



TYCHE

Beiträge zur Alten Geschichte Papyrologie und Epigraphik

Herausgegeben von

Gerhard Dobesch, Hermann Härrauer
Peter Siewert und Ekkehard Weber

Band 7, 1992





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Verlag Adolf Holzhausens Nfg., Wien

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In Zusammenarbeit mit:

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Redaktion:

Johannes Diethart, Wolfgang Hameter, Bernhard Palme
Georg Rehrenböck, Walter Scheidel, Hans Taeuber

Zuschriften und Manuskripte erbeten an:

Redaktion TYCHE, c/o Institut für Alte Geschichte, Universität Wien, Dr. Karl Lueger-Ring 1,
A-1010 Wien. Beiträge in deutscher, englischer, französischer, italienischer und lateinischer
Sprache werden angenommen. Eingesandte Manuskripte können nicht zurückgeschickt werden.
Bei der Redaktion einlangende wissenschaftliche Werke werden besprochen.

Auslieferung:

Verlag A. Holzhausens Nfg., Kandlgasse 19–21, A-1070 Wien

Gedruckt auf holz- und säurefreiem Papier.

Umschlag: IG II² 2127 (Ausschnitt) mit freundlicher Genehmigung des Epigraphischen Museums in
Athen, Inv.-Nr. 8490, und P.Vindob. Barbara 8.

© 1992 by Verlag A. Holzhausens Nfg., Wien

Eigentümer und Verleger: Verlag A. Holzhausens Nfg., Kandlgasse 19–21, A-1070 Wien. Herausgeber:
Gerhard Dobesch, Hermann Harrauer, Peter Siewert und Ekkehard Weber,
c/o Institut für Alte Geschichte, Universität Wien, Dr. Karl Lueger-Ring 1, A-1010 Wien
Hersteller: Druckerei A. Holzhausens Nfg., Kandlgasse 19–21, A-1070 Wien.
Verlagsort: Wien. — Herstellungsort: Wien. — Printed in Austria.

ISBN 3-900518-03-3

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MICHAEL P. SPEIDEL

Ala Celerum Philippiana

(Tafel 23)

In A. D. 244, after Gordian III had died in battle, his successor, Philip, brought the Persian war to a speedy end. Before returning to Rome from the East, Philip took time out to visit his birthplace, Shahba, in northern Arabia. He rebuilt the town magnificently and renamed it Philippopolis. There an inscription has come to light, dedicated by a most unusual cavalry regiment:

*ala Celerum Philippiana.*¹

Though the text was never properly published and the stone is now lost, the unit's name is beyond doubt. It is also highly revealing: the *Celeres*, the "Swift Ones", a thousand years earlier had been the horse guard of Romulus, founder of Rome. *Ala Celerum* thus surely was raised as an emperor's horse guard².

Ala Celerum is known from two further inscriptions. One of these, a gravestone found at Virunum, the capital of Noricum, shows that there was more to this unit than just an unusual name. It honors Aggaeus, an oriental bowman, *hexarchus* of the *ala* (fig. 1)³:

*Aggaeo,
hexarcho
alae Celerum,
viro sagittandi
peritissimo, vi
militum interem-*

¹ For Gordian III dying in battle, see X. Lorient, *Les premières années de la grande crise du III^e siècle: De l'avènement de Maximin le Thrace (235) à la mort de Gordien III (244)*, ANRW II 2 (1975) 657–787 esp. 772; also E. Kettenhofen, *Die römisch-persischen Kriege des 3. Jahrhunderts n. Chr.*, Wiesbaden 1982, 32 n. 65. Philip founded Philippopolis, see Aur. Vict., *Caes.* 28, 1: *Igitur Marcus Iulius Philippus Arabs Thraconites, sumpto in consortium Philippo filio, rebus ad Orientem compositis conditoque apud Arabiam Philippopoli oppido, Romam venere*. For Philip see E. Stein, *Iulius (Philippus)*, RE X 1 (1918) 755–772; Lorient *ibid.* 788–797; G. W. Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*, Cambridge, Mass. 1983, 121–131. *Ala Celerum Philippiana* at Philippopolis: H. G. Pflaum, *Les carrières procuratoriennes équestres sous le haut-empire romain*, Paris 1960, 847f.; M. P. Speidel, *Roman Army Studies I*, Amsterdam 1984, 244–247. I thank A. Birley and J. Cooke for helpful comments on a draft of this paper.

² Romulus' guard (Livy 1, 15, 8): *trecentosque armatos ad custodiam corporis quos Celeres apelavit non in bello solum sed etiam in pace habuit*. See also Plut., *Rom.* 26 (34). The sources gathered in ThLL and by F. Marquardt, *Römische Staatsverwaltung II*, Leipzig ²1884, 321f. show that Romulus' *Celeres* were a well-known feature of the legend throughout.

³ CIL III 4832 (see 11506) = Dessau 2528; the H at the beginning of line 2 was damaged at some later time. See also A. Schober, *Die römischen Grabsteine von Noricum und Pannonien*, Wien 1923, 49; W. Wagner, *Die Dislokation der römischen Auxiliarformationen in den Provinzen Norikum, Pannonien, Moesien und Dakien von Augustus bis Gallienus*, Berlin 1938, 25f.; Pflaum (above, note 1). Photo Credit: Landesmuseum für Kärnten, Klagenfurt.

*to. Monna,
marito amantissimo.*

The title *hexarchus* is not known from anywhere else in the Roman army. It has been mistaken for the rank of *exarchus* of the Later Roman army and hence the inscription was sometimes thought to belong to the fourth century⁴. *Hexarchus*, however, seems to be a Greek translation of Latin *sevir*, and since *seviri* were squadron leaders of the aristocratic Roman knights⁵, *ala Celerum* recalled Romulus' ancient knights down to such details as still lived on in the organization of the equestrian order in the mid-third century A. D. As a squadron leader, the *hexarchus* is likely to have been the equivalent of a decurion in the regular cavalry, hence a leader of 30 men.

The fact that Aggaeus is called *vir sagittandi peritissimus* reveals *ala Celerum* as a first-class fighting unit. The inscriptions from Philippopolis and Virunum show that the *ala* escorted the emperor on his travels across the empire, all the more since neither place needed an *ala* for a garrison. Being elite fighters in the emperor's escort, the *Celeres* were a guard unit. The emperor's horse guard of long standing, the *equites singulaers Augusti*, are known in Rome in A. D. 242 and again in A. D. 250⁶. Although they might have been replaced by the *Celeres* in the intervening years, or their name might have been changed to *Celeres*⁷, this is unlikely, for they were not an *ala*. For whatever role it had been raised, under Philip *ala Celerum* was one of several new cavalry units of the growing imperial field army⁸.

While campaigning with his field army, Philip was killed by the soldiers in the Thracian town of Beroea⁹. Perhaps a part or all of *ala Celerum* had been left behind at Virunum and was caught there in the civil war against Philip's *saevissima dominatio*. Aggaeus, may have stood for Philip and thus may have been killed in Virunum by rioting soldiers, but he could also have lost his life defending the emperor against traitors in Thrace. His death, *vi militum interemptus*, would thus echo the emperor's own, *tumultu militare interfectus*.¹⁰

⁴ C. Cichorius, *ala*, RE I (1884) 1236f.; R. Grosse, *Römische Militärgeschichte von Gallienus bis zum Beginn der byzantinischen Themenverfassung*, Berlin 1920, 109f.; H. Devijver, *Prosopographia Militiarum Equestrum I-IV*, Leuven 1976-1987, 1008; M. Schleiermacher, *Römische Reitergrabsteine*, Bonn 1984, 234. For *exarchus* see now C. Petolescu, *Aper, Milis Exercus*, ZPE 62 (1986) 295f.; M. P. Speidel, *Roman Army Studies II* (= *Mavors* 8), Stuttgart 1992, 388f.

⁵ For the *seviri* of the knights see A. Stein, *Der römische Ritterstand*, München 1927, 63 f.; Y. Le Bohec, *Les centurions des chevaliers romains*, REA 77 (1975) 108-123. The sources gathered in these two works translate *sevir* by *ilarchos* but they are far too few to make this the standard translation.

⁶ A. D. 241: CIL VI 31164 = Dessau 2189 = M. P. Speidel, *Die Denkmäler der Kaiserreiter*, Bonn 1992 no. 63. A. D. 250: CIL VI 31165 = Dessau 2190 = Speidel, *ibid.* no. 64.

⁷ Under Septimius Severus or Macrinus they are known as *Batavi* in Anazarbos/Cilicia, see Speidel (above, note 6) 688-688 e.

⁸ A parallel is *ala nova firma cataphractaria Philippiana*, see Speidel (above, note 1) 246 and (above, note 4) no. 8.

⁹ D. Kienast, *Römische Kaisertabelle*, Darmstadt 1990, 197f.

¹⁰ *Saevissima dominatio*: AE 1935, 164. Decurions as opinion leaders: Tac. *Hist.* 1, 70; compare Dio 78, 32, 4. Philip's death is described by Orosius 7, 20. For a comparable Norican gravestone of a soldier who died in Dacia see CIL III 5218 = 11691 = Dessau 2309; see also RIU V 1155; CIL XIII 8648 = Dessau 2244 (Caelius of the Teutoburg Forest); J.-Ch. Balty, *Apamea in Syria in the Second and Third Centuries A. D.*, JRS 78 (1988) 91-104 esp. 99: Batao died at Aegae in Cilicia, his gravestone stood at Apamea in Syria.

The *ala* may be mentioned also on an inscription found at Andemantunnum (Langres) in A. D. 1605. The stone is now lost, but the following text was recorded:

IVL.....TRIBVNVS
CELERVM

Scholars were at a loss how to understand the words *tribunus Celerum*. The restoration *tribunus [alae] Celerum* seemed ruled out by the fact that tribunes did not command *alae*, while the restoration *tribunus [legionis....., praefectus alae] Celerum* would take up more space than is indicated by our source. Some thought the text had been tampered with. Perhaps as Romulus' *Celeres* were commanded by a *tribunus*, so were the latter-day *Celeres*¹¹. Elements of the imperial field army early in A. D. 250 under Decius may have come to Andemantunnum in central Gaul to quell the uprising of *Imp(erator) Mar(- - -) Silbannacus Aug(ustus)*, a pretender known only from a coin found in Lorraine, north of Langres¹². More likely, though, we have here a local magistrate of the knights¹³.

Giving a regiment a historic name was not unheard of. Caracalla had a "Macedonian Phalanx" that took after Alexander's warriors in every detail, Diocletian had *Triarii* recalling the legions of the Republic, and the fourth century with the *Sabini* and *Latini* harked back to an even earlier time¹⁴. And just as his "Phalanx" proved Caracalla to be a reborn Alexander¹⁵, so the *Celeres*, surely, made their founder a reborn Romulus. There is no telling which emperor this was, since no less than four of them, from the years 222–244, may claim the honor. Severus Alexander (A. D. 222–235) posed on coins as Romulus. Gordian III (238–244), proud to be a Roman of long standing, also revived other traditions from the time of the kings, such as the opening of the Janus temple in A. D. 242¹⁶. Philip the Arab spoke Greek, the translation of *sevir* into Greek points to a Greek milieu, and Aggaeus was a fellow-Arab¹⁷.

Maximinus (235–238) may have the best claim of having raised the unit as a stroke of politics. In January 238 the senate declared him a public enemy. The emperor, if one may trust the Augustan History, then went before the soldiers and took the double-dealing, sanctimonious senators to task, calling them the murderers of Caesar and Romulus. To surround himself with a Romulan *Celeres* guard would have been a perfect answer to the senate's decree, all the more so since legend told that the senators tore Romulus to pieces for having kept a *Celeres* horse guard. As *Romulus redivivus*, the emperor could claim the greater

¹¹ A full bibliography for the inscription is given by Devijver (above, note 4). For Romulus *tribunus Celerum* see Livy 1, 59, 7; Stein (above, note 5) 63f.

¹² RIC IV 3, 66 f and 105. The coin looks like those of Philip. Kienast (above, note 9) 201 thus tentatively assigns the uprising to Philip's reign. A. Birley, *Decius Reconsidered* (forthcoming) rightly assumes that Decius finished off the rebellion, for Eutropius (9, 4) says of him: *Bellum civile, quod in Gallia motum fuerat, oppressit*.

¹³ For such *tribuni Celerum* see CIL I2 p. 234 (Fasti Praenestini) and L. R. Raylor, *Seviri Equitum Romanorum and Minicipal Seviri*, JRS 14 (1924) 158–171.

¹⁴ Caracalla: Dio 77, 7 and 18; Dessau 8878. *Triarii*: AE 1981, 777; CIL VI 37281, see M. P. Speidel, *The Framework of an Imperial Legion*, Cardiff 1992. *Sabini* and *Latini*: *Notitia Dignitatum*, Oc. 5, 194 and 195.

¹⁵ Dio 77, 7, 2.

¹⁶ Coins: BMC. Janus: HA *Gord.* 26, 3; Eutropius 9, 2, 2; Orosius 7, 19, 4. I owe this remark to A. Birley/Düsseldorf. For Gordian's archaising policy see also Lorient (above, note 1) 766.

¹⁷ However, Gordian III, too, favored Orientals; Timesitheus, his prefect of the guard preferred them, see Lorient (above, note 1) 740 f. Philip raised the Thracian Philippopolis, founded by Philip of Macedon, to the rank of an *colonia* (Stein [above, note 1] 760), merely because of its name, it seems; perhaps he raised the Dacian city of Romula also to that rank (Stein [above, note 1] 763 on CIL III 3081 = Dessau 510) because of its name and since he was the new Romulus.

antiquity and hence legitimacy, thus beating the senators at their own game; and in having to fear their perfidious daggers he clawed his way to the moral high ground. If so, Maximinus raised the *Celeres* in January A. D. 238¹⁸.

Ala Celerum, like most *alae*, did not survive to the time of the *Notitia Dignitatum*, and we do not know how it ended. It nevertheless holds great interest for the archaising political ideology of the mid-third century as well as for the growing cavalry strength of the field army long before Gallienus' reform.

Corrigendum: The inscription from Shahba has come to light again: Damaszener Veröffentlichungen 2 (1985) 12: *Divo Marino. Eq(uites) alae Celerum Philippianae*.

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¹⁸ Speech: HA *Maxim.* 18. See A. Lippold, *Kommentar zur Vita Maximini Duo der Historia Augusta*, Bonn 1991, 520. Gordian III in his later reign was also anti-senatorial, see Lorient (above, note 1) 738ff.



Speidel (S. 217ff.) (Mit Genehmigung des Landesmuseums für Kärnten, Klagenfurt)