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SOLDIERS FROM THE PROVINCES
OF MOESIA INFERIOR AND
MOESIA SUPERIOR IN THE
PRAETORIAN GUARD

Thesis summary

Thesis advisor

Prof. Univ. Dr. Lucrețiu-Ion **BÎRLIBA**

Doctoral candidate:

Violeta-Maria **RĂILEANU**

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INTRODUCTION

1. The importance and the motivation of the research

The Praetorian Guard is a military unit whose history stirs much controversy among contemporary researchers. The difficulties in compiling an overview or detailed aspects of its existence, such as the tasks they have fulfilled, the recruitment process of the soldiers or their number, are caused, largely by the limited amount of information provided by the ancient sources. Therefore, to study the problems mentioned above, it is necessary to both examine them in depth, as well as source materials, such as the numismatic, epigraphic and archaeological evidences, thus creating a picture for the quite complex unit that represented an awesome force within the administrative structure of the Roman Empire.

The lack of information on the functioning and role fulfilled by the Praetorian Guard is not based on a lack of interest or importance towards it, but rather on the interest that the Roman emperors showed for discretion toward this military unit, both for their own safety and, also, to not arouse suspicion among the population on the less legal tasks that the Praetorians had to accomplish.

For four centuries, from the civil wars of the late Republic to the bloody reunification of the empire by Constantine, the elite units of the Praetorian Guard have stood in the heart of the Roman army. They acted either as bodyguards or as first-line troops and their combat skills strongly influenced Roman history.

Their reputation is a quite negative. For a very long time it has been thought that the Praetorians were lazy and cowardly in their role as

bodyguards of Rome and that all the big city's temptations has made them weak and greedy, susceptible to corruption and betrayal.

There are numerous episodes, which cannot be denied, when the guard assassinated or abandoned emperors, still their undignified image is slowly being changed by the latest research. Their motives were complex and intertwined with notions of honor and code of conduct, but the Praetorians were essentially loyal to the death, well trained and always ready to fight.

The study of the provincial recruitment of soldiers who entered the Praetorian Guard was included in the recent historiography concerns, but the provinces Moesia Inferior and Superior Moesia did not enjoy an exhaustive study.

This thesis, "Soldiers born in Moesia Inferior and Moesia Superior in the Praetorian Guard", is an attempt to carefully analyze each epigraphic aspect of the inscriptions that mention these soldiers that could provide information on their presence in the Roman army. We tried to insist on their moments of recruitment, the return to their places of origin, onomastics and the social links they formed during their military service.

2. Methodology

This study is focused primarily on soldiers originating in the Danubian provinces with which we are concerned, namely Moesia Inferior and Moesia Superior, who have been part of the Praetorian Guard. These characters are rarely visible in the ancient literature; therefore, epigraphy was the main source of information, as it provides detailed data on the origin of military service and soldiers that cannot be found in literary, numismatic and archaeological sources. The most numerous epigraphic sources are military

diplomas. The importance of funerary inscriptions should be noted, although they share the remaining percentage with religious dedications. These apparently brief documents provide important information on the identity of moesian soldiers and their integration into the army and the Roman institutions, especially due to their onomastics, their journey within the army or family relationships evoked.

In treating the epigraphic material, we set out, first of all, to realize a database of all the Praetorian soldiers recruited in the geographic areas of Moesia Inferior and Moesia Superior, organized according to several criteria, such as the chronological birthdays or ethnicity.

This study is based on a total of 59 inscriptions collected from corpora of inscriptions such as *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, *The Roman Military Diplomas*, *Inscriptiones Latinae in Bulgaria repertae* or *l'Année Épigraphique* that make precise reference to the soldiers of the Praetorian Guard whose place of origin is said to be one of the two Moesia. This *corpus* is subject to all the limitations associated with epigraphy, the most important of which is that we can only provide information for those individuals who had the material means and desire to raise such a monument. The degree of acculturation, also, plays an important role, because, for these military men, its influence was exercised both in their places of origin and in the area where they completed their military service. Therefore, it is important to note that the inscriptions used in this research are grouped according to three different criteria: soldiers who choose to raise votive or honorific inscriptions in their lifetime, soldiers commemorated through funerary inscriptions and official inscriptions that mention soldiers born in Moesia Inferior and Moesia Superior, represented here by military diplomas and *laterculi*.

Chapter I. The evolution of the Praetorian Guard from Augustus to Septimius Severus

In the first chapter, entitled "The Evolution of the Praetorian Guard from Augustus to Septimius Severus" we managed to demonstrate that each praetorian cohort contained a number of 500 soldiers. Most of these soldiers were camped inside the *Castra Praetoria*, although, in our opinion, it does not have a size large enough to accommodate, at any moment, at least 5,000 soldiers. Their origin has changed in quite small intervals of time, but service within the Praetorian Guard was at first reserved to those originating from the Italian Peninsula. Gradually, however, the ethnic composition of the guard had changed and increasingly more people from other provinces have been added to this military unit, till Septimius Severus's decision to conclude the series of bloody moments resulted in the replacement of italic soldiers with those recruited from the Danubian provinces.

Except for a low life expectancy and a lack of comfort from *Castra Praetoria*, the military service in the Praetorian Guard was much gentler compared to the legions defending the frontiers of the empire. *Stipendia* was much higher, but it is enlarged with numerous donations from the Emperors who were eager to buy their loyalty. Also, the Praetorians were committed to a minimum service that was six years shorter than that of the Legionaries and, unlike them, it included the privilege of being able to contract a legal marriage with a pilgrim after demobilization.

The management structure of the Praetorian Guard was headed by two praetorian prefects that came from the equestrian order. The Praetorian Prefect was initially only Commander of the Praetorian cohorts, and, from a strictly legal standpoint, he represented the tool with which the Emperor exercised command over those troops. Initially, the praetorian prefecture was

superior to that of *praefectus annonae* and, until the Flavian period, the function was only lower to that of the prefecture of Egypt for those that were part of the Equestrian Order. It is quite clear why the praetorian prefects have become so important; they were responsible for the personal safety of the Emperor and they controlled a large number of troops in Rome. Probably since their first appointment, but certainly by the end of the first century AD., they played a key role in the consultative councils of the Emperor. No doubt, because of the presence of the prefect in Rome, the emperor would consider it convenient to informally assign to him some tasks that he wanted to be realized. Over time the prefects would receive a whole variety of features that were not necessarily related to their primary role. The strong proximity of the prefects to the emperor and their subsequent ability to influence the general policy led, undoubtedly, to the development of their judicial functions and, in the late Empire, the financial ones. Unfortunately, the process through which these functions have developed is not easy to track in present times. The power and influence of a prefect depends largely on its individual character and that of the Emperor. Prefects like Seianus or Perennis acquired control and authority that went far beyond their formal position.

Praetorian prefects were not necessarily career military men and only in exceptional circumstances came to fight on the battlefields before the reign of Marcus Aurelius. The first prefect who led an army in the field was Otho's praetorian prefect, Licinius Proculus, although he shared the command of the troops with Otho's brother, Titianus and two generals, C. Suetonius Paulinus and M. Celsus. The most famous prefect who commanded an army on the battlefield was Cornelius Fuscus in the conflicts with Dacians in Moesia from the year 86 AD.

Most of the centurions who had served in the cohorts of Rome were promoted to that position from among those that were part of the Praetorian Guard, either during their regular military service or at the end of their careers, when they become *evocati*; still not all soldiers who received *evocatio* will get to become centurions. The Praetorian Prefect was normally responsible for promoting soldiers of the guard to the rank of centurion. However, besides these centurions, promoted from the ranks of the guard, there were other soldiers who had been directly appointed as centurions. Many of them were members of the Equestrian Order, which usually began their military career in the legions before being transferred as centurions in Rome. A favor from someone important (for example, a governor from the senatorial order) could probably ensure presence in the legion; a transfer within the centurions of Rome was a special favor, which would require the approval of the Emperor. While the transfer of an individual from within legions to the centurions of Rome was of great importance for that individual, this route represents only a small part of the seats that were filled in the capital.

The Centurionat of Rome was composed of a select group of about 150 people, representing the excellence of the praetorians and legionnaires. They must have shared a certain unity, not because they had a common social past, but because they held a joint military rank and, because the movements of units and legions of Rome would have developed a knowledge network. Many centurions have spent their adult life together in the Praetorian Guard. The second factor, which allowed for the cohesion of this group of soldiers, was the duration of their military service. A soldier would normally reach the rank of centurion after he served for fifteen to twenty years, often until death. The centurion had one main purpose, to be promoted to *primus pilus*. However, regardless of how much time a

centurion spent in military service, or through which way he came to be a centurion, there is no guarantee he will advance to the rank of *primus pilus*.

CHAPTER II. Soldiers of the Praetorian Guard born in Moesia Superior

There are 25 inscriptions that refer to the phenomenon of recruitment in Moesia superior and they mention 50 soldiers that were part of the Praetorian cohorts. Depending on the type of inscription, I could identify five military diplomas, three votive inscriptions, nine epitaphs and eight *laterculi*. The soldiers come from several municipalities and settlement areas of the province, such as the Dardania, Naissus, Ratiaria, Scupi and Viminacium, but also in rural areas.

Surprisingly, in an analysis of the distribution of the number of soldiers on the basis of their place of origin, we have found that most of them, 25, are from the Scupi colony (50% of the total). At a first glance, we can observe that the colony presents continuity in its role as a recruitment pool. However, isn't it possible that the large number of soldiers coming from this city is actually a sign of different practices in the recruitment of the soldiers who were to serve in the Praetorian Guard and the existence of a large single center where volunteers from one province to enroll?

Having a single recruiting center at the provincial level would, definitely, relieve the incorporation process, but we are aware that the database on which we performed this analysis is not representative or large enough to allow me to state valuable statements in this sense. A higher number of epigraphic discoveries could, in the future, rule out or confirm the hypothesis of a single provincial recruitment center, but till then, I believe that this is still a presumption that is worth being noted.

Although the first evidence of the recruitment of a praetorian native of Moesia Superior can be placed in 119, the systematic use of these individuals began with Septimius Severus and the desire to have a Praetorian guard composed of soldiers that would be loyal. In fact, the king of Leptis Magna began this process by transferring troops from the Danubian legions, including those stationed in Moesia Superior namely Legio III Flavia Felix and VII Claudia.

The first time in which soldiers born in Moesia Superior were demobilized is recorded in the epigraphic sources in the year 200, which would place the recruitment of these soldiers, who have lost possibly his career in the Legion VII Claudia, in the year 184, and the last is roughly dated between 272-273. The inscription records the exact number of years of service for the soldier, in this case 17, recruitment would have been possible in the year 255. Between these two episodes are set demobilization of Moesians at intervals of about 4-5 years.

In terms onomastics, for those born in Moesia Superior, it is possible to see that when trying to join the Roman army, they adopted imperial *gentilicia* using *cognomina* typical for the military and tribal lineage.

CHAPTER III. Soldiers of the Praetorian Guard born in Moesia Inferior

The 35 inscriptions that refer to soldiers of the Praetorian Guard that are natives of Moesia Inferior record a total of 70 individuals; six of them contain information about the Praetorians born in Moesia Superior. Of the inscriptions that make up the epigraphic corpus, the most numerous documents are, undoubtedly, military diplomas, 21, followed by eight epitaphs, seven *laterculi* and two votive inscriptions.

The Praetorians analyzed in our research came from cities such as Callatis, Marcianopolis, Nicopolis ad Istrum or Oescus.

The recruitment of praetorians from Moesia Inferior started in the year 69 with a soldier that fought in Vitellius's guard and whose military diploma, published in 2014, is the only recorded example of a praetorian recruited from Mesembria. Given that the recruitment took place during the Year of the Four Emperors, thus in exceptional circumstances, we can assume their connection of a legion stationed in the province at the time, either V Macedonia or I Italica

The last two soldiers whose demobilization is precisely known can left the guard in the year 248; this allows us to presume that their recruitment took place around the year 230. From the first moment of recruitment till the last soldier was discharged, their demobilization took place at an average of about 2 years.

The study of onomastics for soldiers from Moesia Inferior who have served in the Praetorian Guard is based mainly on a total of 41 individuals, whose names were preserved in a complete form with *duo* or *tria nomina*. It shows us a mixture of Latin, Thracian and Greek elements, with a clear projection of the first. Like the Praetorians born in Moesia Superior, these soldiers adopted the Roman formula of onomastics, except for the fact that some of them have preserved their Thracian cognomina, as a mark of their origin.

Conclusions

Ensuring the sustainability of the memory for the dead has always been a goal for humanity; whether it's scraping the walls of a cave with signs, or with *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*. At one point in the Roman history,

this target was achieved by the inclusion, for individuals from all areas of society, of a person's name accompanied by a series of information limited by several factors that can be assembled in the spectrum of what we call social status on durable materials such as stone and metal. In doing so, these individuals were able to leave an evidence of their presence even after their passage into eternity.

We can observe the effectiveness of these soldiers with the help of a native from the Scupi colony, who was able to achieve the post of *campidoctor*; a function that involved supervising the instruction of all the soldiers from the Praetorian Guard. His case is not unique, because we can also observe the case of an *exercitator* that was born in the province of Moesia Inferior.

One of the observations or, why not, the main contribution made by this thesis is related to the possibility of unique recruitment centers in each of the two provinces, which would easily explain the overwhelming preponderance of praetorians enrolled at Scupi in Moesia Superior and Nicopolis ad Istrum in Moesia Inferior.

In Rome, which at that time must have caused deep feelings of alienation and loneliness, soldiers originating from various parts of Moesia still managed to associate and form deep ties whose manifestation materialized through the worship of local deities and the inscriptions that they raised together.

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