THE ARMY AT AQUILEIA, THE MOESIACI LEGION, AND THE SHIELD EMBLEMS IN THE NOTITIA DIGNITATUM

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1. Exercitus Aquileiensis

Aquileia, seaport at the head of the Adriatic and stronghold guarding Italy against invaders from the Northeast, was one of the great strategic pivots of the Roman empire. Hence, although far from the frontier, it had a permanent military garrison as early as A.D. 238. In that year, as Maximinus came to besiege the town, we hear of a prefect of cohors I Ulpiar Galatarennum being commander of "the soldiers in service at Aquileia guarding the approach roads" (praepositus militum agentium in protensione Aquileia).3

The nature of the troops in Aquileia at the time becomes strikingly clear from the inscriptions on a sarcophagus now in the cloisters of the Grado cathedral (fig. 1). There a dove-tailed panel gives the epitaph of a standard bearer of the fourth Flavian legion:

Dis[...]
M. A[...]
V[...]
Iul[...]
Valent[...]

On each side of the panel, under an arch held aloft by columns, a standard bearer is shown in a belted, long-sleeved tunic, a sagum coat clasped over his right shoulder, and a long spatha sword, ending in a Dovenhorn, on his left side. The flag he holds is mounted on a pointed spear; its small, horizontal bar below serves to push the shaft into the ground or to pull it out (fig. 2). On both flags one reads the words:

EX
AQUIL.

This has been understood to mean ex aquil(is) or ex Aquil(is), rather than exercitus Aquileiensis, for Th. Mommsen thought that Aquileia could not have had an army of its own4.

It is true that the term exercitus mainly means a fully fledged provincial army, but this need not always be the case: even ad hoc garrisons could be so called, such as the exercitus qui Langaricione sedes, known from a rock inscription in Slovakia5. At Bu Njem in Libya a small vexillation is called exercitus6. Moreover, one of Hadrian's army coins, recently found and thus unknown to Mommsen, praises the exercitus Alexandrinus7, thereby showing that armies could indeed be named after cities. Other inscriptions

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Fig. 1. Grado. Sarcophagus of M. Aurelius Sossius.

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1) AE 1934, 230 (= H. Devijver, PME F 36); see J. Šašel, Clastra Alpium Iuliana 1, Ljubljana 1971, 23. For the term proteomio see also M. Speidel, The Roman Road to Dumata (Jawf in Saudi Arabia) and the Frontier Strategy of Pretensione Colligare, Elistoria 36, 1987, 211-221. I would like to thank J. Cooke (Honolulu), R. Tomlin (Oxford), and H. Ubl (Wien) for their kind help with earlier versions of this paper.

2) CIL V, 899; E. Pais, Corporis Inscriptionum Latinarum Supplementa Italica (Rome 1884) no. 72. The sarcophagus is dated on archaeological grounds by Hans Gabellmann, Die Werkstätten der oberitalischen Sarkophage (Bohn 1973), 54, 207 no. 15. See also J. Franzoni, Habitus aspe habitudo militis. Monumenti funerarii di militari nella cisalpina Romana (Rome 1987) 20f. no. 5. I owe the photographs for fig. 1-2 to the kindness of Dr. Elio Marocco, honorary curator of the Lapidarium del Duomo di Grado.

3) See his comment in Pais, ibid: Haec inscription, cum de exercitu Aquileiensis cogitari nequae, patrium opinor declarat veterani legionis IIIII Flaviae eius, ets titulos positis est.


6) A. Nicolini de Fazi, Moneda inedita del emperador Hadriano de la serie 'adlocuciones' a sus tropas, Gaceta Numismatica 44, 1977, 74-76. See also the exercitus Kari/bagmiensis on coins of 308-311 (RIC VI, 499f.)
revolt against Maximinus — is easier to understand if the town was defended by a professional army rather than by mere civilians7).

The events of that year show the reason for the stationing of an army at Aquileia: its role was to safeguard Italy from the Northeast. Other places in the interior of the empire also had armies, such as Strasbourg in Upper Germany and Léon in Spain, but theiries were traditional sites of legionary camps, holdovers from earlier and now somewhat outdated strategic needs8), and typically, their troops were old-style legions. Aquileia, by contrast, is the first place known to us, aside from Rome itself, where new strategic needs demanded a new army in the interior, — and not surprisingly, its troops were selected drafts from other units, just like the elite legions of the Later Roman Empire.

2. The Moesiaci and the Rise of the Palatine Legions

A small marble tablet (37 x 40 x 2 cm) found at Aquileia bears an inscription and three drawings (fig. 3). Hitherto little understood, its text can be restored as follows9):

Aic (=bic) ego sum positus, Mai(---) 
nes, natus in Dardania [--- et ---]
qu(ue) xivit annos bis qua[ternos mecum et sine all-]
a querella in pace decessi[i. Militari inter Mo-]
5 esacos annis triginta
et quinque, ex-
sebi ex protoco-
ribus. Depe-
situs (ante) diem
10 quintu(m) kalenda-
s At[augustas cr[/nsidis]
Decentio Caesa-
ri et Paulo
(July 28, 352)

In the first two lines the names of the soldier and his wife are lost. The verb in lines five and six stands for exivi "I died", spelled like this also in other late Roman inscriptions10). The restoration of the soldier's unit as the Moesiaci is certain since only the first two letters are missing. He mentions no transfers and no promotions save that he ended his days in the rank of a protector. Since he served for 35 years and died in 352, he must have begun his

7) Civilians only: A. Calderini, Aquileia Romana, Ricerche di storia e di epigrafia (Milano 1935) 54, against which see SHA Max. et Balb. 12,2: Maximinus ab oppidum Aquileiensibus et pasci qui illic erat militibus . . . vicus est.

8) See for example G. Alfdöy, Römische Heeresgeschichte. Mavors III (Amsterdam 1987) 510. Perhaps smaller forces at the interior borders of provinces would make a better comparison, such as the force at St. Bertrand de Comminges in Aquitania or the one at Aulitrene on the Phrygian border of Asia, for which see M.P. Speidel, Roman Troops at Aulitrene, Epigraphica Anatolica 10, 1987, 97–100.

9) Franzoni 1987, no. 22, with earlier literature and the following text (whence AE 1982, 383): Aic ego sum positus Mai. . . nes natus in Dardan[a] . . . qua[re xivit annos bis qua[ternos mecum sine all-]a querella in pace decessi[i . . .] exi[a?] annis tricentia et quingue ex-

10) E.g. Diehl 2882A (Rome): exsibit "she died".
service by 312. The length of his service suggests that he was a veteran who had received the rank of protector upon retirement. Since the grave was also for his wife, he seems to have stayed at Aquileia for quite some time, not just in transit. Indeed, the Moesiaci, mentioned at Aquileia in another inscription as well, are likely to have been stationed here. The presence of such a high-ranking patrician legion (Notitia Dignitatum, Oc. V, 7 = 150 VII, 8), together with a fleet (ND Oc. XLII, 4), would suit the strategic importance of Aquileia.

In 352, after the battle at Mursa, Aquileia became the headquarters of Magnentius' defense of Italy and held out as such until September of that year. It was to be expected, therefore, that the date would be indicated on our tablet by Magnentiuss, not Constantius' consuls. However, if the deceased was indeed a veteran, as is likely, he was not a soldier in Magnentius' field army then based at Aquileia.

Perhaps one may now trace the origin of the Moesiaci legion as follows. Soldiers' gravestones leave no doubt that around 300 a detachment of the Lower Moesian legion XI Claudia was stationed at Aquileia. The fact that one of its soldiers died in Maximianus' African war of 298 shows that this detachment was a mobile, elite unit of the new field army. At some time after 312, a centurion of legio I Italica, the other Lower Moesian legion, was buried at Aquileia. The massive presence of Moesian legionaries at Aquileia during the late third and the early fourth century suggests that the palatine legions of the Moesiaci arose mainly from mobile detachments of legio XI Claudia and legio I Italica stationed there.

For some time these detachments used the individual names of their legions, but gradually, perhaps at first inofficiously then officially, they came to be known as legio Moesica. The new name...
Insignia uiri illustri magistri peditum

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**Fig. 4.** Notitia Dignitatum Occidentis V. Shield emblems of units under the *magister peditum occidentis*. The emblem of the Moesiaci is no. 7 (after ed. Seeck p. 115).

is first found, it seems, on a city-Roman inscription from the years before 312 (CIL VI, 2759): *Dis(nis) Manibusius Valeriius Tertius, mili(u) corti(s) X pretori(ae), qui vixit annis XXXVI, me(n)s(es) III, dies XV, mili(it)abit legione Moesica annis V, inter Lanciaros annis XI, in pretoria arm(---, etc.*[23]. The *lanciarii* mentioned here may even have been part of the Moesian legion rather than being an independent unit.[23]

The soldiers of *legio XI Claudia* at Aquileia were, as far as we know, all of Thracian origin[23] and the soldier for whom our tablet was made came from neighbouring Dardania. The elite character of the Moesiaci was thus upheld by recruitment[23], which suggests that the high-ranking Late Roman palatine legions derived not from frontier units somehow assigned to the field army, but from earlier elite mobile units.

This was obviously the case of the praetorian *lanciarii*, of the Moesiaci, and, by analogy, of their sister unit, the *Pannoniaci*. But the same can be shown also for the *Divitienses*, a mobile detachment of legion II Italica[23], stationed at Divitia across from Köln, where in earlier decades other elite troops had been stationed[23]. The palatine legions of the *Divitienses*, just like the Moesiaci, thus did not come from a frontier unit but was an earlier elite mobile unit that continued a long-established tradition and had a right to expect palatine status[23]. The first and the

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[23] CIL VI, 3637 = Dessau 2346 (Rome); CIL XI, 4085 (Otricoli); CIL XI, 4787 = Dessau 2777 (S nepulum); C.P. Valenti, *Epigrifisica 43*, 1981, 216–220; Ritterling 1924, 1474 and Hoffmann 1969, 179 suggest that these soldiers fell on the side of Constantine in 312. More likely they belonged to Maxentius’ forces.


[23] Hoffmann 1969, 179 classifies them and their sister unit, the Tongraceni, wrongly as frontier units; Tongeren is not on the frontier, hence the unit based there is also likely to have begun as a mobile detachment.
highest ranking units among both the palatine legions and the palatine horse — the models for the others — thus were elite field army units of the third century.

3. The Shield Emblems in the Notitia Dignitatum

Of the three drawings on the Aquileia tablet (fig. 3), the one on the left shows the deceased wearing his typically fourth-century Kammhelme while holding his shield and his lance. The picture in the middle shows him drinking, seated on a folding chair, and the one on the left may show his wife. Remarkably, the officer’s shield bears the same emblem as that of the Moesiaca legion in the Notitia Dignitatum (fig. 4): six diagonal lines, like spokes on a wheel, dividing the field between an outer and an inner circle. Only two out of the 277 shield drawings in the Notitia have a somewhat similar design, hence coincidence can be excluded. The close match of the design on the stone tablet and in the handwritten government handbook leaves no doubt that this is the actual shield emblem of the Moesiaca legion.

The Moesiaca shield is proof that, in the beginning at least, the drawings in the Notitia Dignitatum faithfully rendered the troops’ actual shield emblems. It lays to rest the mistaken view that these drawings were largely ad hoc fabrications, for if the Notitia is correct in this case where direct comparison is possible, who is to say this was not so in the other cases? The astonishing amount of information that went into these drawings must have been collected by order of the highest authorities and thus proves that the Notitia Dignitatum was an official document.

only a question mark. For an overall discussion see also P. Berger, The Insignia of the Notitia Dignitatum (1981) 44–57.

Contra: R. Grigg, Portrait-bearing Codices in the Illustrations of the Notitia Dignitatum, Journal Rom. Stud. 69, 1979, 107–123; Inconsistency and Lassitude: The Shield Emblems of the Notitia Dignitatum, Journal Rom. Stud. 74, 1984, 133–142, arguing that some devices are “awkward” (a matter of taste), that devices with concentric circles are “essentially blank” (what about color?), and that some groups of emblems are “over-co-ordinated” (field marshals like to co-ordinate; Constantine co-ordinated his army’s shield-emblems before the battle at the Milvian Bridge). If in some cases the shield emblems of the same units in the Eastern and the Western armies do not correspond, this could be so because either the troops changed their dignitata (Vegetius II,18) or the drawings or captions later slipped in the manuscripts.

A further example of a true emblem seems to be that of the palatine legion of the Scythae (Or.V), for its concentric rings with a flower-like pattern match those of the shield shown on Aurelius Gaius’ gravestone who fought in Diocletian’s comitatus as a soldier of legio I liovia Scythica, see plate IV of Th. Drew-Bear, Les voyages d’Aurelius Gaius, soldat de Diocletien, La géographie administrative et politique d’Alexandre à Mahomet. Actes du colloque de Strasbourg 1979, 93–141, whence AE 1981, 777 and SEG 1981, 1116. The shape of that shield is circular, hence this shape was not, in the Notitia Dignitatum, “motivated by expediency since the circle would be easier to draw than the ellipse”, contrary to what Grigg (1983, 133) suggests. For the Cornutii emblem, found on the Arch of Constantine, see Hoffmann 1969, 133f.