corona vallaris, for the first man over the wall of an enemy camp. The winner of these awards had to have been an impatient and competitive soldier who had rushed to the very front of the fighting, with the intent of an aggressive attack on the defenders inside the

[105] Plautus, *Bacchides*, line 1074, trans. Wolfgang de Melo, vol. 1, *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).
[106] Milne, "Middle Republican Soldier," 143.

fortification. Even the decorations which relate to defending or preserving life could be achieved only with the application of proactivity and initiative. The corona civica was awarded to a soldier who saved the life of a fellow citizen in battle, and then held the ground where the deed had happened for the rest of the day. The implication of this latter stipulation was the halt of a reversal. The awards as a whole reflect an ideal soldier who was at the front when others were charging, and holding his ground when others were falling back. Other awards, such as the corona aurea, were at the discretion of the commander and awarded for miscellaneous acts of bravery.[107]

Many different aspects of Roman society have been explored here. The primary aim of discussing these examples was to highlight the pervasive nature of violence within Roman society, where certain forms of violence were not only tolerated but actively praised and encouraged. Gladiators seeking fame and glory in the arena, mobs being incited to purge political opponents, soldiers receiving rewards for being the first to scale enemy walls, and the triumphs that paraded the military's violent conquests—these all illustrate how violence was both normalized and celebrated. Those who excelled at enacting violence were often regarded as courageous and were rewarded with material wealth and social status. This, in turn, created a cycle where others were encouraged to emulate violent behavior in pursuit of similar recognition in a violent society.

However, is it accurate to say that modern societies view violent individuals much differently from the Romans? While the forms of violence may have changed, there are still parallels. Modern soldiers who perform acts of valor in combat are often awarded medals, and veterans are generally respected in many countries. Professional athletes, particularly in violent sports like boxing or mixed martial arts, can be seen as modern gladiators, with fame and fortune often resulting from their violent pursuits. In some countries, military parades—such as those still held in Russia and China—celebrate the power and violence of the military, while in the United States, fighter jets perform aerobatic tricks on national holidays.

The criminality described in ancient Rome, which contributed to a violent and chaotic environment, can also be found in modern cities where violence remains a constant threat, especially in areas plagued by gang activity or political unrest. There are also countries where

[107] Milne, "Middle Republican Soldier," 146.

political purges and acts of violence against dissenters are still regular occurrences, such as in certain former Soviet states or post-colonial African nations.

On one hand, it is easy to view the Romans as a people obsessed with violence, with it being embedded in nearly every facet of their society. This pervasive culture could have diminished the psychological impact of violence for many Romans, and some even may have benefitted from this violent behavior. However, it is difficult to directly compare how violence was perceived and celebrated in Roman times with our modern mindset. While certain violent acts—such as military valor or the pursuit of glory through combat—are still regarded positively in modern society, other forms of violence, like the murder of a family member, are universally condemned both in Rome and today.

Thus, while I do not completely dismiss the idea that Roman society's pervasive violence could have contributed to their lack of focus on the psychological impacts of violence, I believe there are other, more compelling explanations to be found in both ancient and modern literature that better account for why Roman authors rarely addressed the trauma associated with violence.

II: Triumph in defeat

In this final part of the theoretical analysis, a theory shall be presented that, in my view, offers the most compelling explanation for the relative absence of descriptions of combat trauma in Roman literature. This theory, known as *Triumph in Defeat*, was developed by Jessica Clark in her book of the same name. While Clark's argument primarily addresses Roman society as a collective rather than focusing on individual experiences of trauma, I will attempt to extrapolate her conclusions to apply at the level of the individual soldier as well. Admittedly, this is the most speculative aspect of the argument, but it nonetheless provides a valuable framework through which to explore the Roman conceptualization of military experience, trauma, and memory.

...,but I propose that it is the Romans themselves who blurred the lines between narrative construction and reality, presenting military events within a consistent chronological pattern wherein any defeats were followed by victories, leading to a triumph, and thence to security and expanded economic opportunities.8 Whether one calls this emplotment or good political strategy, it required the exclusion of events outside its careful trajectory and thereby curtailed its audience's ability to assess the costs of Rome's continuing military campaigns.[108]

[108] Clark, *Triumph in Defeat*, 1.

In her book *Triumph in defeat: military loss and the Roman republic*, Jessica Clark describes how Romans who wrote about war, narrativized the defeats of the Roman republic. She argues that it is strange that so little research has been done in the defeats the Roman republic suffered, as the number of battlefield defeats is roughly the same as the number of triumphs during this same period.[109] Jessica Clark's *Triumph in Defeat* offers a compelling reinterpretation of how Romans conceptualized military victory and defeat—terms that, she argues, were often constructed or reconstructed by the state for political purposes. Her central claim is that the Roman elite, particularly during the late Republic, developed mechanisms by which even ambiguous or outright unsuccessful military engagements could be framed as part of an overarching narrative of Roman resilience and eventual triumph. The state frequently declared wars "won" before the achievement of decisive battlefield success, using rhetorical and symbolic tools to reinforce this message.

Clark focuses primarily on the late Republican period—a time when some of Rome's most catastrophic defeats occurred, including those during the Second Punic War. This era is also notable as one in which the triumph still held significant political currency for commanders other than the emperor. In her study, Clark begins by analyzing how military defeats were remembered and commemorated during the late Republic. She then turns to the Second Punic War, arguing that in the face of devastating losses to Hannibal's forces, the Roman Senate and political class crafted narratives that emphasized perseverance, moral superiority, or eventual success. Through speeches, ceremonies, and ultimately the writing of history, they positioned these defeats as stepping stones toward a grander Roman victory.

One of Clark's key insights is that this process of narrativization—aggrandizing the positive aspects of conflict while minimizing or omitting the setbacks—was institutionalized by the Senate and internalized by Roman historians, many of whom were senators themselves. The Roman elite thus shaped both the contemporary understanding and the historical memory of military campaigns. Clark notes a conspicuous absence of detailed casualty reports, despite Rome's otherwise extensive record-keeping in military affairs. She interprets this as a deliberate omission, designed to control the narrative and avoid dwelling on loss. While she acknowledges that the limited monumental evidence in the Republican period could be attributed to broader architectural trends, she contrasts Roman practice with that of the Greek polis, where memorials to military defeat were more common. For the Romans, history itself

[109] Clark, *Triumph in Defeat*, 4.

became the primary vehicle for framing defeat within a redemptive and patriotic story of eventual triumph.

The idea of triumph in defeat can even be seen in the foundational myth of the Romans as described by Virgil. At the start of the Aeneid, as Jupiter reveals to his daughter Venus the fate of her favoured people, the descendants of Aeneas, he does so as follows:

A time will come, as the years glide by, when the Trojan house of Assaracus will force Phthia into slavery, and be lords of beaten Argos.From this glorious source a Trojan Caesar will be born, who will bound the empire with Ocean, his fame with the stars, Augustus, a Julius, his name descended from the great Iulus. You, no longer anxious, will receive him one day in heaven, burdened with Eastern spoils: he'll be called to in prayer. Then with wars abandoned, the harsh ages will grow mild: White haired Trust, and Vesta, Quirinus with his brother Remus will make the laws: the gates of War, grim with iron, and narrowed by bars, will be closed: inside impious Rage will roar frighteningly from blood-stained mouth, seated on savage weapons, hands tied behind his back, with a hundred knots of bronze.[110]

Generals and the overwriting of defeat

During the Republican era, Roman armies were typically commanded by one of the annually elected consuls. These consuls, drawn from the highest ranks of Roman society, were by no means immune to military defeat. However, contrary to what modern expectations of military accountability might suggest, such defeats rarely barred them from future commands. On the contrary, historical sources often show these same generals being reappointed, sometimes even to campaign against the very foes who had previously bested them. This pattern reflects more than just the limited pool of eligible commanders among the Roman aristocracy—it also reveals a deeper ideological conviction. Just as the Roman state refused to frame itself as truly defeated, so too were its representatives in the field viewed as agents of an unfinished story. Reappointment after a defeat was not simply an act of political expediency; it was part of a broader cultural imperative to overwrite failure with success. The Senate's consistent support for defeated commanders suggests a collective effort to narratively transform setbacks into preludes to triumph, reinforcing the mythos of Roman resilience and destiny.

[110] Vergil. *The Aeneid*. Translated by A. D. Melville, Penguin Classics, 2003, 282–296.

This also is debated among the writers, whether the consul led his army against the Boii before the Insubres, and the favorable battle erased the setback, or whether the victory at Como was partly disfigured by the disaster received among the Boii.[111]

This passage from Livy illustrates a key pattern in Roman military and political culture: the ability of generals not only to redeem their own defeats, but also to rectify the failures of others. While not every commander survived a failed campaign—and some were barred from future command due to particularly egregious misconduct—it is clear that both the Roman people and the Senate maintained a vested interest in overwriting military defeats with subsequent victories. This impulse, institutional and cultural, underpins Jessica Clark's theory of *Triumph in Defeat*.

Clark argues that Roman victory was often not an objective battlefield reality but a politically constructed narrative. Especially during the late Republic, the Senate frequently declared a war "won" long before any conclusive military success had been secured. These decisions, made in the political heart of Rome far from the front lines, were less about immediate tactical outcomes than about framing events in a way that maintained Rome's image as an unstoppable force. Through rituals like the triumph, victory was celebrated even when it had only been nominally achieved, reinforcing public perception and shaping the collective memory of a conflict.

As described in previous chapters, these public displays of victory—parades, monuments, and religious rites—not only served political goals but may also have aided Roman soldiers and citizens in processing the violence and chaos of war. They helped frame traumatic or uncertain events within a familiar narrative structure, transforming defeats into mere preludes to inevitable triumph.

Historians, often from the same elite class as the political decision-makers, were instrumental in sustaining this narrative. While they had some flexibility to emphasize or downplay particular events, it is striking that the Roman historical record contains so many detailed accounts of defeats. In the Republican era alone, hundreds of Roman losses are recorded. However, these defeats are rarely framed as conclusive failures. Instead, they are woven into a larger storyline of resilience and ultimate victory—a framing that aligns with Roman ideological commitments to perseverance and destiny.

[111] Livy, *History of Rome*, 33.36.15.

Thus, in Roman political and historiographical thinking, defeat was never final. It was an obstacle to be overcome, a narrative pause before the inevitable restoration of Roman supremacy. Generals who lost battles were often reappointed to command, and their descendants were encouraged to take up arms to redeem past losses. This approach did not just shape politics and literature; it permeated Roman identity itself, enabling a society constantly at war to maintain confidence in its mission and destiny.

For the purposes of this thesis, the application of Clark's theory will be extended beyond the Republican period to encompass the broader scope of Roman military history. While the formal mechanics of triumphs and political narratives evolved under the Empire, the underlying principle—that defeat could be incorporated into a triumphant narrative—remained a constant. This conceptual framework helps explain the Roman reluctance to engage in detailed reflections on psychological trauma in their literature: trauma, like defeat, was not something to dwell on, but something to be subsumed into a larger story of resilience and eventual victory.

Shame in defeat

The theory of *triumph in defeat* offers a compelling explanation for how the Roman state managed and narrativized the frequent military setbacks it encountered. As Jessica Clark argues, the Senate often determined when a war was "won" regardless of whether the military situation justified such a declaration. This meant that certain events—and sometimes entire individuals—needed to be downplayed, reframed, or excluded from the historical narrative altogether. When a defeat was especially devastating, the Roman response was either to secure an equally dramatic victory against the same enemy or to reinterpret the loss in a way that minimized its significance.

The final step in this thesis extends this institutional strategy to the individual level. If the Roman state and its historians actively reshaped the story of military defeat to fit a broader narrative of eventual triumph, it is reasonable to propose that individual experiences of loss and trauma were subject to similar pressures. A soldier returning home from a disaster such as Cannae, recounting the horrors he had witnessed, would serve as a living reminder of the state's failure—something the official narrative sought to obscure. Just as the collective defeat had to be reframed, so too might individual soldiers have been expected, implicitly or explicitly, to suppress or reinterpret their own traumatic experiences.

Exploring the mechanisms behind this process presents a rich opportunity for further research. It seems likely that both top-down and bottom-up forces contributed to the suppression or

transformation of personal narratives of defeat. From the top, aristocratic norms and political propaganda discouraged the public acknowledgment of psychological suffering. From the bottom, the rituals, camaraderie, and narrative frameworks embedded in military life may have offered soldiers a means to rationalize or contain their trauma—if not fully heal from it. Whether conscious or unconscious, these mechanisms reinforced a cultural expectation that defeat and vulnerability were not to be spoken of, but rather absorbed into the larger mythos of Roman resilience and eventual victory.

Collective trauma

While this is not part of the main argument of this research, the concept of collective trauma deserves some attention in this chapter as well. Gilad Hirschberger describes collective trauma as the first step in a process of dealing with a cataclysmic event:

> *The current paper systematically delineates the process that begins with a collective trauma, transforms into a collective memory, and culminates in a system of meaning that allows groups to redefine who they are and where they are going.*[112]

If we apply this framework to the case study examined in this thesis, a cataclysmic event comparable to those discussed in trauma theory might be the Battle of Cannae. This devastating defeat for the Roman Republic resulted in the deaths, injuries, or capture of tens of thousands of Roman soldiers. Beyond the immediate human cost, the psychological threat to the Roman state's continued existence was profound. At any moment, Hannibal—accompanied by foreign mercenaries and war elephants—might have marched on Rome itself, threatening to destroy the city and massacre its inhabitants. This existential crisis can be likened to the Cold War-era phenomenon of nuclear dread: the persistent anxiety that annihilation might occur at any moment.

If such an event is accepted as constituting a point of collective trauma, we can then explore how the Romans processed this experience within their collective memory, following the model outlined by Hirschberger. Traumatic events typically destabilize a group's social identity. For instance, when religious communities endure trauma, it often prompts theological reckoning—members may question the presence or judgment of their deity. To maintain cohesion, the group must integrate the traumatic experience in a way that preserves its core

[112] Gilad Hirschberger, "Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning," *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (2018): 1441.

values. Religious communities might resolve this tension by interpreting the trauma as divine punishment or as part of a larger redemptive narrative.

The Romans similarly possessed a strong collective identity, characterized by values such as *pietas* (familial and civic duty), conquest, martial virtue, resilience, integration, and even ruthlessness. The notion of *Roma Victor*—Rome as the perpetual victor—was a central component of Roman self-conception. As previously discussed, the Roman Republic rarely acknowledged defeat, even when substantial losses were incurred. Senate decrees and official narratives frequently reframed outcomes as victories, regardless of battlefield realities. Events like Cannae, the defeats during the Samnite Wars, or the Gallic sack of Rome might have threatened this identity, but they were ultimately incorporated in ways that preserved Rome's image of invincibility.

So, how did the Romans incorporate traumatic events into their collective memory? The answer, in line with this thesis's broader argument, is that they largely did not. Roman collective identity resisted the acknowledgment of trauma as final or definitive. Military setbacks were portrayed as temporary disruptions, to be rectified by eventual victory. When military retaliation was possible, Rome committed immense resources to reversing previous defeats. When retaliation was not feasible, the Senate employed narrative strategies to reframe defeats in terms that aligned with Roman values. In essence, the Romans did not memorialize defeat; they denied its finality.

According to Hirschberger, the final step in trauma incorporation involves the creation of a new collective meaning—a redefinition of group identity.[113] For Rome, this redefinition may have occurred very early in its history. Foundational myths often feature initial defeat followed by triumphant resurgence. Even the mythic descent from Troy implies resilience: though the Trojans were destroyed, their descendants went on to conquer the known world. This thematic resilience—victory through perseverance—allowed Rome to avoid fully assimilating trauma into its identity.

Whether this cultural framework was already embedded in Roman identity or developed in response to historical experience is open to interpretation. The result, however, is clear: Roman society processed traumatic events in ways that differ markedly from many modern examples of collective trauma.

[113] Hirschberger, "Collective Trauma," 1441.

In the modern era, groups have often been compelled to integrate defeat into their collective identity. Vietnam War veterans, for instance, returned to a society that questioned the legitimacy of the war. German soldiers after World War II had no choice but to reckon with absolute defeat. These experiences necessitated a reconfiguration of collective identity. In contrast, some communities—like the Jewish people—have interpreted traumatic history through a lens of eventual vindication. Despite centuries of persecution and displacement, the Jewish narrative often emphasizes endurance and future redemption. The Holocaust stands as the paradigmatic collective trauma, yet even this is sometimes understood within a theological framework of divine justice or covenantal destiny. The founding of the modern State of Israel exemplifies a secularized version of this redemptive arc.

This form of trauma incorporation is not unique to Judaism. Many religious systems frame suffering as temporary within a larger eschatological vision. Christianity promises eternal salvation in response to earthly suffering, while Islam similarly emphasizes divine support and the ultimate triumph of believers. In these frameworks, defeat is transient and does not undermine group identity.

Thus, while this thesis has argued that the Roman response to trauma was uniquely defined by its rejection of defeat, it is worth recognizing that many group identities—religious or otherwise—are built around narratives of ultimate victory. One could even posit that such narratives are essential for sustaining group cohesion, as they offer members a sense of purpose and assurance that their group is on the "right" side of history.

Shame and guilt

Feelings of shame and guilt were often associated with the experience of PTSD. A relatively recent study found however, that these emotions cannot be used interchangeably with one another.[114] It is argued that guilt is an emotion which only deals with the behavior an individual has exhibited. In a sense, this makes the feeling of guilt less devastating than the feeling of shame.[115] Shame is a psychological state in which an individual's entire self, rather than just their behavior, is negatively judged. A study conducted in this research, although limited in scope, found no positive correlation between guilt and PTSD. While the study's scope was constrained, it is significant to note that guilt proneness was not found to be positively

[114] Jennie Leskela, Michael Dieperink, and Paul Thuras, "Shame and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 15, no. 3 (2002): 223–26.
[115] Heidi La Bash and Anthony Papa, "Shame and PTSD Symptoms," *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 6, no. 2 (2014): 159.

associated with PTSD. Moreover, when shame was excluded from the analysis, feelings of guilt appeared to be negatively correlated with the occurrence of PTSD. This observation suggests that feelings of guilt, which focus on the judgment of one's actions rather than one's entire self, could be part of a coping process. Judging one's actions entails active reflection on specific behaviors, which may prevent a more generalized, self-directed judgment. In other words, the process of evaluating one's behavior could diminish the intensity of self-blame, which is often central to feelings of shame.

This theoretical framework can be applied to the context of a Roman legionary who experienced traumatic events conducive to PTSD. However, I argue that this theory does not fully account for the evidence we have regarding cases of PTSD in ancient Rome. Notably, the high incidence of suicides among soldiers, as well as documented instances of political suicides among generals and high-ranking officers, seems to be strongly linked to specific behaviors or perceived failures. Instances of defeat, retreat, cowardice, or failure were often the triggering events for such drastic actions. These behaviors, marked by perceived dishonor or the collapse of one's personal or professional identity, are more indicative of a direct link between specific actions and subsequent trauma, rather than the broader emotional and psychological processes suggested by the guilt-based model.

It is important to note that in Roman military culture, where personal honor and martial virtue were paramount, the public perception of one's actions, such as cowardice in battle or failure to fulfill one's duty, could have catastrophic consequences. A Roman soldier's identity was intrinsically tied to their ability to embody the ideals of *virtus* (virtue, manliness, and courage). Thus, when soldiers experienced trauma linked to these ideals—particularly when they were unable to meet the expectations placed upon them—the psychological toll could manifest in extreme forms, such as suicide. The psychological impact of failing to live up to the standards of military honor and personal integrity suggests a unique interplay between specific behaviors and the broader social and cultural expectations of the Roman military ethos.

Conclusion

In this final chapter, we have explored two theories that may help explain the absence of references to the mental states of those who experienced violence in ancient sources. The first theory can be summarized as the concept of "the violent society of ancient Rome." The modern preconception of the ancient world is often dominated by its violent aspects, such as relentless warfare and civil unrest, including gladiatorial combat and riots. This perception could lead

one to conclude that Romans were better equipped to cope with violence, perhaps more so than people in modern societies, due to their prolonged exposure to it. However, this view has significant limitations.

First, we must question whether being better equipped to handle traumatic violence alone can explain the complete lack of sources addressing the mental effects of such violence. For instance, even if we accept that societal norms and specific rituals mitigated the impact of PTSD—reducing its prevalence from sixty to thirty percent—this does not necessarily justify the absence of written discussions on a subject affecting thirty percent of military personnel. Shouldn't this still warrant attention in Roman accounts, particularly in a military society where the psychological well-being of soldiers would have had clear social and strategic implications?

Second, we must also examine the accuracy of the assumption that ancient Roman society was more accustomed to violence than modern societies. It is, of course, difficult to generalize about any one period of Roman history, but even if we focus on the third century CE—a time of profound crisis for the Roman Empire—are the challenges faced by the Romans fundamentally different from those of modern societies? Political assassinations, natural disasters, foreign invasions, militarization, and civil unrest were just some of the issues plaguing the Roman world during this period. These same problems can be seen in contemporary global events: the attempted assassination of political leaders such as Donald Trump, the devastating earthquake in Syria and Turkey, the ongoing invasion of Ukraine, the militarization of NATO, and the storming of the U.S. Capitol. These are strikingly similar to the crises faced by Rome at its darkest moments.

The second theory introduced in this chapter, which offers a more compelling explanation for the absence of discussions on trauma, is the concept of "triumph in defeat." This idea, proposed by Jessica Clark, posits that the Roman Republic's proclamations of victory often relied on a process of political maneuvering and narrative construction. Senators sought to frame Rome's military engagements in a way that presented the outcome as a victory, even when military successes were more ambiguous. History, as written by these elites, was shaped by this political agenda. The ability to craft such a narrative was largely due to the limited access to information among the general populace. Political leaders could manipulate casualty reports, omit certain facts, exaggerate achievements, and tell a story in which Rome emerged as the undeniable victor.

I argue that one element purposefully omitted from this narrative was the presence of trauma among Roman soldiers. Just as the elite manipulated the portrayal of physical casualties, minimizing their numbers or importance, they likely chose to overlook or downplay the psychological toll of warfare. In this way, the existence of trauma victims—though perhaps prevalent—was concealed to maintain the narrative of *Roma Victor*, the notion that Rome was an invincible force, unbroken by defeat or suffering. The omission of such psychological casualties allowed the political elites and historians to preserve the image of an undaunted, triumphant Rome, thus reinforcing the ideological foundation of Roman identity and military honor.

Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated, through the analysis of three distinct types of source material, that combat-related trauma was a phenomenon known to the Romans—at least among the upper strata of society. By examining literary and legal texts from the Roman world, I identified clear references to the psychological effects of warfare on soldiers. Greek sources, by contrast, reveal a more pronounced interest in this subject, and the cultural parallels between Greek and Roman societies further support the conclusion that the Romans were aware of the emotional and psychological consequences of war.

While the first chapter established this awareness, the second chapter explored the surprising scarcity of Roman texts that engage directly with the topic of combat trauma. Given Rome's long history of military conflict and the central role of warfare in Roman identity and statecraft, one might expect to find substantial reflection on the mental burdens of combat. Yet, as shown through the analysis of military manuals, historical narratives, and the *Urbs Capta* subgenre, such reflections are rare and often oblique.

The third chapter sought to reconcile this apparent contradiction. Two possible explanations were proposed. The first explored the possibility that Roman cultural norms shaped how trauma was experienced, expressed, or concealed—thereby reducing its textual visibility. The second, and the one I argue is most compelling, centered on the ideological function of "triumph in defeat." This interpretive framework suggests that Roman authors deliberately downplayed or omitted depictions of psychological suffering in order to preserve a narrative of collective Roman strength, resilience, and moral superiority.

When considered in relation to existing scholarship, the findings of this thesis offer a new perspective. Scholars such as Jonathan Shay and David Konstan have acknowledged the presence of emotional distress in antiquity, but their analyses tend to focus on Greek material or medical texts in isolation. Other researchers have noted the silence in Roman literature regarding trauma but have often stopped short of offering a cohesive explanation. In contrast, this thesis addresses the *absence* itself as a meaningful phenomenon—arguing that it reflects broader cultural and ideological dynamics rather than mere ignorance or neglect. In doing so, it contributes not only to the field of classical studies, but also to the broader interdisciplinary conversation in trauma studies and cultural memory.

The central research question posed in the introduction asked whether the Romans were aware of psychological trauma resulting from warfare, and, if so, why this awareness is so seldom

reflected in their literary corpus. This thesis concludes that the Romans were indeed aware of the phenomenon but chose—consciously or unconsciously—not to emphasize it in writing. Instead, trauma was often absorbed into a cultural framework that privileged strength, duty, and endurance over personal suffering. This finding sheds light not only on Roman attitudes toward warfare and the self, but also on how societies construct and police collective memory.

As acknowledged at the outset, the vast body of ancient literature necessarily limited the scope of this study, and some potentially relevant texts could not be included due to constraints of time and space. This limitation, while important, is mitigated by the breadth and diversity of the sources analyzed here, which together provide a robust foundation for the conclusions drawn.

Looking ahead, trauma studies is likely to remain an increasingly important field within classical scholarship. While it remains uncertain whether future methodologies will yield more concrete evidence of trauma beyond literary analysis, such a development may not be essential. For now, a philologically grounded approach—attentive to linguistic nuance, cultural context, and intertextual patterns in Greek and Latin sources—offers a fruitful path forward. There remains a wealth of ancient material to be explored, and continued engagement with the themes of memory, trauma, and emotion in antiquity promises to yield valuable insights in the years to come.

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