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A THEORETICAL APPROACH TO ROMAN MILITARY BELTS

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As suggested in the title, in this paper I would like to concentrate on a theoretical aspect of military belts; namely the question of how we can define a set of decorated belt mounts as having originally belonged to a military belt. In Roman archaeology, the term military belt is regularly used for any belt decorated with elaborate metal mounts. In fact, these mounts are seen as distinguishing a common leather belt - which could have been worn by anybody - from a military belt worn only by soldiers. While this is a reasonable working assumption, it does carry a theoretical sting: many finds of belt mounts are made without an obvious military connection.

Most finds of metal belt pieces were made individually, the pieces having been lost or broken and either thrown away or put aside for recycling in antiquity.¹ Loose finds of belt mounts from forts or legionary camps abound and finds from the surrounding *vici* and *canabae legionis*, the refuse dumps and nearby cemeteries of those military installations are common and only to be expected.²

¹ While re-melting old artefacts for their metal was common practice in antiquity (and later), some large military waste dumps prove that the Roman army was not always so thrifty. Examples of such waste dumps are the river dump of Alphen aan de Rijn (NL) and the 'Schutthügel' of Vidonissa (CH). In the latter, almost 500 belt pieces were found. See UNZ - DESCHLER-ERB 1997.

² The belt finds from Vindonissa include finds from the legionary camp, the *canabae legionis* and the refuse dump (see UNZ - DESCHLER-ERB 1997). Examples from auxiliary forts, the *vici* of these forts and from cemeteries are known from many places as well (see for instance Kronberger 1997, Kat. Nr. 150; Gschwind 2004, Kat. Nr. C386* and Krecovič 1995, Abb. 5, 1).

Finds were also made in civilian settlements not directly connected with legionary camps or auxiliary forts but situated in what might be termed the "Limes zone", the direct hinterland of the Limes.³ While Nicolay interpreted them as representing the weapons taken home by Veterans, a large number may well have been lost by active soldiers patrolling the area or building temporary camps as an exercise.

Finds without a direct military connection come from civilian settlements located in the hinterland far away from any military installation, others from rivers, lakes or bogs.⁴ But some of the most prominent examples are belt mounts found in graves in cemeteries without a military connection.⁵

There are many valid explanations for the appearance of individual belt mounts in non-military contexts - some of them were presented at the XIII Roman Military Equipment Conference 2001 in Brugg (CH).⁶ But the question remains: How do we know if these are really mounts from military belts? Is there any law or

³ NICOLAY 2007.

⁴ Villa: Kerkrade, NL (see HOSS - VAN DER CHIJS 2005, Abb. 7.9); City: Augst, CH (see DESCHLER-ERB 1999, Kat. Nr. 332); Hinterland: Maria Saal, AU (see Fundberichte Österreich 28, 1989, Abb. 708) and Greater Kelco Cave, GB (see DEARNE 1990, Abb. 1), wet contexts: Lake near Wimbourne, GB (see GREW - GRIFFITH 1991, Kat. Nr. 63) and Vimose bog, DK (see JØRGENSEN et al. 2003, Kat. Nr. 6.10).

⁵ Three of the more famous examples are the belt finds from the Lyon (F) grave (see WUILLEUMIER 1952), from Neuburg an der Donau, D (see HÜBNER 1963) and from Lechința de Mureș, RO (see PETCULESCU 1995).

⁶ DESCHLER-ERB 2002.

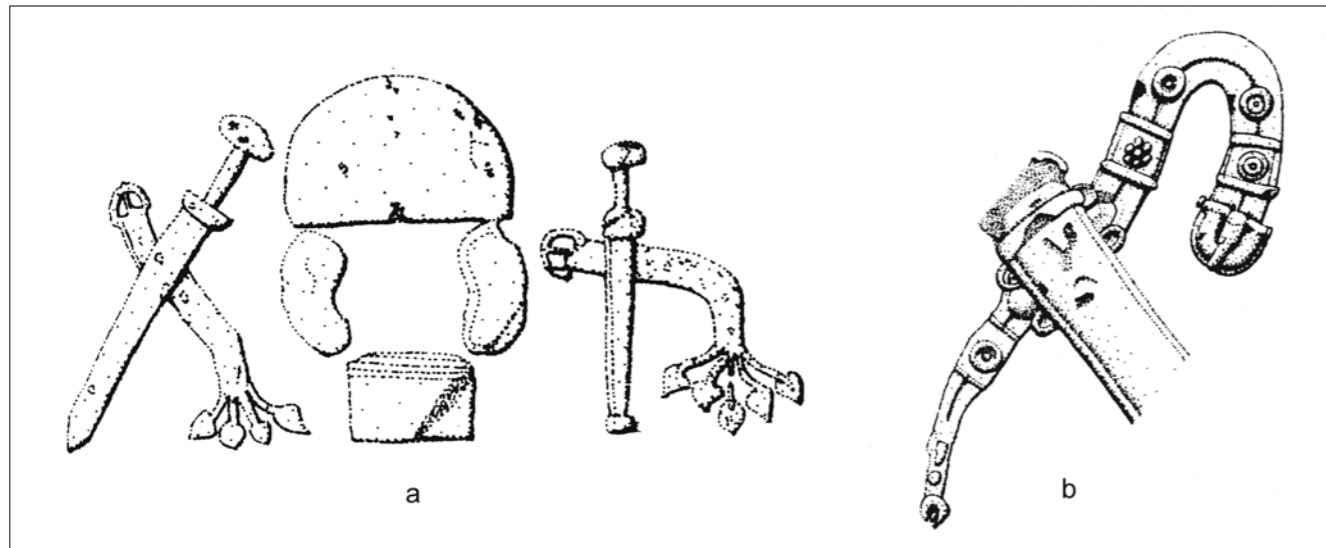


Fig. 1. Depiction of swords and a dagger each on their belt from the funeral monuments of Cottidius Attianus in Assisi (a) and an unknown soldier in Pula (b). Not to scale. After Bishop 1992, Nos 32, 42.

regulation forbidding the wearing of belt mounts to ordinary civilians? Could not anyone have decorated their belt with mounts and worn it?

During the following pages, I shall attempt to define a theoretical model that will hopefully help to solve this problem. But to do this I shall have to back up a bit and explain how the military belt - both an article of clothing and a piece of military equipment - became the distinguishing symbolic object setting the soldier apart from civilian men and marking him as a *miles*.

The Roman legal system separated soldiers from civilians by the right to wear arms - especially a sword - at all times in public.⁷ With the exception of the city of Rome itself, weapons and armour were part of the professional profile of the soldier and could be worn at all times in public.⁸ Civilians were only allowed to wear weapons in vaguely defined exceptional cases, such as while travelling or hunting.⁹

In addition to that, soldiers were also separated from civilians by their special privileges. This included legal privileges such as *testamentum militare* and *perculium castrense* and regular pay, a minimum supply of food, clothing and shelter as well as medical treatment.

⁷ BRUNT 1975.

⁸ While soldiers were forbidden to wear their sword in Rome even in triumphal processions, they were not forbidden to wear their belts then - and presumably at all other times. See RANKOV 2007, 44.

⁹ Travel: Dig. 48.6.1 (Marcianus).

These differences between soldiers and civilians were well known and appreciated by the general public as the following passage from Juvenal's *Satires* demonstrates:

"Who can count up, Gallius, all the prizes of prosperous soldiering? [...]"

Let us first consider the benefits common to all soldiers, of which not the least is this, that no civilian will dare to thrash you; if thrashed himself, he must hold his tongue, and not venture to exhibit to the Praetor the teeth that have been knocked out, or the black and blue lumps upon his face, or the one eye left which the doctor holds out no hope of saving. If he seeks redress, he has appointed for him as judge a hob-nailed centurion with a row of jurors with brawny calves sitting before a big bench. [...]

And now let us note other profits and perquisites of the service. If some rascally neighbour has filched from me a dell or a field of my ancestral estate [...]; or if a debtor refuses to repay the money that he has borrowed, declaring [...] the document null and void: I shall have to wait for the time of year when the whole world begin their suits, and even then there will be a thousand wearisome delays. [...] But the gentlemen who are armed and belted have their cases set down for whatever time they please; nor is their substance worn away by the slow drag-chain of the law.

Soldiers alone, again, have the right to make their wills during their fathers' lifetime; for the law ordains that money earned in military service is not to be included in the property which is in the father's sole control."¹⁰

¹⁰ Juvenal *Satires* XVI (translation G. G. Ramsay 1918).

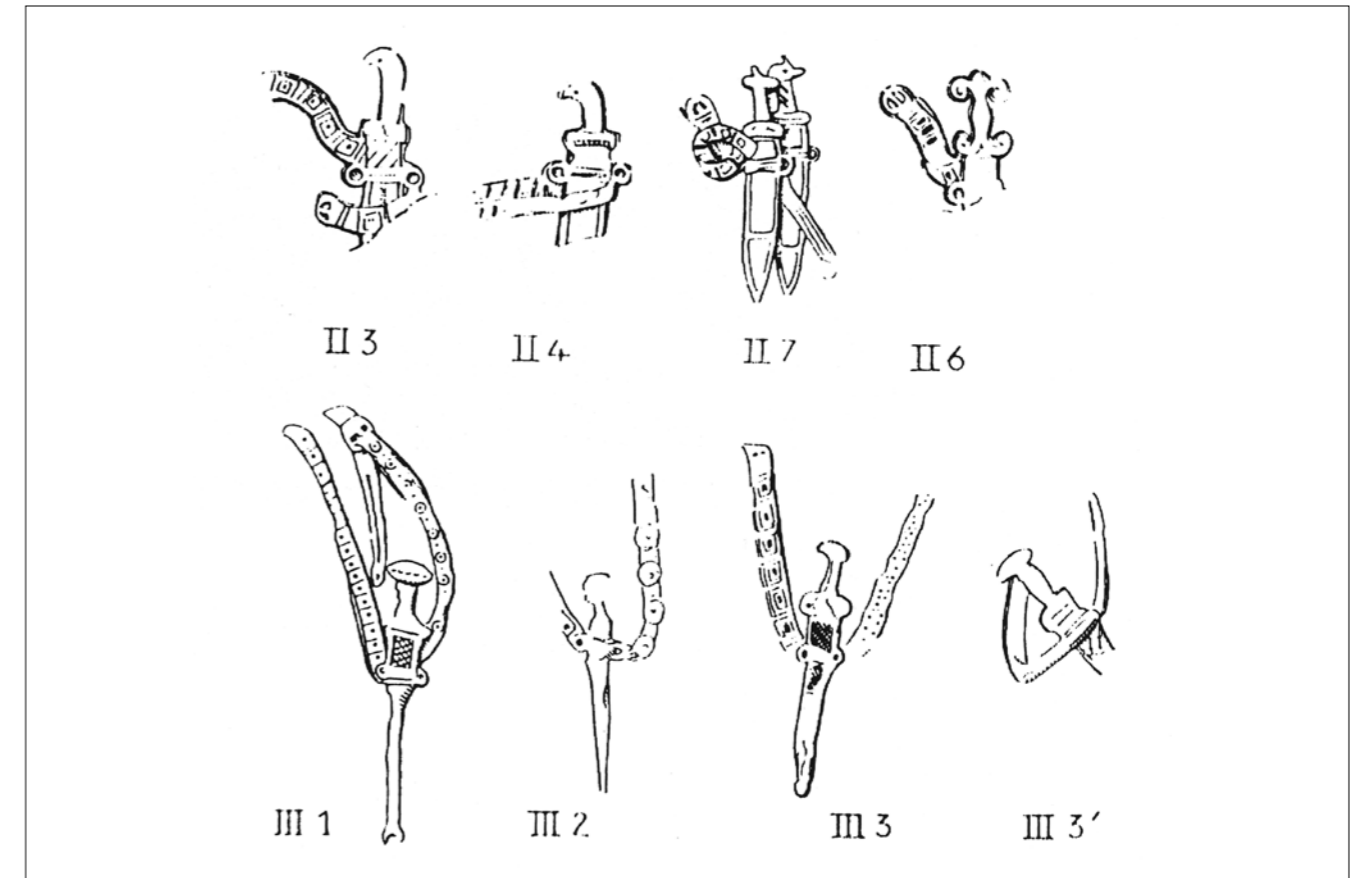


Fig. 2. Enemy swords hanging from *tropaia* on the Arch of Orange. Not to scale. After Amy et al. 1962, Pl. 49.

In including the right to thrash civilians without fear of persecution, Juvenal certainly gives a peculiar twist to the privileges granted to a soldier, but the satire skilfully illustrates that the soldiers formed a sort of parallel society within the larger Roman society, for whom a different set of laws applied.

Research in sociology has demonstrated that it is these smaller groups within a greater society that generate a large part of the social identity of their members. Positive social identity is based on a favourable comparison between the own ingroup - in our case the soldiers - and a relevant outgroup - the civilians.¹¹ Specific dress codes articulate the identity of a group and express the group's particular living conditions in a socially effective manner. This demonstration of the group's identity is directed both to the outside world and the individual group members, committing them to their group both in their own self-reflection as well as in the view of the outside world.¹²

¹¹ TAJFEL - TURNER 1986

¹² SOMMER 2005.

This also applies to the Roman world. A case in point is the toga, symbol and privilege of the Roman citizen, as demonstrated in their own designation as *gens togati*.¹³ In a similar manner, other parts of the dress were obvious markers of the status and position of the wearer, such as the *lati clavi* of the senators and the *angusti clavi* of the equites.¹⁴ Like the higher echelons, the lower ranks of Roman society also had specific styles of clothing typical for specific groups, the most prominent of which were the soldiers. This distinctive manner of dressing is the background for several literal and sub-literal sources alluding to the soldiers' dress, the most famous of which is the "*habitus atque habitudo*" (dress and manner) by which the narrator of Apuleius' satirical novel '*Metamorphoses*' or *The Golden Ass* recognizes a man as being a "*miles e legione*" (a soldier and legionary).¹⁵

¹³ Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.282. Toga: STONE 1994. - VON RUMMEL 2007, 83-90 - EDMONSON 2008. The female equivalent was the stola, which could only be worn by married female citizens. See SEBESTA 1994; VON RUMMEL 2007, 93-94.

¹⁴ GOLDMAN 1994, 116-122; VON RUMMEL 2007, 92.

¹⁵ Apuleius, *Metamorphosis* IX, 39.

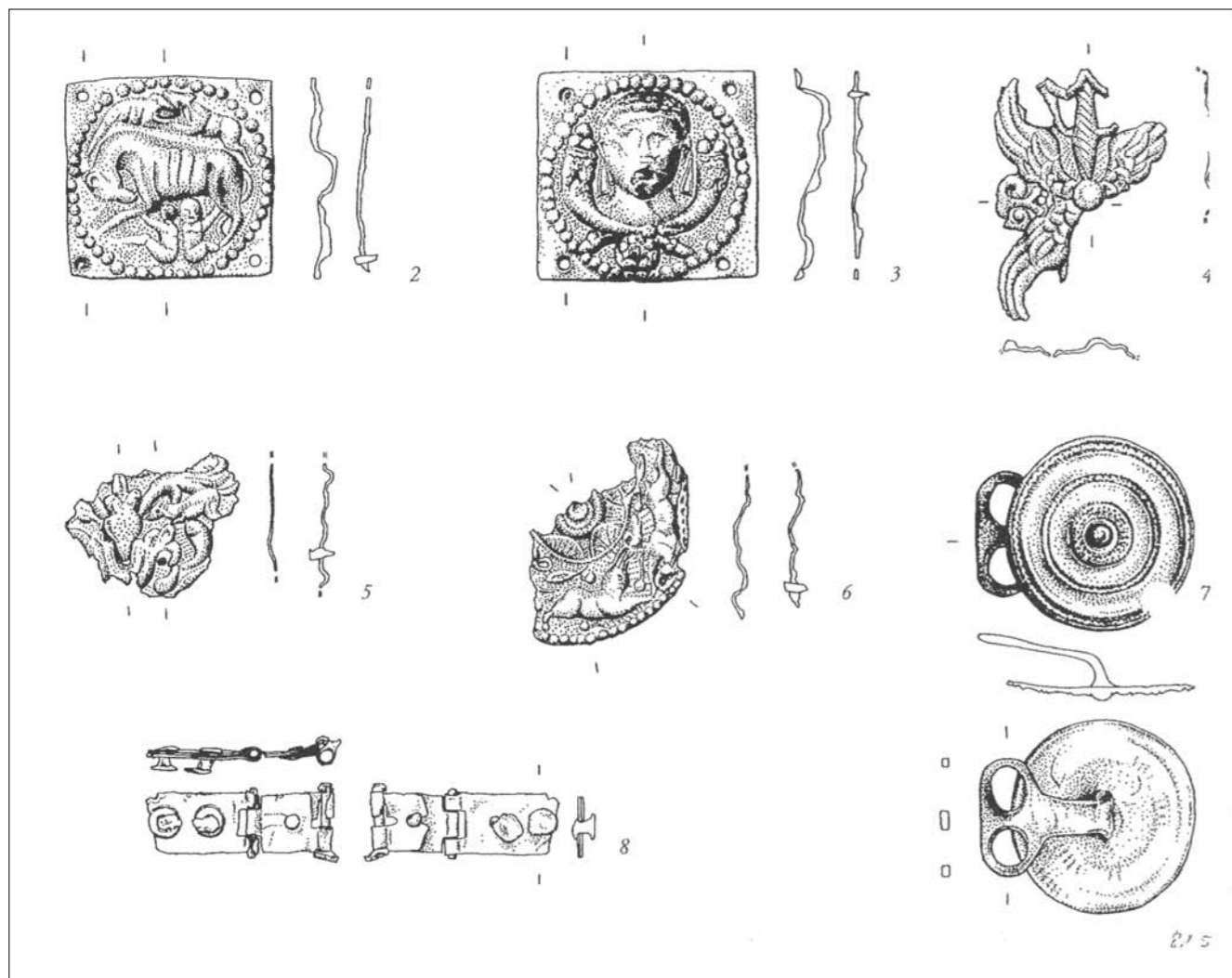


Fig. 3. Belt mounts found together with a *gladius* in a pit at the legionary camp of Vindonissa (scale 2:3). After Deschler-Erb 1996, fig. 8.

But what was the distinctive difference of the soldier's dress compared to that of a civilian?¹⁶ The best source for this are of course the depictions of soldiers, be it on their own monuments or on what has been termed by Coulston the "propaganda art" on state monuments.¹⁷ While both categories of monuments are somewhat problematic in the accuracy of their depiction of the soldiers' weapons, they illustrate the manner of dressing reasonably well. The Roman soldier - that is all ranks from centurion downwards - generally wore a tunic and a mantle, sandals or shoes and a belt. Of these dress items, both the tunic and mantle are not

specific for soldiers. According to the research up to now, both seem to confirm to the items worn by civilians - admittedly rather *wealthy* civilians - during the same time.¹⁸

Only the hobnailed *caligae* and the belt can be defined as typical for soldiers, identifying them as *milites* even when they were not wearing armour.¹⁹ While *caligae* were also worn by civilians, they are typical for soldiers.²⁰ Literary sources and inscriptions describe soldiers' *expressis verbis* as *caligati* or as serving in *caligae*.²¹ And the hobnailed boots and their wearers are

¹⁶ Like other people, most Roman soldiers had of course several different social roles. In some of them - for instance as priest of a cult - they wore the appropriate cult dress instead of their professional dress.

¹⁷ BISHOP - COULSTON 2006, 2.

¹⁸ COULSTON 2005, 142; A. PAETZ GEN. SCHIECK 2011.

¹⁹ PHANG 2008, 84, COULSTON 2005, 141.

²⁰ GOLDMAN 1994, 122-123.

²¹ GILLIAM 1946, 171 (37), 183 (43); Josephus *BellJud.*, 6:85, Juvenal, *Satires* 3.248, 16:25

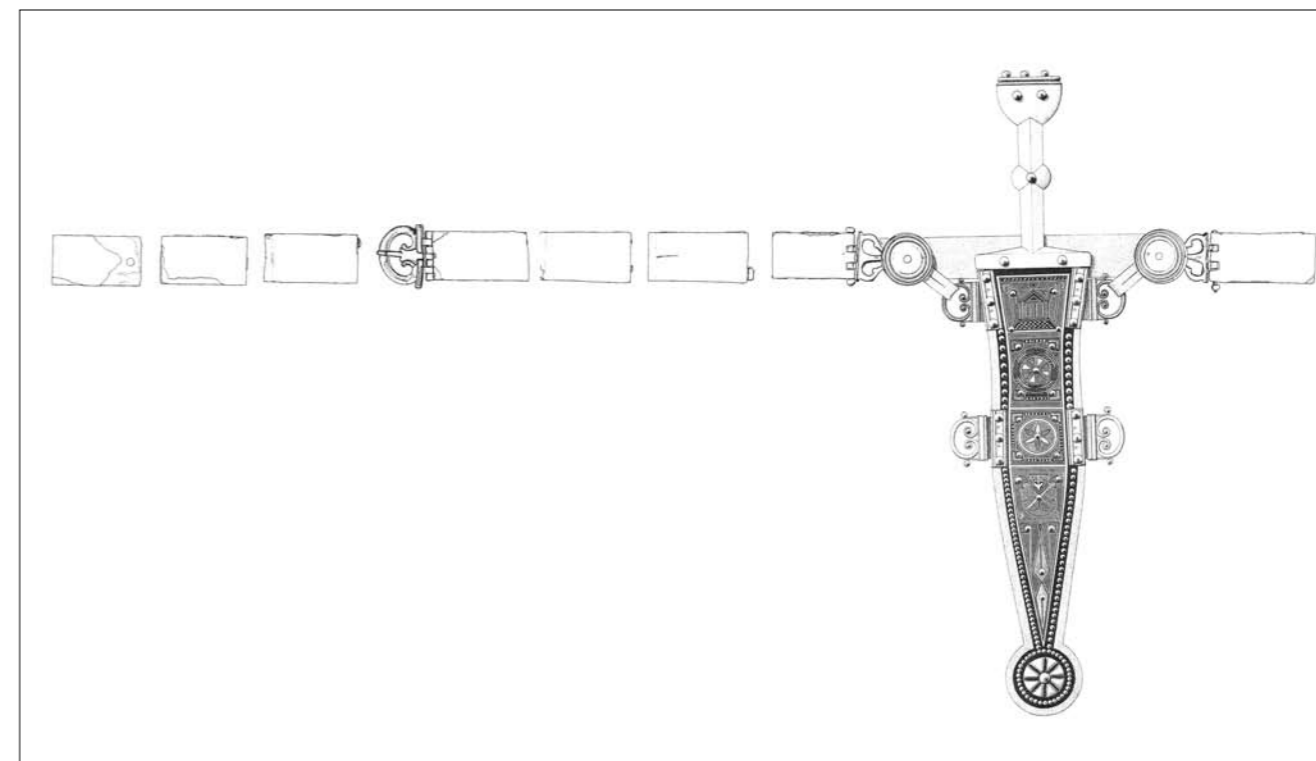


Fig. 4. Complete belt set with dagger found in a well at Velsen, NL (not to scale). After Morel/Bosmann 1989, fig. 5,6.

also equated both in the Roman and Jewish literature of the time.²² This equation is also confirmed by the nickname Caligula chosen by the soldiers for the small son of Germanicus who went about the camp dressed as a soldier.²³

Far more visible and therefore presumably more important than the sandals was the belt as a symbol and identifying dress item of the soldier. In the above-mentioned satire by Juvenal, he describes the soldiers as "gentlemen who are armed and belted", or in the original: *illis quos arma tegunt et balteus ambit* (literally "covered in arms and encircled by belts"). This description is an expression of the visual importance of the arms and the belt of the soldiers to the Roman public.

The belt obtained this status from its unity with the sword hanging from it. The sword was the main weapon of the Roman soldier and its loss was seen as extremely dishonourable: The soldier in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* fears the revenge of the genius of the military oath after having lost his sword.²⁴ In a status-transfer,

the belt from which the sword hung was invested with a similar meaning. This transfer may also have been occasioned by practical reasons as the sword's sheath was connected to the belt in a manner that probably took some time to take off. If one wanted to take off the sword, one usually took off the sword-belt with the sword in its sheath. This is confirmed by depictions showing the swords hanging on their belts from both funeral monuments for soldiers and from depictions of enemy weaponry hanging from *tropaia* on official Roman victory monuments, such as the Arch of Carpentras or the Arch of Orange (see Fig.1 and Fig. 2).²⁵ Finds of swords with their belts wrapped around them from Herculaneum, Vindonissa and Kastell Niedenberg plus the new find from Ilok presented for the first time at this conference further illustrate this point. (see Fig. 3)²⁶ The unity of sword and sword belt is also confirmed by Tacitus, who reports a case of two soldiers being heavily punished by General Corbulo for not wearing their sword-belts while trenching.²⁷ This measure of Corbulo was related to the fact that sol-

²² Josephus *BellJud.*, 6:85; Juvenal, *Satires* 3.248, 16:25; Palestinian Talmud (Yerushalmi), *Shabbath* 8a and 20a.

²³ GILLIAM 1986, 185 (45); Sueton, *De Vita Caesarum*, *Caligula* 1,1; Seneca, *Dialogues*, 2, 18, 4.

²⁴ Apuleius *Metamorphosen*, IV, 41.

²⁵ Funeral monuments for soldiers: SEE FRANZONI 1987; BISHOP 1992. Official Roman victory monuments: see for instance AMY et al. 1962.

²⁶ Herculaneum: GORE 1984, 572; BISHOP - COULSTON 2006, 107; Vindonissa: DESCHLER-ERB 1996, 13-16; Koblenz-Niedenberg: JOST 2007, 49-55; Ilok: see RADMAN-LIVAJA 2010, 245, cat. no. 29 (Author M. Dizdar).

²⁷ Tacitus *Ann.* XI, 18.

diers should have their sword ready at all times and the sword-belt was named here as *pars pro toto*. A similar regulation is mentioned by the 4th century author Vegetius.²⁸

The transfer of status from the sword to the belt seems to have taken place at the same time as the transition from citizen-soldier to professional soldier during the late Republic, which was finalised in Augustus' army reforms.²⁹ Quite fittingly, the first belt mounts - of the undecorated type, whose most prominent find comes from the Velsen well - date from the Augustean period (see Fig. 4) The extraordinary symbolic value of the military belt was retained even after it ceased to be used as a sword belt after the introduction of the *balteus*. It even seems to have increased, as on 3rd century funeral monuments the depiction of a man wearing a tunic belted with a ring buckle belt is enough to identify this man as a soldier.

The belt became invested with meaning to such an extent that taking it away from a soldier in public (*discingere*) for hours or days was a humiliation used as a disciplinary measure.³⁰ The soldiers had to stand on guard in good view for all their *commilitones* and hold a staff or similar object as confirmed by Frontius:

"Because Gaius Titius, commander of a cohort, had given way before some runaway slaves, Lucius Piso ordered him to stand daily in the headquarters of the camp, barefooted, with the belt of his toga cut and his tunic ungirt, and wait till the night-watchmen came. [...] Sulla ordered a cohort and its centurions, though whose defences the enemy had broken, to stand continuously at headquarters, wearing helmets and without belts."³¹

Besides the shame of being without their sword, without a belt the tunics fell in soft long folds to below the knee, which to the Roman viewer evoked associations of the voluminous folds of the tunics of women or - even worse - of effeminate men.³² Taking the belt away permanently was practice after a capitulation or during a dishonourable discharge.³³

²⁸ Vegetius, *De re militari* III, 8.

²⁹ BISHOP - COULSTON 2006, 107. - COULSTON 2005, 141.

³⁰ Livius, XXVII, 13, 9; Frontinus, *Stratagemata* IV, I, 26-27, 43; Valerius Maximus II, 7, 9; Plutarch *Luc. 15*; Sueton *Octavian 24*.

³¹ Frontius *Stratagemata* IV, 1 (translation: Charles E. Bennett).

³² HARLOW 2004, 54; PHANG 2008, 198. Taint of effeminacy: LEN-DON 1997, 241-242.

³³ Herodianus, *Hist. II*, 13, 8-10; Festus 104, *Codex Theodosianus XII*, 1, 181 §1.

Another instance proving the significance of the belt as a symbol of 'being a soldier' are the symbolic acts of late antique Christian soldier-saints openly refusing to remain in the army by throwing off their military belt in public.³⁴ By this time - the 4th century - the military belt was worn by both soldiers and civil servants, whose service was called *militia*, whose titles corresponded to military titles and who - after their *honestissima* - were veterans.³⁵

But while this was a legal broadening of the circle of men wearing the military belt, illegal attempts to pass for a soldier also abounded. Procopius reports a control of the soldiers under Justinian with those that were too unfit or too old having their belts taken away.³⁶ According to Reinhold, the prestige and influence of military uniforms was so high during the 4th century that usurpation of military or veteran status was widespread.³⁷

In an attempt to counter this, legislation was passed several times to ensure that only those which were "*sub armorum labore*" (labouring under arms) would wear the military dress - namely the belt.³⁸ That this was an old problem is proven by the first legislation against the usurpation of military status that has come down on us, which is from the early third century.³⁹ Even earlier are the cases of slaves discovered under the recruits recorded by a letter of Pliny to Trajan and the case of Claudius Pacatus, a fugitive slave who had served in the army and attained the rank of centurion. Presumably because of his service he escaped the usual death penalty and was restored to his master by Diocletian.⁴⁰

While official legislation against the usurpation of rank and the corresponding status symbols - both military and civil - was plentiful, social legislation of this sort is essentially programmatic and could simply not be enforced systematically. Petronius' *Satyricon* illustrates a far simpler and in all probability more effective method of checking the usurpation of the Roman soldier's status symbols:

"So saying, I gird on a sword [...] and stalk like a madman through all the public colonnades. As I was prowling thus [...] a soldier observed me [...] "Ho, there! com-

³⁴ WOODS 1993, 55-60.

³⁵ SPEIDEL 2006, 264.

³⁶ Prokop, *Anekdotia* 24, 8.

³⁷ REINHOLD 1971

³⁸ *Cod. Theodos.* VII, 20, 12 (400 AD) VII, 21, 1 (313 AD), XIV, 10 (382 AD)

³⁹ Paul's *Sententiae* V,25,12

⁴⁰ Dio Cassius, *LXV II*, 13, 1

rade," he cried, "what's your legion, and who's your Centurion?" "I named both legion and Centurion with confident mendacity. "Come, come," he retorted, "do the men of your division go about the streets in Greek pumps?" Then, my face and my agitation sufficiently betraying the imposture, he ordered me to drop my weapon and have a care I did not get into trouble."⁴¹

As it was in the interest of the soldiers themselves to preserve this status symbol, they will have acted with severity if civilians assumed similar modes of dress.

The constraints of space make it impossible for me to cite all the evidence for the special status of the military belt. But both the wearing of the military belt by civil servants and the usurpation of this symbol in order to pass for a soldier in my opinion indicate that this

⁴¹ Petronius *Satyricon* XI, 32 (translation: A. R. Allinson)

belt can be defined as a symbolic object. The military belt marked the ranks from recruit to centurion both internally and to the outside world as soldiers and thus functioned in a manner similar to modern uniforms. This makes it highly unlikely that just anybody could wear a military belt.

It does of course not exclude the possibility of deceit - but the high symbolic value of the military belt and its decorations does give us a theoretical model by which we can define belts with belt mounts as military belts, which could officially only be worn by soldiers. Roman belt mounts found in civilian contexts in the Early Empire can thus be assumed to have belonged to soldiers and in Late Antiquity to both soldiers and Civil Servants - and of course to impostors.

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THE *KAMBEΣTPION* AND OTHER ROMAN MILITARY EQUIPMENT FROM THRACIA

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INTRODUCTION

A rare metal object, kept for a long time in the Historical Museum of Nova Zagora, Bulgaria, until recently remained virtually unnoticed. This object, a part of a hoard of various metal items, was found by an accident in 1962 while ploughing a field in the vicinity of the Elenovo village in the Southern Bulgaria. The hoard was discovered 40-50 cm below the current ground surface level¹. Unfortunately, the discoverer did not consider the find to be of any significance, but still picked up the items of the hoard out of curiosity. Considerably later he reported the find to a local town museum. It is not certain whether *all* of the items of the hoard were collected. In 1964, then-curator of the Historical Museum of Nova Zagora registered all the submitted items and entered them into the museum collection under nos. 3288-3306².

The hoard consisted of 20 various objects, one bronze and 18 iron. It included both items of military equipment — a *pilum* iron, a shield *umbo*, and a significant number of digging tools, such as five pickaxes, three spades, and three mattocks. Additionally, the hoard

contained a ploughshare with a ring, a linchpin, and a tent peg. Finally, it included three items, which, apparently belonged to an arrow-shooting *ballista* with an all-metal spring-frame: a so-called *καμβέστριον*, a massive object of a cranked shape, and a round-sectioned rod with a loop on its end.

The museum inventory book included no additional information about the circumstances of the find, and no archaeological research has been conducted in the site of the discovery, probably because the precise location of the find could no longer be established. The find has not been properly published yet³. Certainly, due to its significance for the Roman military history in general and for the history of the Roman Thrace in particular, the discovery deserves a thorough publication⁴.

³ Apart from a preliminary article dedicated to the *kambestrion* (MINCHEV 2002, 7-13). Unfortunately, for various reasons, the technical data given in that article was found to be incorrect.

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¹ According to the record in the inventory book.

² The date is known from the record in the inventory book.