

Roman Military  
Equipment: the Sources of  
Evidence

Proceedings of the Fifth Roman Military  
Equipment Conference

edited by  
C. van Driel-Murray

BAR International Series 476  
1989

# **B.A.R.**

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**BAR -S476, 1989: 'Roman Military Equipment: the Sources of Evidence'**

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ISBN 0 86054 613 6

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Printed in Great Britain

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## PREFACE

Since 1983, the Roman Military Equipment Seminars have provided a meeting place for amateurs and professionals alike who, for whatever reason, are concerned with the study and interpretation of the equipment and dress of the Roman soldier. That this is not just another of the super-specialization conferences, but answers a widely felt need is well illustrated by the fact that the lustrum of the seminars was celebrated by its first meeting outside Britain, although Continental scholars had regularly attended previous meetings.

The Fifth Conference was organized under the auspices of the Albert Egges van Giffen Instutuut voor Prae- en Protohistorie (IPP), University of Amsterdam, but the seminar itself took place in the very appropriate surroundings of the Rijksmuseum (now Provinciaalmuseum) G. M. Kam, Nijmegen, where a special exhibition of military equipment was also mounted.

The theme chosen for the Nijmegen conference was 'Sources of Evidence for the Study of Roman Military Equipment', a theme wide enough to encompass subjects ranging from the theoretical consideration of the bias inherent in the archaeological evidence (Bishop, Allason-Jones) to iconographic studies of Trajan's Column, that primary source for all military equipment enthusiasts (Coulston).

The great variety of sources which are available for the understanding of the form, function, history, development and use of military equipment - quite apart from the basic archaeological source as the provider of the surviving material - is well illustrated by the contents of this volume. The list is by no means exhaustive, and sufficient remains to fill at least one future conference.

Documentary and epigraphic evidence is only touched on in passing (Uhl), the vicus and its implications as a find location of military equipment will also require further attention (Sommer, Allason-Jones). Practical problems prevented the exploration of the sources of Roman military equipment outside the Limes, not only in the great ritual bog deposits, but also the less spectacular items which so regularly turn up in pre- and early- conquest native sites in Belgium and the Netherlands.<sup>1</sup> The very preliminary account of an unusual mix of military equipment, figurines and a neolithic axe at The Hague also points to alternative interpretations to that of simple 'loss' for finds of military objects (Waasdorp). The contexts of much of the more spectacular equipment would certainly merit re-examination.

Different aspects of the iconographic evidence and its relation to archaeological finds are treated by Waurick, Coulston and Uhl, while Van Boekel taps a much neglected source for the all-round depiction of horse harness in her study of pipe-clay figurines. As in previous years, horse gear is again well served, with the figurines, the reconstruction of harnessing from Pannonia (PaIagy) and the leather trappings (van Driel-Murray, Winterbottom).

Burials provide unique closed associations which are essential sources for the dating of equipment, its history, its function and its reconstruction, though their individuality frequently raises further

problems (Willems). Dr. S. Palágyi was unfortunately unable to attend the conference, but her paper on the reconstruction of Pannonian horse harnesses was circulated there. Whether regarded as a hasty, if pious, burial, or something altogether more sinister, the Velsen soldier gives us the ensemble worn by a single individual. Morel's structural analysis of the dagger not only sets a standard for future work, but also illustrates the close interaction of artifact study and technical analysis which has been a theme running through these seminars from the very beginning.

The rewards of re-examining museum drawers were richly displayed in the exhibition at Museum Kam. Museum collections are also exploited by Bennett, Connolly and van Boekel, while the painstaking attempt by Kalee to trace and document the scattered finds from the blighted site at Vechten illustrates not only the lost potential of this exceptionally rich site, but, more positively, shows what can be rescued from private collections with patience and diplomacy.

At Nijmegen too, the tradition of experiment and reconstruction was maintained. C. Constable, M. White and A. Shaw of the Ermine Street Guard demonstrated a variety of equipment during the conference (and subsequently to appreciative students and a somewhat apprehensive examination committee). The villainous effect of the plumbata was amply demonstrated by J. Eagle, while W. Griffiths only just avoided displaying the efficiency of the sling in creating vacancies in coveted museum posts.<sup>2</sup> The effectiveness of the weaponry and perhaps above all the visual and psychological impact of the Roman military machine can only be fully appreciated by such exact and detailed experiment and reconstruction. From the beginning the conferences have maintained a stimulating mix of academic research and practical reconstruction and experiment to the benefit of both.

One of the purposes in holding the Fifth ROMEK in the Netherlands was to stimulate research into equipment here. For far too long, finds have been relegated to a poor third place, rusting and decaying in cigar boxes while what seem to be more interesting subjects are pursued. Publication is often scattered and I have used these proceedings to solicit publication of some of the more recent discoveries within the context of military equipment studies, rather than as an appendage to settlement archaeology. Though these contributions do fit into the overall theme, the Low Country bias will be evident enough. Assessments and implications have yet to be examined, but at least a start has been made on the rehabilitation of the 'find' as a corner stone in the formation of the theory.

I must record my gratitude to my department for financial assistance and for the general support provided. In particular, Mrs G. Domhoff typed many of the contributions, F. Gijbels adjusted scales and sizes of photographs and B. Brouwensteijn assisted greatly in the preparation of drawings and associated technical problems. I am indebted to Mr. P. Guest for his assistance with German manuscripts. I am particularly grateful to all the members of staff at Provinciaal Museum Kam, especially the then director Mr. A.V.M. Hubrecht and to Mrs. A.M. Gerhartle-Witteveen for the enthusiasm and hospitality which made the conference possible. Thanks are also due to J.K. Haalebos, (Katholieke Universiteit, Nijmegen) for arranging the important matter

of refreshments. In addition, both he and W.J.H. Willems (Rijksdienst voor Oudheidkundig Bodemonderzoek) provided a tour of their respective excavations in Nijmegen. I am also grateful to those who gave papers at the conference which do not appear here.

Finally, I must thank Mike Bishop, who not only took upon himself much of the production of this text, but also, by recognizing the need for such a gathering in the first place and by actively supporting the various organizers, has ensured the continuing success of the Roman Military Equipment Conferences.

C. van Driel-Murray

Amsterdam 1988

#### NOTES

1. ROYMANS, N.G.A.M., 1987: Tribale samenlevingen in Noord-Gallia: een anthropologisch perspectief. (theseis, Amsterdam 1987), ch. 4
2. Nieuwe Rotterdams Courant, 17.04.1987