

THE COLD FACE OF BATTLE – SOME REMARKS ON THE FUNCTION OF ROMAN HELMETS WITH FACE MASKS

Roman helmets with face masks were found throughout the Roman Empire, in graves and where cavalry units were stationed. Their usage is dated back from the turn of eras to the 4th century¹. Although references to masked helmets appear in the works of Roman authors² their provenience and application as a type of armour is still unclear and arouses much interest amongst researchers.

Helmets with masks consist of a bell and a metal facial protector which depicts human countenance³. The leading motif is a young man's face. Both parts – the bell and the mask – were bound with a hinge or hooks hidden under the hair line, behind the diadem or a piled up hairdo. Both elements were attached with a leather strap at the bottom of the rim and nailed to buttons placed at the edge of the mask and the neck guard. A lot of masks take the shape of women's faces with more or less impressive hairstyles. There was smoothly combed back hair adjacent to the head and hairdos styled with inwrought wreaths, both constructions being made of strings and chains⁴.

The bells, similar to masks, were produced with a hammering technique. The right form was obtained by a stroke of a hammer and the use of organic intermediary tools⁵. The major part of the helmet is covered with a relief decoration depicting figural scenes, leaves, flowers and military signs⁶. Additional decorative elements are imitations of precious stones. For example, the placement of a blue oval made out of glass paste was used as an additional adornment whilst producing female mask discovered in Eining (Lkr. Kelheim/D)⁷.

Studies on their functions have been initiated already in the 19th century. In 1878 O. Benndorf wrote that the masks' function was to be placed on the face of the deceased⁸. Whereas, according to P. Coussin the two-part construction of helmets using hinges and hooks, allowing lowering and lifting up the mask, proves that the helmets were used before putting them on its owner in his grave⁹.

Due to the absence of written and iconographic sources relating directly to the possibilities of using masked helmets in combat the majority of modern scholars¹⁰, in compliance with Lucius Flavius Arrianus' record, accepted the hypothesis that they were not used in battle. According to them, these helmets were ceremonial or »tournament« equipment. Their significance was not only religious, i. e. for parades and tournaments, but was also linked to propaganda, with a special reference to the people from the frontiers. They were to demonstrate the wealth of Rome and the combat efficiency of the Roman soldiers¹¹. Other researchers have cautiously suggested the possibility of using them in battle, but without any explanation¹². However, there are some reasons to enhance the latter thesis.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

To demonstrate the usefulness of masked helmets in combat, it would be the best to discover one of them at a battle ground in a context that prevents any other interpretations. However, even such finds of ordinary equipment are rare because such sites were immediately looted after a battle. Due to these circum-

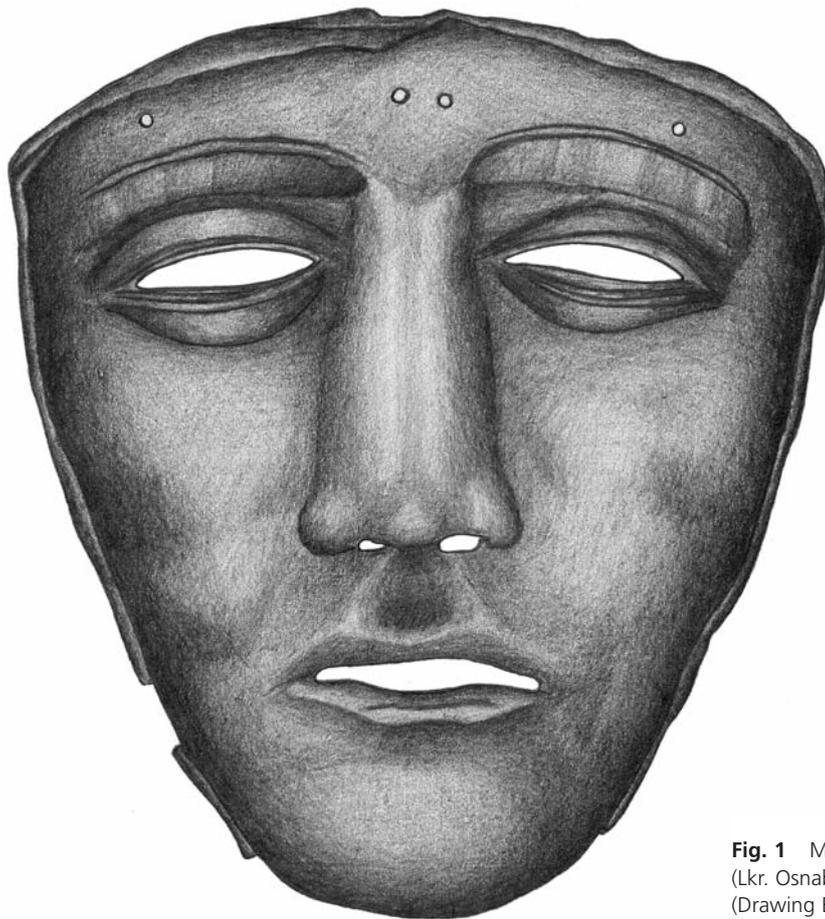


Fig. 1 Mask from Kalkriese (Lkr. Osnabrück/D). – (Drawing E. Szewczyk).

stances a discovery of such a spectacular weaponry like helmets with masks in a battlefield seems almost impossible. However, in two cases, their archaeological context may indicate utilisation during a real fight. In Kalkriese (Lkr. Osnabrück/D), apart from a mask (**fig. 1**), the following inventory was discovered: elements binding wooden and metal parts of *pila*, spearheads, arrowheads, lead sling shot bullets, swords fragments, *lorica hamata* and *lorica segmentata* fragments, bronze *cingulum* buckles, shield-bosses, Hagenau helmet fragments, elements of harnesses, *phalerae* and other metal military equipment elements¹³.

The abovementioned findings prove that during the battle which took place at Kalkriese in Teutoburg Forest in AD 9 between the Roman division and barbarian tribes, at least one horseman armoured with a masked helmet was present¹⁴.

Another case is a mask (dated from the mid-2nd to the 3rd century) found in Aïn Grimidi (prov. M'Sila/Algeria; **fig. 2**) at one of the limes outposts in the province of Mauretania. P. Salama made an attempt to identify the present unit as well as the holder of the mask. The author considers the possibility that this person was a member of another division stationed in forts in close vicinity to this border. According to him, a military service was a rotary¹⁵ and weaponry used for ceremonial or parade purposes during the time of these duties would stay in the main camp.

Grave finds of masked helmets or parts thereof are rare but their analysis may also help us to understand their function. In a tomb at Tell Oum Hauran (gouv. Daraa/SYR), two helmets were deposited, one with a

mask and the other without¹⁶. In this case, these helmets were intended for two different actions. The specimen with the face mask would be used for the *hippika* and the other for the real fight¹⁷. However, many graves were equipped with only a masked helmet, for example, in Hellingen (Kt. Esch-sur-Alzette/L)¹⁸, in Neuvy-Pailloux (dép. Indre/F)¹⁹ or in Chassenard (dép. Allier/F)²⁰. In this light, the deposition of two helmets in the Syrian burial should be interpreted primarily as a highlighting of the status and wealth of the soldier buried there, which could afford to buy such a magnificent equipment. This case should not be considered as a secure proof of the thesis that the helmets with masks were not used in combat. What is more, most funerary findings suggest such a possibility.

TECHNICAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL ISSUES

In the 19th century O. Benndorf admitted that the selection of metal from which the helmets were made, as well as the rich ornamentation giving them luxurious character, rules out its combat usage. Additional arguments were difficulties with binding the mask, limiting visibility as well as giving problems with breathing²¹. These beliefs, often repeated by other researchers²², still do not have a convincing explanation.

The material used for production of these helmets is of the same quality, as other elements of Roman military equipment²³. The bells were hammered out of a bronze or iron plate. Masks made of iron, bronze or brass were covered with an extra silver or golden plate or they were silvered or gilded. Wearing helmets made of materials other than iron was not anything unusual in the Roman army. In the 1st century Montefortino and Coolus helmet types – used by infantrymen – were made of bronze. Since the appearance of the Imperial-Gallic type, the basic material used for production of helmets was iron, but bronze was also in use²⁴.

Gilding and covering the bells and masks with a layer of a different metal also had a decorative purpose for other helmet types, those of an unquestionable combat capacity. An iron Weisenau type specimen from Haltern (Kr. Recklinghausen/D), dated back to the second half of the 1st century, was covered with a brass plate undoubtedly to improve its aesthetical quality²⁵. The bell of the helmet from Deurne (prov. Noord-Brabant/NL), dated to the 4th century, is partially covered with a silver and a partially gilded plate²⁶. Also relief decoration of the helmets cannot be considered as an argument against its use in combat. The thesis that the rich adornment makes it difficult or even impossible to fight seems irrational and void.

Based on a test conducted with a copy of the mask from Dormagen (Rhein-Kreis Neuss/D) it is stated that the universal size of the mask made it possible to be used by many different people²⁷ and the correct placement of the eye, mouth and nasal holes established the accurate visual angle and ease of breathing²⁸. However, it seems very likely that most of the masks were custom-made²⁹. The variety of representations reflects the individual tastes of soldiers thus allowing the masks to fit better to the wearers' faces.

If the helmets with masks limited the perception and breathing ability of the horsemen, they would not be able to do manoeuvres described by Arrian, which were shown at the Roman army demonstration³⁰. This was of great importance when presenting the skills and abilities of a Roman soldier to foreigners. Even applying additional decorative elements like a ring imitating an iris did not have any effect on the battlefield whilst being within eyeshot of the cavalrymen³¹.

The simple construction of the helmet allowed them to be handled easily and fast. The lower binding of the bell and the mask with a metal button and a leather strap was not much more complicated than tying it up under the chin like with other helmets. It was also a measure to prevent the mask from rising up accidentally.

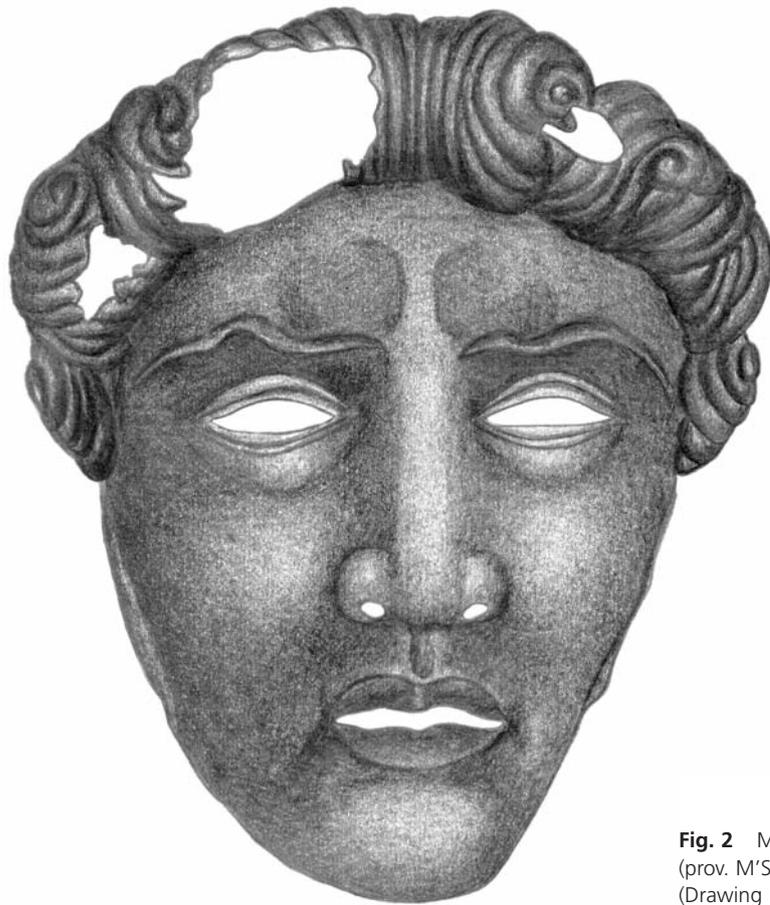


Fig. 2 Mask from Ain Grimidi (prov. M'Sila/Algeria). – (Drawing E. Szewczyk).



Fig. 3 Helmet from Homs (ancient Emesa/SYR). – (Drawing E. Szewczyk).

The elements of the helmet were fitted to each other so that a mask did not lean towards the face but created a whole set with a bell. After striking a blow to the mask the impact was transferred to the back side of the helmet. It also protected from ricochets and effects of sliding the weapon of the opponent down the other elements of equipment.

The Kalkriese mask type does not have any elements that could be bound with leather straps. That is why it could not be worn without stabilising cheeks³². The Nijmegen-Kops Plateau mask type (fig. 3) has got an ear protection in the form of an artistic auricle. The buttons used for binding the mask to the bell with a leather strap are situated under them. They were associated with the cavalry helmet Weiler/Koblentz-Bubenheim type³³, indicated by findings from Vize (il Kirklareli/TR)³⁴, Homs (gouv. Homs/SYR; fig. 3)³⁵, Tell Oum Hauran³⁶ and a bell of this type from Antinopolis (modern Sheikh 'Ibada, gouv. Minya/Egypt)³⁷ with a hinge placed in the middle of the forehead. Also masks of other types were assembled with helmets used by the Roman cavalry³⁸.

Tests conducted with face protection replicas enhance a thesis on the combat use of early Kalkriese and Nijmegen-Kops Plateau mask types and their compilation with Weiler/Koblentz-Bubenheim helmet types³⁹. Literature emphasises their psychological leverage in the early phase of combats at Roman-Germanic borderland⁴⁰.

In his work *Taktiká* Arrian carried out the classification of helmets and divided them into two groups due to their combat or parade/»tournament« usage⁴¹. This record concerns the use of the helmets with masks in the 2nd century and does not apply to their function in the 1st century⁴². That is why we need to assume that those helmets could have been used as combat weaponry as well as ceremonial or »tournament« equipment⁴³.

WRITTEN SOURCES AND THEIR FUNCTION IN THE LATE ROMAN EMPIRE

Due to the fact that most of the discovered helmets are dated back to the 2nd and 3rd centuries, we need to assume that in this period of time they were the most popular ones⁴⁴. Only taking Arrian's record into consideration we might think that this situation is an effect of parades and tournaments being held more often than in the earlier century.

Although in the context of Ammianus Marcellinus and Julian the Apostate records, when describing the use of helmets with masks by heavy-armed Roman cavalry in the 4th century, we should reflect on the possibility of its combat usage⁴⁵.

No later than in the times of Hadrian a new type of a battle formation appeared, called *cataphracti*⁴⁶. In Arrian's record there is no information on using masked helmets by those units, so we could assume that he was not well acquainted with the Roman heavy-armed cavalry. The beginnings of a new formation are connected to Moesia⁴⁷, where the units *ala Gallorum* and *ala Pannoniorum* had been stationed, forming part of the later *ala I Gallorum et Pannoniorum catafractata*⁴⁸. The presence of helmets with masks in this area (a dozen or so), dating back to the 2nd century, can be linked to military actions of the aforementioned formation⁴⁹.

The constant increase in the number of masked helmets being found, from the 2nd to 3rd century, allows us to believe that the meaning and manpower of the *cataphracti* units in that time was growing significantly. It probably had some connection with the military actions against Persia⁵⁰.

The authors of both records from the 4th century, describing heavy-armed Roman cavalry, state that their peculiarity was to fully protect the horse, as well as the cavalryman and his face. In the description of a

parade which took place in AD 357 in Rome, Ammianus Marcellinus⁵¹ recorded a heavily cavalry, describing in depth an armour which did not limit body movements and protected the whole cavalryman⁵². Further, the author mentions several more times this unit type, also fighting on the enemy's side⁵³. A record of a clash between Persian *clibanarii* and Julian's units seems to have a great importance. Ammianus Marcellinus wrote that Persian warriors were fully covered with armour and arrows could only harm them if reached the masks' holes.

Why did Ammianus Marcellinus not state the difference between the use of helmets with masks by heavily armoured Roman cavalry and their opponents? There is no doubt that he knew both types⁵⁴. His work *Res Gestae* is a wealth of knowledge concerning the Roman military system. Why, when describing that formation many times, did he not mention any distinction, despite being such an experienced soldier himself⁵⁵? If there was a difference, surely he would have seen it right away. Thus, the answer is simple – there was none.

Cataphracti fought in a battle array against the infantry holding a *contus* along horse's back. As for the *clibanarii*, they carried it crosswise the horse's neck, the spearhead pointing to the left side. Those, with lighter armoured horse archers, fought against the cavalry in a wedge – column battle array⁵⁶. A particular feature of both units was full armour which enabled them to withstand a frontal clash from an opponent. In this case, the lack of a facial protection would have been »an Achilles' heel«. Although the opportunity of counterstrikes by shields, the helmets with masks had to play an important role in the military equipment of *clibanarii* because their opponents were carrying weapons at the same level. Although having an advantage in height over the infantrymen, the *cataphracti* cavalrymen had to protect their faces when the weapon was sliding down the other armour elements, from an infantry position was heading upwards. Full body protection had a special significance here due to the lack of a shield.

The success of the heavy cavalry depended on the discipline and capacity to keep the battle array⁵⁷. The combat methods did not need greater manoeuvres abilities which light cavalry had to possess. The results of the tests carried out on the abovementioned helmets, together with Kalkriese and Nijmegen-Kops Plateau types of mask replicas prove that the original ones had a significant utility in combat. The later types only differ stylistically so we should appreciate their military worthiness as well.

Ammianus Marcellinus, while writing about the impossibility of wounding a warrior wearing a helmet with mask⁵⁸, states a psychological aspect of this equipment. To make such an impression on the opponent was one of the purposes for using masked helmets. Surely, it was not as easy with more experienced soldiers, but it had to have had an impact on the imagination of their younger colleagues. Describing the march of Roman army from the camp before the Battle of Argentoratum the author states that amongst cavalry shielding infantry flanks were heavily armoured riders, arousing fear⁵⁹.

One of the reasons for mentioning *cataphracti* and *clibanarii* horsemen was often for their elite character. Only a soldier with great experience acquired in other units of cavalry service could join that formation⁶⁰. An exquisite prestige was emphasised by choosing the right recruits and also by their equipment. The cost of a full set of such equipment had to arouse jealousy from soldiers of other types of military formations and the rich decoration stressed out their elite character and impressive look; thus, they were participants of many parades.

The use of *cataphracti* and *clibanarii* units by Julian during the Battle of Argentoratum⁶¹ and the supporting of Roman infantry during Valentinian military actions against Saxons⁶² prove a sufficient manpower in this formation. Also a description provided by Julian⁶³ leaves no doubt as to the numerical force of the units and their combat utility. With a large number of soldiers, it seems too expensive and unnecessary for them to possess two sets of arms, one for fighting and another for parade⁶⁴, because the equipment of Roman *cataphracti* and *clibanarii* was perfectly suited for both purposes.

CONCLUSIONS

The context of the masks findings indicates the thesis on their combat character. A specimen from Kalkriese discovered at the battlefield of AD 9 seems to prove it. The mask from the military post in Ain Grimidi in Algeria also confirms this thesis. Soldiers going to that post did not need to take equipment with them that was not suited for battle. Also specimens from the graves do not exclude this possibility and even suggest it.

We need to say that helmets with masks are not different in a matter of technology to other helmets. They are made of the same material and manufactured in a similar way. They are not inferior to other types, undoubtedly qualified for combat purposes. Their luxurious character and rich adornment of the bells does not prevent their use in combat. Masks – proven by a conducted test – made it possible to observe the battlefield and did not restrict air circulation in a meaningful way.

Aftermentioned sources confirm the use of the helmets with face masks since the 1st century. If we can assume that they were used in combat at that time, we do not have any reasons to believe that in later periods things were any different. The lack of obvious reasons not to use these types of helmets in battle at the beginning of the 2nd century, when their popularity was rising, seems to verify this thesis. Helmets with masks were a great addition to protective armour of the *cataphracti* and *clibanarii* formation, created in the Roman army in the 2nd century. The works of Arrian are extraordinary sources referring to ancient warfare, but they may not be treated as directly concerning the Roman heavy cavalry.

Notes

- 1) The oldest specimen discovered so far comes from Bramsche-Kalkriese in Germany (Franzius 1995, 78). – More on this mask, see Hanel / Wilbers-Rost / Willer 2004.
- 2) Arr. takt. 44. – Iulian. or. I. 37 D. – Amm. 16.10.8.
- 3) On their interpretation, see Bartman 2005, 108-117.
- 4) Kohlert 1978, 19-28.
- 5) Garbsch 1978, 16.
- 6) More on this topic, see Künzl 2004.
- 7) Kellner 1978, 9-11.
- 8) Benndorf 1878, 63.
- 9) Coussin 1926, 413-414.
- 10) Klumbach 1974, 14. – Robinson 1975, 107. – Garbsch 1978, 1-2. – Kellner 1978, 2-4. – Waurick 1986, 794. – Waurick 1988, 364. – Bartman 2005, 101-103.
- 11) Robinson 1975, 107. – Bartman 2005, 117-119.
- 12) Bishop / Coulston 2006, 142. 175. – Junkelmann 1991, 154; 1996, 52; 1999, 40, allows the possibility that they were used in combat but limited to a small territory and a narrow period of time (see below).
- 13) Franzius 1995, 69-88. – Schlüter 1999, 136-145.
- 14) Schlüter 1999, 137-138. 145. – Bartman 2005, 100 note 5, believes that these findings (especially the mask) were part of the baggage train but in the light of the archaeological context, this explanation seems to be too simple. In addition, soldiers could fight in this place because wagons make defense much easier and in case of the ambush they were probably the only cover. This tactic was extremely developed during the Hussite Wars in the 15th century (see Durdik 1955).
- 15) Salama 1986, 651-654.
- 16) On their archaeological context, see Abdul-Hak 1954/1955.
- 17) Bartman 2005, 103.
- 18) Apart from a mask no other item of military equipment was discovered, see Namur 1854.
- 19) In this tomb two masks were accompanied, among others, by spearheads and arrowheads, see Waurick 1986, 794. – Beck / Chew 1991, 120.
- 20) Apart from an iron mask pieces of chain mail, sword, torque, *strigillum* and coins were discovered, see Déchelette 1903.
- 21) Benndorf 1878, 62.
- 22) Garbsch 1978, 4. – Bartman 2005, 103.
- 23) Coussin 1926, 420.
- 24) Bishop / Coulston 2006, 101.
- 25) Klumbach 1974, 36-37.
- 26) Braat 1973, 56-60.
- 27) Sometimes on the inner side of the bell a name of the owner was engraved. Quite often next to an actual user, few names of his predecessors were crossed out: Kellner 1978, 13. – More on this topic, see MacMullen 1960.
- 28) Hanel / Pelltz / Willer 2000, 262.
- 29) For example the mask from Kalkriese (see Franzius 1995, 78; Junkelmann 1996, 19) or from Ain Grimidi (see Salama 1986, 649-651).
- 30) Arr. takt.; on these exercises, see Hyland 1993.
- 31) Robinson 1975, 110.

- 32) Junkelmann 1999, 41.
- 33) Junkelmann 1996, 93. – Born / Junkelmann 1997, 84-88.
- 34) Mansel 1940, 126-128. – Mansel 1941, 167-170. – Robinson 1975, 118. – Kohlert 1976, 509-516. – Garbsch 1978, 62.
- 35) Seyrig 1952, 101-108. – Robinson 1975, 121. – Kohlert 1976, 511. – Garbsch 1978, 62.
- 36) Abdul-Hak 1954/1955, 163-188. – Robinson 1975, 120. – Garbsch 1978, 61-62.
- 37) Robinson 1975, 122-123. – Garbsch 1978, 64. – Pflug 1988, 537-538.
- 38) Hanel / Pelltz / Willer 2000, 265.
- 39) Junkelmann 1996, 53-56. – Junkelmann 1999, 39-43.
- 40) Junkelmann 1996, 52.
- 41) Arr. takt. 34.
- 42) Junkelmann 1996, 52. – Junkelmann 1999, 40. – Born / Junkelmann 1997, 31.
- 43) Junkelmann 1991, 154.
- 44) Gamber 1968, 15.
- 45) Amm. 16.10.8; Iulian. or. I. 37 D. – The records directly do not concern using helmets with masks in combat.
- 46) Mielczarek 1993, 73.
- 47) The idea to create a *cataphracti* formation may have appeared during the Trajan's campaign against Parthia (ibidem 73). – If this military formation was formed, based on the model of the eastern heavy cavalry, we can assume that to their equipment belonged helmets with masks because the Parthian heavily-armoured horsemen surely used them (ibidem 60).
- 48) The presence of such an unit in Moesia is proven by inscriptions from the years 134 and 157/158 (CIL XVI 78; AE [1961], 128). – Also see: Wagner 1938, 38. – Kraft 1951, 27-32. – Beneš 1970, 163. – Roxan / Eck 1997, 195-196.
- 49) Of course, other types of cavalry units also may have used such helmets.
- 50) Mielczarek 1993, 76.
- 51) Ammianus Marcellinus did not witness the parade in AD 357. At that time he stayed with Ursinius outside Rome. There are no records to prove his stay in this city before he stepped aside after a failure of Julian's Persian campaign and his stay in the East (see Thompson 1947, 13-19; Blockley 1975, 10). So we can assume that he described heavy-armed cavalry in this way he knew it from other military actions.
- 52) Amm. 16.10.8.
- 53) Amm. 16.12.7, 21-22; 24.6.8; 25.1.12; 28.5.6.
- 54) Crump 1975, 9-13. – Bitter 1976, 12-56. – Austin 1979, 18-21.
- 55) On his official military career, see Trombley 1999, 16-26.
- 56) Mielczarek 1993, 41-50.
- 57) Ibidem 48.
- 58) Amm. 25.1.12.
- 59) Amm. 16.12.7; on the battle, see Nicasie 1998, 219-233.
- 60) Rea 1984.
- 61) Amm. 16.12.7; 16.12.21-22.
- 62) Amm. 28.5.6.
- 63) Iulian. or. I. 37 C-D. – The nature of this work was favorable to the addresser (in this case to the emperor Constantius), though exaggeration could suggest that the author was mocking the ruler.
- 64) On parade, see Bishop 1990.

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Zusammenfassung / Abstract / Résumé

Das kalte Antlitz der Schlacht – einige Bemerkungen zur Funktion der römischen Helme mit Gesichtsmaske

Dieser Aufsatz stellt einige Überlegungen zur Funktion der römischen Helme mit Gesichtsmaske an. Diese Stücke waren einer der wirkungsvollsten Ausrüstungsgegenstände der römischen Soldaten, die seit dem 19. Jahrhundert für gelehrtes Interesse und kontroverse Debatten sorgten. Trotz überreicher Literatur ist ihre Funktion immer noch Thema zahlreicher Diskussionen. Der Gelehrtenstreit dreht sich immer wieder um einige wenige Interpretationsmöglichkeiten, wovon sich die beiden populärsten gegenseitig ausschließen: Sie postulieren, dass diese Helme entweder bei Paraden und Festlichkeiten oder in der Schlacht getragen wurden. Unter Einbeziehung der archäologischen und historischen Quellen, von Metallanalysen und der Ergebnisse verschiedener Experimente kommt der Autor zu dem Schluss, dass diese Helme für beide Gelegenheiten gleich gut geeignet waren.

The cold face of battle – some remarks on the function of Roman helmets with face masks

This essay offers reflections on the functions of Roman helmets with masks. They were one of the most effective elements of Roman soldiers' equipment, arousing scholars' interest and controversy since the 19th century. Despite abundant literature, their function is still the subject of numerous discussions. Scholars' views revolve around a few possibilities. Two most popular of such theses supposedly exclude one another. They claim that the helmets were used during parades and festivities or during battles. The author, taking into consideration archaeological sources, historical records, metallographic analyses and the outcome of various experiments seeks to show that these helmets proved to be a perfect solution in both cases.

La face froide de la bataille – remarques sur la fonction des casques romains à masque

Cet article propose des réflexions sur la fonction des casques romains à masque. Ces casques étaient l'une des pièces les plus effectives de l'équipement défensif militaire romain et ils ont éveillé l'intérêt et la controverse des scientifiques depuis le 19^e siècle. Malgré l'existence d'une abondante littérature sur le sujet, leur fonction est toujours sujette à discussions. Les deux propositions les plus fréquentes – une utilisation pour la parade ou pour la bataille – semblent s'exclure. Sur la base des sources archéologiques, historiques et d'analyses métallographiques comme d'expérimentations, l'auteur propose que ces casques étaient une solution parfaite pour chacun de ces usages. L. B.

Schlüsselwörter / Keywords / Mots clés

Römische Kaiserzeit / auxilia / Reiterei / Maskenhelme
Roman Empire / auxilia / cavalry / masked helmets
Empire romain / auxilia / cavalerie / casques à visage

Krzysztof Narloch

Uniwersytet Mikołaja Kopernika
Zakład Archeologii Antycznej
ul. Szosa Bydgoska 44/48
PL - 87-100 Toruń
k_nar@doktorant.umk.pl

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