

ROMAN MILITARY EQUIPMENT ON THIRD CENTURY TOMBSTONES

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British students of Roman sculpture and of the Roman Army have largely ignored third century depictions of soldiers on tombstones.¹ This is partly because few spectacular examples of the genre occur in Britain and attention has understandably concentrated on the richer first century figures. In contrast to these the third century stones almost all depict the deceased in 'undress', often with the absolute minimum of military equipment. Very few examples occur in the Rhineland, precisely the region where the first century stones are most numerous. German scholars have been more attentive because of the numerous third century small-finds from Upper Rhenish and Raetian forts which may in some categories be functionally explained with reference to the sculpture. The third century stones are most numerous in the Danubian region where German and Austrian sculptural studies have unavoidably dealt with them.²

However, it is important to draw attention to the third century depictions as an Empire-wide phenomenon and to outline the important characteristics of the equipment shown. A study of the distribution and the relation of archaeological small-finds raises many important questions concerning the development of Roman arms and armour in the third century.

CHARACTERISTICS AND DATING

The familiar first to second century tombstones have one or more of the following depictional elements: a short-sleeved tunic (very occasionally with long, tight sleeves, or baggy three-quarter length sleeves); one or two plated cingula with 'apron'; an infantry paenula or cavalry sagum; a gladius or cavalry spatha on the dexter hip; a rectangular, hexagonal or oval scutum; hasta(e) for auxiliaries, pila for legionaries; sometimes a helmet and a lorica hamata or squamata.³

A new formula appears perhaps at the end of the second century AD depicting a very different panoply (Figs.1-4). The sagum is already worn by all troops on the Marcus Column in Rome and completely replaces the paenula on the tombstones.⁴ The tunic is invariably long-sleeved. Pila do appear⁵ but on most legionary stones they are replaced by hastae or shorter, barb-headed weapons (Fig.1).⁶ The shields are of the earlier, oval type or are broader and proportionally squatter ovals (Figs.1-3). The most characteristic features are the belts and



Pl.1



Pl.2

their fittings. The single cingulum is of varying breadth but may be very wide and an almost ubiquitous 'ring-buckle' is used to fasten it at the front. A number of methods are indicated for fastening, such as simply passing the two ends through the ring from behind and attaching them on either side to fungiform studs. Alternatively the dexter strap-end is passed back along the belt to the dexter hip, then allowed to hang down.⁷ When split the two ends often have ivy-leaf terminals and the deceased may be seen on many reliefs idly holding this strap in his dexter hand (Fig.4).⁸ Sometimes both ends of the belt hang down from the ring and are tucked back up behind the cingulum giving a double-crescent effect.⁹ By itself this type of ring-buckle is sufficient to identify the deceased as a soldier.

The sword, of gladius or spatha length, is usually suspended from a baldric on the sinister hip. Chapes are pelta-form¹⁰ or, more usually, large, flat and round (Figs.2, 4).¹¹ When not obscured by cloak or baldric the scabbard is often attached to the belt by a slide.¹² The baldric is very wide, sometimes having applied decorative plates on the chest area, a roundel over the scabbard and a large ivy-leaf terminal on the end hanging down alongside the scabbard (Fig.4).¹³ Body armour almost never appears though an occasional helmet may be seen (Fig.3).

The first datable depiction of this panoply is from Eining, placed by a consular date in AD211, and shows an officer (T. Flavius Felix) sacrificing on an altar.¹⁴ He wears a long-sleeved tunic, sagum and ring-buckle. For more general dating of these stones names of deceased soldiers often provide a terminus post quem by including 'M. Aurelius'. Regimental names with imperial titles (e.g. 'Severiana Alexandriana', 'Philippiana', etc.) give a dating bracket. Some stones, such as the example from Apamea Syriae (dated to AD231-33) may be dated by supposed historical context.¹⁵ Examples securely dated to the third century include reliefs from Albano (legio II Parthica), the ship relief from Palmyra, the tribune Terentius fresco from Dura-Europos and the series of Roman soldiers and emperors in the Sassanid victory reliefs of Shapur I at Bishapur and Naqsh-i-Rustam.¹⁶ A tombstone from Aquileia has none of the characteristic fittings (although others from the town do) but has a prominent cross-bow brooch and a 'Pannonian bonnet', possibly indicative of a Tetrarchic period or later date.¹⁷

Pl.1 Tombstone of an unknown soldier found in Istanbul Archaeological Museum.

Pl.2 Tombstone of Aprilius Spicatus from a numerus Divitensium. Istanbul Archaeological Museum.



Pl. 3



Pl. 4

Likewise the Diocletianic Luxor frescoes do not perhaps depict ring-buckles, possibly giving a general terminus ante quem for the 'ring-buckle' panoply.¹⁸

A vast majority of the stones with surviving inscriptions prove to have been set up by and/or for legionarii and praetoriani. The auxiliary exceptions often have ranks above plain miles although auxiliary milites do occur at Aquincum, Intercisa and Brigetio in particular.¹⁹ The first and third sites were legionary fortresses where auxiliary burial practices were most likely influenced by legionary stones and Intercisa was exceptional for the wealth of the Syrian community and its strong legionary connections.²⁰ Very few examples fall within the 'horseman' type of relief, the exceptions being confined to scattered single occurrences, or to equites singulares Augusti in Rome.²¹ The majority of third century stones depict full-figure or half-figure standing soldiers, sometimes with their families, though occasionally horses appear in the background or being led by the deceased or his calo. Comparative pay levels were presumably a factor governing the presence of figures on stelae as in earlier periods, hence the praetorian and legionary predominance.

DISTRIBUTION

The sculptural monuments of Rome are quite useless for third century equipment studies. The arches of Severus are very heavily stylised in the large panels and hopelessly conservative in the soldier-prisoner pedestal reliefs. The Constantinian panels on the Arch of Constantine are for the most part the product of sarcophagus sculptors and the style is not concerned with small details of belt or scabbard fittings. This hiatus in the capital puts even greater emphasis on the third century tombstone figures, especially praetorian examples from the city.

Examples of first to second century tombstone reliefs are concentrated along the Rhine and in Britain with a few Upper and Middle Danubian examples. In the Eastern Provinces they are virtually absent with just a few instances in Greece.²² Rather more occur in the West African provinces though due in part to outside vexillationes.²³

Pl.3 Tombstone of Aurelius Surus from the legio I Adiutrix. Istanbul Archaeological Museum.

Pl.4 Tombstone of an unknown soldier found at the site of Herakleia Pontica. Istanbul Archaeological Museum.

The third century reliefs form a rather different distribution pattern.²⁴ Something of a renaissance in the erection of figural tombstones seems to have occurred in the middle Danubian region in the late second to early third century AD and it is likely that the actual volume of such pieces produced there was proportionally greater than in earlier periods. This may be a direct function of the political, strategic and economic importance of the Illyrian armies and the renewed practice spread eastwards and westwards from the region. There may be of course be a survival element involved, notably at Brigetio and Intercisa where very large bodies of sculpture and inscriptions are present. However, this need not distort the overall picture unduly. The spread of tombstone types and decorative motifs from the Danube direct to Rome is indisputable (for example the use of the 'Danubian Rider God' type hunt scene on equites singulares Augusti tombstones) and must be a direct result of the Severan reform of the Imperial Guard units and the consequent shifts in recruitment patterns. Speidel attributed the Danubian revival of figured tombstones to a continuous tradition in the Greek East but there are no 'bridging' examples, geographical or temporal, to support this supposition.²⁵

The concentration of tombstone occurrences principally reflects the distribution of a particular funerary practice. The virtual absence of third century figures on the Rhine and the Lower Danube do not of course reflect an absence of equipment types especially in the case of the former where much small-find work has been carried out.²⁶ However, it is not the absence of tombstone representations which is so significant as much as the presence of them in regions largely devoid of a small-finds record comparable with the British, Rhenish and Danubian provinces. Dura-Europos apart, extraordinarily few relevant small-finds occur in Greece, Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine and North Africa. Third century tombstones in contrast occur in all these regions²⁷ contributing something to contemporary discussion of equipment uniformity and regional currency.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDS

The equipment depicted on the third century stones is well-supported archaeologically and a combination of reliefs and small-finds has allowed reconstruction of the belts and scabbards in particular. Several classes of iron, bronze and bone finds are associated with the cingulum and baldric. The ring-buckles occur either as plain rings or as more complex and decorated adjustable types, notably at Niederbieber, Saalburg and Intercisa.²⁸ At Intercisa grave-finds in situ suggested the function and position on the body.²⁹ Numerous fungiform stud

finds may include those used on the cingulum.

Surviving third century leather baldrics from Thorsbjerg and Vimose (c.7-8cm wide, 118.5cm long) correspond well with sculptural depictions and the appearance of a bronze 'phalera' (Fig.4). The latter appear archaeologically as plain roundels (Thorsbjerg, Vimose, Saalburg, Zugmantel etc.), as roundels with inset reliefs (Vimose, Simris) and as complex figural and lettered openwork (Vimose, Carlisle, Zugmantel, High Rochester etc.).³⁰ Similar openwork rectangular plates with hinged 'tongues' were in the past identified as attachments for the ribbons hanging from standard cross-bars. The Vimose baldrics had punched decoration indicating the baldric positioning of these plates. This and the phalera positioning are clearly corroborated by the Bishapur reliefs.³¹

Bronze scabbard-slides were apparently in use from approximately the mid second century AD but only appear in depictions of the third century. Iron slides were used in the third century and bone and ivory examples occur at South Shields, London, Mainz, Intercisa, Novae, Khisfine and in the Danish bog deposits.³² The important point demonstrated by the reliefs is that the slide was worn outermost (Figs.1, 3). The baldric did not always pass through the long slide opening but is often depicted as overlaying the sword with the phalera over the obscured slide area (Fig.4). Oldenstein has explained this method of attaching the non-plated end of the baldric directly around the scabbard with the end strip tied to an eye projecting from the back of the phalera.³³ Thus the plated end hangs freely alongside the scabbard. Clearly a variety of scabbard attachments were employed judging from the reliefs.

The large, circular chape seen on so many tombstones is well-represented by German finds (Mainz, Köln, Niederbieber etc.) and examples from Danish Nydam, Dura-Europos,³⁴ Khisfine and the Syrian Hauran.³⁵ Peltaform chapes on the tombstone reliefs are attested archaeologically again from the mid second century AD. Bone box-chapes occur in Britain and Germany but do not occur on sculpture except perhaps on the Bishapur rock reliefs.³⁶ Ulbert classified third century spathae from Danish and limes sites into a very long, narrow Straubing/Nydam type (length:width proportion 15-17:1) and a Lauriacum type (8-12:1).³⁷ Some of the former are almost a metre long. Finds from Künzing, however, together with tombstone reliefs demonstrate continuity in the use of a short sword as later suggested by Vegetius' semispatha (Fig.4).³⁸

These belt and sword fittings are mostly given general dating brackets by the occupational periods of Upper Rhine-Raetian limes sites associated with known barbarian

incursions and abandonments.³⁹ A useful securely dated funerary deposit is the Lyon grave with coins of AD194, plausibly associated with the Battle of Lugdunum in AD197.⁴⁰ The grave produced a spatha, a bronze scabbard slide and a bronze baldric phalera. Two identical bronze strap-ends may represent the split ends of a wide cingulum.

According to sculptural representations oval shields were in use by the praetoriani in the first century AD and by some legionarii at least from the late first century and probably throughout the imperial period.⁴¹ The oval shields on the third century stones were another evolutionary stage in the scutum development and may be identified with the Dura oval examples.⁴² The great hiatus in the series of surviving infantry helmets between the Niedermörmter bronze legionary example, dated by Robinson to the early third century AD, and the early fourth century Intercisa helmets⁴³ is only inadequately filled by tombstone representations (Fig.3). These depict something similar to the third century cavalry helmets with a one-piece cheek protection leaving a 'T' shaped face opening.⁴⁴ How much of a projecting neck-flange is present cannot be said with certainty and sculptural evidence for helmet types is anyway notoriously unreliable.

The Caerleon weapon hoard contained pilum-heads possibly dating to the third century AD.⁴⁵ Few pila occur on tombstones although Vegetius suggests the continued use of heavy throwing weapons. The stelae imply legionary abandonment of the pilum in favour of shorter, lighter spears which may represent the precursors of Vegetius' Late Roman types.⁴⁶

The third century representations imply certain changes in military equipment, the cultural and tactical implications of which are as yet far from clear. Without a fuller archaeological record for the Danubian region at least they threaten to remain so. The Sarmatian and Parthian interaction spheres may both be responsible for the process of change, especially where scabbard slides are concerned, these being essentially of Central Asiatic origin. On the pedestal of Trajan's Column slides appear on Daco-Sarmatian scabbards and in Scene C the sinister barbarian horse-holder has one on his scabbard. A gradual influence of barbarian equipment on Danubian region Roman usage seems likely, especially in the equestrian sphere (compare the use of the draco, contus etc.). Trousdale suggests that the Parthians used the scabbard slide as a result of nomadic contacts or of their Asiatic origins.⁴⁷ In Palmyrene sculpture the characteristically Roman 'four-ring' suspension method is depicted until the later second century AD. Thereafter scabbard slides are exclusively shown, the earliest dated example being the Beth Phaseil genii relief of AD191.⁴⁸ That these changes were having important

effects outside the Roman Empire is clearly demonstrated by the extraordinary finds from Free Germany, particularly those from Denmark. What this meant in terms of changing barbarian weapons systems and Roman modifications to combat them is also obscure at present. However, the uniformity of the sculptural representations and the small-find types across the Empire points to a uniformity of equipment which cannot be explained away solely by troop movements.

The point made above that a ring-buckle on a figure is sufficient to identify the deceased as a soldier is of some importance. In the first to second century AD the Roman soldier was distinguishable from 'civilians' when he was in 'undress' by his hobnailed boots, his paenula and his cingulum militare (and sword if carried).⁴⁹ By the third century he no longer wore characteristically military caligae and the sagum had replaced the paenula. Sagum and tunic seem to have been essentially similar to 'civilian' dress and, unless colour was used to distinguish soldiers, only the cingulum was a distinguishing feature.⁵⁰ One might go as far as to say that visually the cingulum militare 'made' the soldier. When Severus cashiered the praetorians their belts were confiscated.⁵¹ With the Late Roman 'militarisation' of the civil service belts became the badges of office, to be conferred or confiscated with favour or disfavour.⁵²

NOTES

1. This paper is a preliminary note to a detailed survey of 3rd century figured military tombstones.
2. For example, HOFMANN, 1905; UBL, 1969.
3. Many 1st-2nd century tombstones depict the deceased in 'undress', i.e. without body armour and helmet. Virtually all the 3rd century stones do likewise so cannot be used in any discussion of a supposed decline in the use of infantry armour. Robinson's conclusions were based on an incorrect observation of the Arch of Severus in the Forum Romanum, Rome (1975, 171).
4. WILSON, 1929.
5. DURRY, 1938, pl.X.B and CUMONT, 1942, pl.XX.1 for two Rome examples. Another pilum appears on a relief in the Museo Civico, Bologna.
6. Mus. Aquileia, 1972, nos 348-9, 351; SPEIDEL, 1976, fig.3 (Istanbul).

7. BARKÓCZI *et al.*, 1954, fig.19, 32.A-C; UBL, 1969, fig.169; OLDENSTEIN, 1976, fig.2,8.
8. HOFMANN, 1905, fig.51 (Salona); *Éspérandieu*, 1907-66, no.5507 (Straßburg); MENDEL, 1914, nos 891-2 (Heracleia Pontica); *C.S.I.R., Deutschland*, I,1, no.31 (Augsburg).
9. For example, CUMONT, 1942, pl.XX.1 (Rome).
10. MENDEL, 1914, no.36 (Istanbul); *C.S.I.R., Great Britain*, I,2, no.47 (Bath).
11. Interestingly none of the British stones depict round chapes which coincidentally do not occur in the province's archaeological record.
12. For example, SPEIDEL, 1976, fig.2-3 (Istanbul).
13. HOFMANN, 1905, fig.56 (Aquicum); MENDEL, 1914, no.891 (Heracleia Pontica); SPEIDEL, 1976, fig.4 (Perinthus).
14. *C.S.I.R., Deutschland*, I,1, no.477.
15. BALTY, 1981, 200, fig.221.
16. TENTORICI, 1975, fig.313; COLLEDGE, 1976, pl.103; CUMONT, 1926, pl.XLIX-L; GHIRSHMAN, 1962, pl.197, 202, 204.
17. *Mus. Aquileia*, 1972, no.354.
18. MONNERET DE VILLARD, 1953, pl.XXX-II; KALAVREZOU-MAXEINER, 1975, pl.I-II, 7-14.
19. For example, HOFMANN, 1905, fig.58; BARKÓCZI, 1951, pl.XII.2; BARKÓCZI *et al.*, 1954, pl.XLI.5.
20. FITZ, 1972, 110-2, 165.
21. For example, SPEIDEL, 1975, pl.2 (Nablus, Palestine); SPEIDEL, 1978, pl.1 (Lambaesis); AMELUNG, 1903, pl.28 (Rome); STUART JONES, 1912, pl.82, 84 (Rome).
22. KOS, 1978, pl.1.
23. Collected by BENSEDDIK, 1979, but omitting 3rd century examples.
24. For a brief summary of occurrences see COULSTON, 1983, and for Britain see COULSTON & PHILLIPS, forthcoming, no.193. A

- very useful catalogue has now been provided by NOELKE, 1986.
25. SPEIDEL, 1976, 135 cites Black Sea stelai as influential but in fact they had little or no effect on those areas militarily most closely connected, namely the Lower Danube and northern Asia Minor.
 26. The primary work on the small-finds, heavily relied upon in this paper, is OLDENSTEIN, 1976.
 27. In addition to those mentioned here and in COULSTON, 1983: Mus. Luxor, 1981, no.296; REINACH, 1912 (Auzia); SPEIDEL, 1978, pl.2 (Tipasa).
 28. BARKÓCZI et al., 1954, pl.XXV.1, 3; ALFÖLDI et al., 1957, 456-61; OLDENSTEIN, 1976, 218-9.
 29. BARKÓCZI et al., 1954, 87, fig.23, 97-9.
 30. STERNQUIST, 1954; OLDENSTEIN, 1976, 226-34; ALLASON-JONES, 1985; idem, 1986.
 31. STERNQUIST, 1954; OLDENSTEIN, 1976, 223-6, fig.10; GHIRSHMAN, 1962, pl.197.
 32. BARKÓCZI et al., 1954, pl.XIV.1-2, XX.3; TROUSDALE, 1975, 220-9, 236-7; OLDENSTEIN, 1976, 95-109; CHAPMAN, 1976.
 33. OLDENSTEIN, 1976, 228-9, fig.11-2.
 34. HUNDT, 1953; 1955; OLDENSTEIN, 1976, 116; pers. comm. Mr S. James.
 35. TROUSDALE, 1975, 106-7, pl.18-'; pers. obs. National Museum, Damascus.
 36. GHIRSHMAN, 1962, pl.197.
 37. ULBERT, 1974, 215-6.
 38. Ibid., 210-11, fig.3; Vegetius, II,15.
 39. OLDENSTEIN, 1976, 59-66.
 40. ULBERT, 1974, 211-15, fig.4; OLDENSTEIN, 1976, 88-9.
 41. STRONG, 1980, pl.72 (Cancellaria relief); SZILÁGYI, 1956, pl.XXXVI (Aquincum stela).
 42. ROSTOVTZEFF et al., 1939, 326-69, pl.XLI-II, XLIV-VI.

43. ROBINSON, 1975, 73; THOMAS, 1971, 13-25.
44. C.S.I.R., Österreich, III, 2, no.86 (Enns); SPEIDEL, 1976, fig.2 (Istanbul), 5 (Brigetio).
45. NASH-WILLIAMS, 1932, fig.20-21.
46. Vegetius, I,20.
47. TROUSDALE, 1975, 85-7. For the question of outside influences on Roman equipment and tactical developments see COULSTON, 1986.
48. COLLEDGE, 1976, pl.44.
49. Cf. Petronius, Satyricon, 83.
50. The evidence for tunic colours is diffuse and mostly of dubious value. Reliable depictions of 3rd century soldiers show white tunics with purple embroidered bands and orbiculi (CUMONT, 1926, pl.XLIX-L, Dura fresco; MONNERET DE VILLARD, 1953, pl.XXX-XXXIII, Luxor fresco; Mus. Luxor, 1981, no.290, Der-el-Medineh(?) mummy portrait). These are indistinguishable from 'civilian' dress depicted in 3rd-4th century mosaics and frescoes (BANDINELLI, 1971, pl.86-7, 199, 207, 211, 226-7, 230, 313).
51. Cf. Herodian, II,13,10.
52. JONES, 1964, 566; L'ORANGE, 1965, 7-8; WIDENGREN, 1968. Cf. Zosimus, Historia Nova, III,19; V,46.

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