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Abstract

Virtus in the Roman world was often cited, by the Romans themselves, to be their defining attribute that allowed them to conquer the Mediterranean. Virtus' meaning changed throughout the Roman Republic as different successful methodologies came into usage, and eventually the word virtus focused solely on those who were successful, rather than their own moral or practical character.

Keywords

Classical Studies, Rome, Language, Latin, Roman History

Virtus and the Roman World: Generality, Specificity, and Fluidity

By
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I. Introduction

Scholars frequently debate the meanings of classical words that do not necessarily have direct modern language parallels. Words like the Greek *othismos* and the Latin *virtus* are poorly understood, and modern scholars strive to provide these words with specific definitions. The Romans saw their *virtus*, a term often inadequately translated as the English word “virtue,” as a major factor in their conquest of the Mediterranean. In this context, the Romans focused on their military *virtus*, a term that includes numerous intricacies of Roman combat ideology but can be simplified by the translation “martial courage.” However, the Romans also used *virtus* to describe men, women and objects off the battlefield, and in these cases *virtus* can also exhibit the adjectival qualities of the English word “excellence.”

These two uses of the term *virtus* are oversimplifications though. Donald Earl presented *virtus* as a word defining a

multitude of complex physical and moral ideas and practices.¹²³ While many more modern scholars oppose Earl's view, it is clear that the term *virtus* does not necessarily define anything specific. Instead, the context gives *virtus* its meaning. The multitude of times *virtus* appears in the Latin lexicon, as well as the numerous different connotations and situations the word is found in, suggest a more broad usage of the term than modern scholars care to admit.¹²⁴ From the literary sources available, three primary uses of *virtus* appear: a more general one meaning "excellence," and two more specific meanings revolving around the battlefield and aristocratic competition in the Roman Republic.

II. *Virtus* as a General Term

Virtus was often used in military histories, accounts, and other such documents to describe a soldier or general's actions on and recently off the battlefield. *Virtus* is also frequently found in poetry, theatre, and philosophical writings. One of the most famous of the non-military uses of the word *virtus* is in Cato's *De Agricultura*, where Cato claims that the best land has natural *virtus*.¹²⁵ Some scholars contribute this usage of *virtus* to Greek

¹²³ Donald Earl, *The Moral and Political Tradition of Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 20.

¹²⁴ Myles McDonnell, *Roman Manliness: Virtus and the Roman Republic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 5.

¹²⁵ Cato, *De Agricultura*, (Harvard: Loeb Classical Library, 1934), Book I, Chapter I, 3.

influence over the Latin vocabulary.¹²⁶ If this was true, *virtus* should have lost, or at least changed, its original, more military meanings based on Greek influence as well, which, with evidence from later and contemporary military documents, is certainly not the case. Myles McDonnell, a modern proponent of the Greek-influence theory, suggests that all uses of *virtus* in Roman plays are simply mis-translated versions of the Greek term for excellence, ἀρετή.¹²⁷ Further, the other uses of *virtus* in this way (such as Cato's usage in *De Agricultura*), according to McDonnell, can be attributed to a similar blending of the two different words that may have occurred during the Pyrrhic War.¹²⁸ McDonnell uses these arguments to attempt to explain away these general uses of *virtus*, and yet, even if the linguistic blending did occur, these uses still existed.

There is another possibility to explain these usages of *virtus*: perhaps these Roman writers were simply speaking metaphorically or with a sort of hyperbole. Classical scholars often see the word *virtus* and assume it is being used literally; in comedic theatre it is more likely the word would have been used ironically, and in other writings, such as Cato's, the word *virtus* may have appeared so that a more general audience could understand the meaning. Ancient sources cannot always be

¹²⁶ McDonnell, *Roman Manliness*, 73.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

translated verbatim, no more than any modern languages can be translated fully into another language due to metaphors, euphemisms, idioms, and other cultural and linguistic tools.

The Roman comedies of Plautus frequently use *virtus* in both military and non-military contexts. In Plautus' *Asinaria*, a slave recounts his own *virtus* involved in his acceptance of his position in life, including his courage in enduring his master's beatings.¹²⁹ Modern scholars, such as Myles McDonnell, tend to argue that this instance is parody, and that a slave with *virtus* would have been a humorous concept to the Roman audiences of Plautus.¹³⁰ However, the Romans themselves would have also seen the slave in question as exemplary, a slave who accepted his place under his master was preferred to one who rebelled or disdained his job.¹³¹ In that context, *virtus* could be used to define an exemplary, or "excellent," slave, and so maintain the general meaning of "excellence."

Another example of a somewhat odd usage of *virtus* comes from a later source: Cicero. While Plautus sometimes gave women the descriptor of *virtus*, Cicero is better known for describing his own wife's *virtus*.¹³² Myles McDonnell mentions this instance as well, but simply glosses over it as a late Republican conception of

¹²⁹ C. Stace, "The Slaves of Plautus," *Greece and Rome* 15, No. 1 (1968): 68.

¹³⁰ McDonnell, *Roman Manliness*, 24.

¹³¹ Roberta Stewart, *Plautus and Roman Slavery* (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 26.

¹³² McDonnell, *Roman Manliness*, 169.

the word. Plautus' use of *virtus* to describe clever women, as well as Cicero's wife's *virtus* of excellence and competence as a wife and mother, show a continuity of the usage of the word from the middle Republic to the late Republic in that specific context.

Regardless of the linguistic origins of *virtus* being utilized in this general way, it appears frequently enough that the general meaning has to be a part of the overall definition of *virtus*. There are so many examples of land having *virtus*, women having *virtus*, slaves having *virtus*, and other non-Roman-male's having *virtus* that a less specific meaning of *virtus* had to have existed in the Roman vernacular, and therefore in Roman writing.

III. Battlefield *Virtus*

Jeremiah McCall, a modern scholar with an emphasis on the Roman aristocracy and military, claims that “*virtus* could only be demonstrated on the battlefield.”¹³³ While the term “only” certainly raises contention, the Romans did frequently use *virtus* used as a battlefield term. McCall discusses the role of the aristocratic cavalry in the army of the Republic and how each member of a cavalry unit was expected to exhibit *virtus*.¹³⁴ This specific *virtus* included the ideals of martial courage, single combat, and other ideas based on one's position on the battlefield

¹³³ Jeremiah McCall, *The Cavalry of the Roman Republic* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 83.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, 83.

and Roman social hierarchy.

For the rank and file soldiers, *virtus* meant courage. These classical warriors may have believed courage was based on the ideals of “single combat,” or dueling, as J.E. Lendon argues.¹³⁵ These virtues would have been inherited from the classical stories in the *Illiad* and *Odyssey*, two Greek stories, along with older Latin tales. The Romans frequently translated and told the story of Othryades, the Spartan warrior who stayed on the battlefield even after all of his comrades had perished, and claimed victory as the two remaining Argive soldiers retreated to inform Argos of their victory.¹³⁶ This story involved the champions of Sparta and Argos in combat with one another, with the Spartan Othryades continuing to fight and stay on the battlefield despite the loss of his unit and his own sustained wounds. This act of bravery would have inspired many Roman soldiers to emulate such acts in their own military careers.

Nathan Rosenstein takes the Greek connection further, arguing that, instead of emulating the *Illiad*, the Roman soldiers saw *virtus* as a code similar to the Spartan’s own military

¹³⁵ J. E. Lendon, *Soldiers & Ghosts: A History of Battle in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Vail-Ballou Press, 2005), 174.

¹³⁶ E. H. Warmington trans., *Remains of Old Latin*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935), 78.

Besides the cited reference, this story is also mentioned by Livy, Cicero, and Seutonius, meaning it was a well-known story at least by the end of the Republic.

tradition.¹³⁷ This code included the sacred duty “not to flee” battle and to hold formation.¹³⁸ Rosenstein suggests the Romans would have adopted this code from early experiences with the Greek city-states in southern Italy, and to an even larger extent from emulation of Pyrrhus during the Pyrrhic War.¹³⁹ This explanation of *virtus* would further explain why the story of Othryades was so popular among the Romans. The Roman manipular formation, however, lent itself far more to a mobile and flexible style of combat, meaning the rigid formation code of the Spartans would not have worked well when integrated into that battle formation.

Lendon extrapolates the single-combat aspect of *virtus* in soldiers to the formation the Romans adopted in the middle Republic.¹⁴⁰ The traditional explanation for the Roman maniple is that they abandoned the phalanx in favor of a looser, more flexible formation in order to fight the Samnites and other peoples in Italy. Lendon, however, argues that the ideal of *virtus*, his definition focusing on single combat and competition, lent itself to a looser formation in which individual soldiers could have their duels with opposing soldiers.¹⁴¹ This is an interesting argument, and one that is not in conflict with the definition of Roman soldiers’ battlefield

¹³⁷ Nathan S Rosenstein, *Imperatores Victi: Military Defeat and Aristocratic Competition in the Middle and Late Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 96.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁴⁰ Lendon, *Soldiers & Ghosts*, 182.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 185.

virtus. Each individual soldier sought their own glory in their service to the Roman state, and the Roman maniple provided them an excellent outlet to show off their military prowess to their comrades, fostering competition and brotherhood as well.¹⁴²

The aristocratic elements of the Roman army viewed *virtus* differently from their lower-class compatriots. Though single-combat was also a major factor in their battlefield *virtus*, the aristocracy did this specifically because they wished to acquire *spolia opima*, or “noble spoils.”¹⁴³ These spoils would be stripped off an enemy that they had slain, generally an aristocrat of the opposing side. In addition to the *spolia opima*, pure exhibitions of courage, such as putting oneself in more danger than the call of duty would require, could be rewarded with military accolades.¹⁴⁴ Either of these, the *spolia opima* or a military award, would launch an aristocrat’s political career forward, and enable them to begin the long ascension in political offices known as the *cursus honorum*.¹⁴⁵

IV. *Virtus* and the Aristocracy

A Roman aristocrat aspired to ascend to a political or military position wherein they would be awarded *imperium*, or the

¹⁴² Ibid., 186.

¹⁴³ Lendon, *Soldiers & Ghosts*, 175.

¹⁴⁴ McCall, *The Cavalry*, 84.

¹⁴⁵ Andrew Lintott, *Imperium Romanum: Politics and Administration* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 45.

right to command troops. These positions included the praetors, consuls and dictators, though the dictatorship was never actively sought by Republican aristocrats until the end of the Republic, as it only served as an emergency position.¹⁴⁶ In numerous Latin accounts from Livy, Cicero, Cato, and others, men who had obtained *imperium* via the *cursus honorum* automatically had *virtus*. Cicero specifically stated that a man with *imperium* had “singular *virtus*.”¹⁴⁷ This commonality between accounts suggests that *virtus* was not necessarily a moral trait achieved by great men, but an omnipresent trait intrinsic in great men who obtained the highest powers and honors in Roman society. The specifics of this trait changed throughout Roman history on the basis of who the top men in the Republic were and how they achieved their victories on and off the battlefield.

Aristocratic males were born under their *pater familias*, the head of the family who was usually the oldest male, and were actually owned by him until either his death or their entrance into Roman public life. The aristocratic *pater familias* was generally a successful patrician, and often a senator who had done his military service and at least part of the *cursus honorum* to earn himself a seat in the Senate upon his retirement. A *pater familias*'s primary duty to their male children was to provide them education and an

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 25.

¹⁴⁷ M. Tullius Cicero, *The Orations of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, translated by C. D. Yonge (London: Henry G. Bohn, York Street, Covent Garden, 1856), 2.

entrance into public life; this training would have included military exercises and moral behavior lessons. The indoctrination of Roman patriotism and *virtus* began at a very young age.¹⁴⁸

Once in the military, an aristocrat would either join the cavalry (if his family had a certain amount of wealth) or become captain for one of the infantry maniples. Once on the battlefield, the aristocrat could search for his single combat or great act of bravery to get himself noticed by their commanders and the Senate. Once the battlefield *virtus* had been established by achieving one of these two goals (or simply through longevity of decent military service), public office was assured for that aristocrat.¹⁴⁹ Often, high-status (born into more noteworthy families) aristocrats would skip a few of the early offices and go straight to quaestor, tribune or a local magistrate, offices not far away from major roles that held *imperium*.

When off the battlefield, an aristocrat could still display *virtus*. This more philosophical ideal of *virtus* included loyalty to the Roman state and “general excellence” as described previously. Competency in their role in public office, an accumulation of wealth, or even just a prestigious family name could contribute to the Senate’s consideration of an aristocrat’s *virtus*. Examples from later Roman literature display these trends; such as Cicero’s claims that Cato had *virtus* more for his public and administrative deeds

¹⁴⁸ McDonnell, *Roman Manliness*, 172.

¹⁴⁹ McCall, *The Cavalry*, 85.

than for his military successes.¹⁵⁰ Likewise, even later commentators, such as Seneca, claimed that Cicero should be commended for having superior *virtus*, though he had no military successes to speak of.¹⁵¹

V. *Virtus* and *Imperium*

Eventually the Roman aristocrat would achieve a successful military career, a productive decade in public offices, become a praetor, consul or dictator, and receive the Roman power of *imperium*. Once *imperium* was achieved, the definition of *virtus* in such a man with *imperium* changed immensely. In fact, the meaning of *virtus* itself changed frequently depending on the man with *imperium* and his degree of success. From roughly 390 BC to the Punic Wars, the Romans preferred an offensive foreign policy due to a national paranoia that took hold after the Gallic sack of Rome in 390 BC.¹⁵²

The case of the Dictator Fabius Maximus perhaps best exemplifies this view of *virtus*. During the Second Punic War, Hannibal of Carthage invaded the Italian peninsula and managed to penetrate deep into the Roman lands of Latium, Campania,

¹⁵⁰ Cicero, *The Orations*, 12.

¹⁵¹ Gary D. Farney, *Ethnic Identity and Aristocratic Competition in Republican Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 225.

¹⁵² Veit Rosenberger, "The Gallic Disaster," *The Classical World* 96, No. 4 (2003): 365.

Samnium, and other southern Italian regions.¹⁵³ The Romans sent out their consuls and praetors, the first line of Republican military defenses, and their armies in an attempt to stop Hannibal from burning the Italian countryside. These consuls and praetors acted with the standard meaning of *virtus* during the time: aggressive attacking strategies, despite tactical disadvantages and numerical inferiority.¹⁵⁴ Their rash actions, done in an attempt to prove their *virtus*, led to the disastrous battle at Lake Trasimene in 217 BC.¹⁵⁵

Lake Trasimene represented one of the most catastrophic defeats in Roman history up to that point. The Roman Consul Flaminius went up against Hannibal's forces with a small consular army when Hannibal invaded Etruria in 217. Hannibal knew that the Roman generals were culturally expected to act aggressively, and so he moved his army around the fortified Roman position and instigated a fight south of Flaminius' favored ground.¹⁵⁶ Flaminius, attempting to avoid looking like a coward, advanced quickly to meet Hannibal's numerically superior forces, at an area around Lake Trasimene. As Flaminius advanced, "No sort of reconnaissance" was performed, according to Livy, which was an unnecessarily risky maneuver.¹⁵⁷ Flaminius was overconfident in his presumed victory, and a poorly calculated attack (if successful)

¹⁵³ Adrian Goldsworthy, *The Fall of Carthage* (London: Phoenix, 2000), 167.

¹⁵⁴ Lendon, *Soldiers & Ghosts*, 200.

¹⁵⁵ Goldsworthy, *The Fall of Carthage*, 181.

¹⁵⁶ Goldsworthy, *The Fall of Carthage*, 185.

¹⁵⁷ Livy, *The War With Hannibal*, translated by Aubrey de Selincourt (New York: Penguin Group, 1972), Book XXII, section 4, 98.

would not only greatly boost his political career and reputation, but would also display his *virtus* as well.

Unfortunately, Hannibal expected the Roman consul to act in an overly aggressive and rash manner. His army had hidden in wait on the hillside, and when the Romans marched past, he signaled his troops to attack. Livy describes the outcome best: “Down they came from the hills, each many by the nearest way, taking the Romans totally unprepared.”¹⁵⁸ This battle resulted in the entirety of the consular army being enslaved, killed, or otherwise disbanded, as well as the death of consul Flaminius himself.¹⁵⁹

In response to this catastrophic loss, the Roman Senate elected Fabius Maximus as Dictator. With a dictator in charge, all other positions that normally held *imperium*, such as the praetors and consuls, had to give their armies over to the dictator, who had supreme military control. Fabius had previously held the consulship three times, and had military prestige from his victories over the Ligurians in the 230s.¹⁶⁰ The situation that Fabius presided over was very bleak. Roman morale was low due to repeated defeats and Carthaginian ravaging of the countryside, and his armies were incredibly fearful of engagement with the ever-

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Goldsworthy, *The Fall of Carthage*, 188.

¹⁶⁰ Goldsworthy, *The Fall of Carthage*, 191.

victorious Hannibal.¹⁶¹

In order to raise his soldiers' morale, Fabius chose a new strategy in waging the war. Instead of following Hannibal and attempting a direct confrontation, he chose merely to shadow Hannibal and perform minor assaults on the Carthaginian baggage train and light infantry. Polybius claims Fabius wished to "incur no danger and not to risk a battle, but to make the safety of his men his first and greatest object."¹⁶² For a few months, this strategy worked quite well. The morale of both the army and the Senate rose quickly while under Fabius' leadership.¹⁶³

Unfortunately, while the Romans suffered no major defeats with Fabius' strategy, the Senate and Fabius' subordinates did not see any massive victories either. The Master of Horse, Fabius' second in command named Minucius, believed that Fabius had become too timid, and so he began leading small bands of troops into direct conflict with Hannibal's army. Minucius, according to Livy, established the meaning of *virtus* as it pertained to him and the Senate: "Rome's power grew by action and daring – not by these do-nothing tactics, which the faint-hearted call caution."¹⁶⁴

In conjunction with Minucius' denouncement of Fabius, the Senate and army showed their displeasure as well. While the

¹⁶¹ Livy, *The War With Hannibal*, Book XXII, section 14, 110.

¹⁶² Polybius, *Histories*, translated by Evelyn S. Shuckburgh (New York: Macmillan, 1889), Book III, section 89, 146.

¹⁶³ Livy, *The War With Hannibal*, Book XXII, section 15, 111.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

Senate merely berated Fabius, his army was highly mutinous and did not follow Fabius' orders.¹⁶⁵ In fact, it seemed that "Had the matter been put to a general vote, there is little doubt that the army would have declared a preference to serve under Minucius rather than Fabius."¹⁶⁶ Fabius was seen as cowardly precisely because he was attempting to protect his army from destruction, rather than aggressively pursuing the enemy as previous generations had done to grow "Rome's power."¹⁶⁷

As a result, when Fabius' term as dictator ended, he was not asked to return in any form to an office with *imperium*, and he retired in relative disgrace compared to how most at least partially-successful generals did.¹⁶⁸ Immediately after, two new consuls were assigned to lead the Roman armies in a more aggressive strike at Hannibal. The Battle of Cannae occurred, resulting in the total annihilation of the Roman military yet again.¹⁶⁹ The Senate received their wish of two *imperium*-wielding generals that exhibited the aggressive aspects of *virtus*, and their reward was another catastrophic loss.

VI. A Fluid *Virtus*

The Roman army had been defeated handily at Lake Trasimene and Cannae. Further defeats, caused by the aggressive

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., Book XXII, section 14, 109.

¹⁶⁶ Livy, *The War With Hannibal*, Book XXII, section 15, 111.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Lendon, *Soldiers & Ghosts*, 202.

¹⁶⁹ Goldsworthy, *The Fall of Carthage*, 197.

and rash decisions of Roman generals wishing to prove their *virtus*, were still to come. Eventually, though, the Senate learned its lesson. Fabius Maximus was brought out of retirement, and entrusted with the task of keeping Rome's morale high, as well as orchestrating any necessary defense of the city.¹⁷⁰ For the remainder of the conflict with Hannibal, a more cautious strategy was allowed, and even the Roman soldiers accepted such leadership without mutiny. Fabius himself gained "the reputation of an outstanding commander" and was loved by his contemporaries as well as future Romans.¹⁷¹

This shift represented a large change in Roman military culture. Up to the time of Fabius, preemptive strike and an aggressive military stance had been the normal mode of *virtus* for Roman generals.¹⁷² Modern scholars, such as Lendon and McDonnell, contend that the aggressive *virtus* continued full-force past this point, all the way up to Augustus and the tragedy with Varus and his legions along the Rhine.¹⁷³ The Senate and aristocratic conceptions of *virtus*, however, seem to have been more pragmatic than that.

Not only was the Senate willing to allow a massive shift in military policy after the relative success of Fabius' strategy, future

¹⁷⁰ Livy, *The War With Hannibal*, Book XXIII, section 21, 194.

¹⁷¹ Frontinus, *Stratagems*, in Campbell, Brian, edit., *Greek and Roman Military Writers* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.3.3, 118.

¹⁷² Lendon, *Soldiers & Ghosts*, 201.

¹⁷³ McDonnell, *Roman Manliness*, 385-386.

strategic decisions of its like were also allowed.¹⁷⁴ The Senate praised future generals, not only for their aggressiveness if they had that trait, but also for their shrewd cunning in achieving victory. Frontinus remarks that the Senate “turned back to Fabius and his strategy” numerous times after the Punic Wars.¹⁷⁵

By the time of the early Principate, there was certainly admiration for generals who used more strategic means to achieve victory. Livy claims that Fabius used “wise delaying tactics” and further criticized the Senate and soldiers under Fabius for having ever held “contempt” for their commander.¹⁷⁶ Suetonius, a Roman biographer of the middle Principate, credited Augustus with saying, “a cautious general is better than a bold one.”¹⁷⁷ While Suetonius’ comment would not necessarily represent what was thought during the early Principate/Late Republic, it at least shows that by the time of the second century A.D. there was a significant cultural shift in seeing *virtus* more as a path to victory, regardless of exactly which path is taken, rather than a specific virtue.

The alternative view of many scholars focused on the rigidly aggressive and martial courage definitions of *virtus*, such as McDonnell, is that, by the time of the Principate, *virtus* had lost most of its original meaning due to Greek influences and

¹⁷⁴ Goldsworthy, *The Fall of Carthage*, 196.

¹⁷⁵ Frontinus, *Stratagems*, 8.14.1, 140.

¹⁷⁶ Livy, *The War With Hannibal*, Book XXII, section 22, 120.

¹⁷⁷ Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, in Campbell, Brian, edit., *Greek and Roman Military Writers* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 25.4, 80.

Augustus' redefinitions of certain Roman cultural terms in order to benefit himself.¹⁷⁸ This argument, however valid in explaining the imperial definitions of *virtus*, does not explain the Senate's willingness to allow and actively promote the use of non-aggressive tactics and strategies in the wake of the Second Punic War.

VII. Conclusion

Myles McDonnell finishes his book, *Roman Manliness: Virtus and the Roman Republic*, with a short section on *virtus* in the Principate. In this section, he claims that the Romans of this period "could use both the martial and ethical meanings of *virtus* frequently and naturally."¹⁷⁹ By this time, *virtus* was a descriptor given to those who achieved success in any major part of Roman society, whether economic, political, military, or even religious.¹⁸⁰ McDonnell argues that this change happened swiftly, with Augustus having instituted most of the changes to the word *virtus* and its public perception between the end of the Republic and the first century AD.¹⁸¹ McDonnell also argues, earlier in the book, that men such as Cicero (from the late Republic) believed that *virtus* was the main quality "responsible for Roman greatness," and that this quality had aspects in the military, political, and economic

¹⁷⁸ McDonnell, *Roman Manliness*, 385.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 386.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 386.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 385.

sections of Roman society.¹⁸²

By the very nature of McDonnell's argument and Cicero's belief that *virtus* was how the Romans expanded their control over the Mediterranean, *virtus* had no single, static meaning. The Romans had not extended their territorial empire across the Mediterranean world simply through aggression and martial courage, but with a myriad of resources including diplomacy, wealth, and adept leadership. In fact, from the view of Cicero, *virtus* may as well have been defined simply as "Roman greatness."¹⁸³

Modern scholars' attempts to define *virtus* as a strictly military word, and, worse, as a strictly military word with only a single military definition, come from a modern wish to translate words into easy, exact definitions. In order to translate *virtus*, however, the context the word is used in ends up far more important than the word itself. Roman generals had *virtus* in the early Republic due to their aggressive tactics that their enemies simply could not handle. During the latter years of the Second Punic War, Fabius had *virtus* due to his successful policy of cautious, periodic combat. Cato's land had *virtus*, because a good harvest could come from its dirt. Plautus' slaves had *virtus*, because they embodied the ideal Roman slave.

Virtus defined those who attained victory and success. It

¹⁸² McDonnell, *Roman Manliness*, 2.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 2.

was not that one man had distinct “martial courage,” and hence had *virtus*, because those who exhibited such a virtue and died had no *virtus*, such as those consuls who recklessly lost their own lives and those of their men at Lake Trasimene and Cannae. There was a definition of *virtus* that was popular among the lower classes, as exemplified by Fabius’ mutinous soldiers who wanted only an aggressive general such as Minucius, but this definition was just as fluid as the more generalized usage used at the higher levels of Roman society. The ideas of the aristocracy seem to have trickled down to the lower classes, as mutinies became less common over the years and there seems to have been a general acceptance that the general’s orders were to be followed regardless of moral issues surrounding aggression and *virtus*.¹⁸⁴

McDonnell’s argument about the homogenization of the term *virtus* during the Principate is certainly valid. The homogenized use of *virtus*, however, had existed for much longer than that. And before the homogenization of usage of the word, which can be dated to the late Republican writers, the term itself was fluid with its meaning. From defining the fertility of land to the excellence of slaves to the martial courage of soldiers, *virtus* was the primary word the Romans used to describe anything they found to be successful or generally positive. If sources existed in a more vernacular version of Latin, it is likely that *virtus* may have

¹⁸⁴ Adrian Goldsworthy, *In the Name of Rome: The Men Who Won the Roman Empire* (London: Phoenix, 2004), 128.

even shown up as a more or less synonym of the modern English word “successful.” Unfortunately, without such a source to analyze, the numerous shifting usages of *virtus* in the Latin lexicon leave the scholar with only one real conclusion: *virtus* represented “Roman excellence,” and had no single translation at any one time in Roman history.

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