

## War-related disability: Ancient or recent history?

Rosagemma Ciliberti<sup>1</sup>, Stefano Alice<sup>2</sup>, Alessandro Bonsignore<sup>3,4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Section History of Medicine and Bioethics, Department of Health Sciences (DISSAL), University of Genova, Genova, Italy;

<sup>2</sup>General practitioner-Asl 3 Genova, Italy; <sup>3</sup>Section of Legal Medicine, Department of Health Sciences (DISSAL), University of Genova, Genova, Italy; <sup>4</sup>IRCCS –Policlinico San Martino-IST Teaching Hospital, Genova, Italy

**Abstract.** This article examines the significance and evolution of war-related disability throughout Italy's history. The concept of war-related disability has antique roots, with references dating back to ancient Rome, where severely wounded war veterans were entitled to social and financial assistance for their reintegration into civilian life through the “*missio causaria*” system. The First World War marked a turning point in the history of war-related disability. With the introduction of new weapons and military technologies, the number of injured and disabled soldiers reached unprecedented proportions. The post-war challenges called for a more organized and systematic approach to create specific assistance and rehabilitation structures for veterans. The Second World War and subsequent conflicts further underscored the attention given to the issues of war-related disability. Countries around the world sought to provide medical care, rehabilitation, and psychological support to disabled veterans, although often with inequalities and gaps. Despite progress made, the recognition of disabled veterans' rights and their full inclusion in society remain crucial objectives.

**Key words:** Roman army, *missio causaria*, *mission honesta*, war-related disability, war, disabled soldiers

### Introduction

The disability resulting from war activities is a matter of considerable social and historical relevance in Italy (1).

Since antique times, soldiers wounded in battle have received a certain degree of protection and assistance, with the development of norms and codes to ensure protection for combatants affected during conflicts. In ancient Italy, as elsewhere, measures were taken to provide them with assistance, often through religious or community organizations. The importance of supporting these so-called veterans has been recognized since ancient times. Throughout the centuries, Italian legislation has faced various wars and conflicts, leading to a constant evolution of norms concerning war veterans.

Specifically, with the Unification of Italy in 1861, the country became a unified nation, necessitating

broader and more uniform regulations. During the War of Independence and subsequent military campaigns, laws were enacted to provide economic and welfare benefits to veterans and their families. However, limited resources and poor service organization often resulted in disparities and difficulties for war invalids.

The First World War (1915-1918) represented a crucial moment in the history of war disability in Italy (2, 3) The conflict led to a considerable number of wounded and disabled, prompting the government to strengthen support measures. In 1920 Royal Decree N. 1626 of 18 November 1920 (entitled “Extension to soldiers of the Royal Army and Royal Navy of the new provisions on pensions”) was promulgated, establishing the right to medical and pension assistance for war veterans.

During the Second World War (1939-1945), the number of wounded and disabled increased

significantly, putting a strain on the assistance system. The post-war period was thus characterized by significant efforts for the rehabilitation and social reintegration of veterans. In 1950 Law No 648 of 10 August 1950 (entitled “Reorganization of the provisions on war pensions”) was enacted, establishing civilian disability, including disability resulting from war activities, providing a wider range of benefits and services to disabled individuals.

Finally, during the post-second world war period, Italy faced new conflicts and participated in peace-keeping missions in different parts of the world. These operations led to a further increase in the number of war invalids. The country continued to develop new regulations and policies to address the challenges posed by these new realities.

In recent decades, particularly, measures have been adopted to improve access to medical assistance, rehabilitation, and social integration services for war invalids. However, some critical issues persist, including the need for more effective support in the transition from military to civilian life and greater attention to the specific needs of older veterans.

This short article addresses the origins of war disability, origins that must always be considered in any reform process.

## The lessons of history

As it is well known, the Romans had developed advanced medical practices within the military, including the establishment of well-equipped hospitals (“*valetudinaria*”), sophisticated wound treatment techniques surpassing those practiced by the Greeks and Egyptians, the manufacturing of new surgical instruments for treating battle injuries, and the deployment of military physicians on the battlefield to attend to wounded legionaries (4, 5). These physicians, who served for about 16 years at the “*valetudinaria*”, were highly trained and possessed extensive practical experience.

They were part of a group of soldiers called “*immunes*”, exempted from certain “routine” duties or services (6). The Roman army had a strong interest in developing a much better healthcare service

compared to what was provided to the average Roman civilians (7). Effectively treating the health of their soldiers in battle allowed them to return to active duty once they were back in good health, and this advanced approach to military medicine was one of the factors contributing to the ancient Rome’s success in warfare.

However, despite the best care available at that time and the efforts made to maintain the troops’ good health, there were inherent limitations to the medical care of that era. Severe physical injuries or mental disorders could render soldiers unfit for continued military service.

It is essential to acknowledge that Roman society was well aware of the mental toll military service took on soldiers (8).

In particular, three types of military discharge were described in the “*Digesta*” a part of the Roman civil law issued under Justinian I, in a book entitled “*De re militari*”: the “*missio honesta*”, the “*missio ignominiosa*” and the “*missio causaria*”.

After completing the legally mandated period of service (20-25 years), a Roman legionary was granted the “*missio honesta*” or honorable discharge, attested by a written document, also known as a veteran’s certificate. This certificate attested their status and rewarded them with money and some privileges, such as the “*ius connubii*” (right granted during the imperial age, possibly under Septimius Severus, even during service), or the “*missio agrarian*”, wherein a piece of agricultural land was given to the veteran as private property, as a form of gratitude for their service (10, 11). On the other hand, the “*missio ignominiosa*” constituted an early discharge applied as a punitive measure against members of the army who committed serious violations of military discipline and law (6). When the “*missio ignominiosa*” was imposed, the transgressor lost their reputation (“*inter infames efficit*”) and all the privileges normally derived from their veteran status (12).

Of greater interest for the purposes of this historical excursus is the “*missio causaria*”, granted to legionaries who were gravely wounded and maimed during combat, and therefore were forced to retire due to their inability to continue military service. The “*missio causaria*” allowed the legionary to return to their family and community of origin, where they could receive

care and support for their compromised physical condition. Additionally, this discharge granted them some form of social or financial assistance to help reintegrate into civilian life and overcome the difficulties caused by war injuries. This practice reflected the attention and consideration Roman society had for soldiers who had sacrificed much in serving the army.

The introduction of both the honorable and dishonorable discharges can be dated to the end of the Roman Republic and the beginning of the imperial era, during which significant changes occurred in the Roman military system and policies related to soldiers' discharges (13).

The exact date when the medical discharge took effect remains debated among modern scholars (14, 15). It is known that Roman lawmakers clearly distinguished between the status of "causarius" or "ex causa" (terms associated with early medical discharge) and that of "missio honesta" (terms associated with the completion of regular service). However, in documents referring to "causarii" from the first and second centuries AD, there appears to be an apparent contradiction between these two distinct situations (16).

The first evidence of a "missio causaria" in a military document can be dated to the third century AD (17).

Recent study (17) indicates that the introduction of the "missio causaria" in the Roman world likely occurred during the reign of Augustus (27 BC - 14 AD). This was a significant development in Roman history since, for the first time, soldiers who had faithfully fulfilled their duty but were forced to retire early from the army due to physical or mental impairments received assistance from the Roman State. Initially, they enjoyed the same privileges as veterans who had completed their regular service.

From a legal perspective, both veterans and "causarii" (soldiers discharged due to impairments) shared the same status, which explains why diplomas granted to "causarii" also mention the honorable discharge. This combination of "causarius" or "ex causa" and "honesta mission" did not, therefore, conflict until the third century AD.

This evolution represented a significant step forward in the social care and treatment of wounded or disabled soldiers within the Roman Empire. The introduction of the "missio causaria" demonstrated the

recognition of soldiers' dedication and sacrifice, offering them proper support in facing life after military service.

However, over time, some changes in the practice of "missio causaria" likely emerged, and with the gradual decline of the Roman Empire and increasing financial difficulties, adjustments may have been made regarding the granting of privileges and benefits to "causarii". These changes could have led to a differentiation between soldiers discharged due to impairments and veterans who had completed their regular service.

Despite this, both the "missio causaria" and "missio honesta" represented significant advancements in the consideration and treatment of Roman soldiers, acknowledging their sacrifices and providing assistance to elderly and disabled individuals who had served the Roman army with dedication.

## Conclusion

Despite the progress made, there are still challenges to be addressed, such as adapting compensation systems to new forms of work and emerging challenges. However, the recognition of the importance of protecting military personnel remains a constant in the history of war disability. In the future, it is essential to continue promoting policies and regulations that improve the benefits provided and take into account the new work-related challenges faced by those disabled due to war.

## References

1. Dalla Torre UP. Storicizzare la disabilità: l'esperienza dei mutilati di guerra italiani e la costruzione di una nuova identità. *Welfare e Ergonomia* 2021; VIII(2):15–25.
2. Pironti P. Warfare to Welfare: World War I and the Development of Social Legislation in Italy. *Historical Social Research* 2020; 45(2):187–216.
3. Stagni SB, Tomba P, Vigano A, Zati A, Benedetti MG. The First World War drives rehabilitation toward the modern concepts of disability and participation. *Eur J Phys Rehabil Med* 2015; 51(3):331–6.
4. Tabanelli M. I valetudinari in Roma antica [Valetudinaria in ancient Rome]. *Minerva Med* 1956; 13;47(47):1046–53.
5. Karabatos I, Tsagkaris C, Kalachanis K. All roads lead to Rome: Aspects of public health in ancient Rome. *Le Infezioni in Medicina* 2021; 3:488–91.

6. Goldsworthy AK. *The Roman Army at War, 100 BC-AD 200*. Oxford - N.Y: Clarendon Press; 1998fgfgvbc.
7. Fernández Ferriol C, Ferriol Rodríguez MR, Fleites CJ. Roma: imperio, cultura y medicina. *Med cult Acta Médica del Centro* 2018;12(2):228–34.
8. Van Lommel K. The recognition of roman soldiers' mental impairment. *Acta Class* 2013; 56:155–84.
9. Dig. Digest of Justinian: Liber XLIX, 16, 3, 3 a.
10. Boyanov I. Two Fragments from Military Diplomas in Yambol Museum. *Archaeol Bulg* 2007; XI(3):69–74.
11. Phang SE. *The Families of Roman Soldiers (First and Second Centuries A.D.): Culture, Law, and Practice*. *J Fam Hist* 2002; 27(4):352–73.
12. Phang SE. *Roman Military Service: Ideologies of Discipline in the Late Republic and Early Principate*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2008.
13. Jung JH. *Die Rechtstellung der römischen Soldaten: Ihre Entwicklung von den Anfängen Roms bis auf Diokletian*. Band 14 *Recht*. Hildegard Temporini (Edit by). Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter; 1982:882–1014.
14. Davies RW. *Service in the Roman Army*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press; 1989.
15. Watson GR. *The Roman Soldier*, London: Cornell University Press; 1969.
16. Van Lommel K. The Terminology of the Medical Discharge and an Identity Shift among the Roman Disabled Veterans. *AHB* 2013; 27:65–74
17. Thomas JD, Davies RW. A New Military Strength Report on Papyrus, *JRS* 1977; 67:51–4.

---

**Corresponding author:**

Rosagemma Ciliberti  
Department of Health Sciences, University of Genoa,  
Genoa, Italy  
E-mail: rosellaciliberti@yahoo.it