

Off the Battlefield: The Civilian's View of Late Roman Soldiers

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When historians discuss the Roman army, they usually talk about the administration of the army or about the army at war. I shall do neither. Instead, I try to show how civilians saw the army when it was away from the battlefield. In many ways their view was very different from the "sharp end," the sort of picture the enemies of Rome saw and that historians often write about.

The army of the late Roman Empire differed in many ways from the better documented and better known army of the early Empire, but is no less interesting. I focus here on two aspects of late Roman military life: the widespread corruption and extortion that often accompanied the army, and the lavish ceremonial displays and parades that frequently took place. Then I look at the archives of a cavalry officer in Egypt to see what they tell us about the daily life of the soldiers. Do the military records tell a different story than contemporary writers? (see box on Sources for the Late Roman Army). Most of my examples come from the late 4th century AD, though similar conditions existed throughout the late Roman and early Byzantine periods.

PARADES

It was difficult for the Roman army to remain as hidden as armies seem to do nowadays, and cities with military bases would have seen large numbers of soldiers

on many occasions. Not every city had a base, but most of the large cities did, e.g., Alexandria, Antioch, Trier, Milan, and Constantinople. Every movement of troops to and from these bases would occur on public highways and would involve soldiers marching through the city to reach the camp itself. Furthermore, most bases did not have any sort of parade ground inside, so every time the unit assembled, it would be in public. These assemblies were frequent. They included the annual swearing of the military oath (*sacramentum*) to the emperor and parades for the emperor's birthday and to celebrate his accession to the imperial throne. On the latter occasions, cash gifts (*donatives*) were given to the troops, usually a pound of silver and four gold pieces (*solidi*).

Besides these frequent public appearances, everywhere the emperor went part of the army and the entire imperial court would go, too (Figs. 1–3). For most of the late Roman period there were two emperors (though often more—in AD 308 there were six). Emperors handled military crises in person in the 4th century and so might be seen in the provinces with their entourage. Generals also could be accompanied by great ceremony, both at this period and later. On some of these occasions, the troops would be in what we can call "order of march," prepared for long-distance movement, with an emphasis on comfort rather than splendor. Not that we should see these marches as rambles through the countryside—they were hard work. A law of



FIG. 1. THEODOSIUS MISSORIUM SILVER PLATE. The Theodosius missorium is a large silver plate, 29 inches in diameter (that at one point in its history was folded in half). At the center is the Emperor Theodosius I (379–395), conferring an honor on a civilian dignitary. His two co-rulers, Arcadius and Valentinian II, sit on either side. Next to them stand imperial bodyguards, marked out by their long hair and the torcs around their necks.

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FIG. 2. DAVID BEFORE SAUL SILVER PLATE. In 1902 a set of nine silver plates illustrating the life of David was found in Cyprus. Because the imperial silversmiths used control stamps (similar to modern hallmarks), these plates can be dated to 613–630, i.e., during the reign of the Emperor Heraclius (610–641). Here the artist has depicted David talking to Saul in the iconography of an audience with the emperor. Saul's bodyguards, with their long hair (though no torcs), match exactly those from the Theodosius missorium, more than two centuries earlier.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917, acc. no. 17.190.397. Dia. 26.7 cm

FIG. 3. GOLD AUREUS OF VALENTINIAN I. The reverse of a gold aureus of Valentinian I (364–375) shows the emperor in a triumphal chariot drawn by four horses, accompanied by a spirit of victory and throwing coins to the crowd—a common imperial gesture of munificence. The legend reads GLORIA ROMANORUM (The Glory of the Romans).

British Museum no. RIC1. Dia. 2.25 cm





FIG. 4. *ADVENTUS* FROM ARCH OF CONSTANTINE. The Arch of Constantine I (306–337) in Rome, completed in AD 315, commemorated Constantine's victory over Maxentius. The contemporary relief shown here depicts his arrival (*adventus*) at Rome in an elaborate chariot (bottom scene, far left). Constantine is surrounded by soldiers in full dress, with crests on their helmets. Note the dragon standards (at the center of the frieze) which had replaced the earlier eagles. *Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Rome, neg. 3134*



FIG. 5. *JOSHUA BEFORE THE ANGEL OF THE LORD*. This mosaic from the church of St. Maria Maggiore in Rome dates to the mid-5th century AD. The soldiers appear in parade dress, with cloaks and helmet crests similar to the troops on the Arch of Constantine, although Joshua is here represented as a civilian. The mosaic itself has been heavily restored and different artists worked on Joshua and the soldiers. *Christlich-archäologisches Seminar, Universität Bonn*

FIG. 6. *GOLD MEDALLION OF CONSTANTIUS I*. Constantius I (293–306) is shown on the reverse entering the city of London in AD 296. The legend reads *REDDITOR LUCIS AETERNAE* (The Restorer of Eternal Light). The city of London is personified as a female figure which kneels to receive Constantius before the gates of the city, while a Roman warship signifies Constantius' crossing of the English Channel. *British Museum no. RIC34 (electrotype). Dia. ca. 4.1 cm*



Constantine even extended military privileges to civilian members of the court because "those who follow our standards are not strangers to the dust and toil of the camp" (*Theodosian Code* 6.36.1).

THE IMPERIAL ARRIVAL

For the more ceremonial occasions, soldiers and emperors made special efforts, especially when approaching a town. Then the dust of the march would be washed off in preparation for the most common of

these ceremonies, the *adventus*, the imperial "arrival" at a city (Fig. 4). This is a ceremony that has a clear counterpart in modern society: the President arriving on Air Force One, being greeted by a rendition of "Hail to the Chief," descending the red carpet, meeting dignitaries, and giving a speech. It was little different in antiquity, and, just as when our President visits a small town, for many Romans this may have been the only chance in their lifetime to see an emperor. What this could mean to even the smallest town is dramatically brought out by a description of the arrival of Constantine at Autun in AD 311.



FIG. 7. JOSHUA AND THE AMORITES. Joshua is here portrayed as a Roman general, leading the Israelites against the Amorites. The artist has used contemporary 5th century styles to represent this Old Testament theme in this mosaic from Santa Maria Maggiore. Thus the Israelites are shown in the guise of Roman soldiers.

Christlich-archäologisches Seminar, Universität Bonn

All men of all ages from the fields flocked together to see the man whom they freely wanted to have over them . . . We decorated the roads by which he might come into the palace, with modest ornamentation, but with the standards of all our corporations (*collegia*), the statues of all our gods and a very small number of loud instruments that, in short bursts, we brought round to you often, by running. He might believe us rich, who judged truth by our eagerness. (*Panegyrici Latini* 8 (5) 8)

But in addition to the process of arriving and the army's own parades, there also existed more formal displays when the army tried to impress itself, its leaders, and the local populace.

FULL-DRESS DISPLAYS

Formal displays involved what we now call "full-dress," with units cleaning up their equipment and putting on their best show (Fig. 5). One of many such occasions was the triumphal arrival of the Emperor Constantius II in Rome in AD 357 to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of his rule (*vicennalia*).

And as if he were planning to overawe the Euphrates with a show of arms or the Rhine, while the standards preceded him on each side, he himself sat alone upon a golden chariot . . . and there marched on either side twin lines of infantrymen with shields and crests gleaming with glittering rays, clad in shining mail; and scattered among them were the fully-armored cavalry . . . all masked, furnished with protecting breastplates and girt with iron belts, so that you might have supposed them statues polished by the hand of Praxiteles, not men. (Ammianus Marcellinus 16.10.6–8)

Remarkably, this differs little from the army's behavior during peace negotiations with barbarians (Fig. 6). Inspection at close quarters would confirm barbarian impressions of Roman power and the glory of the Empire (Fig. 7). In 359 two kings of the German Alamanni, Macrianus and Vadomarius, were brought into a Roman camp while the Romans were campaigning across the upper Rhine in Alamannia.

And indeed, Macrianus, having been admitted with his brother among the eagles and stan-

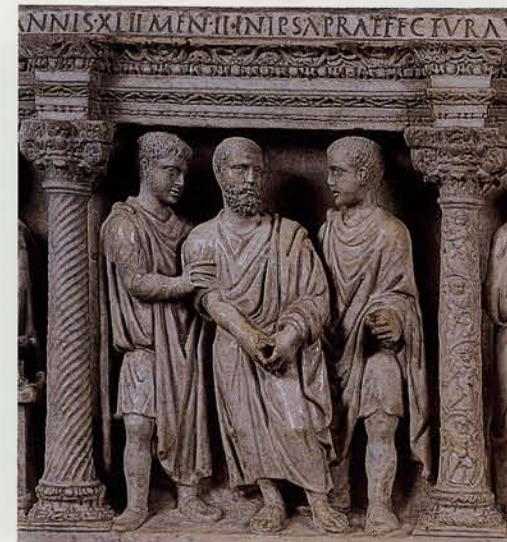


FIG. 8. SOLDIERS ARRESTING PETER. A sarcophagus from the early 4th century, ca. AD 325, shows two Roman soldiers arresting the Apostle Peter. Although this story is not told in the Bible, it is often found on early Christian sarcophagi.

Fabbrica di S. Pietro in Vaticano, neg. 303/97

dards, was amazed at the magnificent appearance of the equipment and the men, which he first saw then . . . But Vadomarius, familiar with us because he lived by the frontier, admired the splendid field equipment, but remembered that he had often seen such things since his youth. (Ammianus Marcellinus 18.2.17)

Although these marching armies and ceremonies were impressive, there was a price to pay for having large numbers of soldiers passing through one's town or fields. When the Roman general Stilicho led the western Roman army into Greece, into the Peloponnese against Alaric and his Goths in AD 397, the historian Zosimus remarks that Stilicho could have easily defeated Alaric "had he not devoted himself to luxury, comic actors and shameless women and allowed his soldiers to plunder what the barbarians had left" (Zosimus 5.7.2). After such scenes of pillage and mayhem, the army may have seemed the same to its friends as to its enemies.

EXTORTION AND CORRUPTION

But for many civilians, the army was a far more constant presence than through the occasional parade or spectacle. One way in which soldiers came into regular contact with civilians was while obtaining supplies for their units. Some of the supply process was carried out in a centralized fashion, but the soldiers collected large amounts of the required supplies themselves. In many cases, especially for those troops based within cities, the

simplest way to obtain these supplies was to visit the local market. Here, it was not always a simple matter of picking up the goods and paying the sticker-price for them—Roman soldiers rarely paid full price. One historian, John Malalas, records an action that the Emperor Diocletian (AD 284–305) undertook in Antioch. "He also built granaries to store corn and he gave everyone measures for corn and all other commodities on sale, so that none of the market-traders should be intimidated by the

soldiers" (Malalas 12.38). Obviously the soldiers were demanding to pay less for their grain than the other customers.

A century later, the orator Libanius (who lived in Antioch) described another type of situation that might have also occurred in Diocletian's market. "A soldier provokes a market trader, employing abuse and verbal insult: he lays hands on him, manhandles and ill-treats him . . . such persons must raise neither voice nor hand against

the soldier, and so this wretch, who is doomed to suffer, is arrested and thrown into the guardroom and purchases the right not to be flogged to death" (Libanius *Oration* 47.33).

This conduct was hardly likely to endear soldiers to the population of a city. Nor were these problems confined to cities, but could occur wherever soldiers were stationed (Fig. 8). Earlier in the same speech, Libanius laments the predations of garrisons based in villages around Antioch, which included looting, cutting down trees, slaughtering and barbecuing cattle, and abducting women. All these actions were, of course, illegal, but the court system to which one had to appeal was run by the military, so often there was little hope of

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FIG. 9. EGYPTIAN TUNIC. Many illustrations show Roman soldiers or officials wearing pale-colored tunics decorated with elaborate bands and circles of embroidery. Some of these tunics survive intact. This example, from an Egyptian tomb, probably dates from the 4th century. Most of these tunics were of linen with red or purple decoration, which might have functioned as insignia of rank.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Edward S. Harkness, 1926, acc. no. 26.9.8. H. 137.1 cm

UNWELCOME GUESTS

Soldiers and civilians also came into frequent contact in the compulsory billeting of soldiers onto civilians (a process known as *metatum*). This billeting usually occurred when groups of soldiers were being moved from one part of the Empire to another. These movements might involve a whole army going to the frontier or to fight a civil war, a party of recruits marching to join their regiment, or a detachment hunting down deserters. However, village garrisons, like those mentioned by Libanius, could be accommodated under the same procedure.

As one would expect, these nonpaying and uninvited house guests were unpopular. There was limited recourse, though those powerful socially could gain exemptions. The less powerful resorted to rubbing out the chalk marks left on their doors by the billeting officers! These house guests overstepped the rules on many occasions. We have numerous edicts issued by the emperor in response to appeals from disgruntled householders. These give us some idea of what could happen when a soldier was assigned a billet. Soldiers were not allowed to demand oil or firewood, but the emperor repeated these laws in AD 340, 393, and 416, suggesting

redress. The problems of exploitation extended far beyond individual soldiers or groups of soldiers; the system itself could be no less corrupt. The city of Leptis Magna in North Africa was suffering from barbarian incursions in the late 4th century, so its inhabitants

implored the protection of Romanus, the newly arrived *comes per Africam* [commander of the African field army]. As soon as he came, leading his military forces, and was asked to bring his aid in these troubles, he said that, unless provisions in abundance were brought and four thousand camels equipped, he would not move his camp. At this response, the wretched citizens were stunned and refused his request . . . so the *comes*, after spending forty days there under false pretenses, left without trying to do anything. (Ammianus Marcellinus 28.6.5–6)

Not surprisingly, the city sent an embassy to the emperor to complain. After all, they had already paid heavy taxes for the privilege of being Roman. Romanus, however, was a skilled political operator with friends at the imperial court. Despite being prosecuted, he was acquitted.

Sources for the Late Roman Army

Many different sources can be used to investigate the late Roman army. Some histories were written by contemporaries, like Zosimus or Ammianus Marcellinus. Ammianus was a military officer who served in the late 4th century army on both the Rhine and Eastern fronts. Other sources include speeches, usually with a political objective, such as the Latin Panegyrics (*Panegyrici Latini*) and the works of the Antiochene orator Libanius. These works are often biased, but still provide a good way of understanding the politics of the era. They can be supplemented by more objective sources such as the *Theodosian Code*, a compilation of laws ordered by Theodosius II (AD 408–450). The military papyri are also useful. The Abinnaeus archive discussed in this article is not unique, and other collections of military paperwork come from Dura-Europos in Syria and from Nessana in Israel. These sources can be combined with the archaeological record (Abinnaeus' fort at Dionysias has been excavated) and monumental and other artistic evidence to give a more complete picture of the late Roman army.

it was a persistent abuse. It was also prohibited to ask for food, again because soldiers had been demanding meals (*Theodosian Code* 7.8, 9, 11). Another law allowed high-ranking officers, but only these, to demand baths; obviously soldiers of every rank had been asking for baths.

THE ABINNAEUS ARCHIVE

By chance, we know something of the career of one military officer, Flavius Abinnaeus. Abinnaeus escorted an embassy of the barbarian Blemmyes from Egypt to Constantinople in AD 337 to see Emperor Constantius II. As an imperial official he almost certainly requisitioned billets and probably demanded baths, oil, and firewood for himself, though there is no record of it. Abinnaeus returned to Egypt and in the mid-4th century became *praefectus* (i.e., commanding officer) of a cavalry regiment called the *ala quinta praelectorum*. This unit was headquartered at Dionysias in the Fayum during Abinnaeus's period of command (342–351). We have 82 of his papers preserved, which give us an illuminating glimpse into the life of 4th century soldiers (Fig. 9). Included among these are 14 petitions, useful to us since, unlike the letters that make up most of the archive, they contain dates. How much of Abinnaeus' time was spent doing this sort of paperwork is unclear. He did, however, have access to nets for hunting gazelles, so probably did not spend all his time shuffling papyri.

Nonetheless, much time had to be spent on official recordkeeping. The archive shows that soldiers were present throughout the region around the village

of Dionysias. We hear of soldiers collecting taxes (P.Abinn. 3) and recruiting from local villages. Some of these recruiting missions were successful, though even these could produce more paperwork, when anguished mothers appealed for release of their sons from service, or at least to keep them in Egypt. Other recruiting missions were unsuccessful. In one case, the troops could not find any recruits in the village of Karanis, but waited for three days before the villagers finally gave up and produced two gold *solidi* and fifty talents of silver. That amount was still less than the official cash value of even one recruit (P.Abinn. 35). Other soldiers were less patient and more violent. After a group of soldiers on a recruiting mission looted houses and drove off cattle at Arsinoe, the president of the village council there was driven to write to Abinnaeus to complain (P.Abinn. 18).

At another village, the situation reminds us of Libanius' complaints. Here, a petitioner by the name of Demetrius had a persistent problem with one of the garrisons and wrote to Abinnaeus.

I wish you to know, my lord patron, when I was collecting the corn at Ibion, a soldier by the name of Athenodorus met me, a man who is under your command, and he did no little violence to me, and not only to me, but he also goes out into the fields continually drunk and makes the village his prey. (P.Abinn. 28)

Soldiers were obviously not always closely supervised and were often drunk. And although soldiers could work hard when not drinking, their efforts were

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not always in the service of the state. Another petition to Abinnaeus comes from Aurelius Aboul of Hermopolis, in which he accused a soldier, Paulus, of shearing eleven sheep one night and of rustling six pigs on another occasion (P.Abinn. 48). Although Aboul knew who had committed the crime, he had to appeal to a military officer to do something about it. He was probably not confident of success.

CONCLUSION

The view presented of the late Roman army is not exactly a flattering one. But is it the whole truth? As well as examining what the sources tell us, we must think about what they don't say. When contemporary Roman authors mentioned the army, it was generally to complain about the troops' behavior; they tended not to write about well-behaved soldiers who did their jobs. One might compare modern press coverage of the armed forces, which also tends to focus on problems, not on the good conduct achieved by most soldiers most of the time. In addition to this bias, a large portion of our information comes from law codes. This means that it was material issued in response to difficulties caused by soldiers. These laws rarely mention the normal behavior that did not engender legislation. But we have to use these biased sources to get at daily activities. Other sources have much to say about generals and

about combat, but tell us far less about what individual soldiers might do on a daily basis. But even given the one-sidedness of the source material, I do not want to minimize the troublesome behavior of the troops. I think it is fair to say that they had a poor reputation.

However, soldiers off the battlefield did perform many other activities that would often escape the notice of their contemporaries. Some of these activities were more martial than those I have described, e.g., weapons training, building and repairing fortifications, carrying out route marches, and hunting down bandits and deserters. Other tasks were less military. One late 6th century soldier from Egypt, Patermuthis, is even described as "a soldier of the regiment of Elephantine, by profession a boatman" (P.Monac. 10). Despite holding what seem to us to be two conflicting positions, Patermuthis was by no means unusual. It is a useful reminder that, although the primary function of the army was to fight battles, it was much more than this. Some of its activity was clearly martial, but other aspects could easily be confused with civilian or criminal activities. Which type of activity was more typical of the army as a whole is hard to determine and probably depended on the location of the troops and whether hostilities were ongoing. Writers living in the frontier regions, where they could see the defensive value of the army, were probably more prone to forgive abuses by soldiers than the inhabitants of Antioch or the Fayum. 2

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