

Historiography is more than the writing of history. It is also a means of constructing historical ideologies. These ideologies inform a reader's overarching perceptions of the narrative of the past, and in so doing create frameworks for interpreting that past. In the case of the Romans' attitude towards prisoners of war in the Middle Republic, the historiographic tradition fostered the belief that the Romans were ideologically committed to rejecting their prisoners – a belief that conflicted with the historical reality of Roman practice. In this paper, I will first present evidence that Roman policy in the Middle Republic assumed that prisoners *would* be ransomed. I will then discuss the ways in which the historical record has distorted that picture through its emphasis on the self-sacrificing heroics of select anecdotes.

The importance of their martial values to the Roman cultural imagination is not in question (for the Republic, McDonnell 2006; Barton 2001; Harris 1979; Rosenstein 1990); an ethos of self-sacrifice is central to the portrait that emerges from the sources cited by these studies. It is worth noting, however, that there are difficulties in subscribing to a culture's own formulation of its value system. Thus while stories like the Senate's refusal to ransom Hannibal's prisoners after the battle of Cannae tell us what statements the Roman Senate wished to make and our sources wished to preserve, they give only indirect testimony to the realities that underlay those statements (for Polybius, Eckstein 1995; Champion 2004).

In order to address the question of how the Romans dealt with their prisoners of war, it is necessary to consider "casual" references to prisoners in our sources alongside such recurrent anecdotes in the exemplary tradition. These do not support the "precedent" of refusal to ransom, alleged by Livy to have influenced the Senate's decision after Cannae (22.61.1; cf. 22.60.7, with Chaplin 2000). Hannibal believed that the Romans would ransom their prisoners (Polybius VI.58.13; Livy 22.56.3, 22.58.1-6); he kept with him the prisoners from the Trebia and Trasimene (Polybius III.77.3-7, III.85.1-5), explicable only by his anticipation of a future exchange. Q. Fabius Maximus met this expectation in 217 BC (Livy 22.23.5-8; Plutarch, *Fabius* VII.3-5). Although the Senate withheld the funds, his action accorded with the recovery of Pyrrhus' prisoners after Heraclea (Ennius fr. VI.183-190; Cassius Dio IX.23, 29-32; cf. Berrendonner 2006). The standard provision of peace treaties, that the defeated state return its Roman prisoners without ransom, also suggests that captives were preserved against this eventuality (e.g. Polybius I.16.9; I.62.8-9, III.27.6; XV.8.7; XVIII.44.6; Cassius Dio IX.22-23). This was not simply the burden of the defeated: the Romans billeted prisoners in private homes, perhaps as surety (Diodorus 24.12; Plautus, *Captivi*, with Leigh 2004; cf. Allen 2006) and were able to return Carthaginian prisoners without ransom after the First Punic War (Polybius I.83.8, III.28.3-4).

In my discussion of the use and transmission of the story of the Cannae prisoners, Regulus' embassy, and the ransom of Rome from the Gauls, I will explore the ways in which these exemplary anecdotes created an ideological stance that differed from third century Roman policy. *Exempla*, beyond their moral value, also provided a legitimizing "cover" for practical action. They delineated a framework that could dominate the interpretation of the past, and thereby liberated historical actors from the need to make every decision also as a statement. Thus so long as Romans were comfortable with contradictions, the divide between the heroic tradition and practical exigencies was an asset; as that tradition was shaken by defeats in the later second century, strategy was increasingly trumped by statements in its defense.