

Horatio at the Bridge – 508 b.C.

Scritto da Administrator

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*Then out spake brave Horatius, The Captain of the Gate:
"To every man upon this earth
Death cometh soon or late.
And how can man die better
Than facing fearful odds,
For the ashes of his fathers,
And the temples of his Gods."
(Lays of Ancient Rome)*

Horatius Cocles (meaning "one-eyed") is a mythical Roman hero dating from VI century BC. His brother was Marcus Horatius Pulvillus (Consul in 509 b.C.). The tradition wants them the descendants of the three legendary Horatii brothers, who saved Rome during the war with Alba Longa in VII century BC.

The Roman historian Titus Livy narrates that in year 508 BC, King Porsenna marched on Rome with his Etruscan armies, conquering the Janiculum hill. Rome's destiny depended on the defense of the Sublicium bridge, the only bridge across the Tiber. Horatius Cocles rushed to the Sublicium bridge together with Spurius Larcius and Titus Herminius, and the three Roman soldiers held back the whole Etruscan army, while their comrades started the demolition of the bridge to prevent Etruscan from crossing the Tiber.

When just a small portion of the bridge was still standing, Horatius ordered his two companions to get safe and carried on the fight alone.

When the last portion of the bridge finally fell, Horatio invoked Father Tiber, leaped into the river with his armor and weapons and then, according to Livy, swam to the river bank and to safety. The people of Rome demonstrated their gratitude to Horatius by building him a statue and donating him as much public land as he could plow in one day.

English writer Thomas Babington Macaulay in his "Lays of Ancient Rome", a collection of poems very popular between the end of the XIX and the beginning of the XX century, described the myth of Horatius at the bridge. The words at the beginning of this article refer indeed to the lyric XXVII, when Horatius is facing the Etruscan army.

Some details about the scene:

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Horatius Cocles and the defense of the Sublicium bridge is most probably a legend, hence there are no historical sources available and over the centuries it has been represented in portraits and paintings in several ways and with different armors and weapons, often not appropriate for the century when the myth took place. Indeed, if we want to place this event in its real historical context, we have use the weapons and armors in use in the VI century BC or what is called the “Oplitic Panoply”, with some minor differences between Roman and Etruscan armies.

The colors used for the Etruscan clothes, armor and shields are historically accurate colors used in that period by the Etruscan: natural earths and ochers. Moreover I chose colors that could provide a strong contrast with the colors used for the miniature of Horatio, in order to evidence the Roman hero. The colors I chose for Horatius dressing are based on a painted terracotta body of an Amazon from the pediment of a temple on the esquiline hill in Rome.

Also the elements reproduced on the Roman and Etruscan shields have been accurately chosen.

First of all, the boar, the bull, the centaur and the eagle (this last one being the symbol of the Roman legions) were the most common and used motifs for shield decoration as animals because they belonged to everyday life.

In particular, Horatius shield has the eagle painted on it. The light blue color represent the color of the sky and the bond of the Romans with the Gods.

A big project, 200 hours work, most of the elements of the scene have been manually crafted: the bridge, the water, the river bank, some of the soldiers, some of the weapons and shields. Most of the figures have been modified to adapt to the scene (Horatio and the romans destroying the bridge, a couple of etruscan warriors) changing heads, shields and bending arms and legs).

Hope you like it!