

Identifying finds of Roman standards: Tops for *vexillum* and composite standards

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Rezumat: Stindardele romane se numără printre cele mai importante elemente ale vieții militare și au un rol determinant în disciplină. Identificarea elementelor componente ale unor stindarde în spectrul materialelor arheologice este foarte dificilă dat fiind faptul că stindardele erau ansamblate din elemente componente care, luate separat, nu sunt direct recunoscute ca parte de stindard. Lucrarea de față prezintă câteva vârfuri de lance caracterizate de prezența unei bare transversale și propune identificarea lor ca vârfuri de stindarde compozite.

The research on the Roman military standards is not very advanced, even less the study of finds of standards or elements of standard. The present contribution shall focus on a small group of tops presenting features that allow their identification as parts of composite standards (like *signa* with *vexillum* on the upper part of the shaft) or of *vexillum*-standards¹.

The basic shape of the standards was the spear, the difference being made by the various additional features². The wooden poles of the standards had a butt spike to allow them to be stuck in the ground and many had a handle to extract them from the ground and more easily carry them while on the march. The archaeological finds attributed to standards are mostly limited to the metal parts: top, butt, *phalerae*, different figures mounted on the wooden shaft, plates with the name of the unit inscribed on them etc.³. However the identification of the specific spear heads is quite difficult for the only source of information are the depictions of standards on Roman monuments (like funerary monuments, so-called historical reliefs, different ornamentations on weapons and so on) and coins.

The items presented here share the material (iron) and the general shape: spear head with soldered or mobile cross-bar as part of it. Further it is possible, due to their documented archaeological context, to identify the former standards as having been military. The observed details on the position on the shaft and on the function of the tops are valuable.

The finds

Nr. 1: *Vexillum*-top with cross-bar (fig. 1)

Provenience: Zugmantel (D)

Collection: Wiesbaden, Museum (?).

Lit.: Jacobi 1909, 98, pl. 21/55; Ritterling 1919, 32 sq. with note 3 and fig. 19; G. Behrens, Mars-Weihungen im Mainzer Gebiet. Mainzer Zeitschr. 36, 1941, 8–21, esp. 19 and fig. 19/3; Richter 2004, 337, fig. 322.

¹ On the terminology see Alexandrescu 2010, 26 sq. This paper presents some finds and iconographical material that were not discussed in the book from 2010.

² Alföldi 1959, 12 sqq.

³ For an overview see Domaszewski 1885; Alexandrescu 2010, 229 sqq.

Mat.: iron. State of preservation: one end of the cross-bar is broken.

Dimensions: H of the top 21,5 cm; L. of the cross-bar: 37 cm.

Description: The spear head consists of two elements – 1. the top with a pyramidal-shaped button above, a round blade with two perforations and the socket for the fixation on the wooden shaft; 2. the cross-bar, preserving a hook at one end.

Date: 2nd – 3rd century AD.

Suggested identification: The item could have been the cross-bar for a *vexillum*. The cloth must have been attached to the bar by textile tabs.

Nr. 2: Cross-bar for a *vexillum*

Provenience: Niederbieber (D), principia; Context: in the room next to the *sacellum*, with further finds of standard elements.

Collection: Bad Homburg v. d. H., Saalburg Museum (?).

Lit.: Dorow 1826, Taf. 22, Abb. 15; Alexandrescu 2010, pl. 99/ST4.

Mat.: iron; good state of preservation (?).

Dimensions: L about 28,6 cm; Dm. of the loop for the shaft about 4,2 cm.

Description: Long strip forming a loop in the middle in order to surround the wooden-shaft of the standard on which it was nailed; from the loop the strip continues to the right and to the left.

Date: 2nd – 3rd century AD.

Suggested identification: The item could have been the cross-bar for a small *vexillum*. The cloth must have been attached to the bar by textile tabs.

Nr. 3: Spear head with cross-bar (fig. 2)

Provenience: Windisch / Vindonissa (CH); acquisition from F. Müller in Melligen (1855).

Collection: Zürich (CH). Landesmuseum Inv. Nr. 11555.

Lit.: V. von Gonzenbach, Fides Exercitum, eine Hand aus Vindonissa, Jahresber. Gesellsch. Pro Vindonissa 1951/52, 84 with fig. 7; Unz/ Deschler-Erb 1997, Nr. 330, pl. 19.

Mat.: iron; good state of preservation, corroded.

Dimensions.: H 12.4 cm; L. of the cross-bar 17 cm; Dm. for the shaft 2.2 cm; width of the blade: about 2.1 cm.

Description: Spear head with cross-bar. Above the cross bar there is a rhomboidal blade with a flat hammered top. The cross-bar is a strip and ended in rings. Below the cross-bar there is the socket.

Suggested identification: The item could have been the top of a *signum* with a small *vexillum* under the top and additional leather straps hanging on the lateral rings.

Nr. 4: *Vexillum*-top with cross-bar (fig. 3 a-c)

Provenience: Bologna (RO); context: *horreum* in *latus sinistrum*, 'B71/Fn 202' (noted on the back of the blade).

Collection: Bucharest, National Military Museum, C832.

Lit.: unpublished (letter from N. Gudea from 05.05.2006); on the site see N. Gudea, Materiale arheologice din castrul roman de la Bologna. Apulum, 15, 1977, 167–215; N. Gudea, Das Römergrenzkastell von Bologna-Resculum. Führer arch. Denkmäler Dacia Porolissensis 1 (Zalău 1997).

Mat.: iron. State of preservation: cross-bar fragmentary; broken head.

Dimensions: h 15.8 cm; width of the blade about 1.9 cm; l. of the cross-bar 15.3 cm, width of the cross-bar about 0.7 cm.

Description: Spear-head with flatten, long blade and a mobile cross-bar (see the sketch on fig. 3b) with turned ends in form of rings.

Date: middle of the 3rd century AD (according to N. Gudea).

Nr. 5: Evtl. top of a *vexillum* or of a composite *signum* with *vexillum* (fig. 4)

Provenience: Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa (RO).

Context: Found together with other *militaria* in a layer (layer no 9) on the forum of the city.

Collection: Deva, Museum of Roman and Dacian Civilisation, Branch of Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa.

Lit.: R. Étienne/I. Piso/A. Diaconescu, Les fouilles du forum vetus de Sarmizegetusa. Rapport général. Acta Mus. Napocensis 39–40, 2002–2003, 59–154, esp. 74–86 pl. 16 Fe.55.

Mat.: iron. State of preservation: broken ends of the cross-bar, rusted surface.

Dimensions: H about 20.5 cm.

Description: Spear head with cross-bar.

Date: before 111 AD (based on the coins from the layer no 9).

Nr. 6: Vexillum-top (fig. 5)

Provenance: Hanau-Steinheim (D), near the bridge over the Main. Context: fire rests, battlefield.

Collection: Schloß Philippsruhe, Museenverwaltung der Stadt Hanau.

Lit.: M. Reuter, Der Wiederaufbau des obergermanisch-rätischen Limes unter Maximinus Thrax, in: N. Gudea (ed.) Roman Frontier Studies. Proceedings of the XVIIth International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies (Zaláu 1999), 534; M. Kemkes (Hrsg.) Zwischen Patrouille und Parade. Römische Reiterei am Limes, Schriften LM Aalen 51, 1997, Abb. 55.

Mat.: iron.

Description: Top made of a spear head with long head and ivy-leaf-shaped blade, below a cross-bar and a long socket. The long head seems to have a rectangular cross-section.

Date: 2nd – 3rd century AD.

Observation: The dimensions and the description are still unpublished.

Suggested identification: The item could have been the cross-bar for a *vexillum*.

Nr. 7: Top of a composite signum (fig. 6)

Provenance: Miltenberg-Altstadt (D); Context: in the Roman fort, North-Western part of the praetentura, along and near the via praetoria (“Fläche 20, Fundkontext 75/72–71).

Collection: Schloß Philippsruhe, Museenverwaltung der Stadt Hanau.

Lit.: Beckmann 2004, 22. 46 and esp. 184, ‘Signa’, 1, pl. 44/14.

Mat.: Iron; State of preservation: cross-bar broken.

Dimensionen: h. 20.5 cm; width of the blade max. 5.3 cm; L. of the upper shaft about 6.5 cm, Dm. of the upper shaft about 0.9 cm, inner Dm. of the shaft about 2.2 cm, width of the cross-bar 1.4 cm, thickness of the cross-bar 0.3 cm.

Description: A short and wide blade ends in a long spear head with round cross-section. On the widest part of the blade is attached the cross-bar. This is broken at one end while the other end is bent and fragmentary preserved.

Date.: 2nd – 3rd century AD (2nd period of the fort).

The Roman standards

The *aquila*, the *imago*-standard, *signa* and *vexilla* are the general kinds of Roman standards. While the first two are known to have tactical function, *signa* and *vexilla* had mainly a tactical role and knew a great variety of shapes, attested by the representations only. Of interest here are the last two categories of standards. It has to be mentioned that the same name is given by convention in the literature to other standards, without military use, but attested in religious milieu⁴ (especially in the eastern part of the empire) and as standards of different kinds of associations/ *collegia*.

The problem of the terminology of the Roman military standards has been recently discussed elsewhere⁵. In regard to the *vexilla* the great variation of shapes is to be pointed out. It is used as convention the name ‘*vexillum*’ for the standard with only one large cloth piece hanged under the spear top, while the standard presenting a small *vexillum* below the top or along the shaft is called ‘composite *signum*’. The finds under discussion here belonged to both kinds of standards.

The vexillum-standard

The dimensions of the only known real *vexillum*-cloth⁶ acquired in Egypt and kept in the collections of the State Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow, make probable that the *vexillum* measured about 50 cm square. For that reason the tops presented here are more likely parts of composite standards, which might have

⁴ See Rostovtzeff 1941, 97 sqq.; Speidel 1978; Künzl 1996.

⁵ C.-G. Alexandrescu, A contribution on the standards of the Roman Army, in: Z. Visy (ed.), Limes XIX. Proceedings of the XIXth International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies Pécs, Hungary 2003 (Pécs 2005) 147–156; Alexandrescu 2010, 26 sq.

⁶ Rostovtzeff 1941.

had a small *vexillum* under the top. However on the Trajan's column, scene VI/VII the *vexillum*-cloth is not that large and the cross-bar ends in rings with leather straps and pendants, while the shaft is very long. The problematic of the representation as a source for our research and especially of the Trajan's column as a source for the study of *militaria* makes the evidence valuable only if confirmed by other examples.

One of the most detailed depictions of a *vexillum* is on a relief from Corbridge, Northumberland: the banner bears also the written identification as *vexillus leg. II Aug.*⁷.

The rich iconographical material attests for the *vexillum*-standard at least three variants: 1. the variant of a simple, large *vexillum*-standard (eg fig. 7); 2. the *vexillum* with hanging straps on the sides – very popular on representations, especially on the Trajan's column⁸; 3. the *vexillum* with figures/statuettes of wreath, eagles, gods (Victoria, Mars, Genius) or emperors above the cross-bar (eg fig. 14).

For the variant 1 the depictions are showing some times the back of the standard, giving inside into the way of fastening (fig. 7 and fig. 8): on the crossbar directly attached to the top of the standard.

The *vexillum* is attested also as a military decoration⁹, probably for officers, in most cases similar in appearance to the standard: ordinary banner, square or rectangular in shape, with a fringe along the bottom, and slung from a horizontal cross-bar attached to a shaft. There are attested different colours and also different materials (as silver) for this *donum*. It was also the sign of rank and power (of the commander in chief, of an eques etc.).

Little we know about the *vexilla* of the veterans and the religious *vexilla*. We are aware of their use and the further development of the *labarum* due to the written sources¹⁰. The depictions are showing a rather standardised shape easy to be recognised and we can only assume that the decoration of the cloth (by means of embroidery, paint etc.) and evtl. additional features made the difference.

In case of the top from Zugmantel (no. 1) the research is rather in favour of the identification of it as part of a non-military standard, for instance one of a *collegium* or of a religious banner¹¹. Arguments are found in the pyramidal shape of the end of the top and in the two perforations presented by the blade¹².

Beside the cross-bar for other finds of spear heads a hint to the identification as top of a standard seems to be the height. For instance the iron find from Aalen¹³ and the one of silver from Caerleon¹⁴ could have been tops of standards like the *vexillum*-standard, similar to the ones depicted on the Trajan's column (scenes XXVI and CXXVIII). The shape of the top from Aalen resembles the upper part of the find from Hanau (here nr. 6).

The free part remaining between top and the banner is in some cases (on representations) ornate with wreaths or figurines (see fig. 14 and 16) or as the *vexillum*-standard on the fresco of the tribune Iulius Terentius from the Bel-temple in Dura Europos¹⁵. It is not necessary a different kind of *vexillum* for the written sources attest the practice of additional ornamentation of standards on special occasions.

The composite standards (*signa*)

Under the general designation 'composite *signum*' the representations show a great variation regarding the kind of assemblage (mainly *phalerae* or mainly *imagines*) and the kind of top (*manus*, eagle etc.). The probability is very high to assume that elements of iron such as no 3, 4 and 5 presented above were part of the tops of the standards or build alone the top. In these cases the small *vexilla* could have been bearing small shields (eg fig. 8, 9 and 12) or further embroidered, woven or painted decoration. Some of the composite standards on the Trajan's column (eg fig. 15) present a small *vexillum* under the top and an additional cross-bar below with rings and hanging straps¹⁶.

⁷ De la Bédoyère 1989, 33 fig. 15/b.

⁸ Domaszewski 1885, 67 sqq. with fig. 94–100.

⁹ Maxfield 1981, 82 sqq.

¹⁰ For the collection see esp. Mayer 1910; Rostovtzeff 1941; Domaszewski 1885.

¹¹ See for example the wall-paintings from Ostia – Alexandrescu 2010, cat. no. P44; the relief from Virunum, now in Klagenfurt, Landesmuseum, Lap.-Nr. 5 – G. Piccottini, Die Römersteinsammlung des Landesmuseums für Kärnten (Klagenfurt 1996) Nr. 32.

¹² Ritterling 1919, 32; Alföldi 1959, 27, pl. 10/39.

¹³ M. Kemkes (ed.), Zwischen Patrouille und Parade. Römische Reiterei am Limes. Schriften Limesmus. 51 (Stuttgart 1997), 48 fig. 54, h. 23 cm.

¹⁴ De la Bédoyère 1989, 33 fig. 15/a, h. 28.5 cm.

¹⁵ Alexandrescu 2010, cat. no P 46.

¹⁶ Other examples are on scene VIII, XL, XLII.

The depictions attest also another kind of standard having a top with cross-bar and different pendants hanged on the both sides of the wooden shaft (fig. 16–20). They seem to be of early date and are mainly attested by funerary monuments of former soldiers of legions. The pendants could be ivy-leaf-like in shape (as on the examples from Dalmatia – fig. 17) or round (like on the reliefs in Nola and Aquileia – fig. 18 and 20), bearing originally additional decoration¹⁷. There are also archaeological finds of such pendants¹⁸. For the tops from Zugmantel (no 1) and Bologna (no 4) such strips are to be imagined based on the preserved rings at the end of the horizontal bar.

The gravestones of standard-bearers from the auxiliary troops are attesting some ‘unique’ shapes: the standard of Carminius (fig. 20) and the one of Iulius Pancuius (fig. 18). The top no 7, with the cross-bar soldered on the blade looks very much like the composite standards on the figures 17, 18, 19 and 20¹⁹.

Of interest is also the category of weapon decorations were the standards are a popular motive²⁰. On the scabbard from Oosterbeck (fig. 15) Mars stands between two standards, both presenting a cross-bar in the upper part of the shaft below the spear head and a crescent mounted on the shaft, the one on the right of the god has a *vexillum*, while the one on his left presents only hanging straps.

Conclusions

Even on the selection of iconographical material presented it is obvious that the identification of the finds of elements of standards is limited. Only a special situation like the find from Niederbieber where more elements have been found in the same place²¹ could bring more information on the composition of the original standard. For the time being is therefore only a small step to be made on the way of the study of the finds of Roman standards: the identification of the tops as belonging to standards. It is to hope that future finds and a re-evaluation of the spear heads in the collections will add further examples to this small list.

The length of the cross-bar makes plausible the attribution of the tops no 1 and no 2 to *vexillum*-standards. The tops no 3 and 4 belong to composite standards with *vexillum* under the top and with hanging leather strips. Also for no 5 this identification is probable but the kind of cross-bar with circular cross-section makes us not to exclude the possibility that the initial cross-bar was not very long and served to the fastening of some features like wreath, *imago* or *phalera*²².

For the tops no 6 and 7 it is difficult to decide. Their dimensions and the few depictions of similar tops make probable that they belonged to either auxiliary standards like the one on the gravestone of Carminius Ingenuus (fig. 21), to composite standards or to large *vexillum*-standards.

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¹⁷ The standard of the *signifer* Pintaius from the *cohors V Asturum* presents acorn-shaped pendants, Bonn, LVR-Landesmus., Inv. U 98 – CSIR Deutschland III 1 Kat. Nr. 5 Taf. 10.

¹⁸ From Aalen: M. Kemkes (ed.), *Zwischen Patrouille und Parade. Römische Reiterei am Limes*. Schriften. Limesmus. 51 (Stuttgart 1997), 48 fig. 54. From Sisak: Z. Demo (Hrsg.), *From the Invincible Sun to the sun of justice* (Zagreb 1994) 89 Nr. 67. See also Alexandrescu 2010, 232 and note 1852.

¹⁹ For further examples see Alexandrescu 2010, cat. no. G 15, G 16, G 22 but also the composite standard on scene CXXVIII of the Trajan’s column – detail in Alexandrescu 2010, pl. 102.

²⁰ See Künzl 1996.

²¹ Dorow 1826, 131; Alexandrescu 2010, 230 sq.

²² See for instance the gravestone of Oclatius, *signifer* in *ala Afrorum*, Neuss, Clemens-Sels-Mus., Inv. Nr. R 1923 – Webster 1986, 114 Nr. 5 Abb. 6; Horn 1987 Abb. 256; the gravestone of the *signifer* Pintaius (see above note 17).

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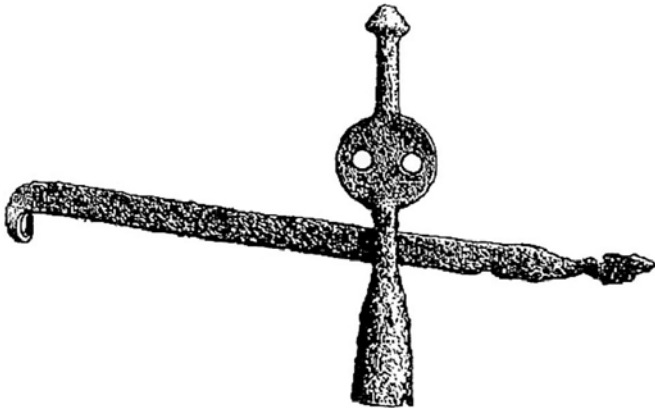


Fig. 1

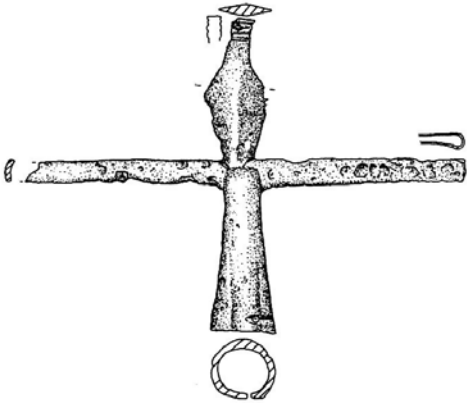


Fig. 2

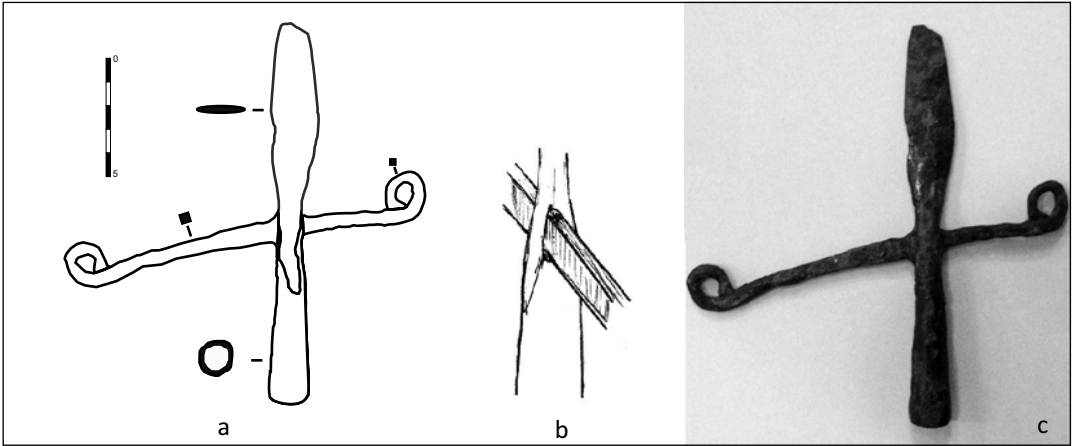


Fig. 3

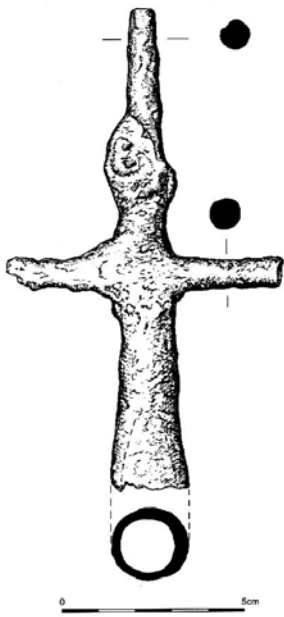


Fig. 4



Fig. 5

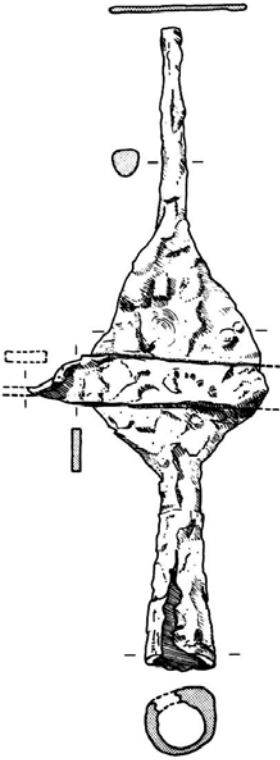


Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Fig. 16



Fig. 17



Fig. 18



Fig. 19



Fig. 20



Fig. 21