



TYCHE

Beiträge zur Alten Geschichte Papyrologie und Epigraphik

Herausgegeben von

Gerhard Dobesch, Bernhard Palme
Peter Siewert und Ekkehard Weber

Band 20, 2005

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MICHAEL P. SPEIDEL

The Origin of the Late Roman Army Ranks

During the early and high empire, the well-known centurions served as the legions' officers in varying ranks, while below them stood other ranks such as the *signifer*, *optio*, and *tesserarius*¹. In the cavalry of the time, the decurion was the troop officer; below him ranked the *sesquiplicarius* and *duplicarius*². In the mid-third century, however, a new *Rangordnung* came to the fore in the new-type units raised during the crisis of the empire. The new ranks, according to our documentary and literary sources, were *circitor*, *biarchus*, *centenarius*, and *ducenarius*³. Historians of the Roman army would very much like to know when, where, and why this new hierarchy arose⁴.

The rank of *circitor* is known since about A.D. 230, both in the regular *cohors XX Palmyrenorum* and in the 'irregular' *numerus Catharensium*⁵. Vegetius says that *circitor* was shortened from *circumitor*, „he who makes the rounds“, and that while it was at first merely a function, it later became a rank. This is plausible and may have happened in several types of units, regular, irregular, or detachments⁶.

¹ A. von Domaszewski, *Die Rangordnung des römischen Heeres*, Köln 1967 (2nd ed. by B. Dobson).

² D. J. Breeze, *The organisation of the career structure of the immunes and principales of the Roman army*, BJ 174 (1974) 245–292 (= D. J. Breeze, B. Dobson, *Roman Officers and Frontiers*, (MAVORS X), Stuttgart 1993, 11–58).

³ R. Grosse, *Römische Militärgeschichte von Gallienus bis zum Beginn der byzantinischen Themenverfassung*, Berlin 1920, 112; A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284–602*, Oxford 1973, 634 and 1263f.; D. Hoffmann, *Das spätrömische Bewegungsheer und die Notitia Dignitatum*, Düsseldorf 1969, 79. B. Palme, *Die römische Armee von Diokletian bis Valentinian I. Die papyrologische Evidenz*, in: Y. Le Bohec, *L'armée romaine de Dioclétien à Valentinien I^{er}*, Lyon 2004, 101–115; M. P. Speidel, *Das Heer*, in: K.-P. Johne et al., *Handbuch zur Krise des römischen Reiches im dritten Jahrhundert n. Chr.*, Berlin 2006, forthcoming. The fuller, fourth-century hierarchy is laid out by Jerome, *Contra Ioh. Hierosolym.* 19 = PL 23, 386f.: *Finge aliquem tribuniciae potestatis suo vitio regradatum per singula militiae equestris officia ad tironis vocabulum devolutum. Numquid ex tribuno statim fit tiro? Non, sed ante primicerius, deinde senator, ducenarius, centenarius, biarchus, circitor, eques, deinde tiro.*

⁴ None of these titles is found in the indices of Y. Le Bohec, *La hiérarchie (Rangordnung) de l'armée romaine sous le Haut-Empire*, Paris 1995.

⁵ P.Dura 82, I 7 and 17 (= R. O. Fink, *Roman Military Records on Papyrus*, Cleveland 1971, nr. 47); P.Dura 88, 2 (= Fink 1971, nr. 49; ChLA VII 343). M. P. Speidel, *Der Circitor und der Untergang des Numerus Catharensium beim Fall des obergermanischen Limes*, Saalburg Jahrbuch 46 (1991) 148; Palme 2004 (s. note 3), 108. Contra: Grosse 1920 (s. note 3), 112–114

⁶ Vegetius 3, 8, 18: *Idoneos tamen tribuni et probatissimos eligunt, qui circumeant vigilias et renuntient, si qua emerit culpa, quos circumitores appellabant; nunc militiae*

In the mid-third century the new rank of *exarchus* is found⁷. Greek ἑξάρχος can mean „leader“ in a general sense, as for example in Arrian, *Tactica* 10, 1 and 10, 5. As a Roman army rank, it is first known in the *ala Celerum*, at or shortly before the time of Emperor Philip the Arab (A.D. 244–249)⁸. The name of the *ala* hints of the troopers being aristocrats, hence the *ala Celerum* very likely was a guard unit of the emperor⁹. The Greek title *exarchus* points to an eastern origin and the rank may have come into use when new sub-units were formed from chosen horsemen and their regular decurions.

The rank of *biarchus* derives from *exarchus*, as the following will show. The latter rank could be awarded twice to the same soldier who then became a proud *bis exarchus*¹⁰. By the end of the third century, *bis exarchus* was shortened to *biarchus* in the same way as *circumitor* became *circitor* — military efficiency likes shortened terms such as „flak“ or „jeep“. The fact that *bis exarchus* became *biarchus* also explains why the rank of *exarchus* belongs mainly to the third century, while the later *biarchus* belongs to the fourth and later centuries¹¹. Hence there is no need to look for a Greek etymology of *biarchus* such as βία-αρχος, „food officer“¹².

The ranks of *centenarius* and *ducenarius* show more clearly where the new hierarchy took root. Gallienus (at the latest) gave the centurions of the field army these titles of high equestrian rank, including the *ducena dignitas*¹³. *Centenarius* and *ducenarius*, of

factus est gradus et circitores vocantur. Fink 1971 (s. note 5), 191. See the Greek equivalents given by Grosse 1920, 113.

⁷ CIL III 4832 (cf. 11506) = Dessau 2528; AE 1992, 49 (in my paper, *Ala Celerum Philippiana*, *Tyche* 7 [1992] 217–220 I read *hexarcho*, but the supposed H is merely a trace of an earlier inscription that was chiseled out for this one). Further *exarchi*: Hoffmann 1969 (s. note 3), II, 24, note 135; C. Petolescu, *Aper, Milis Exercus*, ZPE 62 (1986) 295f. (ILYug. 1448).

⁸ *Ala Celerum*: M. P. Speidel, *Riding for Caesar*, London 1994, 70f.

⁹ M. P. Speidel, *Roman Army Studies* I, Leiden 1984, 244f. Sons of horse guards became knights even earlier: idem, *Die Denkmäler der Kaiserreiter*, Köln 1994, nos. 34 and 730; cf. idem, *Roman Army Studies* II, Stuttgart 1992, 296. *Celeres* guarding the palace: Malalas 181.

¹⁰ CIL III 14214 = E. Popescu, *Inscriptiile grecești și latine din secolele IV–XIII descoperite în România*, București 1976, 272. Compare the earlier *primus pilus* and *primus pilus bis*.

¹¹ *Exarchus*: Hoffmann 1969 (s. note 3), II, 24, note 135. *Biarchus*: M. P. Speidel, *A Horse Guardsman in the War between Licinius and Constantine*, *Chiron* 25 (1995) 83–87 = AE 1995, 1338; also P.Col. VII 188 = SB XII 11402 (cf. SB XX 14379) of A.D. 320; P.Oxy. LX 4084 (A.D. 339); BGU I 316, 5 (A.D. 359), etc.

¹² Grosse 1920 (s. note 3), 114: „Verpflegungskommissar“.

¹³ Speidel 1984 (s. note 9), 245 contra Grosse 1920 (s. note 3), 117f. The earliest evidence for *ducenarii* is Speidel 1984 (s. note 9), 245 (but the graffito from Dura-Europos remains doubtful) and 258; CIL III 1805, cf. CIL III, Suppl. 4–5, cf. p. 2318.¹¹⁹ = Dessau 5695 (cf. H.-G. Pflaum, *Les carrières procuratoriennes équestres* II, Paris 1960, 952) of A.D. 280; AE 1938, 100; AE 1964, 256; RIU 237; 600. CIL V 1721: *ducena dignitate inter viros lectos* (= field army) *meruerat*. *Centenarii*: AE 1989, 641 = 1990, 866. Ph. Richardot, *Hiérarchie militaire chez Vègèce*, in: Le Bohec 1995 (s. note 4), 422 takes the *ducenarius praefectus* CIL III 99 for our rank, but it is a High-Empire equestrian officer. Vegetius (2, 8, 3) later mistakenly associates the *ducenarius* with the command of 200 men.

higher rank than regular centurions, were titles given to leaders of picked men in new units¹⁴, as assumed above for the *exarchus*. The title *centurio*, however, is still found in A.D. 320 among the *vexillatio equitum Promotorum* of *legion II Traiana* in Egypt, perhaps because the horsemen, stationed near their legion, were not truly part of the field army¹⁵.

The new, Late-Roman ranks thus arose from assimilating the ranks of field-army officers to those of the older equestrian nobility (aside from the *circitor* which denoted a function). Tellingly, by the beginning fourth century the rank of *senator* was added, as that was the old nobility's next higher rank after *ducenarius*¹⁶. The titles, found in the new units of the field army (*scholae*, *vexillationes*, *auxilia palatina*) and the weapon factories (*fabricae*), continued the older *Rangordnung* insofar as functionally the *exarchus* and *biarchus* corresponded to the former decurions¹⁷, the *centenarius* and *ducenarius* to former centurions. The new, Late-Roman ranks remained in force for some 300 years, until replaced in the sixth century by another set of ranks, those known from the *Strategikon* of Emperor Maurice¹⁸.

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¹⁴ Speidel 2006 (s. note 3).

¹⁵ P.Col. VII 188 = SB XII 11402 (cf. SB XX 14379) — but the same document mentions a *biarchus*, which, together with the papyrus M.Chr. 196 of A.D. 309 listing an *exarchus*, shows that the legionary *promoti* horsemen indeed had the new ranks. A possible, but by no means certain, *centurio* among the *equites Dalmatae* may be found in CIL V 7000 = Dessau 2692 (Torino).

¹⁶ Cf. Jerome, *Contra Ioh. Hierosolym.* 19 (s. note 3) and BGU I 316, 8 (359): σινάτορος γουμέρου ἀσιλ[ιαρίων] | Κωνσταντιακῶν.

¹⁷ The catafract vexillations all had the new ranks, hence CIL XIII 3495 (Amiens), read, so far, as *D(is) M(anibus) e(t) m(emoriae). Val(erius) Zurdiginu[s], de(curio) Ca[tafr(aractariorum)]* — must instead be read as *de Ca[tafr(actariis)]* —. Contra: O. Harl, *Die Kataphraktarier im römischen Heer, Panegyrik und Realität*, JbRGZM 43 (1996) 601–627, esp. 620.

¹⁸ J. Haldon, *Administrative Continuities and Structural Transformations in East Roman Military Organization ca. 580–640*, in: F. Vallet, M. Kazanski (edd.), *L'armée romaine et les barbares du III^e au VII^e siècle*, Paris 1993, 45–53.