

This paper examines the legend of Fabius *Cunctator*'s dictatorship (217 BCE) as a venue for competition among alternative conceptualizations of *virtus* and *gloria*. Scholars have intensively studied the events and circumstances of “The Delayer’s” six-month term in command of Roman forces after the defeat at lake Trasimene, as well as the character of the texts that inform us about this period (Beck 2000, 2005; Erdkamp, Lesinski, Rambaud, Stanton). Yet the specifically moral dimension of the Fabius legend has never received systematic study, despite its prominence in the sources. In this talk I sketch out the paradoxical moral challenge that Fabius’ “delaying” strategy poses to conventional Roman military values, and I demonstrate how the texts that inform us of these matters explore, develop, and ultimately resolve that paradox in Fabius’ favor. This moral elaboration of the legend, I contend, constitutes Fabius as a compelling *exemplum* for later generations of Roman aristocrats.

I begin by sketching the Roman economy of social prestige. *Virtus* is the (positive) value ascribed to soldiers or generals who display aggressive valor in combat (McDonnell). The military success assumed to follow upon valorous performances in battle yields military decorations, spoils, triumphs, honorific statues, laudatory narratives, and other monuments that transmit information about these performances far and wide; this positive renown is *gloria* (Harris, Thomas). Yet the “delaying” strategy Fabius pursues as dictator—shadowing Hannibal’s movements, but avoiding set battles—deprives him and his soldiers of the opportunity to display *virtus* and gain *gloria* as defined in this way.

A moral debate ensues, as our sources indicate. Contemporary Romans—including Fabius’ own soldiers and *magister equitum* Minucius—universally condemn Fabius for cowardice, the vice opposite to *virtus* (Polyb. 3.89-90, Plut. *Fab.* 5, Livy 22.14, 25-26, etc.) Fabius, conversely, stresses the “safety” of the *res publica* and of his soldiers (Enn. *Ann.* 364 Sk.; Polyb. 3.89; Livy 22.12, 25, 30; Sil. 7.705-45, etc.) At issue here, I argue, is Hannibal’s current superiority in fighting pitched battles. Usually the *res publica* benefits when a Roman soldier displays *virtus* in battle. But now, the impulse to join battle in pursuit of military *gloria* risks a(nother) disastrous defeat, mortally endangering the *res publica*. This decoupling of “valor displayed in battle” from “the good of the *res publica*” spurs Fabius to embrace the latter as the ultimate moral standard, against contemporaries who still embrace the former.

Our sources seek to communicate the essence of this moral debate through various paradoxical formulations. “Delaying” words from the *cunct-* root are often deployed either to praise or to criticize Fabius, and can be rhetorically repositioned to change their ethical valence even within a single passage (*DVI* 14.6, cf. Flor. 1.22; Livy 22.14.5, 27.4, cf. 12.12, 23.1). The paradoxical claim that Fabius “wins without fighting” likewise encapsulates the debate (Cic. *Sen.* 10, Sil. 7.150, Flor. 1.22, along with variations on the phrase *mora fregit*). Finally, our sources explore the paradox that Fabius gains *gloria* by spurning *gloria*: that is, he rejects the traditional quest for renown via battlefield performance, but attains greater, truer renown from his focus on, and success in, preserving the *res publica* (Enn. *Ann.* 365 Sk., Cic. *Off.* 1.84, Livy 22.25.15, 39.18; Dio fr. 57.16, 21; Plut. *Fab.* 10.4). Thus Fabius is represented as winning the moral debate in the long run, and our sources are always on his side.

In the legend of Fabius, then, our sources place alternative systems of valuation into competition. They examine the immediate and long-term consequences of advocating a less popular moral position against a more popular one. The value of the Fabian *exemplum* for subsequent Roman aristocrats lies precisely in its modeling of how to weigh such alternatives. I conclude with two examples of later aristocrats who, deliberating over alternative courses of action, explicitly adduce the Fabian model: Aemilius Paullus before Pydna (Livy 44.22.10, with Rebuffat), and Cicero on the orator’s duties (*Off.* 1.84).