

THE MASTER OF THE DRAGON STANDARDS AND THE GOLDEN TORC: AN INSCRIPTION FROM PRUSIAS AND PRUDENTIUS' *PERISTEPHANON*

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A recently found inscription from Prusias ad Hypium in Bithynia can be understood with the help of Prudentius' poem on the martyrs' crowns, the *Peristephanon*. The two texts explain each other and together shed some light on the military decorations and the organization of the standard bearers in the Later Roman army.

In the early seventh century A.D., Emperor Heraklios put the Byzantine Empire on a new footing, basing its constitution on the military areas of the themes. At that time the area of northwestern Asia Minor, the theme closest to the capital, was named Opsikion, for it was to support the troops who followed the emperor himself (*obsequium*). Yet the stationing of the emperor's own troops, i.e., the guards, in northwestern Asia Minor had already a long tradition. Under Justinian, by A.D. 562, imperial guards of the *scholae palatinae* were stationed in Nikomedeia (Izmit), Kios (Gemlik), Prusa (Bursa), Kyzikos (west of Bandirma), Kotyaion (Kütahya), and Dorylaion (Eskishehir).¹ Inscriptions show that *scholae palatinae* were stationed in some of these cities even earlier, indeed, as early as the fourth century A.D.²

¹ Theophanes, *Chronographia* 236 (de Boor):

ἐκέλευσεν ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν ἐπὶ τὰ σχολαρίων (sc. ἀριθμῶν) τοὺς καθεζο-
μένους ἐν τῇ Νικομηδείᾳ καὶ Κίῳ καὶ Προύσῃ καὶ Κυζίκῳ καὶ Κοτναεῖω
καὶ Δορυλαίῳ ἀπελθεῖν καὶ καθίσαι ἐν τῇ Θράκῃ, ἐν τε Ἡρακλείᾳ καὶ
ταῖς περὶ αὐτῆς πόλεσιν.

D. Hoffmann, *Das spätrömische Bewegungsheer und die Notitia Dignitatum* (Düsseldorf 1969) vol. I, 298 (hereafter cited as "Hoffmann"). The *scholae* are also described by R. Grosse, *Römische Militärgeschichte von Gallienus bis zum Beginn der byzantinischen Themenverfassung* (Berlin 1920) 93ff.; A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire* (Oxford 1964) 613f.; R. I. Frank, *Scholae Palatinae, The Palace Guards of the Later Roman Empire* (Rome 1969), reviewed by A. H. M. Jones, *JRS* 60 (1970) 227–29. Hoffmann's (279–303) is by far the best account.

² Hoffmann 298; for Kotyaion see now also *AE* 1976, 665:

Two gravestones from Prusias ad Hypium (Üskübü), in the same area, have been cited as proof that in this town also a *schola palatina* was stationed. One of the stones tells of a fourth-century *decanus num(eri) scut(ariorum)*, the other of a fifth-century *σκουντάριος*.³ A newly published gravestone from the same town now confirms Prusias as the garrison of a guard regiment. The stone bears the following inscription:⁴

† ἐνθάδε κατάκιτε ὁ τῆς μα-
καρίας μνήμης Ἀλέξανδρος,
υἱὸς γενάμενος Γεωργίου,
τοῦ λαμπροτάτου σχ<ο>λαρίου καὶ μα-
γίστερος δρακῶνων, καὶ Εὐφη-
μίας. ἐτελιόθι μην(ὸς) ἡ' Νοεμβρίου
ἰνδ(ικτιῶνος) ιβ'. ὃν ὁ κύριος ἀναπάντη.

Here lies, of happy memory, Alexander, son of George the splendid *scholarius* and master of the dragon standards, and of Euphemia. He lived nine months. November of the twelfth indiction. May god rest him.

George's title *σχ<ο>λάριος* shows he was a soldier in a *schola palatina*. His senatorial rank *λαμπρότατος* (*vir clarissimus*) suggests that the gravestone dates from the fifth, rather than from the fourth, century A.D.⁵

The rank, *μαγίστερ δρακῶνων* = *magister draconum*, is remarkable and in this form known from nowhere else.⁶ A close parallel, however, can be found in Prudentius' *Peristephanon* 1.33ff., in the poem on the martyrdom of Emeterius and Chelidonium. The two men, soldiers in an unspecified unit, had been bearers of dragon standards which they deserted for the cross:

Caesaris vexilla linquunt, eligunt signum crucis
proque ventosis draconum, quos gerebant, palliis
praeferunt insigne lignum, quod draconem subdidit.

† / † Ἐνθάδε / κατάκειται / Θεόδουλος / κόμ(ης) σχολῆ(ς) / γεντιλίων /
ἰωνιόρων.

The mention of the commanding *comes* shows that the whole unit was stationed there. Fourth century: *TAM* IV, 1.367 (Nikomedeia). For the militarization of Bithynia during the third century, see M. Speidel, "Bithynian Gravestones of Roman Legionaries," *Epigraphica Anatolica* 5 (1985) 144–54; idem, "Catafractarii Clibanarii and the Rise of the Later Roman Mailed Cavalry. A Gravestone from Claudiopolis in Bithynia," *Epigraphica Anatolica* 4 (1984) 151–56.

³ *IK* 27 (Prusias ad Hypium) 101 and 95; see Hoffmann 293f. and 298.

⁴ W. Ameling, *Die Inschriften von Prusias ad Hypium*, *IK* 27 (Bonn 1985) 120; cf. 126.

⁵ Grosse (above, note 1) 95, 119; Hoffmann 314f.

⁶ *IK* 27.120: "μαγίστερος δρακῶνων (= δρακῶνων?) verstehe ich nicht ganz; δρακων(αρι)ον? Obwohl es eine genaue Parallele zu dem Ausdruck nicht gibt, kann man wohl sagen, dass er in einer schola draconariorum gedient hat." However, the only *schola draconariorum* known was an office staff of ten clerks for the civilian *praefectus praetorio Africae* in A.D. 534: *Cod. Iust.* 1.27.1.35; cf. Jones (above, note 1) 590–93.

When their officers, the *magistri signorum* and the *tribuni*, tried to talk them out of their aim, telling them they would be stripped of their rank and honors, the standard bearers replied:

ite, signorum magistri, et vos, tribuni, abstitite.
aureos auferte torques, sauciorum praemia. (64–65)

The *tribuni*, clearly, were the unit commanders, while the *magistri signorum* must have been the more immediate superiors of the two *draconarii*. No study of the Later Roman army has taken into account these *magistri signorum*. Mentioned by no other source, they might have looked like an error or, worse, an invention by Prudentius. The inscription from Prusias now shows that Prudentius was using genuine military terms. The knowledge he exhibits here is more likely to date from his own period, around A.D. 400, than from the time of Emeterius and Chelidonius a hundred years earlier, for Prudentius, by his own admission, had no documentary evidence about them.⁷

Since they were the superiors of *draconarii*, Prudentius' *signorum magistri* are likely to be but poetic variations of the inscription's *magister draconum*. The two sources, taken together, thus reveal a hitherto unknown rank of the Later Roman army, the *magister draconum*. His function, as can be learned from Prudentius, was to look after the standard bearers of a unit, *draconarii* being the typical standard bearers of the Later Roman army, having replaced as such the *signiferi* of the High Empire.⁸

Standard bearers were essential for the battle manoeuvres of the Roman armies, so that it would be of great interest to learn exactly what function a *magister draconum* fulfilled. Did he direct the *draconarii* in battle and train them in peacetime, or was he merely president of the standard bearers' club (*collegium*, *schola*)?⁹ Unfortunately, the question cannot be answered. The title *magister* occurs only rarely as a soldier's rank in the Later Roman army,¹⁰ and even in the army of the High Empire it is a vague term, denoting in some cases a general supervisor

⁷ Cf. line 75: *Chartulas blasphemus olim nam satelles abstulit*.

⁸ Vegetius 2.7 (41.6): *Signiferi qui signa portant, quos nunc draconarios vocant*. Cf. Grosse (above, note 1) 125 and 229ff.; Jones (above, note 1) 634, 675. The late fourth-century *bearcus draconarius* (Hoffmann 75, number 8, cf. *ibid.* 79–80) seems also to have been an unusually high-ranking *draconarius*. For other Late Roman *draconarii* in Asia Minor see *MAMA* I.218 and Dessau 8881 (Robert, *Bull. Épigr.* 65.382). An actual dragon-standard was found at Niederbieber on the Upper German limes, i.e., from before 260; see J. Garbsch, *Römische Paraderüstungen* (Munich 1978) 88 and plate 48.

⁹ During the third century, at least, the *collegia* could also be called *scholae*; see J. Šašel, "Bellum Serdicense," *Situla* 4 (1961) 3–30.

¹⁰ Cf. Hoffmann I.63, II note 16; A. Demandt, *Magister Militum*, *RE* Suppl. XII (1970) 553ff.; *RIB* 721; *AE* 1955, 16.

and in other cases a training officer.¹¹ The rank analogous to *magister draconum* during the High Empire was *optio signiferorum*. It is likewise little known; indeed, its very existence has been doubted,¹² and the function of such an *optio* may (or may not) have been merely to serve as president of the *signiferi* club (*collegium*).¹³ Such clubs of soldiers of the same rank remained important during the fourth century,¹⁴ but the term *magister*, while frequently used for presidents of civilian *collegia*,¹⁵ is not yet known for presidents of military *collegia*. The attempt by the *signorum magistri* of Prudentius to talk the two *draconarii* out of desertion would be consistent with either of the functions discussed.

While the function of the *magister draconum* thus remains somewhat in the dark, we learn from Prudentius an interesting detail about the *draconarii*: the standard bearers wore golden torcs (necklaces) as rewards for their wounds. From a passage in Ammianus Marcellinus it had been known that the *draconarius* as a rank wore such a golden torc: *torquem, quo ut draconarius utebatur* (20.4.18). This may be understood to mean that the *draconarii* wore these torcs merely as a badge of their office, not as a reward for bravery.¹⁶ However, now that the Prusias inscription validates Prudentius' information, the award of torcs as *dona militaria* for gallantry in action may be assumed to have lasted well into the fourth century. Perhaps standard bearers were selected only from those who had been awarded torcs.

Awards of military decorations for gallantry mark a well-led army that harnesses its men's pride and their eagerness to outdo each other.¹⁷ By contrast, Caracalla, in replacing such awards with gifts of money, appealed only to those instincts of his soldiers that befitted his wretched leadership.¹⁸ The one decoration retained, or reintroduced later, was the torc, known from inscriptions of the later third century.¹⁹ Towards the

¹¹ General supervisor: D. J. Breeze, "A Note on the Use of the Titles *Optio* and *Magister* Below the Centurionate During the Principate," *Britannia* 7 (1976) 123–33; training officer: Pliny, *Pan.* 13.5 *exercitationibus nostris—magister adstitit*; *CIL* III.10307 = Dessau, *ILS* 2540; cf. *RAS* I.146: *magister cohortis*.

¹² B. Dobson in his introduction to the second edition of A. V. Domaszewski, *Die Rangordnung des römischen Heeres* (Cologne 1967) xiv; there was no need for doubt, though: cf. *CIL* XIII.7006: *Fidelie Verule, Prudentius Revers, obtio signiferorum coniugi incomparabili ac dulcissimae quae vixit annis XXXI mensibus III, diebus XIII, f(aciendum) c(uravit)*. See also the *adiutor signorum* *CIL* VI.3472 = Dessau, *ILS* 2348, 9068; cf. 2415.

¹³ Domaszewski (above, note 12) 43.

¹⁴ E.g., M. Speidel, "Catafractarii" (above, note 2) 151–56, esp. note 3.

¹⁵ *ThLL* s.v. *magister* 79, 26ff.

¹⁶ A. Müller, "Militaria aus Ammianus Marcellinus," *Philologus* 64 (1905) 537–632. Cf. Frank (above, note 1) 139.

¹⁷ V. A. Maxfield, *The Military Decorations of the Roman Army* (Berkeley 1981).

¹⁸ Domaszewski (above, note 12) 70.

¹⁹ *CIL* III.3844 = 13398 = Dessau, *ILS* 2423 = *AIJ* 172: *D(is) i(nferis) M(anibus) Aurelius Iovinus, veter(anus) leg(ionis) XIII Gem(inae), mil(es) torquatus et duplarius EMESIS*

end of the fourth century, Vegetius (2.7) lists among the *principiores* of his own time the *torquati duplares*, *torquati simplares* as established ranks.²⁰ He explains: “torques aureus solidus virtutis praemium fuit, quem qui meruisset praeter laudem interdum duplas consequebatur annonas.” Vegetius’ use of the past tense (*fuit*) suggests that by his time things had changed. From the well-known mosaic of Justinian and his escort in Ravenna’s San Vitale church it is clear that torcs were still awarded in the sixth century.²¹ What, then, had changed by Vegetius’ time? Perhaps torcs were no longer made of solid gold—it is hard to think of a soldier ranking as *torquatus* who had not been given an actual torc. Perhaps the torcs no longer came with increased rations, or they were dished out for reasons other than *virtus*, such as seniority. Prudentius’ testimony, however, suggests that even in the fourth century torcs were still considered a reward “for wounds,” or the risk of wounds, i.e., for bravery.

Was the torc a sign, as has been claimed, of the growing “barbarization” of the army?²² Insofar, perhaps, as the gold value of the torcs must have appealed to the mercenary instinct of the soldiers, especially since during the third century the army relied increasingly on foreign mercenaries. Golden torcs for foreigners, however, were nothing new, as is clear from Pliny (*NH* 33.10.37): “auxilia quippe et externos torquibus aureis donavere, at cives non nisi argenteis; praeterque armillas civibus dedere, quas non dabant externis.”

The Prusias inscription and Prudentius thus combine to show that during the Later Roman Empire *dona militaria* were still awarded, and that the standard bearers still had an organization of their own under the *magistri*. Both these items increase our respect for the continuing sophistication of the fourth-century army, heir to the splendidly organized army of the High Empire, and certainly not mere “barbarian battle mobs.”²³

s(ibi) v(ivus) p(osuit) (et) Aurel(iae) Urs(a)e co(n)iugi karissem(ae); I. di Stefano Manzella, “Falerii Novi,” *Supplementa Italica* n.s. 1 (Rome 1981) 101–76, number 21: *D(is) M(ani-bus) s(acrum)*, Aurelio Saturnino, militi torquato legionis primes Italice, qui vixit anis XL, messibus VI, diebus X, militavit annis XIII. Aurelius Arborius fratri benemerenti fecit. Cf. Lydus, *Mag.* 1.46. On the other hand, *CIL* II.115 (*torq. aur. et an. dupl.*) is a fake, while *SHA* Maxim. 3, Aur. 7.7, and Prob. 5.1 are not reliable.

²⁰ Vegetius does not make the *torquati* part of the *antiqua ordinatio*, pace Maxfield (above, note 17) 238f., 248f. Hence they need not be dated to the time before Diocletian.

²¹ Frank (above, note 1) 138.

²² Domaszewski (above, note 12) 70; J. Krohmeyer-G. Vieth, *Heerwesen und Kriegsführung der Griechen und Römer* (Munich 1928) 538. Contra: G. R. Watson, *The Roman Soldier* (London 1969) 115. Cf. E. Sander, “Zur Rangordnung des römischen Heeres: der Duplicarius,” *Historia* 8 (1959) 239–47, esp. 242.

²³ Grosse (above, note 1) 233: *barbarische Schlachthaufen*.