



# TYCHE

Beiträge zur Alten Geschichte  
Papyrologie und Epigraphik

Herausgegeben von

Gerhard Dobesch, Hermann Harrauer  
Peter Siewert und Ekkehard Weber

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HOLZHAUSEN



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**H O L Z H A U S E N**

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ARIEL LEWIN  
The Egyptian *cunei*

The *cunei equitum* represent an important feature of the limitanean military apparatus along the danubian provinces. The Notitia Dignitatum lists 13 units of *cunei* in the western duchies: 6 in *Pannonia II*, 5 in *Valeria*, 2 in *Pannonia I*. The same document lists 31 *cunei* in the eastern duchies: 7 in *Scythia*, 7 in *Moesia II*, 8 in *Moesia I* and 9 in *Dacia Ripensis*<sup>1</sup>. No sure evidence has emerged about their strength.

As far as their origins are concerned some scholars affirmed that the *cunei* were new constantinian formations which substituted the *equites* at the time of that emperor<sup>2</sup>. A. H. M. Jones, noting that the *cunei* are mentioned for the first time in a law issued by Constantine or Constantius II and that some *cunei* are called *Constantiniani* or *Constantiani*, argued that the danubian frontier was re-organised by Constantine after the damages suffered in the Sarmatic Wars. The units bearing a dynastic name were new creations, but many other *cunei* bearing the old names of *Promoti*, *Dalmatae*, *Stablesiani*, *Sagittarii* derived from vexillations of *equites*<sup>3</sup>. J.-M. Carrié accepted the timing posited by Jones adding that the *cunei* were the old units of *equites*, debased after the creation of the *comitatenses* and transferred by Constantine in the category of *ripenses*, that is an intermediate status between the *comitatenses* and the old *auxilia*, the *alae* and the *cohortes*<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, more recently, a good handbook on the late roman army has affirmed that „the *cunei* ... may simply represent the old cavalry

<sup>1</sup> N.D., *Oc.* XXXII 22–27; XXXIII 24–28; XXXIV 14–15; *Or.* XXXIX 12–18; XL 11–17; XLI 12–19; XLII 13–21.

<sup>2</sup> D. Van Berchem, *L'armée de Dioclétien et la réforme constantinienne*, Paris 1952, 90–100; D. Hoffmann, *Das spätromische Bewegungsheer und die Notitia Dignitatum*, Düsseldorf 1968, I 211. Both scholars argued that the danubian section of the Notitia is a stratified document listing units that were present in the area in different times. The *cunei* were introduced into the danubian duchies at the time of Constantine and remained there at the time of the writing of the Notitia. On the contrary, the presence of the diocletianic *equites* was no longer actual at that time. But for solid arguments against this theory see G. Clemente, *La 'Notitia Dignitatum'*, Cagliari 1968, 134–145. Hoffmann, *Bewegungsheer* loc. cit. 261–262 also argued that Constantine incorporated the *equites* of the danubian duchies in his mobile army; nonetheless part of them was left in the provinces and reorganized as *cunei*. R. Scharf, *Equites Dalmatae und cunei Dalmatarum in der Spätantike*, ZPE 35 (2001) 186; 188f. points out that only in the eastern danubian duchies the *equites* were withdrawn from the provincial armies.

<sup>3</sup> A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284–602*, Oxford 1964, I 99f. See also M. Nicasie, *Twilight of Empire. The Roman Army from the Reign of Diocletian until the Battle of Adrianople*, Amsterdam 1998, 39; 63f.; 110–112 with important observations about the meaning of the noun *cuneus*. The same scholar rightly rejects the idea that the late antique *cunei equitum* derived from barbarian formations.

<sup>4</sup> J.-M. Carrié, *Eserciti e strategie*, in: *Storia di Roma* III.1, Torino 1993, 131.

units of *alae* and *cohortes equitatae*, but if so, this change of name was not universal over the whole Empire, and the origins of the *cunei* remain obscure<sup>5</sup>. L. Varady argued that the *cunei* had a strength of 1.250 men. He based his theory on a passage by Zosimos who recalls that in the year 409 five τάγματα from *Dalmatia* totalling 5.000 men were annihilated by Alaric. He also argued that the *cunei* were larger units than the *equites*<sup>6</sup>. His identification of the five τάγματα with the *cunei* has been already disproved by a detailed study<sup>7</sup>.

Other than in the danubian duchies, limitanean *cunei* are only attested in *Britannia* and in *Thebais*. One *cuneus* is listed by the Notitia at the disposition of the *dux Britanniarum*<sup>8</sup>. The same source lists two units of *cunei* at disposition of the *dux Thebaidos*, that is a *cuneus equitum Maurorum scutariorum* based at *Lycopolis* and a *cuneus equitum scutariorum* at *Hermupolis*<sup>9</sup>. Several papyri show that a unit of *equites Mauri scutarii* was stationed in late antiquity at Hermoupolis<sup>10</sup>; this proves beyond every reasonable doubt that the full name of the unit mentioned by the Notitia at Hermoupolis was *cuneus equitum Maurorum scutariorum*<sup>11</sup>. The first document that reveals their presence there is dated to the year 340<sup>12</sup>. Furthermore, a papyrus of the year 375 reveals that at that time a unit of *equites Mauri scutarii* had been already installed at *Lycopolis*<sup>13</sup>.

Some documents concerning the egyptian *cunei* are now able to provide enlightening information on their origins and on the date of their deployment in the bases that the Notitia attributes to them. In the year 339 a certain Aurelia Nonna addressed a document before the *curator* of Oxyrhynchus. She describes herself as the wife of a Flavius Dionysius *biarchos* of the ἀριθμὸς ἰπέων Μαύρων σκουταρίων κομιτατησίων<sup>14</sup>. Furthermore, in another not dated papyrus of the fourth century, con-

<sup>5</sup> P. Southern, K. R. Dixon, *The Late Roman Army*, London 1996, 34f. S. MacDowall, *Late Roman Cavalry*, Oxford 1995, 6 argues that the *cunei* of the danubian provinces „may ... have been semi irregular, locally recruited cavalry“.

<sup>6</sup> Zos. V 45, 1–2; L. Varady, *Additional Notes on the Problem of the Late Roman Cunei*, *AAntHung* 11 (1963) 391–406.

<sup>7</sup> See Clemente, *Notitia Dignitatum* (s. n. 2) 139–154.

<sup>8</sup> N.D., *Oc.* XL 54: *cuneus Sarmatarum Breitenraco*.

<sup>9</sup> N.D., *Or.* XXXI 23 (*Lico*); 24 (*Hermupoli*). Moreover, two *vexillationes comitatenses* are known: a *cuneus equitum promotorum* (N.D., *Oc.* VI 85) at disposition of the western *magister equitum praesentalis* and a *cuneus equitum secundorum clibanariorum Palmyrenorum* (N.D., *Or.* VII 34) at disposition of the *magister militum per Orientem*.

<sup>10</sup> See the documentation collected by F. Mitthof, *Quittung eines υποδέκτης ἀννωνῶν ἐπὶ τόπων Μαύρων über eine Steuerzahlung in Gold*, in: A. Bülow-Jacobsen (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 20<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Papyrologists*, Copenhagen 1994, 258–265. See also R. Mazza in her edition of P.Oxy. LXVII 4628.

<sup>11</sup> See already Hoffmann, *Bewegungsheer* (s. n. 2) II 62, n. 412; J. G. Keenan, *Soldier and Civilian in Byzantine Hermopolis*, in: Bülow-Jacobsen (Ed.), *Proceedings* (s. n. 10) 444.

<sup>12</sup> BGU I 21, Kol. II 19 (Prektis [Hermopolites], 13<sup>th</sup> Aug. 340).

<sup>13</sup> P.Oxy. LXIII 4381 (*Lycopolis*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Aug. 375).

<sup>14</sup> P.Oxy. LX 4084 (*Oxyrhynchus*, 6<sup>th</sup> May 339).



cerning a dispute about the right of *metatum*, it is mentioned that in a previous time the *Mauri* had been lodged at Oxyrhynchus<sup>15</sup>.

In absence of any other papyrological information about an eventual presence of the unit at Oxyrhynchus before 339 it is possible to argue that the *equites Mauri* were a new entry into Egypt of the late constantinian period or immediately after. The unit abandoned Oxyrhynchus at a very early stage. As we have noted above, we do know of a unit of *equites Mauri scutarii* based at Hermoupolis already in 340.

The proceedings held in the year 375 before a *dux Aegypti* reveal that at that time the *numerus* of the *Mauri scutarii* stationed at Lycopolis was complaining regarding taxes that the local collectors tried to exact on a camel stable the *numerus* owned at Oxyrhynchus<sup>16</sup>. It is not clear if the stable was owned by the military unit or, more probably, by the soldiers themselves as private property. It seems logical to infer that the owning of the stable at Oxyrhynchus implies a previous presence of the unit in the town.

The date of the first attestation of the *Mauri* at Hermoupolis and the fact that the *Mauri* of Lycopolis owned a stable at Oxyrhynchus lead us to conclude that the two *cunei* mentioned in the *Notitia* derived from the same unit attested to at Oxyrhynchus in the year 339<sup>17</sup>. Furthermore, it is worth emphasizing that in the papyrus from Oxyrhynchus of the year 339 the *equites Mauri scutarii* of Oxyrhynchus are designated as κομιταῖσσι.

Therefore we can assume: 1) the process of the fragmentation of the military units already initiated by Diocletian continued during the time of the sons of Constantine<sup>18</sup>; 2) it was possible to debase a unit of *comitatenses* transferring it to the limitanean

<sup>15</sup> P.Oxy. LXVII 4628 (Oxyrhynchus, 4<sup>th</sup> cent.) with the convincing interpretation of the passage about the *Mauri* provided by the editor of the text, R. Mazza, who also adds further papyrological references on the *equites Mauri scutarii* to the ones listed by Mitthof, *Quittung* (s. n. 10).

<sup>16</sup> P.Oxy. LXIII 4381 (s. n. 13).

<sup>17</sup> The existence of a strict relation between the two *cunei* has already been pointed out. See Keenan, *Soldier and Civilian* (s. n. 11) 444; 446f. It is important to note that the presence of the *equites Mauri scutarii* is attested to in the Oasis as well: see O.Douch IV 457; P.Oasis 11 (late fourth / fifth century). We may assume that the units based at Hermoupolis and at Lycopolis had a large number of tasks over a wide geographic area. On the character of the military activity in the Oasis see M. Reddé, *A l'ouest du Nil: une frontière sans soldats, des soldats sans frontière*, in: V. A. Maxfield, M. J. Dobson (Eds.), *Roman Frontier Studies 1989. Proceedings of the XV<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies*, Exeter 1991, 485–493.

<sup>18</sup> On the origin of the process and its development see M. P. Speidel, *The Rise of Ethnic Units in the Roman Imperial Army*, ANRW III.2, Berlin, New York 1975, 222–224; P. Brennan, *Divide and Fall: The Separation of Legionary Cavalry and the Fragmentation of the Roman Empire*, in: T. W. Hillard (Ed.), *Ancient History in a Modern University II*, Grand Rapids 1998, 238–244; A. Lewin, *Limitanei and comitatenses in the Near East from Diocletian to Valens*, in: *L'armée romaine de Dioclétien à Valentinien I<sup>er</sup>*, forthcoming; D. N. Christodoulou, *Galerius, Gamzigrad, and the Fifth Legion*, JRA 15 (2002) 275–281 proves that at the time of Galerius the legions of the danubian sector had already undergone a process of fragmentation.

army<sup>19</sup>. It seems obvious that the change of status of the *Mauri* occurred at the moment of their transfer from Oxyrhynchus to the new bases. Already in the papyri immediately after 339 the unit is no longer designated as *comitatensis*, although this is a distinction that could hardly be omitted in the documents.

Furthermore, it seems that the unit in service at Oxyrhynchus was not a *cuneus* but a unit of *equites* and that the change in the denomination of the unit occurred at the time of its division into two units. As we have seen, Jones and other scholars argued that in many cases it is possible to infer that the *cunei* derived from units of *equites*. In the Egyptian case, the *cunei* derived from the fragmentation into two units from a single unit of *equites Mauri*. If so, L. Varady's idea (s. note 6) concerning the size of the *cunei* in relation to the *equites* must also be abandoned<sup>20</sup>.

An additional observation might be recalled in order to support this idea: some archaeological documentation from the Danubian provinces seems to show that the *cunei* needed much smaller space than the *equites* for lodging in the forts<sup>21</sup>. However, we must stress that much caution is needed before drawing figures on the strength of a certain unit from the dimension of a fort. There is the possibility that the forts had been built for other units and that the ones mentioned in the *Notitia Dignitatum* occupied them only at a later stage. Moreover, many other factors could undermine the deductions about the strength of a garrison based only on the dimension of the fort.

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<sup>19</sup> This would confirm the idea that elite cavalry units used to move temporarily or permanently between provincial, regional or court commands. See P. Brennan, review of Nicasie (s. n. 3) in *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 114.2 (2001) 261–266. See also Speidel, *Rise of Ethnic Units* (s. n. 18) 224.

<sup>20</sup> Jones, *Later Roman Empire* (s. n. 3) 681 tentatively argued that all cavalry units, *alae*, *equites*, *cunei* and *vexillationes* of the mobile army had a strength of 500 soldiers. See also H. Elton, *Warfare in Roman Europe AD 350–425*, Oxford 1996, 99f. on *alae* and *equites*. Nicasie, *Twilight of Empire* (s. n. 3) 71–74; R. S. O. Tomlin, *The Legions in the Late Empire*, in: R. J. Brewer (Ed.), *Roman Fortresses and their Legions*, London 2000, 170–173 show the existence of much smaller units of cavalry. Elton, loc. cit. 99, n. 29 affirms that „at some point before the drawing up of the *Notitia*, *cunei equites* and *cunei* apparently became synonyms for *equites* and should not be considered as different types of units“. According to my opinion C.Th. V 6, 1 (347); VII 13, 1 (353), the sources quoted in order to support the idea, are not cogent.

<sup>21</sup> See N. Hodgson, *The Late-Roman Plan at South Shields and the Size and Status of Units in the Late-Roman Army*, in: N. Gudea (Ed.), *Roman Frontier Studies XVII*, Zalău 1999, 549f. on the *cuneus equitum Dalmatarum Divitensium* at Drobeta, whose strength, deduced from the barracks destined to the soldiers of this unit, is supposed at 210 and 300. The forts of the *equites Dalmatae* and of the *equites promoti* were much bigger but are not uniform in their dimension. The smallest of them was appropriate for a unit having a strength of 450. On some presumed forts of *equites* in the Near East see A. Lewin, *Kastron Mefaa, the Equites Promoti Indigenae and the Creation of a Late Roman Frontier*, LA 51 (2001) 299–301.