

AUXILIARY CENTURIONS

THE FORGOTTEN OFFICERS

The legionary centurions of the Roman imperial army are iconic figures. Inscriptions and reliefs provide abundant evidence of their prospects and their often dazzling careers. However, their less prestigious brother-officers who commanded the centuries of auxiliary infantry are often overlooked in the published literature. So how much do we actually know about auxiliary centurions?

By Duncan B. Campbell

Many handbooks on the Roman army commonly refer to “centurions” when they mean legionary centurions, and it is sometimes forgotten that there was another type of centurion in the Roman army: namely, the commander of an auxiliary *centuria*. This is perhaps understandable when we consider that each legion had ten times as many centurions as the average auxiliary unit. However, the men who staffed the legionary centurionate appear to have been of an entirely different calibre from those who served in the *auxilia*. (On legionary centurions, see “Backbone of the legions”, *Ancient Warfare Special Issue* 2010.)

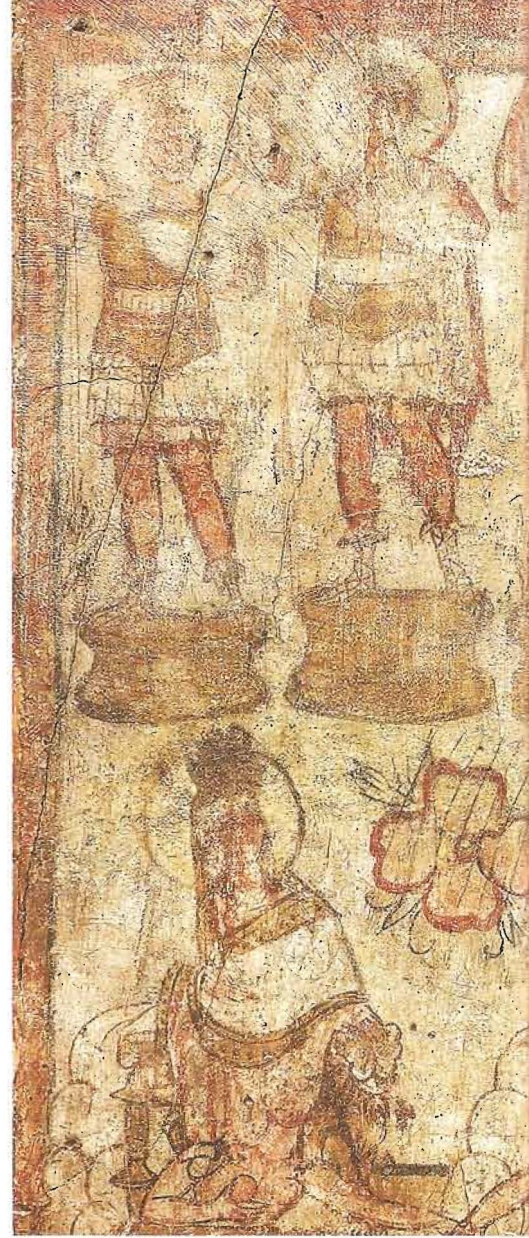
Alfred von Domaszewski, in his famous study of career structures (see Further Reading), underlined the gulf separating legionary centurions from their auxiliary counterparts by including the latter in his section on *principales* (the various ranks and functions beneath the legionary centurion), not in his section on *centuriones*. This was partly based on his opinion of the auxiliaries in general, for he

believed that the auxiliary infantryman drew only one-third as much pay as the legionary. However, more recent studies have suggested five-sixths as a

more reasonable proportion. Nevertheless, although legionary centurions are known to have drawn very generous salaries (thought to have been fifteen times the basic rate), no scholar has ever suggested that auxiliary centurions received more than five times the infantryman’s pay.

The careers of auxiliary centurions

Domaszewski’s low opinion of auxiliary centurions was also based on his observation that a *decurio alae*, the officer commanding one of the troops (*turmae* of around 30 men) of an auxiliary cavalry squadron (or *ala*), could be placed in temporary charge of an entire infantry cohort, if no legionary centurions (the usual men for such a job) were available;



Tombstone of the centurion Lucius Valerius Albinus, who died aged 65 after 35 years service (CIL XIII 6286). In his left hand, he holds a vine-stick, the centurion’s symbol of office.

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Wall painting from the Temple of Bel at Dura Europos, depicting officers and men of the Twentieth Part-mounted Cohort of Palmyrenes. The central figure is the commander, Julius Terentius the tribune. One of the officers standing behind him is holding the characteristic vine-stick of a centurion.
© Yale University Art Gallery

and although the same officers seem frequently to have been promoted into the legionary centurionate, Domaszewski knew of only two auxiliary centurions who had achieved the same feat. Although the background of one of them (the unnamed 62-year-old of CIL VIII 3005, whose stint in the Third Cohort of Bracaraugustans led on to a sequence of legionary centurionates) remains unknown, the other, Lucius Arnius Bassus, had begun his career as a legionary before achieving promotion to the Praetorian Guard and progressing to a centurionate in the Second Cohort of Roman Citizens, based in Lower Germany, after which he made the leap to a sequence of centurionates in the legions of Britain (CIL V 522).

Prior to the reign of Septimius

Severus, legionaries transferring to the Praetorian cohorts are only known during the turbulent events of AD 69, when the emperor Vitellius recruited his new Guard from the legions, and the promotion of a Praetorian to an auxiliary centurionate is otherwise unheard of. So Bassus' peculiar progression smacks of having consistently been in the right place at the right time. Consequently, the curious case of Lucius Terentius Secundus, who "transferred to the Praetorians (... from ...) Cohort of Breucians" (CIL VIII 9391), led Domaszewski to suggest that Secundus had, like Bassus, been a legionary when he was transferred to the Guard, and subsequently became centurion of the Breucians. Unfortunately, only the left-hand side of the

inscription survives and it is unknown how much text is lost in the middle of the sentence quoted above, enabling others to suggest an alternative scheme, whereby Secundus moved from an auxiliary centurionate to membership of the Guard. However, while a transfer from the legions to the Guard was definitely a welcome prospect, it would surely have been seen as a demotion for an auxiliary centurion.

Study of the cavalry decurions can be fruitful, as the epigraphic record shows that service as a caval-

► DID YOU KNOW?

The tombstone of the unknown auxiliary centurion from Ariminum (CIL III 8438) was lost at sea in 1878 en route from its findspot at Vid (ancient Narona) to the Archaeological Museum in Split (Croatia).

ryman was fully integrated into the military hierarchy and several careers are known to have culminated in the post of *decurio alae*. By contrast, we know the antecedents of only a handful of centurions. Besides Basus (mentioned above), three had

been legionaries who were promoted to a centurionate in a neighbouring auxiliary cohort. Of these, Lucius Campanius Verecundus seems first to have become a *signifer* in the First Cohort of Cispadansians before his promotion to centurion (CIL V 8185), whereas the unnamed 60-year-old centurion from Ariminum (modern Rimini), whose epitaph is now missing (CIL III 8438), had been decorated with torques, armlets, and medallions as a legionary prior to his promotion. A cast of the monument taken before its disappearance shows the centurion's characteristic vine-stick (*vitis*) and greaves flanking a representation of the man's military decorations. The third man, Lucius Varius (his surname has not survived), moved straight from the ranks of his legion to become an auxiliary centurion (CIL III 2062 + 8747). It is not known how representative these careers were.

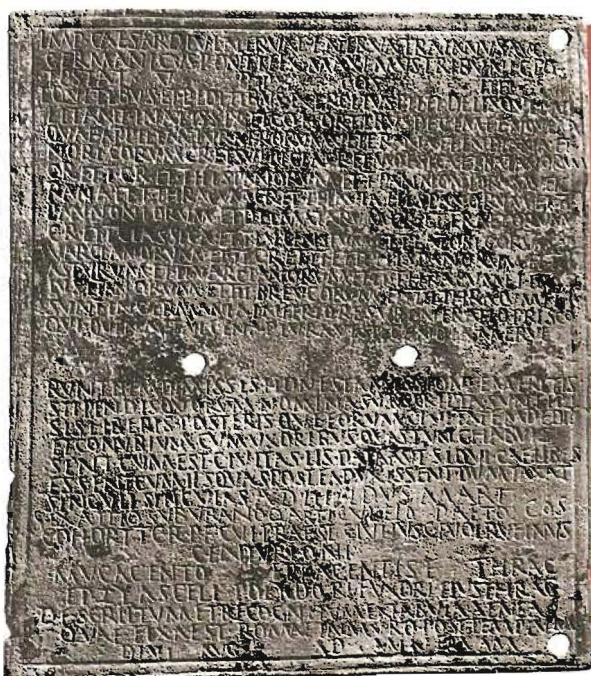
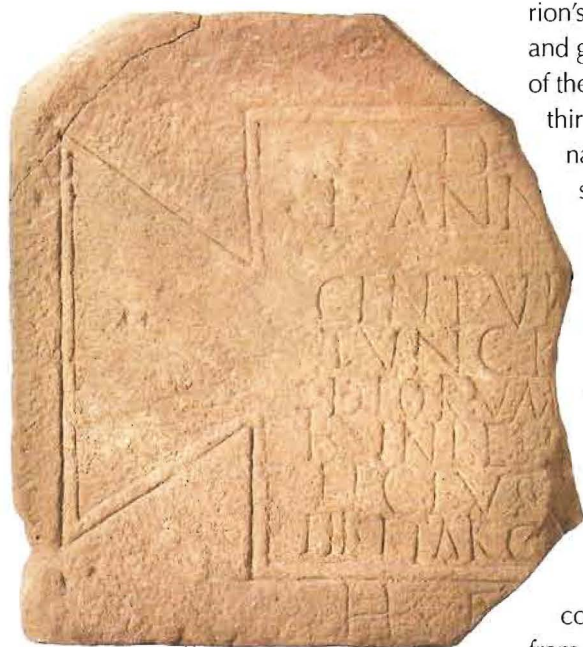
The origins of auxiliary centurions

The papyrologist J.F. Gilliam suggested that auxiliary centurions might be recruited either from the rank and file of their cohort or, more rarely, directly from civilian life (see Further Read-

ing). He took his cue from a fragmentary list of officers belonging to two units of the Egyptian army in the AD 240s (P. Mich. 164). The names of only seven men survive, of whom five were promoted to the post of decurion in an unknown cavalry squadron and two were made centurions of the Third Cohort of Ituraeans. Two of the decurions and one centurion had previously served as legionary cavalrymen, while the other three decurions had been *principales* in auxiliary cavalry squadrons; the remaining centurion (named Hierax) was promoted in the very year of his enlistment. Gilliam suggested that he must have been a civilian, by analogy with the case of Sextus Sempronius Candidus, who is known to have been a civilian when he was recruited as a centurion of the First Augustan Part-mounted Cohort of Lusitanians in AD 156 (B.G.U. 696).

Other examples of direct commissioning can be found. Gaius Julius Sabinus, the son of a veteran, died at the age of 25 while serving as centurion of the Second Cohort of Raetians (CIL XIII 7583), so he had probably been recruited into that post. Other tombstones mention only the centurionate, so it is likely that the deceased had been directly commissioned: examples include Gaius Campanius Vitalis, who died aged 27 as centurion of the First Cohort of Batavians (CIL III 839), and Publius Aelius Tertius, a retired centurion of the First Britannic Part-mounted Cohort, who died at the age of 60 (AE 1980, 751).

Gilliam believed that "for those ambitious to rise higher there was a possibility of advancement, greater presumably for those who had superior qualifications or useful connections to begin with". This view is difficult to demonstrate. It is not often noticed that, in the papyrus mentioned above (P. Mich. 164), the decurions had moved steadily along the path of promotion, whereas the



(Top) Gravestone of the centurion Titus Annius, who was "killed in war" and buried at Vindolanda (RIB 3364). It is not clear whether he was a legionary centurion in temporary charge of the First Cohort of Tungrians, or if he was an auxiliary centurion belonging to the unit.

© The Vindolanda Trust

(Bottom) Military diploma issued to the centurion Mucacenus, son of Eptacens, who was a Thracian serving in the First Cohort of Roman Citizens in the army of Lower Germany.

© Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum, Mainz. Photographer: V. Iserhardt.

centurion Hierax had been in post for over twelve years. The epigraphic evidence shows the same phenomenon: namely, that auxiliary centurions largely remained in that post for the duration of their career.

From all walks of life

Such men probably came from diverse backgrounds. Marcus Fannius Vitalis received an honorary discharge from the emperor Hadrian, after service as a centurion in the Fourth Cohort of Sugambrians and the First Flavian Cohort of Spaniards, both based in Mauretania Caesariensis (modern Algeria). An inscription discovered near Carthage, some 900 km distant, tells us that he was honoured by the *municipium* of Thuburbo Maius with the juridical position of *praefectus iure dicundo* and the religious position of *flamen perpetuus*, “in acknowledgement of which he paid 10,000 sesterces to the public purse and furthermore gave a day of theatrical games and a banquet”. The inscription goes on to divulge that, “when the council had decreed a statue to him, being content with an inscription, he set it up at his own expense” (CIL VIII 12370).

Similarly, a reference to the sum of 9,200 sesterces in the inscription of the unnamed 62-year-old mentioned above (CIL VIII 3005) suggests that the man had been honoured by his town council in a similar manner to Vitalis. It could be that the sons of well-to-do provincial families, destined for a seat on the town council and an honorary priesthood, proved themselves by a successful stint in the Roman army. If they

(Top) Gravestone of Ammonius, son of Damio, a centurion of the First Cohort of Spaniards, who died after 27 years of service (RIB 2213). Found outside the fort at Ardoch and now in the Hunterian Museum, University of Glasgow.

© Ross Cowan

(Bottom) Hammer from Bar Hill on the Antonine Wall. Inscribed ‘7 (centuria) IIBVTI’, “century of (A)ebutius” (RIB 2428.1). In the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow.

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could not secure a cavalry decurionate – for many such careers are known (Titus Flavius Breucus, decurion in the First Squadron of Pannonians, and Marcus Julius Julianus, decurion in the Squadron of Sebastenes, are two examples) – an auxiliary centurionate would do just as well.

Gilliam’s suggestion that centurions might be promoted from the rank and file seems to be supported by the tombstone of Aprilis, born amongst the Lingones, who died aged 22 with the rank of centurion in the First Belgican Cohort (CIL XIII 7038). The handful of military diplomas – which confirmed a man’s legal status once he had served his time in an auxiliary unit – issued to centurions reminds us that many (perhaps most) were of peregrine non-citizen origin, though some will have struck up a relationship with a non-citizen woman and wished to ensure that their offspring would be Roman citizens. (For diplomas in general, see “A Praetorian in New York”, in *Ancient Warfare* XI.4.)

Finally, the level of accommodation provided in Roman forts for auxiliary centurions is instructive. Broadly speaking, the centurions’ quarters in legionary fortresses measure around 10 m by 25 m, divided into a suite

of rooms, including a latrine and possibly an open courtyard for light and fresh air; evidence of painted wall plaster and mosaic flooring is occasionally found. By contrast, the centurions’ quarters in auxiliary forts would typically measure around 10 m by 10 m, sometimes divided into two rooms, and might incorporate a cesspit in lieu of a functioning latrine. There can be no starker indication of the gulf separating the legionary centurion from his auxiliary counterpart in the hierarchy of the Roman army. **AV**

FURTHER READING

The work of Alfred von Domaszewski, *Die Rangordnung des römischen Heeres* (Bonn 1908, reprinted in 1967 with an extensive introduction by Brian Dobson), remains fundamental to discussions of Roman army ranks. The opinions of J.F. Gilliam on auxiliary centurions can be found in *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* Vol. 88 (1957), pp. 155-168.

