Chapter 3

Caesar’s *Exempla* and the Role of Centurions in Battle*

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The role of literary *exempla* in military history is a highly problematic one, particularly for the characters recorded in Caesar’s *Bellum Gallicum*, as the figures appear under extraordinary circumstances and often have a close association with the literary objectives of this work. E.L. Wheeler noted this troublesome aspect of *exempla* in Caesar stating “… emphasis on combat anecdotes ignores both ancient historic penchant for the dramatic effect of such *exempla* and the possibility that the exceptional of such anecdotes may not be typical.”

This comment typifies the problems associated with using *exempla* in military history, as their appearance in the texts is determined by a range of criteria that are not necessarily related to the normal circumstances of combat. However, exceptional behaviour does not make these figures useless in determining roles on the battlefield, and it is the purpose of this chapter to demonstrate that behind the exemplary activity that these characters engage in are a set of fundamental values and responsibilities that give important insights into actual Roman combat. Even though the veracity of the described events cannot be confirmed, centurion *exempla*, even as literary figures, have value for what information they can provide about battle, as they serve in a summary capacity to support Caesar’s presentation of a battle. It is also possible to use *exempla* to define the role of centurions in combat as they act against a background of responsibilities when they appear in the text. Through an analysis of the broader literary context in which the centurions are used, it is possible to identify these responsibilities and show that exemplary combat at the front of the cohort was not part of their normal duties. Rather, Caesar expected centurions to involve themselves in combat only when a legion was on the edge of collapse, with the specific aim of restoring the situation. This is most evident in the manner that the centurions Lucius Vorenus and Titus Pullo

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are paired with the defeated commanders Q. Titurius Sabinus and L. Aurunculeius Cotta, in which the pairing helps to determine how centurion roles should be understood. These boundaries on expected behaviour are best illustrated through an examination of the account of the battle of Gergovia, where Caesar makes use of *exempla* to explain why control was lost on the battlefield, and in the process of defending his own conduct, provides information on his general expectations regarding the rank. The account of Gergovia is particularly illustrative of how an analysis of the *exempla* and the purposes of the text can yield rich rewards in understanding the role of centurions in combat.

**Exempla and Roman Battle Narrative**

The traditional use of *exempla*, particularly in the works of authors such as Livy, is generally associated with ‘moralising’ and a desire to instruct, and there is a long Roman tradition of using moral *exempla*.² Livy states that such characters are “worthy of imitation” or are used to illustrate behaviour that should be avoided (Livy *Praef.* 10).³ Oakley even argued that Livy made some important factual changes to historical accounts in order to moralise, such as to inflate the *superbia* of Tarquin, or direct attention to the *clementia* of Scipio Africanus.⁴ The extent of exaggeration may be unknown, but the emphasis on traits and the moralising element is an important aspect in such accounts.⁵ Nevertheless, where they appear in combat the exemplars in Livy are used to make general points about battle according to his overall schema. This is most evident in the duel of Manlius where the attributes of the opposing nations are expressed in terms of the two combatants; Manlius representing the Roman values of *pietas*, *virtus*, and *disciplina*, the Gaul representing characteristics such as size,

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² For more comprehensive examinations of *exempla* in Roman culture refer generally to Roller (2004); (2009) and Chaplin (2000) 11–31. For general information on *exempla* see also Price (1975) and Kornhardt (1936). See also Oakley (1997) 114–116 on *exempla* and moralising.

³ See Moles (1993) for an overall examination of Livy’s preface. See also Cic. *Arch.* 14. Wiseman (1979) 37 notes that Cicero regarded *exempla* as the main value of history in guiding individual conduct.

⁴ As Oakley (1997) 115–116 states, several episodes are shaped so as to reveal particular moral qualities. For example Manlius Torquatus is revealed to have *pietas*, *clementia* and *disciplina* at Livy 7.9.6–7.10.14. Oakley notes that Manlius even calls himself an *exempla* self-consciously to his son at Livy 8.7.17.

⁵ See also Oakley (1997) 115–116 for examples such as the Volscian campaign and *temeritas* of L. Furius Livy 24.9, and the *temeritas* of the Manlii at Livy 6.30.2–8. At Livy 7.5.2 Manlius rescues his father and is described as exemplary.