

The pen behind the sword: power, literacy and the Roman army

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The creation and cohesion of the Roman empire owed much to the spread of literacy through the provinces and the use of texts as an instrument of government. An important manifestation of this is the role of the written word in the Roman army, exemplified by the diplomas that granted Roman citizenship and other privileges to auxiliary soldiers on completion of their military service. Margaret Roxan, one of the Institute's honorary research fellows, has studied these diplomas for many years, and her achievement was honoured at an international conference in London in May 2002.

For more than 500 years the Mediterranean empire of the Romans brought political and economic unity to the area bounded by the Atlantic, the Sahara and the rivers Rhine, Danube and Euphrates. The creation of this world state (*oikumene*) has tended to be viewed as the triumph of superior Latin- and Greek-speaking communities over illiterate barbarians. Adoption of these languages, involving the skills of reading and writing, were benchmarks for the advance towards civilization, and the survival of minor languages was similarly judged to be evidence for signs of a resistance to the ruling power. For more than a decade, students of the ancient world have been paying increasing attention to the role of reading and writing in the exercise and the long survival of this imperial power. Their significance has been described by Keith Hopkins: "The Roman empire was bound together by writing. Literacy was both a social symbol and an integrative by-product of Roman government, economy and culture. The whole experience of living in the Roman empire, of being ruled by

Romans, was overdetermined by the existence of texts".¹

The key stages in this "conquest by book" are evident in the long reign of the founding emperor, Augustus (27 BC to AD 14), notably in the creation of a central resource of statistics and information based on the compilation of written documents forwarded from all over the empire to a central bureau in the capital. The first and most important device of the written record was the registration (census) of Roman citizens.² It included men, women and children, and their property, wherever they lived in the empire. In former republican times a census of Roman adult males was regularly conducted for the needs of military service, but the new census was quite different and was held by Augustus on several occasions. Registration of births was also now compulsory. In the case of non-Romans, such registrations took place when new territories were annexed and organized as provinces. In Gaul the compiling of the census was an unpopular and protracted business, and the famous census in Judaea was explicitly linked with the imposition of taxation.

The creation of these documents and their regular revision was the key to maintaining control of the many conquests achieved by the great names of the Roman past, and the value of such stores of information soon became apparent. In dealing with a crisis that had arisen through corruption involving resident Romans and local Greeks in the law courts of Cyrene in 7 and 6 BC, Augustus was able to state in an edict "I find that in the province of Cyrene *in toto* 215 Romans with a census valuation of 2500 denarii . . .". At the same time he remarked that he had not yet discovered, although he intended to do so, the total number of Greeks registered with the same or a higher census valuation – presumably by consulting the census that had been compiled in 8 BC.³

Texts and the Roman army

Proper records of the resources and revenues of the empire were fundamental to the regime of Augustus, which rested on the loyalty of a professional standing army stationed in camps around the empire. Taxes were needed to pay the soldiers in cash and also to reward veterans on completion of service. Fifty years later, when some members of the normally loyal native elite in Gaul were tempted to join a local rebellion, a Roman general reminded them bluntly of the "deal" the Roman empire offered its subjects:

"We ourselves, despite many provocations, imposed upon you by right of conquest only such additional burdens as were necessary for preserving peace. Stability between nations cannot be maintained without armies, nor armies without pay, nor pay without taxation. Everything else is shared equally between us."⁴

Text was a significant accompaniment to many of the activities performed by the Roman army, above all in the newly conquered territories of the empire, in Europe, Africa and Asia. The initial application of



Figure 1 A monumental inscription flanked by reliefs showing Roman cavalry (left) and sacrifice (right) and recording the construction in about AD 140 of part of the Antonine Wall on the frontier between the Forth and Clyde estuaries in Scotland. The text begins with the name and titles of the reigning emperor, Antoninus Pius, and records that the Second Augustan Legion (LEG II AVG) constructed a stretch of the frontier 4652 paces in length.



Figure 2 Aerial view of the Roman fort of Vindolanda (at present-day Chesterholm), looking north. A fort was first constructed late in the first century AD for a garrison of some 800 auxiliary infantry. The visible fort, dating from the second century, overlies the remains of earlier forts in which the writing tablets were discovered.

the census was in many areas conducted by senior officers from the army. The system of compulsory purchase of wheat and other supplies was based on written records. Land survey, the fixing of local boundaries, road planning and many similar activities conducted by the army around the empire were also based on the compilation of written records. The most visible relics of this essentially text-based institution have long been the many thousands of inscriptions in Latin that record the presence and activities of Roman soldiers. Great works of building were commemorated by monumental inscriptions (Fig. 1) detailing the work done and the names of those units responsible, such as roads, bridges and tunnels, many of which were linked with the army's own infrastructure of camps and frontier works. The widespread expertise in stone carving was also responsible for thousands of memorials to individual Roman soldiers in the form of epitaphs and figured reliefs carved in stone that survive in many parts of the empire.

One could regard this category of written military record as essentially external or official. Ordinary soldiers may have understood little of what was written in their name. Epitaphs were provided by means of contributions to a burial association and were based on official army

records that stated name, origin, age, rank, unit and years of service, with no reference to family or other associations.⁵ If our evidence was confined to these monumental records, one might reasonably argue that the level of literacy among soldiers and their associated communities around the frontiers was minimal. However, widespread use of the written word among such communities has now been clearly demonstrated by remarkable finds made in excavations in areas as remote as the eastern desert of Egypt, the fringes of the Libyan Sahara and, above all, at Vindolanda, in northern Britain.⁶

Since 1973 a unique collection of documents consisting of thin tablets of wood bearing ink writing in Latin has been recovered from an area within the site of Vindolanda, an auxiliary fort in Northumberland (Fig. 2). They belong to the generation (c. AD 90–120) before the construction of the nearby Hadrian's Wall between the River Tyne and the Solway Firth, and they furnish the most significant evidence of literacy in the western part of the early Roman empire. Most are discarded copies of letters or documents from the period when the site was occupied by the residence (*praetorium*) of the garrison commander, whereas others come from a later phase when the site was occupied by barracks and a workshop.

Those from the commander's residence comprise a variety of reports and accounts, including cash accounts and lists of commodities relating to both the commander's household and the garrison as a whole (Fig. 3). There are also personal letters on various subjects written by many different individuals, including the earliest surviving example of Latin shorthand. It is all the more remarkable that this unique collection, now totalling more than 1000 items as new finds continue to be made, was generated during the earliest years of the Roman occupation, not by a corps of scribes, nor even by an educated elite of Romans or Italians, but by the officers and lower ranks of non-Roman auxiliary units recruited from Gaul and Germany. Many of the documents indicate regular contact with places in northern Britain and farther afield, such as York and London. They illustrate the power and the role of written documents in the Roman army as a controlling force.

In addition to the formal rosters and accounts, some of the letters offer more intimate snapshots of life at Vindolanda. At the highest social level we have an invitation from the wife of the commander of a neighbouring garrison to the wife of the Vindolanda commander to her birthday party on 11 September. The document was evidently produced by a clerk, and the



Figure 3 Fragments of two ink writing tablets from Vindolanda relating to supplies. The two fragments on the left belong to a document (no. 4) that records payments in cash and kind and the daily issue of food supplies to military personnel, covering a few days in late June of an unspecified year. That on the right (no. 5) lists purchases of meat (roe-deer, young pig, ham and venison) and other supplies (spices, salt and wheat), probably for the Vindolanda garrison.

lady added a note in her own hand: "I shall expect you, sister. Farewell sister, my dearest soul, as I hope to prosper, and hail." There is also a letter addressed to a soldier, referring to a parcel containing pairs of socks, sandals and underpants sent to him, along with greetings to him and his messmates.⁷

The scale of literacy revealed at Vindolanda is perhaps a part of the explanation for the success of the Roman army in maintaining long-term control over huge territories with a quite modest deployment of troops, notably in North Africa and western Asia. Regular communication in writing by many individuals, for both official

and private purposes, not only contributed to the coherence of Roman society as a whole but was also vital to the army's success as an instrument of control.⁸

Many young males in the frontier provinces were recruited to serve in the auxilia, as cavalry or infantry in non-Roman ethnic units, such as the German Batavians and the Gallic Tungrians stationed at Vindolanda.⁹ From the moment the soldier took the military oath until discharge 25 or more years later, his life was controlled through the medium of Latin. The use of native languages is likely to have declined as once-homogeneous units became more mixed through local recruitment from the

region in which they happened to be stationed. The military calendar specified units of time for the compilation of all manner of records bearing upon the life of a soldier: rosters for the entire unit, religious festivals and anniversaries, pay (for which a written receipt was required), and the issue of supplies and equipment. An individual soldier's proficiency in reading and writing might well lead to a promotion or a special appointment in the unit's administration, which carried exemption from fatigues, but every soldier's day-to-day life was governed by the written word.

Military diplomas: rewarding Roman soldiers

When an auxiliary soldier's period of service neared completion, he could anticipate a grant of Roman citizenship. This was signified and authenticated by a personal copy of the emperor's enactment inscribed on bronze, and such copies furnish written testimony of the direct relationship between an ordinary soldier and his commander-in-chief in Rome. A diploma (the ancient name is not recorded) was stated to be a certified copy of a bronze tablet displayed publicly at Rome. In legal terms, diplomas may have been classed as *constitutiones*, granting specified privileges to veterans of the auxilia, as well as to sailors in the fleets and to members of the praetorian guard at Rome. They were not certificates of discharge, and there are some examples of grants made before the completion of service. The grants to members of the praetorian guard, who were already Roman citizens, were confined to the right of legal Roman marriage with a non-Roman woman, and they specified that the children of such unions should be treated as offspring of a marriage between Roman citizens. Similar grants were made to auxiliaries and sailors in addition to that of Roman citizenship. Existing and future children were also to be Roman citizens, but not, it appears, the wives. Completion of 25 years of service (*stipendia*), 26 for sailors, was the normal qualification for the grant, but a few examples are known where the privilege was awarded sooner, following distinguished conduct in the field. Examples of diplomas have survived for all three services (the praetorian guard, auxiliaries and sailors) dating from the mid-first to the mid-third centuries AD, although it remains unclear why they should have continued to be issued after the universal grant by Caracalla in AD 213 of Roman citizenship to everyone living in the provinces of the empire.

Diplomas, of which several hundred examples survive, although many only as small fragments, provide valuable evidence for both civil and military history. This evidence includes the full title of the ruling emperor, the names of the two consuls in office on the day of issue, with a calendar date, a list of the units stationed in a province containing soldiers qualified



Figure 4 The outer text of a bronze military diploma issued on 23 March AD 178, recording the grant by the emperors, Marcus Aurelius and Commodus, of Roman citizenship to Thiodus, son of Rola, a Dacian serving in the seventh cohort of Thracians then stationed in Britain. The text (first published by Margaret Roxan as no. 184 in her third volume of Roman military diplomas, 1994, see n. 10 below) also contained new information on the history of Roman Britain as a whole, in particular concerning the governor at the time of the grant, Ulpius Marcellus.

for the grant, and the name of the provincial governor.

Each diploma was inscribed with the names of the individual recipient and of any wife and children, together with his rank, unit and commanding officer. Diplomas consisted of two bronze plates measuring approximately 16×13 cm. They had one copy of the enactment incised on the inner surfaces, and another on the outer face of one of the plates (Fig. 4). Inscribed on the other outer face of the plate were the names of seven witnesses to the authenticity of the text. The two tablets were fastened together, face to face, with strands of twisted wire passed through two holes located near the centre of each tablet, and sealed. As time passed, the text of the actual legal document tended to be poorly engraved, with many abbreviations being introduced into the text. For most purposes the sealed document with the outer text was sufficient, but, in court or during similar official proceedings, the seals of the witnesses would be broken and the authentic text verified.

Study and publication of military diplomas has for more than a century been a major branch of Roman military studies, because the diplomas relate to deployment of the army, to lists of army units and

recruitment, and to the social status of soldiers and their families. The total number of known diplomas has increased over the years, and it is now possible to date even small fragments and to identify them with a province. Also, X-ray photography has revealed more about the mechanics of how diplomas were produced, including alterations and the correction of errors.

During the past 30 years Margaret Roxan (Fig. 5), while working at the Institute of Archaeology, has become a leading authority on these remarkable documents. She has catalogued new finds of diplomas, revised the interpretation of earlier texts in the light of new discoveries, and published the results in three edited collections of the texts.¹⁰ Her fourth collection will be published in 2002, and her work was celebrated in May 2002 at an international conference in London that explored the written word of the Roman army in its many forms from all parts of the Roman empire.¹¹ Thanks to the work of Dr Roxan and her colleagues in related fields, we are beginning to understand how the Romans actually achieved and maintained control over most of what was then the known world. Today the opening scene of the film *Gladiator* gives us a vivid and terrifyingly authentic portrayal of Roman soldiers in action. The enduring existence and consistent success of the Roman army certainly owed much to training and personal courage, but it also owed not a little to thousands of written records, on the basis of which the army was fed, supplied, controlled and rewarded.

Notes

1. K. Hopkins, "Conquest by book", in *Literacy in the Roman world*, J. H. Humphrey (ed.), 133–58, quotation on p. 144 (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series no. 3, 1991). The volume consists of eight essays that form a collective response to the minimal view of the extent of literacy advanced by William V. Harris in his *Ancient literacy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989) which initiated much of the recent debate.
2. The introduction of the census and other forms of public record are discussed by Claude Nicolet in *Space, geography and politics in the early Roman empire* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1991); see especially chapter 6 "Control of the human sphere: the census", 123–47.
3. Nicolet 1991 (see n. 2 above), p. 132.
4. Tacitus, *Histories*, book 4, chapter 74, p. 257 in K. Wellesley's translation (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964).
5. An analysis of legionary recruitment and veteran settlement based mainly on the evidence of individual epitaphs is provided by J. C. Mann in his *Legionary recruitment and veteran settlement during the Principate* (edited for publication by M. M. Roxan, Occasional Publication 7, University of London Institute of Archaeology, 1983).
6. A. K. Bowman, *Life and letters on the*



Figure 5 Margaret Roxan, September 1998.

Roman frontier (London: British Museum Press, 1994), provides a comprehensive introduction to the Vindolanda texts. The texts from Bu Njem in Tripolitania and from the Mons Claudianus granite quarries in Egypt consist of ceramic fragments (*ostraca*) bearing Latin writing in ink, and most of them relate to household affairs, food and other supplies: see R. Marichal, *Les ostraca de Bu Njem* (Tripoli: Libya Antiqua Supplement 9, 1992), and J. Bingen, A. Bülow-Jacobsen, W. E. H. Cockle, H. Cuvigny, L. Rubinstein, W. Van Rengen, *Mons Claudianus, ostraca Graeca et Latina* (Cairo: IFAO (Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire), Document de Fouilles 29, 1992).

7. Bowman 1994 (see n. 5 above), p. 127, no. 21 (birthday invitation), pp. 139–40, no. 34 (sandals and underwear).
8. This is the theme of a volume of essays edited by A. K. Bowman and G. Woolf, *Literacy and power in the ancient world* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Particularly relevant here are the editors' contributions: "Power and the spread of writing in the West" (Woolf, 84–98) and "The Roman imperial army: letters and literacy on the northern frontier" (Bowman, 109–125).
9. I. Haynes, "Military service and cultural identity in the *auxilia*" in *The Roman army as a community*, A. Goldsworth & I. Haynes (eds), 165–74 (Portsmouth, Rhode Island: Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series 34, 1999).
10. M. M. Roxan, *Roman military diplomas (RMD) 1954–1977* (University of London Institute of Archaeology Occasional Publication no. 2, 1978); *Roman military diplomas (RMD) 1978–1984* (Occasional Publication 9, University of London Institute of Archaeology, 1985); *Roman military diplomas (RMD) 1985–1993* (Occasional Publication 14, University of London Institute of Archaeology, 1994).
11. "Documenting the Roman army: an international colloquium in honour of Margaret Roxan" held at the Institute of Classical Studies, Senate House, University of London, 17–18 May 2002.