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THE ROMAN SOLDIER IN DACIA

ASPECTS OF SOCIAL AND DAILY LIFE

ABSTRACT

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The imperial army is undoubtedly the most well known institution of the Roman age, but the research has mainly focused on more formal issues (hierarchy, equipment, fortifications, the defensive system) or on those concerned with historical events (battles, campaigns). Although there are numerous and informative studies dealing with the legal privileges of the Roman soldier, the military routine and training, the diet, the family etc., it seems that there is more to be done in order to grasp what it actually meant to be a *miles Romanus,* to describe the army in its own terms and ways of relating to the rest of the society. Consequently, new questions started to be asked, which led to the development of new areas of research. Thus, alongside more traditional approaches, the study of the Roman army started to accommodate concepts like identity, military community, or social practices, many derived from social sciences.

The purpose of this thesis is to use the vast quantity of information regarding the Roman army, to which an array of researches from different fields of activity have contributed, for further exploring a subject which has been previously only touched upon: the social dimension and the social mechanisms of the provincial army in Dacia. As a result, I tried to sketch the image of the Roman solider primarily on social coordinates, using both epigraphic and archaeological evidence, as these are complementary. The choice between different aspects of social and daily life was in part dictated by the potential, availability and quality of the sources.

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The introductory chapter (*Introduction*) represents a very short review of the development of social themes across the filed of ancient history, as well as its impact on the study of the Roman army. The two main parts of the thesis follow: *Social life* and *Daily life as reflected by the archaeological material*. To keep the structure simple, these are conventionally called chapters.

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The first part is based to a high degree on epigraphic data, which I found to be useful in outlining three facets of the social life of Roman soldiers in Dacia: status, family and military communities. The situation observed in the province was compared against what is known from the rest of the Empire.

In the firs subchapter (*Sources*) the ancient written records (juridical and literary texts, private documents – *testationes, epikrisis* papres and the like) are reviewed and assessed,

drawing attention on their uses and limitations. Special attention was given to epigraphs and military diplomas as these have a direct bearing on Dacia.

Concerning the inscriptions, the most important problems are their small numbers, too small to allow any convincing statistical analyses, and the impossibility of a close dating, resulting in difficulties when it comes to tuning the quantity of the inscriptions to the resolution at which the required analyses are possible and relevant. Furthermore, funerary inscriptions, despite using legal terms, are not legal documents. Other problems stem from the so-called "epigraphic habit". Even in Dacia, it is clear that the rank and file are massively underrepresented in inscriptions. However, some general trends can be detected with the aid of large-scale studies conducted for the entire Empire.

Just as important are military diplomas, which offer unparalleled information about the families of auxiliary soldiers, the restrictions they were subjected to, and the impact of their profession on their private lives. The more so since, in the later years, the number of known diplomas issued for Dacia has risen spectacularly, reaching almost 100 copies. The apparently minor alterations made to the text of the imperial constitutions reflect in fact not only the process of organizing the *auxilia,* but also the changing attitudes, changing practices and social realities. The intent and care of the authorities to settle in detail the life of prospective new citizens is easily recognizable.

The second subchapter (*The status of the Roman soldier*) details the place of the soldiers in society, place determined by legal privileges, constant pay and other material rewards, as well as by the increasing political power of the army. As such, the status of the military men was not static, but dynamic and brought whit it serious social consequences.

If, in theory, the soldier in Dacia is a privileged individual, it is much harder to judge the actual stat of affairs when it comes to social dynamics and upwards mobility, owning to the scarcity of sources. In any case, the persons who appear in inscriptions are almost exclusively those with certain ambitions, and their successes or failures can be meaningful. What is already known is that in Dacia, as elsewhere, despite being a highly militarized province, the veterans were not willing to commit themselves to the municipal administration, and their status certainly allowed them to avoid such burdens. Their destiny in rural areas is even more difficult to guess. However, at *Micia,* a *pagus* of *Sarmizegetusa,* developed in the vicinity of an important military base, some well known inscriptions were set out by *veterani et cives Romani,* attesting to the importance of the former category of citizens. It has also been assumed that among the initial owners of the modest rustic villas

known in Dacia there must have been some veterans, and inscriptions prove their presence in the respective areas.

The impression of a relatively elevated status is substantiated by other epigraphic and archaeological evidence. Some soldiers did spend their money on works of public utility, some inscriptions testifying to the building or renovation of various structures *impendio suo, pecunia sua* or *a solo*. Besides these, there are also collective inscriptions praising the (pecuniary) generosity of certain emperors.

Except for the first years of the province, when the veterans of the Dacian wars were able to secure for themselves an important social standing, the status of the common soldier probably depended more on the society in which he chose to settle than on his profession. As such, it is unsurprising that military men are more visible in small communities around forts, such as *Micia,* or in legionary *canabae,* as is the case of the XIIIth legion. The evidence from Dacia does not disprove the general image. At all times, but especially so in the 3rd century, the army presented opportunities to accumulate a large wealth by the standards of common people. This was not due to the regular pay, but mostly to the possibility to build a career, to obtain donatives, to get involved in businesses, to commit abuses and to establish connections with influential persons.

The next subchapter (*Family*) starts with a brief account of the problem of military marriages. Although a thoroughly researched subject, some unknowns still remain, such as whether the marriage ban also applied to legionary centurions. Furthermore, a series of recently published military diplomas raise doubt on a subject thought to be closed: the lifting of the ban during Septimius Severus' reign. What is clear though, is that the soldiers regarded their relations as marriages even in the lack of *conubium,* as revealed by the use of terms like *uxor, coniux, maritus, sposus, sposa* in private inscriptions, a testimony of feelings between partners and not of their legal status.

To understand the situation in Dacia, it was necessary to relate it to a much larger context, as the basis of studying the social relations of the soldiers in the province constitutes of only a little over 200 inscriptions. Obviously, the most well documented families were those of the auxiliary soldiers, partly due to the existence of diplomas. These documents mention most frequently families with up to three children, although cases with four, five or even six offspring are known. Of a total of 43 copies of imperial constitutions disclosing information about the recipient's family, 32 or 34 do not mention wives. It is hard to believe that most soldiers remained single or were widowers. Most likely they were in no hurry to

legitimize their relations, preferring to resort to *ius conubii* at a later date; however, *civitas liberorum* seems to have been important. On the other hand, since number of Roman citizens was on the rise, it means that more women had citizenship, and some were descendants of soldiers, as *uxores* with the name of Ulpia or Aelia are extremely common.

Bearing into mind the more severe restrictions imposed on the legionary soldiers due to their traditionally superior status, as well as the patterns observed in the rest of the Empire, it can be assumed that these had some difficulties in establishing quasi-marital relationships in the first years of Roman administration. Also, the respectability of their children was more important than for the auxiliary. However, although the social pressure on the latter was greatly reduced, it seems that they also took wives with citizenship, some of which might have been daughters or freedwomen of soldiers. It is hard to say if this was a consequence of the decision made by Antoninus Pius in the winter of 140, or just the natural evolution of communities developed around military installations. The families of auxiliary soldiers are more numerous in part due to their privileges prior to 140, in part due to the chance of inscription survival.

Especially of interest to the subject are the cohesion mechanisms that led to the development of the army as an outstanding social organism, which are dealt with in the subchapter entitled *Forms of social cohesion*. On the one hand there can be detected a pressure to conform to certain patterns of behaviour imposed from the top of the military hierarchy, on the other some social phenomena are determined by the very specific condition of communal living. The formation of an *esprit de corps* was essential, and this can be observed on different levels: the *milites* defined themselves in relation to their comrades with which they shared a *contubernium,* to their *centuria,* to their unit and to their profession. The most powerful feelings of belonging did not manifest themselves towards the ”Roman army”, an abstract entity they probably did not put much thought into, but towards their colleagues affectionately called in Dacia and elsewhere *fratres, contubernales, commanipulares, contirones, conveterani*. Altars are raised for the *genii* of different troops, but most for the *genii* protecting the centuries, since these groups constituted the real system of reference for the soldier.

The pay rise during the reign of Septimius Severus also contributed to the reinforcement of military communities in a stricter sense. *Scholae* appear all over the Empire and this phenomenon is remarkably similar, the legionnaires at *Potaissa,* for example, being no different from those in *Lambaesis* in their manifestations. Allowing the inferior officers to

gather in *collegia* provided them not only with a means to socialize sanctioned by the emperor, but also with an occasion to invest their monetary surpluses in honouring the imperial family, consolidating the relationship between the monarch and his armies. The fact that different troops from distant places use the exact same formulas to hail the generosity of the emperor is connected with the same circumstances.

The feeling of belonging to a very distinctive community and a way to stress a military identity are suggested by burials with military belts as well. Although not many are known from Dacia, their number steadily increases, and the future publication of cemeteries such as those around *Apulum* will surely change the facts of the matter.

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The second chapter, *Daily life as revealed by the archaeological material* is intended to capitalize on the already published small finds from forts in Dacia. Because of a more straightforward processing, this type of artifacts have enjoyed a better publication than other categories of archaeological finds, and are in fact well suited to reveal aspects of daily life. The categories chosen are, however, more relevant to the social sphere. Hopefully, their contextualization will complement the subjects previously discussed in the light of epigraphic data, subjects dealing with status, family, community and identity. The underlying paradigm is that which sees practices as securing a link between patterns of object distribution and the social life of the people who used them.

The first subchapter, *Small finds,* is dedicated to unavoidable methodological issues with impact on the interpretation of the artifacts. The traditional study of small finds entails their cataloging in accordance with function, material, typology etc. in order to use them as clues for dating different archaeological contexts. Nevertheless, in the last few decades, the true potential of objects to reveal social and economical dimensions of the Roman world has come to be recognized. A central argument pertaining to the field of archaeology has always been the relation between humans and the material world that they inhabited. New theories developed regarding the interpretation of material culture with a significant input of ideas and concepts taken from social sciences. Thus, the post-processual stance claims that material culture is not merely an adaptation to external conditions, but could also be used in social strategies. Geographical and temporal patterns of distributions could consequently be regarded as disclosing ”ways of doing things”.

The next subchapter, *Small finds from Roman forts in Dacia* presents and assesses the published material. Most of the objects have also been included in a database, to have a general view of the assemblages. Evidently, not all the categories were deemed relevant to the subject, having little or nothing to say in what concerns military identities or social relations. Taking into account their quantity as well, I settled on the finds which could potentially transmit social and cultural messages: (auto)representation (personal ornaments, dress accessories, belt sets) or a certain cultural behaviour (toilet implements, writing instruments and inscribed objects). It was inescapable that certain objects received more attention than others, depending on the literature available, on their nature and the questions asked of them. Multifunctional finds, those with ambiguous purposes or invested with a symbolic value were considered in more detail.

Solving some of the issues regarding function and practices, in the theoretical directions outlined above, was tackled with in the third subchapter (*Discussion. Finds categories*). This implied a more "technical" approach, discussing functions, typologies, analogies, dating etc. As far as possible, an account of how the small finds were employed in different contexts or situations was also given.

The information obtained in this way was then used in the following subchapter (*Interpretations*) to answer more complex questions that required the integration of other sorts of data, like the presence of women in forts, the medical and personal care, the spread of literacy and the military fashion. Some of the results for each of these topics will be summarized in the following lines.

In the current state of research, a consistent or significant female presence inside the fortifications cannot be claimed. Even so, the archaeological evidence proves that there were certainly some women (and children) in forts, although their identity remains obscure. The inscriptions, scarce as they are, point to conjugal families of legionnaires and especially of auxiliary servicemen. The latter are also depicted by diplomas as fathers of numerous children, as well as taking care of mothers and sisters. Nevertheless, considering most of the personal ornament as feminine would be misleading. Attributing beads or pendants to cavalry harness was an easy way to eschew mentioning women, but my analysis of such material from Dacia indicates that this conclusion is not necessarily wrong. More could have been done if only contexts were recorded properly, enabling researches to observe associations between objects.

Among the personal contributions can also be counted a more refined classification of ”medical instruments.” Traditionally, under this label all sorts of indeed medical, but mostly toilet or domestic implements recovered from forts were placed. Once the unmistakably surgical instruments were isolated and the provision of a formal medical care within the army examined, what really stood out was the generalized concern for personal care and hygiene. It appears that almost all the investigations, no matter how limited, yielded at least one toilet item. Not only were these the most frequent, but they were also distributed quite evenly in barracks and other constructions. This fact is not so surprising, since prevention was extremely important. Furthermore, it might have a great deal to do with the importance of appearance.

Writing was everywhere in the military environment, taking the form of monumental inscriptions, of *instrumentum domesticum,* of official or private documents. Writing instruments and accessories represents other clues. However, these observations cannot be used to accurately appreciate the spread of literacy in the army. As such, it was deemed much more useful to take note of the use of writing in administrative and social structures, and of the role it played in the everyday life of individuals. The evidence from Dacia displays a wide range of skills, from soldiers barely managing to scratch their names or a mark on a vessel, or struggling to learn the alphabet, to those fully capable of expressing themselves in writing.

In the previous chapter, and especially in the section concerned with military communities, some of the mechanism required to maintain group cohesion were noted. Still, belonging to a certain group and sharing a communal identity could be further and more outwardly expressed. This accords with the idea that a certain behaviour can be imposed on a social group from the top, but that the group itself tends to develop particular ways of involving material culture in social practices, leading to the structuring of the *habitus* described and discussed by P. Bourdieu. Appearance is one of the more easily employed means of constructing and conveying an identity. Two modes of imposing and disseminating fashions were signaled out in the literature: from the top down, by controlling production and distribution, or from the bottom up, determined by peer pressure. In the time span under analysis (2^{nd} – 3^{rd} centuries A.D.) there is not really a question of a centralized production of military equipment, which might account for the remarkable uniformity. Consequently, the ”uniform” of the Roman soldier, exactly because there was no such concept, represents a deliberate intention to signal social standing and profession. The major changes brought about in the 3^{rd} century are also reflected in this kind of material, the Roman army in Dacia

gradually placing itself against a more regional background. A related point of interest is the use of a rather specific type of *Ringschnallencingulum* in Dacia, and the important quantity of ring buckles that have started to surface form the sites at *Apulum*.

In the last subchapter of this section (*Case study. The archaeological assemblage from Buciumi*) I attempted to subject to some modern techniques of distribution analysis the large assemblage published from an auxiliary fort. Although not completely useless, the results were overall unsatisfactory, which stresses the severe limitations of essentially unstratified finds.

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More than a summary of the previous chapters, in the final one, *Conclusions,* I wanted to question the validity of applying an array of ultimately modern and post-modern concepts on an ancient society. The most frequently employed was the concept of identity.

The soldiers had to conform to certain social expectations that affected their own expectations and attitudes, as well as some more mundane aspects of their lives. Collectives have certain unwritten rules regarding the right way of behaving, of using objects, of dressing and speaking etc. Military fashion, as revealed by belts, for example, proves the existence of an internal pressure. The main means for imposing external pressures from the top of the hierarchy, necessary to control such a large and heterogeneous human group, is probably *disciplina militaris*. As long as we accept these premises, then, indeed, we can talk of a military identity, which explains why we can so easily generalize today about the Roman soldier as a human and socio-professional type.