

This paper argues that small and informally constituted groups of volunteers, rather than the much-studied organizational units of the Roman army, were the key actors in the vast majority of critical moments in combat. This contention necessitates a re-imagining of Roman warfare, since the soldiers who fought in such situations arrived there not through orders but by self-selection, and were not motivated by discipline or unit-loyalty but by more personal factors. In rejecting overly schematic and formal understandings of combat in the Roman world and emphasizing neglected factors such as morale, leadership, and psychology, my work echoes that of the military historian John Keegan (*The Face of Battle*, 1976) and follows the excellent recent work of classical historians who have helped rescue Roman military history from shabby treatment by military generalizers and restore the Roman soldier to membership in his own peculiar culture (e.g., Goldsworthy, 1996; Lendon, 2005).

Roman authors and modern historians have long emphasized the discipline of the Roman army and praised the order, organization, and weapons skills that gave the Roman army unparalleled tactical flexibility and allowed it to win battles even when greatly outnumbered or after suffering the type of localized defeats or stoppages of momentum which would have thrown a less organized force into full retreat. Yet traditional military history has over-emphasized the role of tactics and of discipline at the expense of moral and psychological factors which were dominant on the ancient battlefield, particularly in situations of great difficulty and danger. It is abundantly clear in the ancient authors who best combine eyewitness testimony and military experience (specifically Caesar, Josephus, and Ammianus) that many battles and virtually every siege featured decisive moments when the mass of men on both sides became spectators and individuals or small groups chose to fight in a situation of much higher personal danger. To the best of my knowledge, there is no reference in any Roman source to any *unit* being ordered to initiate an action (the storming of a breach is the most readily identifiable type) in which the first men to engage would stand little chance of surviving unscathed: volunteers were absolutely necessary. The unusual formalism of the Roman army kept it from losing battles, but it did not, in this sense, help win them; the centurion's *vitae* needed to be augmented by carrots in various forms—the personal glory of a still half-heroic military culture, prestigious decorations (especially the *corona muralis*), or prizes of booty or money, often specifically promised before the assault.

The sources have, in deference to the prevailing ideal of discipline, disguised the enormous importance of volunteer, small-group actions by using terms such as *dilecti*, or “picked men,” a characterization which speaks to their high status rather than the manner of their group's constitution. It is my contention that these “picked men” were, depending upon the situation, either habitually-risk-taking “front fighters” (comparable to Homeric *promakhoi*, see van Wees in Lloyd, ed., *Battle in Antiquity* 1997) known to their commanders as such, or volunteers who were “picked” based on their high morale and fighting spirit at one crucial point in time. The fact that the Roman army lacked formal elite units but—with great success—relied upon mechanisms of morale in moments of extreme military crisis surely merits a continuing effort to better understand the distinct culture of an army that was both ahead of its time and living in an otherwise-vanished heroic past.