The Roman Army and Roman Cities

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Abstract: The incompatibility of the army and city life not only in Rome and Italy, but also in the provinces was respected from the beginning of Roman rule until the end of Antiquity. In Rome the army could be gathered on the Campus Martius, outside the City. Augustus disposed the legions along the frontier. Examples from the Danubian frontier prove that the military legionary and auxiliary camps were usually located not far from the city, but still at some distance, two or more miles from the civil settlement. Roman emperors in the 1st–4th century encountered the difficulties of stationing the army when passing with troops from one part of the Empire to another, or during the wars on the frontiers: where to put the troops? In the following pages, the discussion about this issue will be limited to the examples of the big cities in the Eastern part of the Empire, Asia Minor and the Balkans: Constantinople, Nicomedia, Naissus, and Sirmium.

Key words: camping of the troops, Hebdomon, Constantinople, Mediana, Nicomedia, Sirmium.

Introduction

The presence of the army and soldiers en masse in cities was not allowed in the Roman State for a variety of reasons. In Rome the army could be gathered only outside the city, on the Campus Martius. An army in a city represents danger for the citizens and their property, even in peace time. Licentious soldiers could provoke disorder in different ways. Ancient authors usually inform us that the emperor and the army stayed temporarily in one city or another, but paid no attention to the problem of where the troops were lodged during the emperor’s stay. Where should the troops be placed during shorter or longer periods of time spent in big cities, such as Constantinople, Nicomedia, Sirmium, Antioch, Alexandria, Mediolanum, and other urban centers? Excavations in Constantinople, Sirmium and Naissus did not bring to light any military camps in the territory of the cities which could receive a large contingency of military troops. For Nicomedia, Constantinople and Naissus it could be proved that the rule of incompatibility between the city and military camp was respected during the Later Roman Empire as well, not only by the legal emperors, but also by usurpers. For Sirmium the data is indirect: the milestones indicate that the army was located at a distance of three or five miles from the city.

Constantinople and Hebdomon

During the stay of emperors and usurpers in Constantinople, the army was camped at the seventh mile from the city, in Hebdomon (today Bakırköy), as stated in the sources. Hebdomon was parallel to the...
Campus Martius in Rome. Speaking of Valens’ proclamation as emperor, Ammianus Marcellinus mentioned that it happened in the suburbs (suburbanum) of Constantinople, without naming where, Amm. Marc. 26.4.3: *Indeque cum venisset Constantinopolim, multa secum ipse diu volvens et magnuminitudine urgentium negotiorum iam se superari considerans nihil morandum ratus, quintum Kalendas Aprilis, productum eundem Valentem in suburbanum, universorum sententiis concincentibus nec enim audebat quisquam refragari – Augustum pronunciavit.* etc. – “Then on his arrival in Constantinople, after much counsel with himself, […] on the twenty-eighth of March he brought the aforesaid Valens into one of the suburbs and with the consent of all proclaimed him Augustus”\(^2\). In his translation J. Rolfe notes that the place was called *Hebdomum* and also *Septimum*, because it was seven miles away from the city. Later other emperors were also proclaimed there. From *Hebdomon* Theodosius started his campaign against Eugenius; it is mentioned as the place where, beside Valens, the emperors Arcadius, Honorius, and Theodosius II, as well as other early Byzantine emperors, such as Mauricius and Phocas, were proclaimed in the presence of the army, as was the custom. Even those who came to the throne illegally were proclaimed emperors by their troops not in Constantinople, but in *Hebdomon*. Basiliscus, who rebelled against Emperor Zeno, was proclaimed by his troops in this place in AD 475.

How disastrous the presence of soldiers in the city of Constantinople could be, is exemplified in the case of Gainas in about AD 400. He had left the majority of his troops in *Hebdomon*, but many of them stayed together with him in Constantinople. The soldiers, mostly Goths, spent their time plundering. Forced to leave the city, Gainas withdrew together with the troops, the cattle and the booty to *Hebdomon*, the place where Theodosius put together his army in preparation for the battle against Eugenius and built the church of St. John the Baptist before moving to the west, as explained in the source (Seeck 1913, vol. 5, 251).

Many monuments have been located in Hebdomon: Κάμπος τοῦ τριβουναλίου, Theoph. 1.291; barracks of Theodosius, καστέλλιν Θεοδοσιανῶν, Theoph. 1.297; palaces; cisterns; many churches, among them the one consecrated to St. John the Baptist (Janin 1964, 447 ff.). It could be compared with the buildings excavated in Mediana, not far from Naissus.

**Mediana**

For Naissus, it is directly proven that the army, together with both emperors, Valentinian and Valens, camped in Mediana (fig. 1), at a distance of three miles from the city. As recorded by Ammianus Marcellinus, it was at this point that Valentinian and Valens divided the troops, the command and the staff. This event is described in Amm. Marc. 26.5.1 in some detail: *Acta igitur tranquillus hieme, concordissimi principes, unus nuncupatione praelatus, alter honori specie tenus adiunctus, percursis Thraciis Naessum advenerunt, ubi in suburbano, quod appellatum Mediana, a civitate tertiio lapide disparatur, quasi mox separandi, partiti sunt comites.* – “So, then the emperors spent the winter quietly in perfect harmony, the one eminent through the choice that had fallen upon him, the other joined with him in the office, but only in appearance. After hastening through Thrace, they came to Naesus, where in a suburb called Mediana, at a distance of three miles...”\(^2\) Translation by J. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 2, 586.
from the city, they shared the generals between them in view of their forthcoming separation.3

A palace, a cistern with an aqueduct, two granaries (horrea) and military barracks, and the remains of two churches were also discovered during the archaeological excavations in Mediana (Milošević 2011; Milošević et al. 2013; Vasić et al. 2016).

Even in the time after the Hunnic invasion, in the mid-fifth century, when the Roman frontier was removed from the Danube to the south in the line of Naissus, the ancient rule not to have soldiers in the city – although it was ruined by this time – was respected. The embassy sent from Constantinople in AD 448 to Attila found Agintheus, the commander of the Roman military forces in Illyricum, not in Naissus, but at some distance from the city4, probably in Mediana.

**Nicomedia**

The meeting place of troops in Nicomedia was three miles away from the city, as directly confirmed in Lactantius. Diocletian convoked the army in AD 305 in Nicomedia in order to make public his decision to retire from power and to announce the coming of the new Augusti, Galerius and Maximinus Daia. This happened in the presence of the army assembled on a hill, three miles from the city of Nicomedia, as Lactantius records in *De mortibus persecutorum* 19.1-2:

> Cum haec essent constituta, proceditur Kalendis Mais. Constantium omnes intuebantur; milietes qui aderant et primores militum electi et acciti ex legionibus in hunc unum intenti gaudebant, optabant et vota faciebant. Erat locus altus extra civitatem ad milia fere tria in cuius summo Maximianus ipse purpuram sumpserat et ibi columna fuerat erecta cum Iovis signo. Eo pergitur. Contio militum convocatur in qua senex cum lacrimis alloquitur milites, etc.

– “After deciding this, they proceeded to the action on 1 May. The gaze of all was upon Constantine, no one had any doubt; the soldiers who were present, the military officers who had been chosen and summoned from the legions, had eyes only for him; they were delighted with him, they wanted him, they were making their prayers for him. There was some high ground just under three miles out of the city, on whose summit Maximian himself had assumed the purple and on which a column had been erected with a symbol of Jupiter. It was to this point that they proceeded. A meeting of the troops was called there”5.

The troops assembled there were probably from the Eastern part of the Empire and were under the command of Diocletian and Galerius6.

It is clear that the army was not in the city of Nicomedia, the seat of Diocletian.

**Sirmium**

Located at some distance from the frontier on the Danube, Sirmium was convenient to serve as the starting point for the wars of the Emperors Domitian and Marcus Aurelius, and often in the Later Roman period, during the wars against the Quadi, Marcomanni, Sarmati, and the German tribes that lived along the Danube. It was a base where the emperors and troops who took part in the expeditions camped. There is reason to believe that the army, gathered for a campaign or other reasons, was located outside the city. The evidence is indirect. Distances of three or five miles appear on milestones, without naming the station.

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3 Translation by J. Rolfe.
6 There is no reason to believe that only a *comitatus* was present, as suggested by Creed 1984, 100, who quotes it as Moreau’s opinion: salutation was made by all troops temporarily under the command of the emperors.
Two of them were found at a short distance of 4 km to the east of the city, on the Crepovac farm. One milestone dated to the time of Marcus Aurelius was erected in AD 161, and another was dedicated to Septimius Severus by the governor of Pannonia Inferior, Claudius Claudianus, in AD 198 in the same place; both at the third mile from Sirmium.

AD 161: CIL III 10615; Mirković, Sirmium 1, # 92:

\[
\text{Imp(erator) Caes(ar) M. Aurel(ius) | Antoninus Aug(ustus) |}
\text{trib(uniciae) potest(atis) XV co(n)s(ul) III et | Imp(erator) Caes(ar) L.}
\text{Aurel(ius) | Verus Aug(ustus) | trib(unicia) potest(atis) | co(n)s(ul) II |}
\text{divi Antonini fili | divi Hadriani nepotes | divi Traiani Pa[r]thic | prone-
\text{potes | divi Nervae abnepotes | Sirmi | m(ilia) p(assuum) III.}
\]

AD 198: CIL III 10616; Mirković, Sirmium 1, # 93.

\[
\text{Imp(eratori) Caes(ari) | L. Sept(imio) Seve|ro Pio Pert(inaci) |}
\text{Aug(usto) Arab(ico) | Adiab(enico) Part(hico) [m(aximo)] | [div(i}
\text{Marci f(ilio)] div(i) Commodi fr(atri) | divi Anton(ini) Pi(i) nep(oti) |}
\text{divi Had(riani) pron(e)p(oti) | div(i) Tr(aiani) Part(hici abn(e)
\text{p(oti) | div(i) Nerc(eae) abn(e)p(oti) p(atri) p(atriae) | imp(eratori)
\text{XI tr(ibuniciae) p(otestatis) VI co(n)s(uli) II pr(o)co(n)s(uli) |}
\text{Imp(eratori) M. Aur(elio) Ant(onino) Aug(usto) L. Sep(timii) | Sever(i)
\text{Pert(inaci) Aug(usti) n(ostri) f(ilio) | div(i) Ant(onini) n(e)p(oti) div(i)
\text{| Ant(onini) Pi(i) pronep(oti) | div(i) Hadriani abn(e)p(oti) | div(i)
\text{Tr(aiani) Part(hici) et div(i) | Nervae abn(e)p(oti) et | [L. Sept(imio)
\text{Geta(e) Caes(ari) ] Aug(usti) n(ostri) fil(lio) cur(ante) Ti. Cl(audio)
\text{Claudiano leg(ato) Augg(ustorum) | pr(o) pr(aetore) | A Sirmi(o) | m(ilia)
\text{p(assuum) III.}
\]
The text on the third, marble milestone, which is dated to AD 354, begins in an unusual way, by giving a distance of five miles, **MPV, m(ilia) p(assum) V**, and notes the repairs of the road leading from Atrans to the river Sava.

*CIL III 3705 + 10617 (Dessau, ILS 732); Mirković, Sirmium 1, # 97.*

\[
\text{M(ilia) p(assuum) V | Imper(erator) Caes(ar) Fla(vius) Iul(ius) Constantius Pius Fel(ix) | Aug(ustus) victor maximus | triumfator aeternus | divi Constantini optimi | maximique principis (filius) divorum Maximiani et | Constanti nepos divi | Claudii pronepos pontifex maximus Germ(anicus) | Alamannicus (!) maximus | Germ(anicus) max(imus) Gothicus | maximus Adiabin(icus) (!) max(imus) | tribuniciae potestatis | XXXI imper(ator) XXX consuli (!) VII | p(ater) p(atris) proconsuli (!) viis munitis pontibus refectis | recuperata re publica | quinarios lapides per Illyricum fecit | ab Atrante ad flumen | Savum milia passum | CCCXLVI.}
\]

At the third or fifth mile from Sirmium there is no station recorded in the Roman itineraries. It could have been a villa or a farm on the state domain, similar to the *villa Pistrensis* to the west of Sirmium, where the army camped temporarily. The different distance in milestones from AD 161 and AD 198 on the one hand, and the one from AD 354 on the other, could be explained by the measurement of the distance once from the city center, and once from the city walls, or by the fact that the army camp was changed, but never far from the city where the emperor dwelled in the palace.

It seems that the milestones indicated a place at a distance of three or five miles from the city, probably an imperial or a state domain, where the large number of troops temporarily camped during the campaign on the Danube or on their way to the eastern frontier.

**Conclusion**

The later Roman author Zosimos criticizes Constantine’s decision to withdraw the military troops from the frontier and to locate them in the towns which did not need any protection. In this way the city is transformed, as he says, into a theatre of disorder of every kind, provoked by the soldiers accustomed to enjoying pleasures and a lazy life. Whatever reason Zosimos had to hold Constantine responsible for corrupting the army, he could hardly be right in blaming him for withdrawing the army into the cities which did not need any protection and leaving the frontier open to the barbarians. There is reason to doubt his statement about Constantine’s policy. The later practice does not confirm the presence of a large army either in the city of Constantinople, or in Naissus or Sirmium. A big army was gathered in *Hebdomon* outside the city after his reign, during Theodosius’ preparation for the campaign against Eugenius, but only temporarily. The army was again camped at the frontier in the fourth century, like it had been before. There is direct proof that the troops were not located in the cities, as for instance in Sirmium. When Julian approached the city in AD 361, the military commander charged with the defense of this part of the Empire had to collect troops garrisoned in the neighboring stations at the frontier and bring them to Sirmium, as we are informed by Amm. Marc. 21.9.5: *none the less, count Lucilianus who then commanded the troops stationed in those regions, with headquaters at Sirmium, having some slight intelligence of Iulian’s move, gathered*
together such forces as regard for speedy action allowed to be summoned from the neighboring stations and planned to resist him when he should arrive\textsuperscript{8}. Knowing that he could not trust these troops, Julian did not join them to his army, but sent the two legions, \textit{VI Herculia} and \textit{V Iovia}, which Lucilianus brought to Sirmium, and the \textit{cohors sagitariorum} to Italy, and left only the loyal unit of Batavi in Sirmium\textsuperscript{9}.

\textbf{Bibliography}

\begin{itemize}
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\textsuperscript{8} Translation by J. Rolfe.
\textsuperscript{9} Zosim. 3.35.

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