

Lucius Vorenus and Titus Pullo

HBO's critically-acclaimed television series *Rome* (2005-2007) elevates Lucius Vorenus and Titus Pullo, two obscure characters who appear only in passing in Caesar's *De bello Gallico* (5.44), to a level of prominence that Caesar probably never could have imagined. In the series, Vorenus is an honorable, old-fashioned centurion, dedicated to traditional Roman values with a sense of *pietas* worthy of Aeneas himself.¹ As Marc Antony describes him, "There's no better man in the legion. None more respected by the men" (Season One, Episode Four). His subordinate Titus Pullo, on the other hand, is a more ordinary legionary soldier – brave and dutiful but very poorly educated. He is drawn to a military career by the prospect of a steady paycheck, the appeal of glory in battle, and the hope of receiving an allotment of land upon retirement.² "Me, I have simpler tastes [than Vorenus]," he explains. "Kill my enemy. Take their gold. Enjoy their women. That's it" (Season One, Episode One). Pullo has a certain everyman quality, and like Forrest Gump, another well-known everyman character in American popular culture, he has a propensity for influencing the course of history in marvelously unexpected ways.³

Unlike Pullo and Vorenus in *Rome*, however, the *De bello Gallico* versions of these characters never come close to interacting with prominent figures such as Pompey, Antony,

¹ Brian Cooke, "Caesar's Soldiers: The Pietas of Vorenus and Pullo," in *Rome, Season One: History Makes Television*, ed. Monica S. Cyrino (Malden: Blackwell, 2008), 79.

² Cooke, 79-80.

³ Monica S. Cyrino, "Introduction," in *Rome, Season One: History Makes Television*, ed. Monica S. Cyrino (Malden: Blackwell, 2008), 5-6.

Cicero, and Cleopatra. Both men are simply low-ranking officers in the army of Caesar, serving under the leadership of Quintus Cicero in northern Gaul. Pullo and Vorenus are very brave centurions (*fortissimi centuriones*), and their heated rivalry for the coveted position of *primus pilus* leads to ongoing friction (*perpetuas controversias*) in their relationship. While their camp is under siege by the Nervii, Pullo rushes out alone into the thick of the battle, challenging the *virtus* of Vorenus in the process: “Why do you hesitate, Vorenus? What opportunity of proving your manliness are you waiting for? This day will make a ruling about our disagreements” (*Quid . . . iudicabit*). Not to be outdone, Vorenus quickly follows Pullo into the fray, where he saves his rival from imminent death (*succurrit inimicus illi Vorenus et laboranti subvenit*). A few moments later, Vorenus is the one surrounded by Gauls, and Pullo returns the favor (*huic rursus circumvento fert subsidium Pullo*). Both men then return triumphantly into the Roman camp (*summa cum laude*), with the issue of superiority in *virtus* remaining unresolved (*uter utri virtute antefereendus videretur*).

Snapshots of *Virtus*

In many ways, the Pullo and Vorenus episode is emblematic of Caesar’s fondness for illustrating specific examples of conspicuous bravery and leadership from relatively low-ranking soldiers during moments of grave crisis.⁴ For example, in Book Two of *De bello Gallico* (2.25), Caesar highlights Publius Sextius Baculus, a very brave (*fortissimo*) centurion who is seriously wounded in battle (*multis gravibusque vulneribus confecto*) against the Belgae. Although he cannot even stand up straight (*iam se sustinere non posset*), Baculus nevertheless rushes to the front of the battle line (*in primam aciem processit*), calls out the other centurions by name

⁴ Robert D. Brown, “Two Caesarian Battle-Descriptions: A Study in Contrast,” *Classical Journal* 94, no. 4 (1999): 357.

(*centurionibus nominatim appellatis*), and encourages the other soldiers to fight bravely against the enemy (*reliquos cohortatus milites*). Later in the commentary (6.38), Baculus appears again, this time in an even more diminished physical capacity – he hasn't eaten for five days (*diem iam quantum cibo caruerat*). Yet, when he sees the Germans approaching, he rushes out of his tent unarmed (*inermis ex tabernaculo*), grabs weapons from some of his comrades (*capit arma a proximis*), and leads the charge into battle. Another such scene occurs during the invasion of Britannia in Book Four (4.25), when the *aquilifer* notices that his fellow troops are reluctant to jump down into the water and engage the enemy in combat (*nostris militibus cunctantibus*). He encourages his comrades first with direct discourse: “Jump down, soldiers, unless you want to betray the eagle standard to the enemies” (*Desilite, milites, nisi vultis aquilam hostibus prodere*). He then follows up his words with decisive action, jumping down into the water and leading the charge against the barbarians (*se ex navi proiecit atque in hostes aquilam ferre coepit*). The other Roman soldiers, inspired by the leadership of the *aquilifer*, promptly jump down from the ships and join the battle (*universi ex navi desiluerunt*). Yet another example of one of Caesar's snapshots of *virtus* comes from Lucius Fabius, a centurion of the 8th legion at the siege of Alesia (7.47). Fabius insists on being the first one to climb the wall of the enemy compound (*ut prius quisquam murum ascenderet*), and he is so eager to do so that he literally climbs on top of three of his men to reach the top (*tres suos nactus manipulares atque ab eis sublevatus murum ascendit*). Unlike Baculus, the *aquilifer*, and Pullo and Vorenus, however, Fabius isn't quite so lucky in the end; he and his men are eventually surrounded by the Gauls, killed, and thrown from the wall (*circumventi atque interfecti muro praecipitabantur*, 7.50).

Caesar employs this same narrative technique in *De bello civili*, as well. During the Battle of Pharsalus (3.91), for instance, Crastinus, a soldier of outstanding courage (*vir singulari*

virtute), exhorts his fellow soldiers in the same fashion as the *aquilifer* in Britannia: “Follow me . . . this one battle remains” (*Sequimini me . . . unum hoc proelium superest*). He then turns to his commander directly, promising Caesar that he will give thanks to him at the end of the day, whether he lives or dies (*aut vivo mihi aut mortuo*). Crastinus is then the first soldier to rush into battle (*primus . . . procucurrit*), leading by example, just like Baculus and the *aquilifer* in *De bello Gallico*. In another part of *De bello civili*, moreover, Caesar singles out the bravery of the centurion Scaeva (3.53). When Caesar discovers 120 battle marks in Scaeva’s shield (*inventae sunt in eo foramina CXX*), he rewards him with 200,000 sesterces and a promotion to the rank of *primus pilus*.

Examples of such generosity were probably extremely rare, but like most Roman commanders, Caesar knew that centurions offered valuable experience and leadership to the rank-and-file soldiers on the ground, and they were often the key to an army’s success in battle.⁵ Therefore, he is more than willing to turn the spotlight on these men whose actions, like those of Titus Pullo and Lucius Vorenus in Book Five, manifest the critical importance of *virtus* in military operations. In fact, in all of *De bello Gallico*, Caesar refers to *virtus* 65 times, but only twice in direct reference to himself; rather than promoting his own *virtus*, he prefers to illustrate how he inspires it in his subordinates.⁶ This technique of deflecting *virtus* away from himself and reflecting it on to others also allows Caesar to avoid writing an overtly self-aggrandizing narrative, thus keeping his propaganda as subtle and understated as possible.⁷

⁵ Nic Fields, *The Roman Army: The Civil Wars, 88-31 BC* (New York: Osprey, 2008), 35.

⁶ Edwin S. Ramage, “Aspects of Propaganda in the *De Bello Gallico*: Caesar’s Virtues and Attributes,” *Athenaeum* 91, no. 2 (2003): 332.

⁷ Ramage, 371.

Cotta and Sabinus

Another traditional interpretation of the Pullo and Vorenus scene is to read it as a direct contrast to the Cotta and Sabinus episode earlier in Book Five (5.24 – 5.37).⁸ To summarize this passage, Lucius Aurunculeius Cotta and Quintus Titurius Sabinus are in charge of Caesar's winter camp in the land of the Eburones, just west of the Rhine River in northeast Gaul. When the Eburones attack the camp, Ambiorix, their leader, warns Sabinus that a more wide-scale assault is imminent. Grateful to Caesar for previous displays of clemency, Ambiorix generously offers Sabinus and his men safe passage to another Roman camp (the winter quarters of Quintus Cicero, for example). A vigorous debate ensues in the *hiberna*, with Cotta and the leading centurions arguing that they shouldn't vacate the camp without direct orders from Caesar himself, especially at the suggestion of a Gallic leader. Sabinus, on the other hand, insists that the Romans will not be able to resist another attack of the Eburones, especially once they are supported by their German auxiliaries. The discussion continues deep into the night, but Sabinus ultimately prevails, and the Romans set out at first light.

As the Romans are marching through a deep ravine, Ambiorix and his men launch a surprise attack. The Romans suffer massive casualties, and when it becomes obvious that they are not going to be able to withstand the onslaught, Sabinus appeals directly to Ambiorix to spare his life and the lives of the surviving Roman soldiers. During the negotiations for the terms of surrender, however, Ambiorix deliberately draws out the discussion while his men slowly surround Sabinus and kill him (*paulatim circumventus interficitur*, 5.37). Cotta fights valiantly to the very end, but he and most of his men are killed, too (*Cotta pugnans interficitur cum maxima parte militum*, 5.37). The few Roman survivors then scurry off through the woods,

⁸ Robert D. Brown, "Virtus Consili Expers: An Interpretation of the Centurions' Contest in Caesar, *De Bello Gallico* 5.44," *Hermes* 132, no. 3 (2004): 292.

seeking refuge at the winter camp of Titus Labienus (*pauci ex proelio lapsi incertis itineribus per silvas ad Titum Labienum*, 5.37).

Throughout the entire episode, Sabinus demonstrates an appalling lack of *consilium*, the good sense and careful judgment so vital to the *ethos* of a Roman military commander.⁹ During the debate in the Roman camp, for example, after Cotta and his supporters evaluate the situation carefully (*existimabant*, 5.28) and attempt to explain the most prudent course of action (*docebant*, 5.28), Sabinus responds with little more than cheap fear mongering.¹⁰ He drowns out the opposing argument with a loud voice – *clamitabat* (5.29) and *clariore voce* (5.30) – and terrifies the soldiers with jarring images of isolation, starvation, and death (*non reiecti et relegati longe ab ceteris aut ferro aut fame intereant*, 5.30). (Incidentally, Sabinus' oration is the first example of direct speech in *De bello Gallico* after the *aquilifer's* words in Book Four, and his shallow demagoguery is indeed a corrupt echo of the *aquilifer's* remarkable heroism.¹¹) When the debate is finished and Cotta finally concedes, he offers his hands to Sabinus like a vanquished barbarian (*tandem dat Cotta permotus manus*, 5.31), conquered not by a sound plan (*consilium*) but rather by a foolish opinion (*sententia*, 5.31).¹²

When Ambiorix and his men ambush the Romans the next morning, moreover, Sabinus' abysmal leadership qualities become even more obvious. He wasn't expecting the attack at all (*nihil ante providisset*, 5.33), and the only semblance of planning comes extemporaneously (*in ipso negotio consilium capere coguntur*, 5.33).¹³ By then, of course, the *consilium* of Sabinus is completely worthless, and even the admirable *virtus* of Cotta – who fights valiantly to the very end, even after taking a sling shot to the face (*in adversum os funda vulneratur*, 5.35) – cannot

⁹ Brown, 296.

¹⁰ Brown, 296-297.

¹¹ Brown, 297.

¹² Brown, 298.

¹³ Brown, 298-299.

salvage it. The supposedly dimwitted barbarians have bamboozled the Romans (*at barbaris consilium non defuit*, 5.34), and as Ambiorix tricks Sabinus a second time during the bogus peace negotiations (5.37), he reveals himself once and for all to be a far superior leader and tactician.¹⁴

The Pullo and Vorenus episode, then, offers an almost redemptive counterexample.¹⁵ Like Sabinus and Cotta, Pullo and Vorenus quarrel fiercely (*hi perpetuas inter se controversias habebant*, 5.44), but they do not quarrel about matters involving policy or strategy, they do not jeopardize the safety of the entire legion, and they do not question the judgment of Caesar. Their rivalry is a healthy one, and instead of tearing them apart, it enhances their effectiveness in battle and brings them closer together in the pursuit of a common goal (*sic fortuna in contentione et certamine utrumque versavit, ut alter alteri inimicus auxilio salutique esset*). Furthermore, unlike Cotta and Sabinus, Pullo and Vorenus put aside their differences during combat and help each other out. When Pullo, unable to draw out his sword, is surrounded by Gauls (*impeditumque hostes circumstant*), Vorenus quickly rushes in to offer assistance to his struggling rival (*succurrit inimicus illi Vorenus et laboranti subvenit*), and when Vorenus winds up in a similar position a few moments later, Pullo reciprocates (*huic rursus circumvento fert subsidium Pullo*). Therefore, Pullo and Vorenus offer an almost idealized example of *virtus*, a perfect complement to the prudent *consilium* of a master strategist like Caesar himself.¹⁶

Consequences of the Actions of Pullo and Vorenus

Although Pullo and Vorenus certainly demonstrate selfless heroism on the battlefield, and

¹⁴ Brown, 300.

¹⁵ Brown, 301.

¹⁶ Brown, 302.

although their comrades enthusiastically praise their efforts (*summa cum laude*, 5.44) when they return safely to the camp, the incident is primarily a personal issue between the two centurions, and propaganda and *virtus* aside, the fact is that it has no discernible effect on the war with the Nervii.¹⁷ They do kill a few Gauls (*compluribus interfectis*), but they don't kill anyone of particular significance, and they don't inspire their fellow Roman soldiers in a way that turns the tide of the war. In the very first sentence of the next chapter, as a matter of fact, Caesar states this unambiguously: day by day, the siege becomes even more serious and difficult to manage (*quanto erat in dies gravior atque asperior oppugnatio*, 5.45), and the soldiers in the camp have little choice but to appeal directly to Caesar for help (*crebriores litterae nuntiique ad Caesarem mittebantur*, 5.45). The bravery of Pullo and Vorenus, therefore, is soon forgotten, and the war rages on as if the incident never occurred at all.

One commentator suggests that Caesar actually makes this statement at the beginning of 5.45 to very subtly diminish the foolhardy behavior of Pullo and Vorenus, thereby highlighting his own role in defeating the Nervii.¹⁸ Whether or not this is true, it certainly is true that Pullo's decision to rush out alone into battle – and Vorenus' decision to follow him based on little more than an almost Homeric sense of shame (*omnium veritus existimationem*, 5.44) – lacks logic and discretion. Not only does he run out when the fighting is at its most intense (*cum acerrime ad munitiones pugnaretur*), but he also runs out to where the enemy is the most heavily concentrated (*quaque pars hostium confertissima est visa irrumpit*). And again, aside from killing a few Gauls, nothing is really accomplished.

Such demonstrations of reckless bravado would have been extremely unusual in the Roman military; soldiers were trained to fight together in a disciplined, cohesive group, and the

¹⁷ Adrian Keith Goldsworthy, *The Roman Army at War: 100 BC – 200 AD* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 269.

¹⁸ Severin Koster, "Certamen Centurionum," *Gymnasium* 85 (1978): 160-178.

vast majority would have been unwilling to leave the physical and mental security of this group, especially not if it meant exposing themselves to serious personal danger, and especially not if there was no real military objective on the line.¹⁹ The Romans regarded mindless, reckless, undisciplined fighting as a sign of barbarian warfare, and according to Cassius Dio, Caesar himself points out the stark contrast in the fact that “we employ both reason and organization, whereas they are unorganized and rush at everything impulsively.”²⁰ In fact, outside of the Pullo and Vorenius vignette, one of the few examples of a Roman soldier exhibiting such careless swagger occurs during the siege of Jerusalem, and it doesn’t end well – a Roman soldier (named Pudens, curiously enough), drawn out of formation by the taunts of a Jewish soldier named Jonathan, trips and falls as he approaches his enemy, allowing Jonathan to easily cut his throat.²¹ At the very beginning of the first episode of *Rome*, moreover, Pullo frenetically rushes out of formation and fights on his own, similar to his behavior in *De bello Gallico*. Instead of receiving a laudatory *summa cum laude* reception from his comrades, though, he receives a severe public flogging.²² “Legionary Titus Pullo is a hero of the 13th legion, but look at him now,” Vorenius announces during the punishment. “Justice knows every man’s number. He has committed a terrible sacrilege, and he will pay for it with his life. As will every man who breaks with the law. Brawlers and drunkards will be flogged. Thieves will be strangled. Deserters will be crucified” (Season One, Episode One). Ironically, the consequence of Pullo’s reckless behavior seems more realistic in the “fictional” television series than it does in “historical” account provided by Caesar himself.

¹⁹ Goldsworthy, 264-265.

²⁰ Michael P. Speidel, “Berserks: A History of Indo-European ‘Mad Warriors,’” *Journal of World History* 13, no. 2 (2002): 279, 283; Cassius Dio, 38.45 (Loeb translation)

²¹ Goldsworthy, 267; Josephus 6.2.10

²² Cooke, 81.

Berserk

Another interpretation of Pullo's harum-scarum decision to rush out alone against the Nervii, then, is to read it as an illustration of a Roman soldier, overwhelmed by the stress of extended combat in a foreign territory, simply going berserk.²³ One of the most common triggers of the berserk state is "when a soldier is trapped, surrounded, or overrun and facing certain death . . . because he apparently has nothing to lose and everything to gain from reckless frenzy."²⁴ This description certainly applies to Pullo. The camp of Quintus Cicero, isolated from the other Roman legions in a harsh winter climate, is surrounded by the Nervii, and to make matters worse, just before Pullo "snaps," the Nervii launch flaming spears (*fervefacta iacula*, 5.43) into the quarters of the Roman soldiers, causing all of their baggage and personal property to burn (*suaque omnia impedimenta atque omnes fortunas conflagrare intellegent*). The circumstances facing the men of Quintus Cicero are indeed dire, and although Caesar is careful to point out that they were still fighting hard against the siege (*tum omnes acerrime fortissimeque pugnarent*), many of them probably felt utterly hopeless. Other general characteristics of the berserk state – virtually all of which are exhibited by Pullo – include recklessness, inattentiveness to one's personal safety, absence of fear, insatiability, beastlike frenzy, and delusional feelings of invulnerability.²⁵

The actions of Vorenus are a little more difficult to assess. He also rushes out heedlessly into the thick of the battle, and although he does end up saving Pullo's life, that isn't his primary objective for leaving the camp and risking his own personal safety; his real motivation, at least

²³ The word *berserk* is derived from a word used to describe Norse warriors who ran out into battle naked (or at least without armor) in a state of pure frenzy – Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam* (New York: MacMillan, 1994), 77.

²⁴ Shay, 79.

²⁵ Shay, 82.

according to Caesar, is to avoid losing face with the other soldiers (*sed omnium veritus existimationem subsequitur*). In combat, however, it is very common for the berserk warrior to attract other soldiers around him, since “. . . the berserker’s sense of godlike invulnerability seems to make others feel safe. They often volunteer to go on patrols with the berserker, despite his visible indifference to their safety.”²⁶ Therefore, perhaps Vorenus is drawn in by the berserk confidence of Pullo, or perhaps he goes berserk himself.

Of course, Caesar’s purpose in including an account of the actions of Pullo and Vorenus is to illustrate Roman *virtus* and to offer a redemptive contrast to the catastrophic episode of Cotta and Sabinus, but the scene also offers the audience something that Caesar probably didn’t intend – a glimpse of the psychological trauma inherent to warfare. In reading the jingoistic propaganda of *De bello Gallico*, with its celebration of Caesar’s valiant triumph over the barbarians, it is easy to lose sight of the men who actually made the conquest possible – men who served in the army for years, hundreds of miles away from the familiarity and comfort of home, witnessing and committing unimaginable acts of violence – and to lose sight of the psychological impact that such prolonged combat would have caused. Pullo and Vorenus may have been *fortissimi centuriones*, but their actions in 5.44 remind us that they, along with the other men who fought in Caesar’s army, were also human.

²⁶ Shay, 90-91.

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