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MICHAEL L. SPEIDEL

Stablesiani

*The raising of new cavalry units during the crisis of the Roman Empire**

*Stablesiani equites passim nominantur in
Notitia, sed nominis origo adhuc latet.*
TH. MOMMSEN, CIL V 4376.

In the middle of the third century A. D. when on all sides barbarians broke through the Roman defense lines and pushed the Empire to the brink of disaster, the situation was restored by a new, mobile cavalry force, Gallienus' famous *equites*.¹ Destined not to be bogged down in the defense of any specific frontier section but to stay with headquarters and from there to strike at intruders and rebels, the new 'battle cavalry' proved to be the Empire's successful response to altered conditions of warfare engendered by the barbarians' preponderance in cavalry. This crack force not only allowed Aurelian to retrieve the Orient from the Palmyrenes in A. D. 272, but its units, such as the *equites Dalmati*, *Mauri promoti*, and *scutarii* still represent much of the best cavalry on the fourth century army lists of the 'Notitia Dignitatum'.

On the same lists are carried also fifteen regiments of the previously unknown *equites stablesiani*. Since it seems that they, too, go back to these decades of crisis and creativity, ascertaining their origin may reveal in a significant case how the means were found to turn the tide and to insure the survival of the Empire for another century and a half.²

Italia

<i>equites stablesiani Italiciani (vexillatio comitatensis).</i>	Oc. 6, 39 = 6, 82 =
Later transferred to Africa.	7, 180
= <i>vexillatio equitum stablesianorum?</i>	DESSAU 2793 (Brixia)

* Meinem verehrten Lehrer, Professor HERBERT NESSELHAUF.

¹ Recognized in their importance by E. RITTERLING, *Zum römischen Heerwesen des ausgehenden dritten Jahrhunderts*, Festschrift O. Hirschfeld, Berlin 1903, 345-349; excellently documented by A. ALFÖLDI, *Der Usurpator Aureolus und die Kavalleriereform des Gallienus*, ZfN 37, 1927, 197-212.

² For a recent discussion of these units see D. HOFFMANN, *Das spätrömische Bewegungsheer*, Düsseldorf 1969, 251 ff.

Britannia

equites stablesiani Gariannonenses Oc. 28, 17
 = *equites stablesiani (vex. com.)* Oc. 7, 203

Germania II

(*vexillatio equitum*) *stablesia(norum)* VI AE 1927, 153 (Deurne)

Raetia

equites stablesiani seniores, Augustanis Oc. 35, 14
equites stablesiani iuniores, Ponte Aeni Oc. 35, 15
equites stablesiani iuniores, Submunturio Oc. 35, 16

Pannonia I

cuneus equitum stablesianorum, Arrabona Oc. 34, 15

Valeria

cuneus equitum stablesianorum, Ripa Alta Oc. 33, 27

Dacia Ripensis

cuneus equitum stablesianorum, Almo Or. 42, 19

Moesia II

cuneus equitum stablesianorum, Sucidava Or. 40, 17

Scythia

cuneus equitum stablesianorum, Cii Or. 39, 14
cuneus equitum stablesianorum, Bireo Or. 39, 15

Asia

κῶρος σταβλισιανῶν SEG 6, 187 (Sebaste, Phryg.)

Aegyptus

equites stablesiani, Pelusio Or. 28, 16

Oriens

equites secundi stablesiani (vex. com.) Or. 7, 29
equites tertii stablesiani (vex. com.) Or. 7, 30

Africa

equites stablesiani Italiciani (vex. com.) Oc. 6, 39 = 6, 82 = 7, 180

equites stablesiani seniores = equites stablesiani Africani (vex. com.) Oc. 6, 21 = 6, 64 = 7, 182

= *equites stablesiani* DESSAU 2794; AE 1916, 7–8 (Sitifis); AE 1937, 35 (Thamallula).

Who were the *stablesiani* / σταβλησιανοί from whom so many regiments could be raised? The parallel term *castrensiანი* / καστρησιανοί provides the clue. *Castrensiანი* were then men in the service of the *castrensis*, the majordomo of the palace.³

³ A. H. M. JONES, *The Later Roman Empire*, Oxford 1964, 567–71. For the Greek version see P. Masp. I, 54, etc.

Analogously, the *stablesiani* served with the *stablensis*, an otherwise unknown officer in charge of the stables. This is confirmed by comparable groups of officials named after their superiors, like the *vicariani*, *duciani*, *praefectiani*, *paedagogiani*, and *privatiani* in the service of the *vicarius*, *dux*, *praefectus*, *paedagogus*, and *comes rei privatae*.⁴

The «Notitia Dignitatum» refers to *praepositi gregum et stabulorum* (Or. 14, 6) who seem to have been in charge of the imperial stud farms. Such farms were certainly run by men of all ages with a high percentage of slaves among them. Thus the *praepositi gregum et stabulorum* could hardly have had at their disposition enough qualified men to raise over a dozen first class cavalry regiments. For while all fifteen regiments of the «Notitia Dignitatum» need not be created at the same time, inscriptions show that on the other hand there existed sundry more *stablesiani* regiments which became extinct before the redaction of the «Notitia». Consequently a pool of several thousand men was originally needed, even if these regiments were only some 200 strong.⁵

Another official in charge of stables was the *tribunus* (later *comes*) *stabuli*. His personnel were *stratores*⁶ whom third century sources show as grooms and fourth century sources as supervising the supply of horses to the army.⁷ One is tempted to think of the *tribunus stabuli* as *stablensis* and of his *stratores* as *stablensiani*, but the men at his disposition could certainly not have sufficed for so many regiments. Still, the fact that *stratores* served with the official in charge of the stables provides the answer.

Were there elsewhere enough *stratores* to form such a large number of units? The answer is *yes* with regard to the *stratores* of the provincial governors. For contrary to the general assumption, they did not only serve as grooms but also as part of the governors' guards – and in numbers large enough for that purpose. This is inferred from the following observations:

- 1) *Stratores* as legionary soldiers on the governors' staff enjoyed a high status. They cannot have been stable boys.⁸ Characteristically, they were entrusted with special duties of importance, e. g. supervising the fortification of a city.⁹

⁴ JONES, op. cit., Index.

⁵ HOFFMANN, l. c. suggests the stable-boys of Gallienus' battle cavalry provided the recruits, but cavalrymen either tended their own horses or had slaves doing the work for them. The assumption that the battle cavalry had a huge central stable with thousands of stable-boys seems unwarranted.

⁶ Amm. Marc. 30, 5, 19; cf. E. STEIN, *Histoire du Bas-Empire*, Paris 1949, 798.

⁷ SHA, *Caracalla* 7; Cod. Theod. 6, 31, 1; Amm. Marc. 29, 3, 5; 30, 5, 19. For the supply of horses see R. W. DAVIES, *The Supply of Animals to the Roman Army and the Remount System*, Latomus 28, 1969, 429–459.

⁸ Contra: E. STEIN, *Die kaiserlichen Beamten und Truppenkörper im römischen Deutschland*, Wien 1932, 74: «Stallmeister und Reitknechte».

⁹ E. g. AE 1900, 160, cf. H.-G. PFLAUM, *La fortification de la ville d'Adraha d'Arabie, Syria* 29, 1952, 307–330.

- 2) The *stratores* were the most independently organized group among a governor's legionary staff. They alone had their own centurions and occasionally even higher ranking commanders, as well as their own administrative office (*tabularium*).¹⁰
- 3) The *stratores* were at times under the command of the same officer as the governor's *pedites singulares*.¹¹ Since the latter were undeniably part of the governor's guard, so were the *stratores*, i. e. they must have had similar duties.
- 4) Arrian reports (Ektaxis 22) that as governor of Cappadocia he had a legionary guard of 200 *σωματοφύλακες* under their own centurions. These will be his *stratores*, for the *beneficiarii* which have been seen in these guards had no centurions of their own nor could they, scattered over their *stationes* as most of them were, train together to become an effective guard unit.¹² Legionary discharge lists point to a similar figure: in one case 3 out of 84 men had been *stratores*.¹³

As part of the governor's guard the *stratores* were an elite corps like the *equites legionis* who during the same epoch were transformed into new *equites promoti* regiments. Moreover, their commanders were of a high enough rank to carry a title like *stabulensis* and to have the men detached for work with them be named after it. Most important, if all governors of the twenty or so legionary provinces had a like number of *stratores* each could provide sufficient men for the core of a *stabesiani* unit.

The formation of new units out of a provincial governor's guard was an old tradition of the Imperial army. The auxiliary part of the guards, *equites* and *pedites singulares*, had fathered numerous *alae*, *cohortes* and *numeri singularium*.¹⁴ The reason why up to the middle of the third century no new regiments had been raised from *stratores* is that all new regiments of *ala* or cohort size were auxiliary, so that *stratores* as legionary soldiers could not be used for them. But when Gallienus turned to legionaries for the creation of new *equites* regiments, the *stratores*, too, could be employed the way *singulares* had been for centuries: to form new, independent units.

¹⁰ CIL XIII 8150; AE 1929, 125; *tabularium*: CIL XIII 6746, cf. B. DOBSON, Introduction to A. DOMASZEWSKI, Die Rangordnung des römischen Heeres, 2nd ed., Bonn 1967, XIII.

¹¹ CIL XIII 8203 = ILS 2418; H. NESSELHAUF, Neue Inschriften aus dem römischen Germanien und den angrenzenden Gebieten, BRGK 27, 1937, 237.

¹² Contra: E. RITTERLING, Ein Amtsabzeichen, BJ 125, 1919, 25. Josephus, Bell. Iud. 3, 95 also talks of a legionary guard of the Roman commander in Palestine which may show that these were standard rather than *ad hoc* institutions.

¹³ CIL VIII 2568.

¹⁴ M. SPEIDEL, The *pedites singulares Pannonici* in Mauretania, AJPh 93, 1972, 299–305. Idem, The Guards of the Roman Armies (forthcoming).

A further observation will confirm this. In provinces without a legionary garrison the governors had to recruit their *stratores* from auxiliary soldiers.¹⁵ From them new auxiliary units could be raised even though that will not have happened very often, since such provinces were generally far from the theaters of war. A document which until now had to be interpreted as misconceived may illustrate just such a case.

SEG 6, 187, Sebaste/Phrygia: Ὁρσινιανοῦ καὶ Φλωρεν|τίας θυγάτηρ Ἡλιό-|
πολις ἀπὸ κώρτας | σταβλησιανῶν ἀνέσ|τησαν στίλλην τῆ (sic) | εαυτοῦ
τάφω· ἔστιν δὲ ἐτῶν δέκα ἕξ· εἰ δέ | τις βουληθῆη κακου|γῆσαι, ὡς ἡ
θυγάτηρ || τὴν μητέρα οὐκ ἐχόρ|τασεν οὔτε ἡ μήτηρ | τὴν θυγατέρα,
οὔτως | μὴ χορτασθῆ τῆς ἐκί.

The unit that is mentioned here was hardly called a cohort by mistake,¹⁶ for it represents exactly what one would expect. The Proconsul of Asia, having neither legion nor *ala* at his command, recruited his *stratores* from the cohorts stationed in his province.¹⁷ They in turn could only be formed into a new cohort. The fact that this Asian *cohors stablesianorum* is not otherwise known suggests that it originated after the opening decades of the third century A. D. at a time when inscriptions became sparse. Nor did it survive for inclusion in the *Notitia Dignitatum*. It should nevertheless be added to our list of the *auxilia* of the Roman Imperial army.¹⁸

The date when the *equites stablesiani* were created is elusive. It can be narrowed down to some extent by the observation that on the one hand units of the *equites*-type were common only from Gallienus' reign onwards, while on the other hand the prevalence of the name Valerius in their inscriptions suggests the existence of *stablesiani* units already by Diocletian's time.¹⁹ Perhaps the distribution of the regiments may lead a step further in unraveling that date.

¹⁵ E. g. CIL X 7580 = ILS 1358 (Sardinia); CIL III 2067 = ILS 2587 (Dalmatia); CIL VIII 9002 = PFLAUM, Carr. 773 (Mauretania Caesariensis), *ibid.* CIL VIII 9370 = ILS 1357a and AE 1958, 156.

¹⁶ Contra: HOFFMANN, *Bewegungsheer*, 2; 108, n. 570. RUGE, RE 3A (1929) 1925 f., would even derive the name of this cohort from a locality.

¹⁷ For the garrison of Asia see R. K. SHERK, *The inermes provinciae of Asia Minor*, *AJPh* 76, 1955, 400–413. Dig. 1, 16, 4: *nemo proconsulum stratores suos habere potest*, does not mean the Proconsuls had no *stratores* (witness AE 1959, 12), but that they must be seconded from the army rather than specially hired. Contra: MOMMSEN, *Staatsrecht*, 263 (252), n. 4.

¹⁸ The creation of this cohort incidentally confirms what could already be inferred from the common command of *stratores* and *pedites singulares*: that *stratores* were at least in part infantrymen, not cavalrymen.

¹⁹ Thus HOFFMANN, *Bewegungsheer*, commenting p. 251 ff., n. 494 on CIL VIII 8490 = ILS 2794 and on AE 1916, 7–8. The dating by R. GROSSE, *Römische Militärgeschichte*, Berlin 1920, 16, n. 9, cannot be maintained, since several units mentioned by the *Notitia Dignitatum* in Britain are clearly post-Diocletianic, cf. D. v. BERCHEM, *On Some Chapters of the Notitia Dignitatum*, *AJPh* 76, 1955, 138–147.

Inscriptions and the *Notitia Dignitatum* combine or show that *equites stablesiani* were stationed in all major military areas of the Empire except the Orient. This probably reflects their origin in the various third-century legionary provinces. Now, if Aurelianus or Diocletian had been the founders of the *stablesiani* one would expect to find such units also in the Orient, while if Gallienus raised them their absence from Cappadocia to Arabia would be explained by the fact that precisely these areas did not fall under Gallienus' effective control.²⁰ Thus, Gallienus is likely to be the founder of the *stablesiani*.

Apparently, though, the *stablesiani* were not part of Gallienus' new battle cavalry, for when Aurelianus or Diocletian broke that new force up for garrison duty along the open frontier of the Orient, no *stablesiani* went there.²¹ Instead, to judge from their later distribution, most *stablesiani* remained in the provinces where they had been raised. They may even have continued one of the functions of the former governors' guards, i. e., to serve as mobile reserve units for the armies of their provinces. If so, Gallienus could be said to have created not only a forerunner of the later palatine field armies (in the form of his battle cavalry) but also of the regional field armies (in the form of the *equites stablesiani*), measures that must be seen in the context of the increase of the legionary cavalry from 120 to 730 men.²²

The close parallel of the *equites promoti* supports the suggested origin of the *equites stablesiani* from *stratores*: in both cases mounted legionary guards were transformed into independent cavalry units in accordance with a comprehensive plan, effected no doubt upon imperial orders in most or all military provinces. For the *stablesiani* an already existing unit somewhere in the East – not necessarily the Asian cohort – may have served as a model and thus inspired the Empire-wide use of the strangely grecized name *stablesinai* instead of *stabilensiani*.²³

Further support for the origin of the *stablesiani*-regiments from guards, imperial or provincial, comes from the find at Deurne/Netherlands of an elaborate gilt and silver-plated helmet with the inscription *STABLESIA VI* which shows that in A. D. 319 a *stablesiani*-regiment still served as guards.²⁴

If our suggestion is correct and the *equites stablesiani* were raised from *stratores* they will illustrate how the Roman army was readied to overcome the crisis of the Empire: with characteristic Roman traditionalism by changing only slightly an existing institution, adapting it to new exigencies.

²⁰ Cf. e. g. A. ALFÖLDI, *CAH* 12, 1939, 181 ff.

²¹ Cf. *Not. Dig. Or.* 32–37. Contra: HOFFMANN, *Bewegungsheer*, 251 ff.

²² Josephus, *Bell. Iud.* 3, 120; Vegetius 2, 6.

²³ HOFFMANN, l. c. assumes a complicated bilingual history of the word which is rather unlikely given that the parallel term *καστροησιανοί* is simply a transliteration.

²⁴ For the helmet and its related finds see now H. KLUMBACH, *Spättrömische Gardehelme*, München 1973, 51–83 (60: inscription) with pl. 19–21.