

# EAGLES, FLAGS AND LITTLE BOARS

## *The Cult of the Standards in the Roman army*

THE VARIOUS STANDARDS CARRIED BY ROMAN ARMIES WERE NOT SIMPLY FOR SHOW. NOR WERE THEY PURELY UTILITARIAN SYMBOLS TO MARK A RALLYING POINT IN BATTLE, OR HONORIFIC EMBLEMS REPRESENTING TRADITION OR UNIT PRIDE. IN FACT, EACH UNIT'S STANDARDS WERE VENERATED AS DEITIES THAT ENCAPSULATED THE VERY SPIRIT OF THE UNIT ITSELF. IT IS NO WONDER THAT THE LOSS OR DESTRUCTION OF THE STANDARDS WAS CONSIDERED SHAMEFUL AND BROUGHT DISGRACE ON THE MEN, ON THE UNIT, AND ON ROME HERSELF.

By Duncan B Campbell

We derive much of our knowledge about the Roman army from Vegetius. This late writer, drawing on a variety of earlier sources, records that it was the responsibility of the first cohort of each legion "to pay homage to the images of the emperors, which is to say the sacred and propitious standards (*signa*)."

(Vegetius, *Epitome of Military Affairs* 2.6).

Over a century earlier, the Christian writers Minucius Felix and Tertullian attempted to show that the Christian cross was actually central to pagan religion, by pointing out that some Roman gods incorporated a wooden cross in their form. "The *signa* themselves, and the *cantabra* and *vexilla* of the camp, what are these but gilded and ornamented crosses?" (Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 29.6-7) and:

"The entire religion of the Roman camp is about worshipping the standards (*signa*), swearing oaths by the standards, and setting the standards above all the gods."

Tertullian, *Apology* 16.8

Here, as elsewhere, Tertullian's anti-pagan rhetoric is not strictly true. As we shall see, Jove (or Jupiter, as he is otherwise known) was still revered on his

own account, despite being identified, in particular, with the *aquila*, or eagle standard. But all of the army's standards were, in the words of Vegetius, "sacred and propitious."

Even when laying out a marching camp, "first of all, the *signa* are set up in their places inside the camp, because nothing is more venerated by the soldiers than their majesty" (Vegetius 3.8). In the permanent forts and fortresses, the standards were kept inside the headquarters building, in a shrine known as the *aedes principiorum*. Here, along with the regimental pay chest, they were entrusted to certain key personnel, who ensured that they were treated correctly.

### Roman army standards

Pliny the Elder thought that the earliest standards of the Romans had depicted five different creatures: the eagle, the wolf, the minotaur, the horse, and the boar (*Natural History* 10.16). But the famous general Marius, in his second consulship (104 BC), decreed that only the eagle should be carried into battle, while the other emblems were left in camp. Writing centuries later, Vegetius confirms (if we needed confirmation) that "the principal standard (*signum*) of the entire legion is the eagle (*aquila*), which the eagle-bearer (*aquilifer*) carries" (Vegetius, *Epitome* 2.13). Because the eagle was attached to the first cohort, the chief centurion (*primus pilus*) shared responsibility for it. At Novae, an altar "to the military



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The well-known tombstone of Quintus Luccius Faustus, who served in *Legio XIV Gemina Martia Victrix*, shows the most common variant of centurial standard with *phalerae* and, near the bottom, the symbol of the legion, a Capricorn above a crescent *lunula*. Now in the Landesmuseum, Mainz.

gods, to the guardian spirit, and to the excellence of the sacred *aquila* and the *signa* of the First Italic Severian legion" (*ILS* 2295), was erected, not by the eagle-bearer, but by the *primus pilus*, on 20 September AD 224.

In the earliest days, the legionary eagles had been kept in the *aerarium Saturni*, the "treasury of Saturn", located in the dark interior of the ancient god's temple at Rome (e.g. Livy 3.69).

This was not entirely in recognition of their sacred status, as the *aerarium* was the central repository for anything of value, from gold bullion to senatorial archives. Nevertheless, the link with both a temple and a treasury was established, and the tradition continued.

"The aquila is a little portable shrine and in it perches a golden eagle. It exists in all the legions on the list, and it is never disturbed from the winter-quarters unless the whole army takes the field; one man carries it on a long pole which ends in a sharp spike so that it can be stuck firmly in the ground."

Cassius Dio 40.18.1-2



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Oclatius was a cavalry standard-bearer in the *Ala* of Africans, though he himself was a Tungrian, from northern Belgium. Though his rank was *signifer*, his standard seems to bear the imperial *imago*. Now in the Clemens-Sels museum, Neuss.

At some point, the individual companies of men, the *centuriae* ("centuries"), were each given a standard too. Polybius records that, in his day, the centurions in each maniple (or double century) "chose two of the most vigorous and excellent men as standard bearers" (Polybius 6.24.5). Vegetius records that, in later times, these "standard-bearers (*signiferi*), who carry the *signa*, are now called dragon-bearers (*draconarii*)" (Vegetius 2.7).

So, besides the *aquilifer*, each legion will have had 59 or 60 *signiferi* on its books, one per century. Vegetius mentions a third type of standard-bearer, the "image-bearers (*imaginiferi*) who carry the images of the emperor" (Vegetius 2.7). Like the *aquila*, there is likely to have been one *imago* in each legion. And, whenever a vexillation was detached for duty away from base, it marched under a flag (*vexillum*) that required the services of a *vexillarius*.

### The standard-bearers

The 19th century doyen of Roman military studies, Alfred von Domaszewski, divided the ranks of the Roman army into two main groups beneath the centurionate: the 'tactical ranks' within the century, and the headquarters staff. The latter were largely the *cornicularii* and *beneficiarii*, men whom we characterise as adjutants, attached to senior officers like tribunes, prefects and legates. The 'tactical ranks', on the other hand, were the tightly-knit group of *tesserarius* (keeper of the watchword), *signifer* (standard-bearer), and *optio centuriae* (centurion's assistant). As a rule, men holding any of these different posts were classified as *principales* and earned either pay-and-a-half or double pay. The fortunate few who made the leap up to centurion had generally held a variety of these posts beforehand.

Standing somewhat apart from this hierarchy were the *aquilifer* and *imaginifer*, who followed a different career path. We can see that, for most of the two or three dozen *aquiliferi* and somewhat fewer *imaginiferi* who recorded their careers on tombstones, only death or retirement removed them from their post. Unlike other *principales*, only three are known to have progressed to a different rank, in all cases as centurion.



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Tiberius Pancuius' standard, belonging to the early imperial auxiliary Lusitanian cohort, has a crossbar with pendants hanging from it, as well as a *phalera* and a *lunula*. Now in the Clemens-Sels museum, Neuss.

"For Sextus Sammius Severus, of the Voltinian voting tribe, centurion of the First Germanica legion, who was made eagle-bearer by the same consul who initiated his military career, served as eagle-bearer for 13 years, and was made centurion during the consulship of Gaius Antistius Vetus, for the second time, and Marcus Suillius Nerullinus [AD 50]. (Set up) according to the terms of his will."

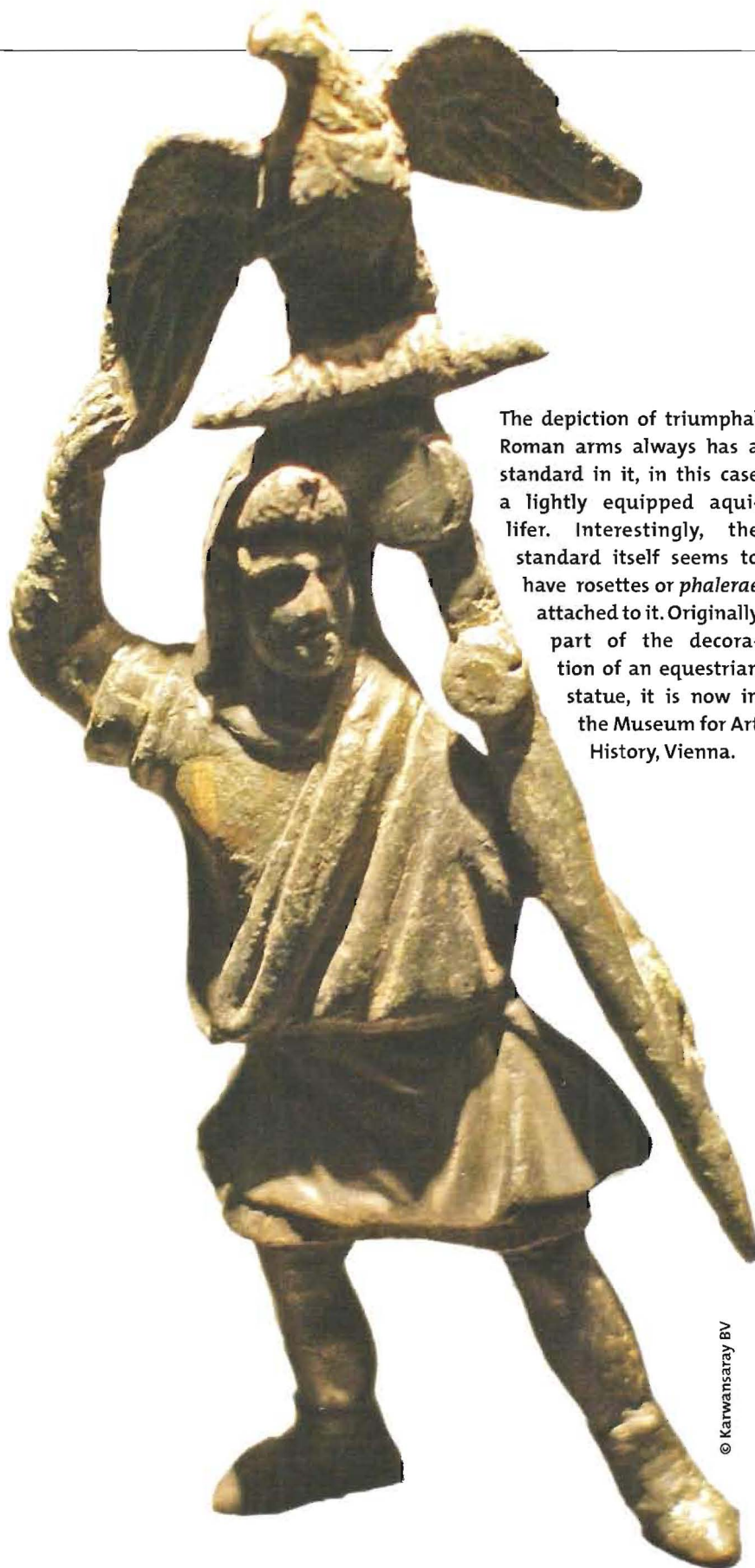
H. Dessau, *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae* § 2342

These posts were prestigious. On 1 January AD 69, when the legions of Upper Germany refused to take the oath to the new emperor Galba, it was the *aquilifer* of the Fourth Macedonica who was sent to take the news to the governor of the Lower province, Aulus Vitellius. Trustworthy and brave, a man like 41-year old Publius Carsidius Calvus, buried at Burnum after eighteen years service as *aquilifer* (CIL 3, 14995), would have had the necessary gravitas to carry a delicate message to the provincial governor. Their sacred office placed them second only to the centurions in seniority.

The overwhelming bulk of evidence relates to the legions, with their highly developed and complex career hierarchy. However, the auxiliary units had a similar, if less complicated, system. Clearly, the *aquilifer* was, by definition, a legionary role, but each auxiliary regiment had an *imaginifer*, along with several *signiferi*, one per infantry century or cavalry troop.

The rank of *vexillarius* was, however, different. Most commonly found amongst the auxiliary cavalry, it often appears as *vexillarius equitum* ("flag-bearer of the cavalry", as on the well-known tombstone of Tiberius Claudius Maximus; AE 1969/70, 583). But even in an infantry cohort, the *vexillarius* may have been mounted, as a tombstone from Tomis (Romania) suggests (AE 1957, 193, set up by Valens, *eques vexillarius cohortis I Cilicum*). The *vexillarius* of the part-mounted Twentieth Palmyrene cohort at Dura Europus appears, alongside a *signifer*, on the books of one of the *turmae* (cavalry troops). It reminds us of the fact that such specialists probably remained with the century or troop in which they were originally enrolled.

It seems that the auxiliary *vexillarius* occupied a similar position to the legionary *aquilifer*, although he lacked the seniority and status of the eagle-bearer, and almost certainly drew a smaller salary. Nevertheless, it is interesting to find that the *vexillarius* and *imaginifer* at the fort of Niederbieber were able to fund, in AD 239, a "standard (*signum*) with its own chapel (*aediculum*) and marble plaque" (CIL 13, 7753). They dedicated it to "the guardian spirit (*genius*) of the flag-bearers and



The depiction of triumphal Roman arms always has a standard in it, in this case a lightly equipped *aquilifer*. Interestingly, the standard itself seems to have rosettes or *phalerae* attached to it. Originally part of the decoration of an equestrian statue, it is now in the Museum for Art History, Vienna.

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image-bearers", further emphasizing the religious aspect of the standards.

### The honour guard

In the early 3rd century, the Twentieth Palmyrene cohort, a thousand-strong part-mounted unit of archers, occu-

pled the frontier town of Dura Europus, perched on the west bank of the Euphrates in deepest Syria. The town is renowned for its unrivalled collection of papyrus documents, which, though fragmentary and incomplete, give a flavour of military routine under the

Severan emperors.

A duty roster dated to AD 219 (*P. Dura* 100), lists soldiers assigned “to the sacred images” in the regimental *aedes principiorum*. This was clearly a responsible assignment, for one of the men, by the name of Aurelius Cocceius, was a *duplicarius* (“double-pay man”, probably the cavalry *curator*). Another document, a morning report from the period AD 223-235 (*P. Dura* 82), notes that several men “are keeping watch at the *signa* of our lord, the emperor Severus Alexander.” The honour guard included the decurion Timinius Paulinus, an *aedituus* (“chaplain”) named Aurelius Silvanus, and a *circitor* (“patrolman”). On one occasion, they were joined by an *optio*, a *signifer*, a *sesquiplicarius* (“pay-and-a-half man”, probably a cavalry *signifer*), a *librarius* (“clerk”), and several cavalry troopers. On another occasion, it was the turn of two *curatores* and a cavalryman (along with some others, whose names are now lost).

A later morning report, filed on 27 May AD 239, lists the honour guard “at the *signa* of our lord, the unconquered emperor Marcus Antonius Gordianus Pius Felix” (whom we know as Gordian III). This time, it was fronted by an *ordinatus princeps* (highest ranking centurion of his cohort) named Aurelius Germanus, accompanied by three *signiferi*, two *tesserarii*, a *bucinator* (“trumpeter”), and a *sacerdos* (“priest”).

Papyrus documents are known from Egypt, also. One undated fragment, clearly related to one of the legions of Egypt, records that “the centurion Varius led the night watch at the eagle and the *signa*” (*PSI* 13, 1307). His honour guard may have included a type of priest known as an *antistes*, again underlining the religious significance of standing guard over the standards.

### Annual dedications

A remarkable series of altars is known from Villamontán de la Valduerna, about 50 km from León in northwest Spain. They prove that individual army units carried favour with Rome’s chief god, Jupiter Optimus Maximus, by making an annual sacrifice, and they shed such an interesting sidelight on the Roman army’s cult of the standards that it is worth quoting some of them in full:

*“To Jupiter Best and Greatest, and for the good health of the emperors Marcus Aurelius Antoninus and Lucius Aurelius Verus, on account of the birthday of the eagle, a detachment of the Seventh Gemina Felix legion (set this up) under the supervision of Licinus Paternus, centurion of the same legion, the procurator Hermes, freedman of the emperors, and Lucretius Paternus, decurion of the First Celtiberian cohort, and Fabius Marcianus, assistant (beneficiarius) of the emperors’ procurator, and Julius Julianus, standard-bearer (signifer) of the same legion, on 10 June in the year when Laelianus and Pastor were consuls [AD 163]”*

H. Dessau, *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae* § 9125

The Seventh Gemina legion was originally raised in AD 68 by the governor of Spain, Servius Sulpicius Galba, in preparation for his bid for power. This inscription reveals that the legion tactfully dated its official establishment to 10 June, the day after Nero’s death. It seems that this date was revered thereafter as “the birthday of the eagle” of the Seventh Gemina.

Detachments of the legion were brigaded with auxiliary units at various locations, and each one will have celebrated on the same day. The ceremony of the Villamontán de la Valduerna detachment was witnessed, not by the governor, but by the procurator, who was the emperor’s financial official in the province, and by a representative from the First Celtiberian cohort, alongside a centurion

and standard-bearer from the legion. Meanwhile, the provincial governor and the legionary legate presumably officiated at a similar ceremony in the legionary headquarters at León.

Ultimately, there must have been hundreds of annual dedications here, the majority of which have never been found, so there is a long interval before the date of the next known legionary altar. But the other unit in the garrison, the First Celtiberian part-mounted cohort, had their own annual celebrations. One of these, unfortunately incomplete, mentions the same procurator, Hermes, so it must date from



2nd Century AD fragment of a statue of Jupiter, holding a staff with his symbol, the eagle, atop it. Now in the Allard Pierson museum, Amsterdam.



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around AD 163. Another dedication falls only four years later, and was witnessed by a new procurator. Lacking a legionary eagle, the cohort instead commemorated the birthday of its *signa*, which clearly had the same religious importance, on 15 October each year.

*“To Jupiter Best and Greatest, and for the good health of the emperors Marcus Aurelius Antoninus and Lucius Aurelius Verus, on account of the birthday of the standards (signa), a detachment of the First Celtiberian cohort (set this up) under the supervision of the procurator Zoilus, freedman of the emperors, Valerius Flavius, centurion of the First Gallic cohort, and Aelius Flavius, assistant (beneficiarius) of the emperors’ procurator, and Lucretius Maternus, image-bearer (imagini-fer) of the Seventh Gemina Felix legion, and Julius Sedulus, keeper of the watchword (tesserarius) of the First Celtiberian cohort, erected on 15 October in the year when the emperor Lucius Aurelius Verus, for the third time, and Quadratus were consuls [AD 167].”*

*H. Dessau, Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae § 9127*

It seems the detachments of the First Celtiberian cohort and the Seventh Gemina legion were not the only units in garrison, because a centurion of the First Gallic cohort was also officiating. Other altars from Villamontán de la Valduerna commemorate that cohort’s standards, but with an interesting twist.

*“To Jupiter Best and Greatest, and for the good health of the emperors Marcus Aurelius Antoninus and Lucius Aurelius Verus, on account of the birthday of the Little Boars (aprunculi), the soldiers of the First Gallic cohort (set this up) under the supervision of the procurator Zoilus, freedman of the emperors, and Valerius Flavius, centurion of the same cohort, and Valerius Valens, assistant (beneficiarius) of the emperors’ procurator, and Julius Julianus, standard-bearer (signifer) of the Seventh Gemina Felix legion, on 22 April in the year when Pudens and Pollio were consuls [AD 166].”*

*H. Dessau, Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae § 9129*

Here, we find Zoilus, the same procurator, accompanied by personnel from

Building stone from Hadrian’s wall showing a standard (a *vexillum*?) flanked by a capricorn and Pegasus, symbols of the Second Augustan legion. Though based in Caerleon, Wales, detachments of the legion helped construct the wall. Now in the British museum, London.

the Seventh Gemina legion, celebrating “the birthday of the Little Boars” on 22 April, with soldiers of the First Gallic cohort. Like the legion, only part of the cohort seems to have been present, under the command of the centurion Valerius Flavius. It was not unusual for a centurion to receive this kind of assignment, acting in lieu of the regimental prefect. Interestingly, whereas the First Celtiberians were content to worship their *signa*, the First Gallic cohort evidently had a boar standard.

The Celtic symbol of the charging boar is certainly well known as the emblem of the Twentieth Valeria Victrix legion, but others legions preferred zodiacal emblems, and the boar’s particular significance remains a mystery.

The Second Augusta legion in Britain, for example, used the Capricorn emblem. However, a pair of inscriptions from their fortress at Caerleon (RIB 327-8) show that they celebrated the birthday of their eagle on 23 September,

which ought to imply the star-sign of Libra. Nevertheless, Augustus is known to have favoured the Capricorn emblem, perhaps recalling his rise to power in January 27 BC. (Interestingly, Suetonius mistakenly believed that Augustus had been born under Capricorn.)

A final example from Villamontán de la Valduerna demonstrates another change of garrison, as the ceremony of the First Gallic cohort was this time witnessed by a cavalry decurion of the Second Flavia squadron, who was perhaps in charge of a detachment here:

*“Sacred to Jupiter Best and Greatest, and for the good health of the emperor Marcus Aurelius Commodus Antoninus Pius Felix, Greatest Conqueror of the Germans, in the 16th year of his Tribunician power, acclaimed Imperator fifteen times, consul for the 6th time; on account of the birthday of the Little Boars (aprunculi), the soldiers of the First Gallic cohort, under the supervision of Aurelius Firmus, the emperor’s freedman and procurator of the mines, and Valerius Marcellinus, decurion of the Second Flavia cavalry squadron, (set this up) on 22 April in the year when Popilius Peto and Bradua Mauricus were consuls [AD 191].”*

H. Dessau, *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*  
§ 9131

Fragment of a decorative slab depicting a legionary *vexillum* flanked by decorative pilasters. A separate fragment depicts the top of one pilaster, crowned with roses and clearly referring to the *Rosaliae Signorum* (rose ceremony of the standards). Now in the Corbridge Museum, UK.

### The Rose ceremony

Probably the most valuable of the documents found at Dura Europus is the so-called *Feriale Duranum* (“Dura festival calendar”: *P. Dura* 54). Like most of the papyri, it is fragmentary, but it preserves a partial listing of religious festivals drawn up around AD 225 for use by the Twentieth Palmyrene cohort. Some scholars have seen, in the plethora of feast days, an attempt to entertain the soldiers with frequent holidays. But it was equally important to synchronise the Dura garrison with daily life in the city of Rome. When the soldiers sacrificed, on 3 January, “for the welfare of our lord, the emperor Marcus Aurelius Severus Alexander, and for the eternity of the empire of the Roman people”, they knew that a similar event was occurring in every military base and in every town, not only in the province of Syria, but all over the Roman empire.

The entries for May 9 and May 31 show that, on those days, the army celebrated the *Rosaliae Signorum* (“rose ceremony of the standards”) with a supplication. The flower theme suggests the standards were perhaps garlanded with roses and paraded in splendour. Pliny was outraged by the fact that “the eagles and the standards, dusty

and bristling with sharp points, are anointed with perfume on feast days” (*Natural History* 13.23). His indignation came from his knowledge of the excessive price of perfume. But it is thought that some of this expense may have been defrayed by deductions from soldiers’ pay, if the small amounts labelled *ad signa* or *ad sacrum* can be interpreted as subscriptions for this kind of ceremony. Of course, the soldiers who annually venerated their “sacred and propitious standards”, and willingly followed them into battle, will have been only too pleased to suitably maintain their upkeep. ■

*Duncan B. Campbell is a regular contributor.*

### Further Reading

J. Helgeland, “Roman Army Religion”, in: *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 2.2, 1978, 1470-1505, with a transcript and English translation of the ‘*Feriale Duranum*’.



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