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Standards and Standard-Bearers in the Alae

The cavalry standards and their bearers have always been a problem to students of the Army. The information from the ancient histories is either lacking or suspect. Even Caesar with his great field experience tended to use technical terms loosely or even colloquially¹. Tacitus had limited military experience and may well have been ignorant of such matters, and, in any case, considered them too trivial in the context of his broad themes². The one writer who could have supplied the detailed information we seek was Velleius Paterculus, but his self-appointed task was to present a eulogy of Tiberius and his account of the campaigns in which he played a leading role, and he omits such technical details. The only satisfactory evidence comes from inscriptions, sculptural reliefs and original documents, but even here there are blank areas. It is also becoming clear that the ranks of standard-bearers and the types of standards present a highly complicated and often confused pattern. This brief paper does not offer any new solutions, or even classification, but gathers together the existing evidence on the standards of the alae.

The universal standard associated with the cavalry was the *vexillum*. This word was, however, also used as a call to arms and a signal to attack. It was the oldest known standard in the Roman army, and summoned the citizens to vote in the *comitia centuriata* and to attend the annual selection for the recruitment into the legions³. The *ve-*

¹ Caesar used *vexillum* as a signal of a call to arms (civ. 2, 20: *vexillum proponendum, quod erat insignia cum ad arma concurrere oporteret*), signal for attack (Gall. 3, 99) and for a group of legionaries (Gall. 6,36: *sub vexillo una mittuntur*).

² Tacitus used it as a standard under which miscellaneous auxiliary troops were grouped in A.D. 69 (hist. 1,70) and also of legionaries who in the mutiny under Tiberius tore down their standards (ann. 1,20: *vexilla convellunt direptisque . . .*) although in a preceding passage when the three legions were amalgamated he writes of the three *aquilae* and *signa cohortium* (ann. 1,18). Mommsen's opinion of Tacitus as 'the most unmilitary of historians' (Röm. Geschichte 5 [1885] 165) has been corrected by Sir Ronald Syme in his magisterial 'Tacitus' (1958, chapters XIV and XV), but Syme admits that Tacitus deliberately chose to exclude much detail to preserve the pulse of his narrative. It is not likely that he was wholly familiar with military technical terms as was Caesar nor would he have considered them important and one cannot expect precise accuracy.

³ Liv. 1,432; the word *legio* means 'a levying'.

xillum took the form of a square piece of cloth with a tasselled bottom edge, and it hung from a cross-bar from each end of which there were long tassels with pendant terminals. The standard was carried on a long shaft surmounted by a spear head. An actual example of such a flag, found in Egypt, is now in the Pusckin Museum of Fine Art in Moscow⁴. It is a 50 cm square of coarse linen dyed scarlet, and on it, painted in gold is a victory on a globe and four angle pieces (cf. fig. 1). Although it has the same form as those shown on monuments, it was the considered view of Rostovtzeff that this *vexillum* was a *donum militare* which had been awarded to an army officer, and probably buried with him. These awards are occasionally shown on tombstones⁵. Two *vexilla* are depicted on Trajan's Column, carried by dismounted horsemen⁶; and there are two examples on the Column of Marcus Aurelius, being carried by a soldier wearing a *lorica segmentata* and by unarmoured auxiliaries wearing the Phrygian *pileus*⁷. On the base of the Column of Antoninus Pius *vexilla* are carried by mounted soldiers⁸. There are no examples on these three monuments of any other type of cavalry standard.

According to Domaszewski there were four different standards in the *alae*⁹, and their bearers ranked as *principales* in the following order of rank: (1) *signifer alae*; (2) *imaginifer*; (3) *signifer turmae*; (4) *vexillarius*, who is listed as a staff trooper. Whether this list is as simple and straight-forward as it would appear is doubtful in the light of a recent study by D. Breeze who has demonstrated the difficulties of finding evidence of a properly organised career structure for *principales* and *immunes*¹⁰. Instead the information so far available appears to indicate a remarkable flexibility. These difficulties are compounded by the duplication of *vexillarii* in legions, first noticed by Domaszewski¹¹ and commented on by M. Speidel in his valuable paper on the captor of Decebalus¹². He has drawn attention to the Dura roster dated to AD 219 (Pap. Dura 100, cols. 38 and 39) where four *vexillarii* are listed in a single *turma*, that of Octavius Mucianus, which also included one *signifer*, Lucius Valerianus (col. xl, line 19)¹³. When this list is compared with Pap. Dura 101, dated to AD 222, three of these names are listed, but without a rank being given, one, Bassus Salman [. . .] is absent, but another *vexillarius*, Domittius Proculus appears (col. xl, line 19) with the two words *cum albos* inserted in small letters under *vexil* and has been taken to mean 'with the name-lists'. The *signifer* Lucius Valerianus is also listed (col. xl, line 24). The problem is further confused by Ulpus Silvanus, also listed as a *vexillarius centurio*

⁴ M. ROSTOVITZEFF, *Vexillum and Victory*. *Journal Rom. Stud.* 32, 1942, 92–106.

⁵ V. MAXFIELD, *The Military Decorations of the Roman Army* (1981).

⁶ C. CICHORIUS, *Die Reliefs der Trajanssäule* (1896–1900) nos. 20–21 pl. 9; K. LEHMANN-HARTLEBEN, *Die Trajanssäule* (1926) pl. 7,7; J. KROMAYER and G. VEITH, *Heerwesen und Kriegführung der Griechen und Römer* (1928) 405; 520 pl. 33 fig. 103.

⁷ P. BARTOLI, *Columna Cochlis M. Aurelio* (1704) pls. 51; 52.

⁸ C. VOGEL, *The Column of Antoninus Pius* (1973) pls. 9; 10; 15.

⁹ A. VON DOMASZEWSKI, *Die Rangordnung des röm. Heeres* (1967) 56.

¹⁰ D. J. BREEZE, *The Organisation of the Career Structure of the immunes and principales of the Roman Army*. *Bonner Jahrb.* 174, 1974, 278–286.

¹¹ A. VON DOMASZEWSKI, *Die Religion des röm. Heeres*. *Westdt. Zeitschr.* 14, 1895, 88.

¹² *Journal Rom. Stud.* 60, 1971, 145.

¹³ R. O. FINK, *Roman Military Records on Papyrus*. *The Am. Philol. Assoc. Monograph* 26 (1971) 18–51.



1 Württembergisches Landesmuseum Stuttgart, replica of the *vexillum* from Egypt.

(col. xl, line 9); he appears also in Pap. Dura 100 (col. xl, line 1), but without any designation, merely that he was on out-post duty. Nor is this the only example of a *vexillarius centurio* in a *turma*, another appears in the *turma* of Demetrius Victorius (col. xxxviii, line 8). There is only one example of an *imaginifer* and this is a doubtful reading of . . . *Jag* (Pap. Dura 100, col. xxviii, line 22) listed in a *centuria* and there is also a *vexillarius* attached to a *centuria* (Pap. Dura 101, col xviii, line 19). These documents as R.O. Fink has stressed are no more than 'working' rosters of *cobors XX Palmyrenorum equitata*¹⁴. The papyri are very fragmentary, but even when lines can be read in full, it is obvious that the record is far from complete when a comparison is made between the two lists, 100 and 101. For example, when a man was on detached duty, the name of the place is given but his rank is omitted. These serious irregulari-

¹⁴ *op. cit.* 9.

ties make it difficult to draw any general conclusions, but one fact that cannot be denied is that in a *cohors equitata* there was more than one *vexillarius*, and it can be inferred that not only was it possible for the unit to have its own *vexillum*, but also one for a *turma* as well as for a *centuria*. Furthermore, the appearance of only one *imaginifer*, and that a doubtful one, suggests that this may have been the only one of the whole unit. Unfortunately, what may have been the arrangement for a *cohors equitata* need not necessarily apply to an *ala*.

As a possible solution to this *crux* it is suggested that there may have been a small body of *vexillarii* to protect the sacred standard, so that should the horseman holding it fall in battle, it could immediately be taken by another, otherwise the sudden disappearance of the *vexillum* could have been seen as an act of divine displeasure, with a consequent sudden lowering of morale in the unit. Although there is no evidence for this, Eusebius, at a much later period, recorded the information he received from Constantine himself of the existence of a corps of fifty men, selected from his body-guard to protect the *labarum* and ensure that it would be carried aloft for all to see¹⁵. It would seem sensible and logical to have protected the *vexillum* by similar arrangement from a much earlier period.

The problems of the evidence for these ranks extend to the standard-bearers themselves when they are studied as reliefs on tombstones. No less than seven such tombstones are known but the evidence they present tends to confuse rather than illuminate the issue.

TOMBSTONES WITH STANDARD-BEARERS OF CAVALRY ALAE

1. *Sextus Valerius Genialis eques Alae Thracum civis Frisiaus turma Genialis*, was stationed at Cirencester (*Corinium Dobunniorum*) in Britain during the period c. AD 45–75 (fig. 2)¹⁶. Although the trooper is not designated as a *signifer* in the inscription, he had a standard or some kind of device. It seems to have been the general practice for the standard to be carried in the right hand, as seen on the examples below. *Genialis* is an exception as it is here on his left hand side between his arm and his large oval shield. This prompts the question as to how exactly and to what it was attached. The shield would have been held on the forearm by a strap and held by a hand-grip, but the standard is against the upper part of his arm and must have been attached to the shield. This would have been awkward and cumbersome for the man in combat conditions and would presumably have been fairly light-weight, as otherwise it would have been a serious strain on his left arm. One begins to question the use of this particular device in the field. It is certainly not in the form of any known standard. An alternative possibility would be that it may have had a function in the elaborate convolutions of the ceremonial parade drill, described by Arrian in his 'Tactica'. The object consists of a plain disc at the end of the staff, and to which were attached two strips folded against the staff and held by two bands spaced at equal intervals. This arrange-

¹⁵ EUS. *vita Const.* 2. – I am grateful to Dr. Roger Tomlin for this reference.

¹⁶ RIB 109 and pl. IV; see also J. WACHER and A. MCWHIRR, *Cirencester Excavations 1* (1982) 67–71.



2 The upper part of the tombstone relief of Genialis at Cirencester.

ment would appear to suggest some kind of signalling device, which allowed for the arms to be turned on the disc to any required angle, much in the form of the modern semaphore. This would seem more applicable to the parade ground rather than the battlefield. Genialis may have been at the end of a line of horsemen or at a marker-point, setting his signal to the required manoeuvre at each stage of the ceremony. If this supposition is correct, Genialis would have been wearing parade armour, that highly elaborate and decorated equipment peculiar to the *alae*¹⁷. One of the most distinctive features of this is the helmet with a mask visor which took several forms, and examples of which are clear on other cavalry tombstones¹⁸. Unfortunately, the face of Genialis has been deliberately destroyed, except the stylised hair below the helmet and a strip of embossed decoration below the chin. These indicate the possibility that he was wearing a face visor of either the complete or partial type¹⁹.

¹⁷ J. GARBSCH, *Röm. Paraderüstungen* (1978).

¹⁸ Most of the troopers are shown bare-headed but Reburrus of the *ala Frontoniana* at Bonn (CSIR Deutschland III 1 [1978] no. 17 pl. 21) is wearing a parade helmet with a stylised hair pattern and face visor incorporating the cheek pieces, like one from Viza in Thrace (H. RUSSELL ROBINSON, *The Armour of Imperial Rome* [1975] pls. 341–344). Similar helmets may have been worn by *equites* on two tombstones at Mainz (Germania Romana [1922] nos. 5 and 7 pl. 32 of the *ala II Flavia* and *ala Noricorum* respectively at Mainz).

¹⁹ *ibid.* pls. 24–27 and RUSSELL ROBINSON, *op. cit.* 107–135 and in particular the one from Viza, Thrace, pls. 341–344, where the visor incorporates the cheek pieces and which would account for decoration in this position.



3 Part of the tombstone of Flavius in Hexham Abbey.

There is, however, other evidence that Genialis is wearing parade armour. The relief shows what appears to be a combined breastplate and shoulder strips, onto which is attached a large Medusa head. This equipment is only shown in outline and it would appear that the stone-carver was copying the pair of decorated plates which had been accepted as part of the parade dress²⁰. Actual examples of plates which have been found are of two kinds, those of Manching are in pairs covering the whole of the breast²¹ and those of Pfünz and Mundelsheim which are thinner and would have left a gap between them which could have been filled by a third central plate²², and this is what appears to be indicated on the stone, the Medusa mask would then have been part of the central plate, but has been made too large for this. Another *ala* tombstone

²⁰ GARBSCH, *op. cit.* 7 f. pls. 8–9; RUSSELL ROBINSON, *op. cit.* 161 figs. 164–170 pls. 454–455.

²¹ GARBSCH, *op. cit.*, pl. 8.

²² RUSSELL ROBINSON, *op. cit.*, figs. 164–170.



4 Part of the tombstone of Vellaunus at Bonn.

which has similar features is that of Vonatorix at Bonn²³, where again the sculptor has shown a pair of combined shoulder and breast plates; but two other cavalry tombstones show very large shoulder pieces only²⁴. The possibility must, therefore, remain that all these stones show the riders with mail shoulder-breast strips and not the decorated plates which may have been a later introduction to the equipment. There seems little doubt that this trooper is wearing parade armour and that the device attached to his shield may have been used on ceremonial occasions. Even if it was normal practice to show the horsemen of the *alae* in parade armour on their tombstones, the argument would still apply.

2. *Flavius eques alae Petr(ianae) signifer tur(mae) Candidi* stationed at Red House near Corbridge, North Britain, at the end of the first century (fig. 3). The stone is now in Hexham Abbey, but there is a cast in the Museum of Antiquities, The University of Newcastle upon Tyne²⁵. Attached to the head of the staff of this standard is a large disc on which there is the relief of what appears to be a radiate head. Above this there may have been an elaborate crest, but the corner of the stone is badly damaged and the only projection to survive is on the inner side, and this has the form of a long curling horn and is not to be confused with the plumes attached to the top of the rider's helmet. Although the form of this standard would appear to be that of a *imago*²⁶ the designation of Valerius is that of a *signifer*, apparently of a *turma*.

3. *Vellaunus Nonnius eques alae Longiniana* stationed at Bonn in the early Flavian period²⁷; the stone is in the Rheinisches Landesmuseum Bonn (fig. 4)²⁸. At the top of the standard is a large square frame onto which is fixed a bull's head in heavy relief, not, as J.M.C. Toynbee has described, 'incised on the flag'²⁹. On one side of the animal's head is what could be intended for an angle-iron attaching it to the frame. The bull has two short horns above the ears but the projection from the top of the head has been identified as a third horn³⁰. The triple-horned bull (*Tarvos Trigaranus*) is a well known Celtic mythological beast³¹ and could be expected to have been favoured by the *ala Longiniana* with its Celtic origin³² and, as Lehner pointed out, it was the practice of Celtic tribes to carry images of fearsome beasts into battle³³. Although this is a logical interpretation of the head, close inspection shows that this particular feature curls at its tip and has far more the appearance of an upright feather than a horn. It seems possible that this standard was the unit's religious emblem, presumably car-

²³ CSIR Deutschland III 1 (1978) no. 14 pl. 18.

²⁴ Reburus and Niger Nemes (cf. note 18).

²⁵ RIB 1172; CSIR Great Britain I 1 (1977) no. 68 pl. 20.

²⁶ A. VON DOMASZEWSKI, *Die Fahnen im röm. Heere* (1885) 71.

²⁷ E. STEIN, *Die kaiserlichen Beamten und Truppenkörper im röm. Deutschland unter dem Prinzipat* (1932) 140 f.

²⁸ CIL XIII 8094; CSIR Deutschland III 1 (1977) no. 12 pl. 15.

²⁹ *Britannia* 13, 1982, 247.

³⁰ H. LEHNER, *Die antiken Steindenkmäler des Provinzialmuseums in Bonn* (1918) 25 f. no. 650.

³¹ RE IV A (1932) 2453 (HEICHELHEIM).

³² STEIN, *op. cit.* (note 27) 143.

³³ *Ferarum imagines*, according to TAC. hist. 4, 22.



5 The tombstone of Carminius in the Worms Museum.



6 The tombstone of Oclatius, before restoration, in the Museum Clemens Sels, Neuss.

ried on parades and ceremonial occasions³⁴, rather than the unit or a *turma* standard, and this may be why Vellaunus has no designated rank.

4. *A. Carminius signifer alae Hispanorum* stationed at Worms in the Julio-Claudian period, the stone is in Worms Museum (fig. 5)³⁵. The signifer is carrying a staff with

³⁴ As with the legions depicted on Trajan's Column.

³⁵ CIL XIII 6223; Bonner Jahrb. 114–115, 1906, pl. 1,3; Germania Romana (1922) pl. 30, 3; STEIN, *op. cit.* (note 27) 140 f.

a cross-bar from which hang two pear-shaped pendants on the visible half, the staff appears to terminate in a spear-head³⁶. This standard has a basic resemblance to an actual example found at Zugmantel and now in the Saalburg Museum³⁷. It was suggested by Ritterling that this could have been a 'tactical standard'³⁸. By this is presumably meant that movements could be directed on the battle field by the manner in which the standard was held or moved about. It could equally well have been the type of standard used by each *turma*, and the equivalent of the centurial standards. The number of discs on the latter is apparently without any special significance and it could therefore be too imaginative to suggest that the number of pendants could have indicated the number of the *turma*.

5. *Oclatio Carvi f. signifer alae Afrorum* was stationed at Novaesium possibly by the end of the first century³⁹. The stone was found in 1922 during the excavation for the foundation for a new house⁴⁰, unfortunately, while the stone was on the site, a disgruntled workman stamped on the relief with his heavy boots and seriously damaged the standard (fig. 7)⁴¹. Oclatius stands in a niche in the upper part of the stone with the standard in his right hand and it is almost as tall as himself. His servant leads his horse with saddle but no harness, below the inscription. Only the top of the standard survived the damage and this shows the spearhead at the top of the standard and the top of a disc with the relief of a head surrounded by a crest. According to Oxé, the head is that of a lion and this seems to be confirmed by the surviving fragment. Below the head is a small rectangular plate from the sides of which hang tassels. It is hardly surprising to find a lion's head as the emblem of a unit raised in Africa. This standard would seem to offer comparisons with that of Vellaunus who carried the bull's head of a Celtic unit.

6. *T(iti) Fl(avi) Barbi Veter(ani) alae I Fl(aviae) Aug(ustae) Brit(annicae) milliaria c(ivium) R(omanorum)*. This *ala* was stationed at Vindobona at the end of the first century AD as part of the concentration of troops in this part of the Danube under Domitian as a response to the threat posed by Dacia⁴². The stone has been lost and is only known from a 16th century drawing⁴³. The drawing shows a soldier holding a large *vexillum* in one hand and the horse's tail in the other; the horse is without a saddle or harness. It is not uncommon for horses to be shown on tombstones of *equites* and centurions and they may even depict the mount of the deceased in the funeral

³⁶ As with the legions depicted on Trajan's column.

³⁷ ORL 98 no. 8; *Germania Romana* (1922) pl. 95,4.

³⁸ *Bonner Jahrb.* 125, 1919, 32 note 3 fig. 19.

³⁹ G. ALFÖLDY, *Die Hilfstruppen in der röm. Provinz Germania inferior*. *Epir. Stud.* 6 (1968) 12; 172 no. 20. – I am most grateful to Dr. G. Schauerte, for supplying me with excellent photographs and information about the history of the discovery and restoration of the stone.

⁴⁰ A. OXÉ, *Der Grabstein eines Signifer der ala Afrorum*. *Germania* 9, 1925, 120–122.

⁴¹ It has since been skilfully restored, H. WEICHELBAUMER, *Zur Restaurierung der Grabstele des Oclatius*. *Neusser Jahrb.* 1977, 21 f.

⁴² A. MÓCSY, *Pannonia and Upper Moesia* (1974) 82 f.

⁴³ *CIL III 4575*; *CSIR Österreich I 1* (1967) 26 no. 31 pl. 32.

procession⁴⁴. Above this scene is a large wreath in which is an eagle displayed holding a large fish in its talons. The fish was an eastern symbol of the dead⁴⁵ and the eagle of the spirit ascending to heavens.

7. *T(itus) F(lavius) Verecund(us) Mag(. .) eques alae I Fl[a(viae)] Aug(ustae) Brit(annicae) milliaria c(ivium) R(omanorum) [t]ur(ma) Italici an(norum) xxxx s[t(ipendiorum)] XIX [b(ic)] s(itus) es[t] Pro(. . .) et Priscinus vex(illarii?) et Ingenus hered(es).*

This is another tombstone of the same unit as no. 5 also from Vindobona, and also known only from a 16th century drawing⁴⁶. The relief shows a trooper on his horse riding to the right, he has turned and making a gesture towards a soldier on foot who holds a large *vexillum* in one hand and the tail of the horse in the other. It could be argued that this is intended to show Verecundus bidding farewell to the standard as he starts his journey to the Underworld. Unfortunately, the two lines of the inscription are garbled beyond recovery, but the suggested reading of *hic situs est* in the fifth line is most unlikely since the formula is invariably placed at the end; also *Pro[. .]* is only one possible contraction for the Proculus. It is impossible to be certain that VEX is in the singular or plural and in these circumstances it would be better to make it *vexillarius* as the rank of Priscinus. He may even have succeeded Verecundus in this post.

Picture credit

- 1 Württembergisches Landesmuseum Stuttgart
- 2 Photographed by the author
- 3 University of Newcastle upon Tyne, Museum of Antiquities
- 4; 6 Rheinisches Landesmuseum Bonn
- 5 Museum der Stadt Worms

⁴⁴ As on the tombstones of Silvanus Lupus, an *eques* of the *ala Vocontiorum* from Xanten (CSIR Deutschland III 1 [1977] no. 23 pls. 24–25; see also *Germania Romana* [1922] pl. 33, 4–5). – As to a centurion cf. the tombstone of T. Caldius Severus at Carnuntum: G. WEBSTER, *The Roman Imperial Army* (1979) pl. 4.

⁴⁵ J.M.C. TOYNBEE, *Death and Burial in the Roman World* (1971) 178 pl. 65.

⁴⁶ CIL III 4576; CSIR Österreich I 1 (1967) 26 f. note 26 no. 32 pl. 31.