



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

# The Legionary Horsemen: Arms, Armor and Tactical Role of the *Equites Legionis* and *Equites Promoti*

Michael F. Pavkovič

## Introduction

The Roman military establishment of the high empire was composed of four different categories of units. The first category was the so-called *militia urbana*, the units stationed in and around the city of Rome; included in this group were the members of the imperial guard. The most famous troops of the imperial household were the Praetorians who formed the infantry component of the guard.<sup>1</sup> The mounted portion was furnished by the horseguards of the emperor, the *equites singulares Augusti*, who were drawn from the auxiliary cavalrymen on the frontier and were charged with the protection of the emperor's person.<sup>2</sup> The second category of troops formed the mainstay of the Roman army: the legions.<sup>3</sup> These were units of Roman citizens approximately 5000 strong, mostly infantrymen but including a small contingent of cavalrymen, usually 120 men under the high empire, but later substantially increased up to at least 726. The legions were deployed along the frontiers and provided Roman generals with the close order infantry who formed the line of battle.

The third group of units were those of auxiliaries.<sup>4</sup> The auxiliaries were formed into regiments of either five hundred or one thousand men; the foot units were called cohorts while the regiments of horse were known as *alae*.<sup>5</sup> These auxiliary units were the support troops for the legions, often deployed as skirmishers either in front of or on the flanks of the legions. Moreover, it was the regiments of auxiliaries which provided the Roman army with its corps of "specialists" such as archers and slingers.

The final component of the Roman armed forces was the fleet.<sup>6</sup> Roman squadrons and flotillas were distributed along the coastal regions of the empire and were also posted along the major rivers of the empire. The fleet acted more or less as a coast guard (after all, the Mediterranean was a Roman lake) although it could, on occasion, be called upon to aid in amphibious operations, such as the Emperor Claudius's invasion of Britain.

Of these four major divisions of the Roman military establishment, the best known both to scholar and layman alike are probably the troops of the second category, the soldiers of legions. The reason behind this notoriety is the large number of documents concerning the legions preserved from antiquity. These documents range from official troop rosters to private letters to the gravestones of the soldiers: these usually record information on the career of the deceased and occasionally even depict him in uniform.



A vast amount of academic ink has been spilled on various topics concerning the legions such as their officers, organization, recruitment, and the histories of individual legions. Despite this plethora of information and scholarship on the legions as a whole, there is one particular aspect of the legions which has suffered from a dearth of erudite investigation, to wit, the horsemen of the legions: the *equites legionis* of the high empire (ca. 14 B.C.-A.D. 260) and the *equites promoti* of the later empire (ca. A.D. 260-476).<sup>7</sup> The reason behind this lack of disquisition is a deficiency of source material. The number of monuments, inscriptions, papyri, and literary references for the legionary horsemen number somewhat more than a hundred as compared with the thousands of documents for the legions as a whole. As a result, many truisms about the organization, officers, ranks and role of the legionary horsemen have come into being, based mainly on the observations of some of the early scholars of Roman army studies.

Many of these axioms can now be dispelled, based upon new evidence and the reinterpretation of older evidence in light of new discoveries about the legions as a whole or even other similar units. But to discuss all the bugbears of the legionary horsemen is beyond the scope of this paper.

The purpose of the present discussion is to look at a particular aspect of the legionary horsemen, viz., their equipment and tactical role. While it has been admitted, rather reluctantly at least for the *equites legionis*, that the legionary horsemen had a battlefield role, it is generally accepted, based on a dubious passage in Livy (37.7), that their primary duty was to act as messengers for the legionary commander. Their relatively small number, only 120, has also played a part in denigrating the battlefield role of the legionary horsemen.

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PLATE 1

This paper examines the battlefield role of the legionary cavalrymen based upon their arms and armor, and the inferences which can be drawn from this equipment. Three basic types of evidence can be adduced for the arms and armor of these men: 1) the depictions of legionary horsemen on monuments including their tombstones; 2) the archaeological remains of their arms and armor; and 3) the occasional literary or documentary reference to the equipment of the legionary cavalry.

### The *Equites Legionis* of the High Empire

Of the more than one hundred *monumenta* which record the *equites legionis* of the high empire, eight are tombstones which preserve a complete depiction of the deceased soldier. Six of the stones date to the first century A.D., the period during which we have the largest number of

representations in his "battle dress;" many of these depictions belong to cavalrymen, who were rather more affluent than their colleagues in the infantry.<sup>8</sup> These stones generally represent the legionary horsemen in the same poses and with the same equipment as their counterparts in the auxiliary cavalry units.

The first century auxiliaries are most often depicted in the so-called rider-relief, where the trooper is shown mounted on his horse riding down a defeated barbarian opponent; the soldier is often accompanied by his servant (*calo*) who carries additional spears (see Figure 1). In the rider-God, also known as the Danubian Rider,<sup>9</sup> the equipment shown on the gravestone was that of the trooper when in battle. He is represented with a helmet (usually, at least), protective body-armor, usually chain mail (*lorica hamata*) or, less frequently, scale mail (*lorica squamata*), a large shield, a spear capable of being thrust or thrown (*hasta*), and a sword, usually of the long Celtic-type (*spatha*).

Of the six stones of the legionary horsemen which can be dated to the first century A.D., four represent the deceased in the posture of the Thracian Rider-God (Plate 1).<sup>10</sup> Three of the stones are rather badly weathered and as a result only the most obvious articles of equipment are still clearly visible: the shield, the spear, and, in one instance, the helmet.<sup>11</sup> One stone, however, is fairly well-preserved.<sup>12</sup> The stone, from Bonn, represents a certain Caius Marius who served fifteen years in *legio I Germanica* (Plate 2). Marius is depicted as bare-headed, but wears some type of armor over his tunic; the armor is in turn decorated with his military decorations (*dona militaria*). The type of the armor cannot be determined from the stone, but was probably painted to represent chain mail.<sup>13</sup> He also carries the characteristic spear and shield so well-known from the reliefs of the auxiliaries.

The two stones not from the Thracian Rider-God genre show the same basic elements of equipment. One gravestone of two brothers, both *equites legionis*, from the early first century A.D., has a very small battle scene which shows a legionary horseman in combat with a mounted barbarian opponent.<sup>14</sup> The legionary horseman carries the typical cut-oval shield. The second stone, which is anepigraphic, can be demonstrated to belong to a legionary horseman by the military decorations the man had won.<sup>15</sup> The trooper is shown mounted and protected by a chain mail shirt.

There are two grave reliefs of the legionary horsemen from the early third century A.D. Unlike the first century examples, these stones portray the troopers standing about in camp uniform rather than in full battle equipment. One of our stones thus shows the deceased only with a spear and shield while the other shows the trooper merely with a sword. This method of representing the soldier in an undress uniform became the norm in the third century.<sup>16</sup> It is therefore not possible to determine if the equipment of the legionary horsemen had changed from that carried by the auxiliary troopers, but there is no reason to believe that it had.

There is also an imperial, i.e., state-constructed, monument, which shows legionary horsemen. This is the early

first century triumphal arch at Orange in southern France (ancient Arausio). The monument was erected to celebrate the suppression of a Gallic revolt by *legio II Augusta*.<sup>17</sup> Since the arch was erected to honor legions, the horsemen depicted as part of the Roman force have, no doubt correctly, been taken as *equites legionis*.<sup>18</sup> The equipment of these legionary horsemen is generally the same as appears on the first century tombstones: chain mail, shield, spear and sword (Figure 2). The sword, however, is not the usual Celtic longsword, the *spatha*, but rather the shorter *gladius* of the legionary infantry.<sup>19</sup>

There is, however, one horseman who does not wear chain mail, but rather scale mail (Figure 3). This soldier is an officer of the legionary horsemen and may be identified as a centurion, probably the commander of the *equites legionis*.<sup>20</sup> The centurions of the Roman legions were the commanders of the infantry companies, *centuriae*; some of the high-ranking ones were seconded for other duties, including staff and command duties.

The presence of a centurion in scale armor might explain the tombstone of a centurion of *legio XV Apollonaris* from Carnuntum in Austria which shows the officer's scale armor and represents the centurion leading his horse, an uncommon thing for an infantry officer. This man may perhaps now be identified as the commander of a unit of legionary horsemen.

Archaeology, one of the great tools for students of Roman military equipment, is not of much help in the case of battlefield equipment of the legionary horsemen. Although many pieces of cavalry equipment, especially helmets, have been found, there is no way of telling if a piece belonged to an auxiliary or a legionary; even the find spot can be deceptive.<sup>21</sup>

There is, however one area in which archaeology has been instructive: the sports of the legionary horsemen. The legionary cavalry, it can be shown now, like their colleagues in the auxiliaries, took part in special cavalry games, the *hippika gymnasia*, as part of their training. These games are described in detail in the *Taktika* of Flavius Arrianus, the historian of Alexander the Great who was also a Roman commander, a provincial governor.<sup>22</sup>

A large amount of sports armor has been found, much of it from legionary camps, although, as noted above, the find spot cannot be taken as proof positive of the unit of the owner.<sup>23</sup> The most spectacular finds are the sports helmets which were fitted with an ornamental, but protective, mask. Unfortunately none of those found, even in legionary fortresses, can be definitively ascribed to a legionary horsemen, although they must certainly have had them as part of their panoply.

Several pieces can, by means of their inscription or design, be shown to be part of the equipment of legionary horsemen. There are two plaques which were affixed to the soldier's cuirass (Plate 3). One has the letters GEM which should be expanded *gemina*, "twin", the title of the *legio X* which was stationed in the general vicinity of the find spot of the armor.<sup>24</sup> A second plaque has the names of the owners

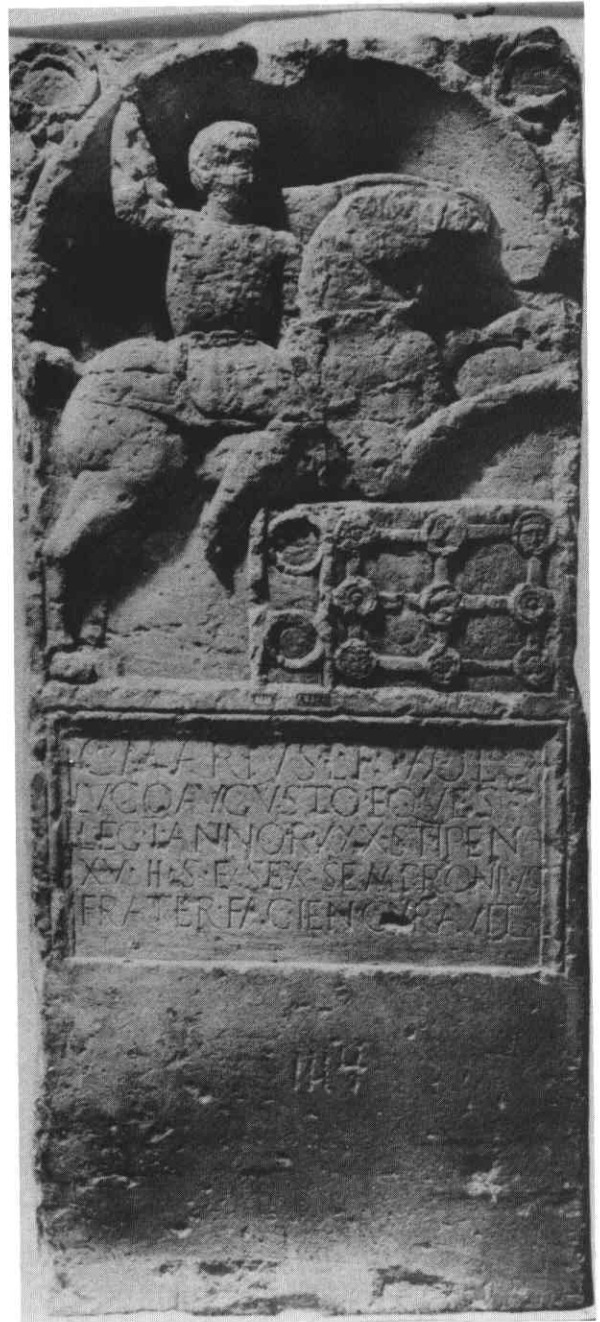


PLATE 2

inscribed who identify themselves by their century, or company; only legionary horsemen were in companies: auxiliaries were in squadrons (*turmae*).<sup>25</sup> Several other plaques have animal symbols which served as totem emblems of the legions, often associated with the creation of the unit.<sup>26</sup> There is also an ornate shield boss which belonged to a member of the legionary horsemen.<sup>27</sup> This boss bears an inscription which mentions the century of the owner (Plate 4).

Finally, there is a literary reference to the equipment of the *equites legionis*. There is an inscription of the emperor Hadrian (CIL 8.18042 = ILS 2487) which congratulates the legionary horsemen for their fine performance in the *hippika gymnasia*. The soldiers hurled their spears while wearing armor (*ut loricati iaculationem perageratis*: armored you performed the hurling of the spear).

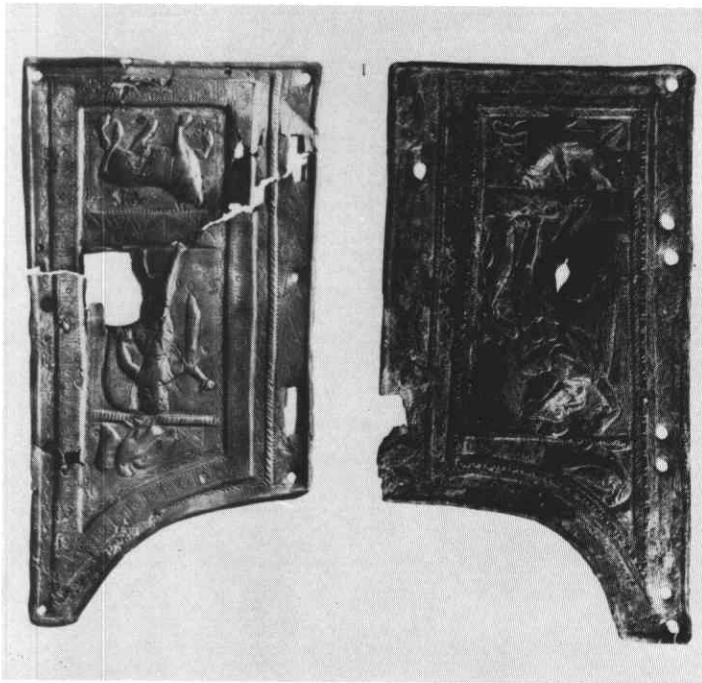


PLATE 3

### The *Equites Promoti* of the Later Empire

Toward the end of the third century, the legionary horsemen were greatly increased in numbers. Some of them were formed into separate units, but others clearly remained attached to their parent legions.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, this was a period of crisis for the empire. As a result, there was less incentive to erect monuments during the later empire and so we have even fewer pieces of evidence for the *equites promoti*, as the legionary horsemen were now called, than under the high empire.

For the later legionary horsemen there is but one tombstone, only recently published.<sup>29</sup> The soldier's shield and spear figure prominently in the relief. There is a minor change in the shield, which is now less oval. The spear must be a *lancea*, apparently a throwing spear, as the trooper calls himself a *lancierius*.

Similar equipment is to be seen on a painting from Luxor. While the soldiers are not called legionary horsemen, it seems that they must be, since Luxor was a legionary camp, probably garrisoned by *legio II Flavia* at the time the painting was completed under Diocletian.<sup>30</sup> These soldiers, in camp dress, are shown with their spear and shield. The exact type of spear cannot be determined; it is probably the standard type, the *hasta*, while the round shield shown in the painting (Plate 5) is similar to that on the tombstone of Aurelius Gaius. That the troopers depicted at Luxor are legionary horsemen may be reinforced by the presence of a soldier in a red tunic, the second figure from the left, which it seems was worn only by the centurions, whom we have seen to command the legionary cavalry; the remaining soldiers wear white tunics (Plate 6).<sup>31</sup>

For the late empire, literary and documentary sources are more instructive. We find from Vegetius that the legionary horsemen were still armored, i.e., *loricati* (2.14). Moreover, we find out that the legionary horsemen were becoming increas-



PLATE 4

ingly specialized, something hinted at by the rank *lancierius*, a horseman armed with a special type of throwing spear, noted above. The *Notitia Dignitatum*, a listing of late Roman military commands and units mentions a unit of legionary cavalrymen who were heavily mailed horsemen, *clibanarii* (*Not. Dig. Or.* 7.2); the *clibanarii* were the forerunners of the medieval knight, completely armored from head to toe and riding armored horses (Figure 4).<sup>32</sup>

Finally, a papyrus from Egypt mentions the weapons of an officer of the legionary horsemen, a centurion.<sup>33</sup> The list of equipment includes a shield, a breastplate, two axes, and a *contus*, or lance. This implies that at least a portion of these particular *equites promoti* were lancers. Perhaps a particular opponent in the region was lance-armed and this required the presence of similarly equipped troopers in the Roman unit.<sup>34</sup>

### Conclusions

What conclusions can be drawn from this morass of information on the equipment of the legionary horsemen? During the first three centuries A.D. their equipment was virtually identical to the genuine cavalry supplied to the auxiliaries of the cavalry regiments. They also possessed sports equipment; this, coupled with the inscription of the emperor Hadrian from Africa, shows that they were involved in the *hippika gymnasia*, the cavalry training events. Moreover, the presence of certain training officers usually restricted to elite units suggests a high degree of training for battle. During the later empire, we see that the legionary horse developed weapons specialists, something which seems to have been a trend in the Roman army. All of this seems to point to a much more active battle field role than has previously been admitted. I would in fact suggest that the legionary horsemen were not the legate's messengers, but rather his bodyguard.<sup>35</sup>



PLATE 5

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The standard work on the Praetorian Guard remains M. Durry, *Les cohortes prétoriennes* (Paris, 1938). A more recent supplement for the numbers of the Guard can be found in D.L. Kennedy, "Some Observations on the Praetorian Guard," *Ancient Society* 9 (1978), 275-301. The urban cohorts are discussed by H. Freis, *Die Cohortes Urbanae* (Köln-Bonn, 1967=*Epigraphische Studien* 2) while the night watch, *vigiles*, is examined by P.K. Baille Reynolds, *The Vigiles of Imperial Rome* (Oxford, 1926).

<sup>2</sup>See M.P. Speidel, *Die Equites Singulares Augusti. Die Begleittruppe der römischen Kaiser des zweiten und dritten Jahrhunderts* (Bonn, 1965).

<sup>3</sup>An old but sound introduction to the Roman legions is the study by H.M.D. Parker, *The Roman "Legions"* (Oxford, 1928). For the histories of individual legions, the article by E. Ritterling, *Legio* in Pauly-Wissowa, *Real-encyclopädie des classischen Altertumswissenschaft* 12 (1925), 1211-1829, must still be consulted.

<sup>4</sup>G.L. Cheesman, *The Auxilia of the Roman Imperial Army* (Oxford, 1914) still serves as a useful introduction, but should be supplemented by more recent works, e.g., P.A. Holder, *Studies in the Auxilia of the Roman Army from Augustus to Trajan* (Oxford, 1980).

<sup>5</sup>Some cohorts also had a contingent of cavalry attached. These units were called *cohortes equitatae* and had either one hundred and twenty or two hundred and forty horsemen, depending on the size of the unit. The troopers of these units were originally considered little more than mounted infantry, but that myth has been dispelled: R.W. Davies, "*Cohortes Equitatae*," *Historia* 20 (1971), 751-763 (=Service in the Roman Army, D. Breeze and V.A. Maxfield, eds., New York, 1989, 141-151).

<sup>6</sup>The fleet is well-discussed by C. Starr, *The Roman Imperial Navy* (New York, 1941). A more recent work, excellent on items of detail but less satisfactory for an overview of the fleet, is the ponderous study by M. Reddé, *Mare Nostrum: les infrastructures, le dispositif et l'histoire de la marine militaire sous l'empire romain* (Rome, 1986).

<sup>7</sup>The standard work on the legionary horsemen of the high empire is that of D. Breeze, "The Organization of the Legion: the First Cohort and the *Equites Legionis*," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 59 (1969), 50-55, esp. 53ff. The *equites promoti* of the later empire are discussed by R. Grösse,

*Römische Militärgeschichte von Gallienus bis zum Beginn der byzantinischen Themenverfassung* (Berlin, 1920), 16ff.

<sup>8</sup>See M. C. Bishop, "Cavalry Equipment of the Roman Army in the first Century A.D., *Military Equipment and the Identity of Roman Soldiers*" (Oxford, 1988=British Archaeological Reports International Series 394), 114, shows that 55% of the richly decorated Roman tombstones from the Rhenish frontier belong to the horsemen of the auxiliary or legionary cavalry.

<sup>9</sup>The Thracian Rider-God and Danubian Rider are discussed by G.I. Kazarov, *Die Denkmäler des Thrakischen Reitergottes in Bulgarien* (Budapest, 1938), 1-16, and, with particular reference to the tombstones of Roman horsemen, M. Schleiermacher, *Römische Reitergrabsteine, Die kaiserlichen Reliefs des triumphierenden Reiters*, (Bonn, 1984) 60-65, esp. 63f.

<sup>10</sup>CIL 13.8053=Schleiermacher K4; CIL 3.4061=Schleiermacher K107; IGR 3.401=Schleiermacher K120; CIL 3.4477=Ubl K15.

<sup>11</sup>The helmet on the relief of CIL 3.4061=Schleiermacher K107 is quite visible and even the type can be determined. See H.J. Ubl, *Waffen und Uniform des römischen Heeres der Prinzipatsepoche nach den Grabreliefs Noricums und Pannonians* (Diss. Vienna, 1969), 28f., classifies the helmet as of Weisenau type, more commonly referred to as an Imperial Gallic Type D: cf. H.R. Robinson, *The Armour of Imperial Rome* (London, 1975), 53.12CIL 13.8053=Schleiermacher K4.

<sup>13</sup>Chain mail was difficult to represent by cutting into the stone, so the Romans often applied a coat of gesso or simply painted the armor grey with blank "links" to show that a soldier was wearing chain mail. See the discussion by Robinson, *Armour*, 169, and *idem*, "Problems in Reconstructing Roman Armour," *Bonner Jahrbucher* 172 (1972), 24-35, esp. 26.

<sup>14</sup>See Ubl, 20.

<sup>15</sup>The original publication of the stone by H.G. Frenz, *Römische Grabreliefs in Mittel- und Süditalien* (Rome, 1985=*Archaeologica* 37), K119, did not identify the man's rank. A review by M.P. Speidel, *CW*, forthcoming, shows the man to have been an *eques legionis*.

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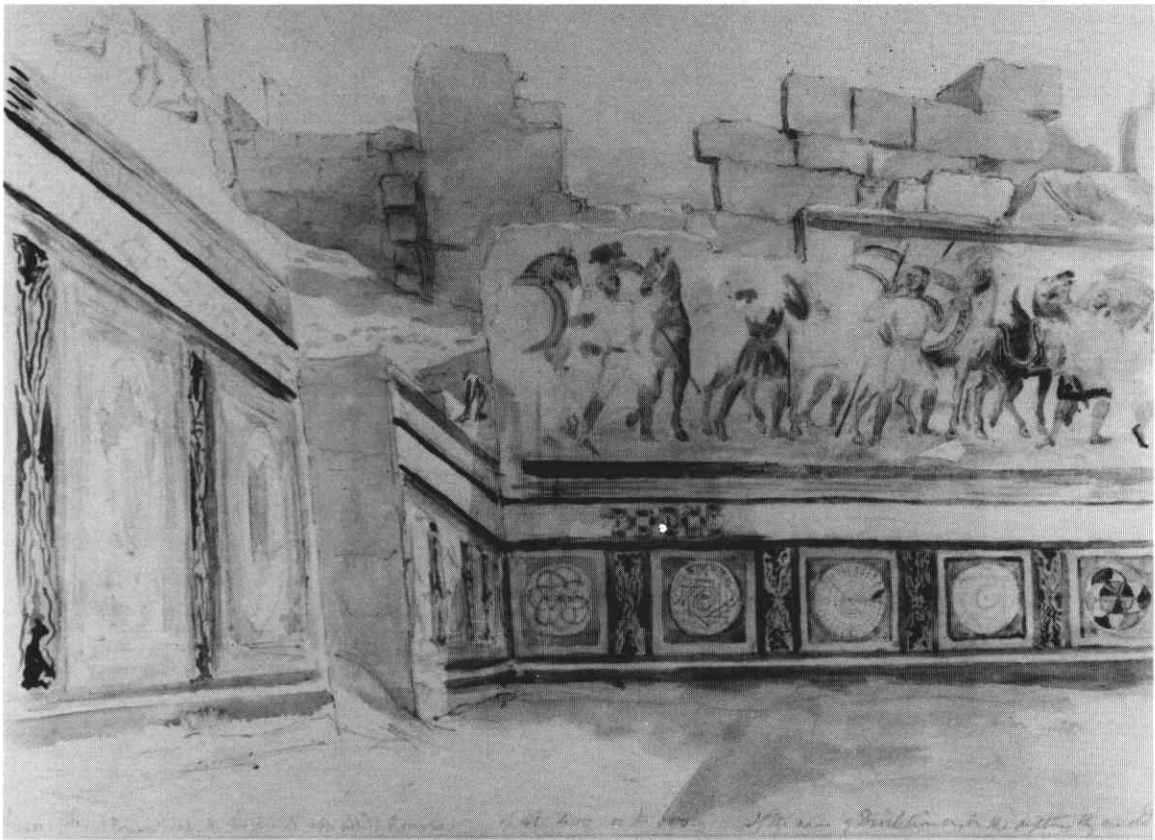


PLATE 6

<sup>16</sup>J. C. Coulston, "Roman Military Equipment on Third Century Tombstones," **Roman Military Equipment: The Accoutrements of War** (Oxford, 1987=British Archaeological Report International Series 336), 141-156.

<sup>17</sup>As dated by P.M. Duval, in R. Amy, P.-M. Duval, J. Formigé, J.-J. Hatt, A. Piganiol, Ch. Picard, and G.-Ch. Picard, **L'Arc d'Orange** (Paris, 1962=XVe Supplément a "Gallia").

<sup>18</sup>G.-Ch. Picard, in **L'Arc d'Orange**, 126f.

<sup>19</sup>G.-Ch. Picard, in **L'Arc d'Orange**, 125.

<sup>20</sup>For a centurion as commander, see the suggestion by M.P. Speidel, "Ein Silbererring aus Baden für die Reiter der 21. Legion," **Helvetia Archaeologica** 70 (1987), 56-58. Cf. the comments by M.F. Pavkovič, **The Legionary Horsemen: An Essay on the Equites Legionis and Equites Promoti** (Diss. Hawaii, 1989).

<sup>21</sup>V.A. Maxfield, "Pre-Flavian Forts and their Garrisons," **Britannia** 17 (1986), 59-72.

<sup>22</sup>The best discussion of the *Taktika* is the commentary of F. Kiechle, Doe 'Taktik' des Flavius Arrianus," **Bericht der Römisch-Germanischen Kommission des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Frankfurt** 45 (1964), 87-129. The cavalry games and the training grounds of the Roman cavalry are described by R.W. Davies, "The Training Grounds of the Roman Cavalry," **The Archaeological Journal** 125 (1969), 73-100 (=Service in the Roman Army, 93-123).

<sup>23</sup>The best collection of sports armor is the catalog by J. Garbsch, **Römische Paraderüstungen** (Munich, 1978).

<sup>24</sup>Garbsch, P7.f Brief introductions to legionary titles are found in H. M. D. Parker, **The Roman Legions**, 261-271, and L. J. Keppie, **The Making of the Roman Army**, (Totawa, 1984), 205-212.25Garbsch, P23.

<sup>26</sup>Garbsch, 31f.

<sup>27</sup>Garbsch, R7.

<sup>28</sup>Grosse, 16ff.

<sup>29</sup>Th. Drew-Bear, "Les Voyages d'Aurelius Gaius, soldat de Dioclétien," **Lag-éographie administrative et politique d'Alexandria Mahomet. Actes du colloque de Strasbourg 14-16 juin 1979** (Strasbourg, 1981), 93-141.

<sup>30</sup>The unit which formed the garrison was discerned by M.P. Speidel and M.F. Pavkovič, "Legio II Flavia at Luxor," **AJP**, forthcoming. For the pain-

ting, see M. El-Saghir *et al.*, **Le Camp Romain de Louqsor** (Paris, 1986), 27-31.

<sup>31</sup>The red tunic of centurions: N. Fuentes, "The Roman Military Tunic," **Roman Military Equipment: The Accoutrements of War** (Oxford, 1987=British Archaeological Report International Series 336), 41-71, esp. 61.

<sup>32</sup>Late Roman mailed horsemen are discussed by M.P. Speidel, "Catafractarii Clibanarii and the Rise of Late Roman Mailed Cavalry," **Epigraphica Anatolica** 4(1984), 151-156.

<sup>33</sup>R. Bagnall and N. Lewis, **Columbia Papyri VII. Fourth Century Documents from Karanis**, (Missoula, 1979), no. 188, 212-218.

<sup>34</sup>M.P. Speidel, "Horsemen in the Pannonian Alae," **Saalburg Jahrbuch** 43 (1987), 61-65, where *contarii*, lancers, were included in a non-lancer unit to fight the Sarmatian lancers who formed the unit's main opposition.

<sup>35</sup>The training officers and role of the legionary horsemen are discussed in Pavkovič, **Equites Legionis and Equites Promoti**.

Figure 1: After M. C. Bishop, "Cavalry Equipment of the Roman Army in the First Century A.D.," **Military Equipment and the Identity of Roman Soldiers** (Oxford, 1988=British Archaeological Reports International Series 394).

Figure 2: After R. Amy, P.-M. Duval, J. Formigé, J.-J. Hatt, A. Piganiol, Ch. Picard, and G.-Ch. Picard, **L'Arc d'Orange** (Paris, 1962=XVe Supplément a "Gallia").

Figure 3: After R. Amy, P.-M. Duval, J. Formigé, J.-J. Hatt, A. Piganiol, Ch. Picard, and G.-Ch. Picard, **L'Arc d'Orange** (Paris, 1962=XVe Supplément a "Gallia").

Figure 4: After M. Rostovtzeff, *et al.*, **The Excavations at Dura-Europos 6** (New Haven, 1938).

Plate 1: Courtesy of M.P. Speidel

Plate 2: After V. A. Maxfield, **The Military Decorations of the Roman Army** (Berkeley, 1984).

Plate 3: After J. Garbsch, **Römische Paraderüstungen** (Munich, 1978).

Plate 4: After J. Garbsch, **Römische Paraderüstungen** (Munich, 1978).

Plate 5: Bodleian Museum, Oxford.

Plate 6: Bodleian Museum, Oxford.