DID CENTURIONS LEAD DETACHMENTS OF THEIR LEGIONS IN WARTIME?

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ABSTRACT

It is generally believed that, in wartime, legionary detachments or ‘cæsāriates’ were commanded exclusively by senatorial and later equestrian officers, whereas centurions were entrusted with detachments raised only for garrison duty or work-related tasks in peacetime. However, certain literary and epigraphic sources suggest that, even from the mid-first century AD, the usual leader of fighting-detachments of up to 800 legionaries was really the centurion.

According to the traditional view, the command of legionary detachments in wartime was the preserve of the senatorial class, that is up until the time of the Marcomannic wars (AD 166-172 and 177-180), when the pressures of those struggles necessitated the employment of equestrian officers in the same way. Only in peacetime were centurions entrusted with much smaller detachments engaged in garrison-duty or work-related tasks. However, there appear to be substantial grounds for questioning whether centurions really were excluded from commanding detachments of their legions in wartime. Indeed, the evidence, although fragmentary, appears to show that, when legionary detachments were part of a larger tactical grouping, these very capable men were actually the usual leaders of detachments of up to 500 men.²


² Domaszewski, Cagnat and Neumann stated that ‘cæsāri veteranorum’ were commanded by centurions in wartime, but this clearly contradicts their view that only senatorial officers commanded legionary detachments; see Domaszewski 1908:78, Cagnat 1900:776; Neumann 1958:2445.
Certainly, there is no doubt that legionary detachments were regularly commanded by centurions in peacetime, for a large number of religious and building dedications from around the empire attest to this fact. Typically, a centurion is said to be ‘praestopus vexillatio’, that is ‘put in charge of a detachment’, or the detachment itself is described as ‘sub cura’ or ‘under the care’ of a particular centurion. Such expressions clearly indicate that the centurions were in command of the legionary detachments concerned. Admittedly, in most instances, it is impossible to know the exact size of the detachments because the term ‘vexillatio’ carries with it no indication of magnitude. Nevertheless, a number of inscriptions show that some centurion-led garrison/work detachments were organized along the lines of single centuries, while others had sufficient soldiers to form several centuries.

What evidence is there, then, to suggest that centurions were employed as leaders of picked or detached legions in wartime? The earliest hint appears to come from Caesar’s account of the civil war. Soon after the outbreak of hostilities, Caesar despatched three cohorts of the Thirteenth Legion at Ariminum to secure the distant towns of Pisaurum, Fanum and Ancona. The cohorts were probably not vexillations, but it is significant that they were apparently led by no one more senior than their own centurions (Caes. BC 1.11). \(^1\) Tacitus’ account of the war against Taforanis in AD 22 provides another example. According to Tacitus, Q. Iunius Blaesus divided the three columns of his army into yet more numerous detachments, and placed over these centurions of proven courage: *tripertium cernitum pluris in manus dispertit praeposito centurio virtutis virtuti omnium* (Tac. Ann. 3.74). Later, in the 2nd century, Arrian tells us that during his campaign against the Alans (c. 132) he kept about his person a bodyguard of up to 200 picked legionaries (in addition

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3 I.e. the same term is attested for a body of around 40 men as it is for one of military strength; cf. CIL 6.1063 = ILS 2178 and CIL 10.5829 = ILS 2726.


5 Indeed, Caesar later sent C. Serbonius Curio to take command of the cohort at Pisaurum, taking with him two other cohorts that had remained behind at Aemum-nun (Caes. BC 1.12). A further five cohorts of the Thirteenth were sent from Ariminum to Arretium (Caes. BC 1.11), and were entrusted to M. Antonius, who, as a tribune of the plebs, had been to Caesar after the senate passed the ‘last decree’.  

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to his regular auxiliary horse guards) and that these men were commanded by centurions:

οἱ δὲ ἐπίλεκτα ἱππεῖς ἀμφοτερῶν Ἰουνίων ἑτοίμων, καὶ τῶν ἀπὸ τῆς διάρροιας τῶν πεζῶν ὅσοι εἰς διοικήσεις, ὑμνομελῶν, καὶ συμμαθη-

τέλων, καὶ ἐκπομπῇ ἑπτά τῶν ἐπίλεκτων ἑξετητήγαμον ἢ τῶν συμμαθητέων ἔμμοικών, καὶ διακόμης ὑμῶν ἐπίλεκτων.

(Ar. Eust. 22)  

This excerpt confirms, therefore, that at least some centurions did in fact command groups of picked legionaries on campaign. For what it is worth, moreover, legionary centurions were sometimes put in charge of very large numbers of auxiliary troops. As E. Birley showed, legionary centurions were employed from time to time as interim commanders of entire auxiliary units of up to military strength, and these, of course, were combat units.9

But some of the strongest support for the idea that centurions may have led legionary vexillations in wartime comes from pseudo-Hyginus’ treatise On Camp Fortifications, sometimes now retitled De notation castrorum, On Castramentation or Camp Surveying. The treatise details the layout of a camp for a model army accompanied by the emperor and including units of the Praetorian Guard, three legions, three bodies of vexillation-soldiers (‘ vexillarii’) and numerous units of auxiliaries and irregulars (‘nationes’). The text reveals that the three groups of vexillation-soldiers included in the model were intended to represent not baggage-handlers or veterans, as has sometimes been argued, but rather fighting-d detachments from three legions stationed outside of the area of operations.10 The treatise also makes plain that each detachment had the same strength as a regular legionary cohort and, for that reason, was probably organized along similar lines.11 Unfortunatley, the rank of the commander of each detachment is nowhere stated. If one follows the established view, then it may be that each commander was a senatorial tribune who goes unmentioned because he was accommodated, along with other legionary tribunes, in the camp’s ‘praetentura’ (De munit. castr. 15). The problem with this hypothesis,

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9 Gilliver 2001:179 translates: ‘The equites singulares will be stationed around Xeno-

phon (Arrian), as well as up to 200 infantrymen from the legions as a personal

bodyguard, centurions commanding the picked troops and bodyguard, and the

decurions of the equites singulares.’

10 See especially Birley 1983:73-83. For examples of legionary centurions as interim

commanders of military units of the auxilia, see Ar. 1908, 46 and Fink, RMfP no. 50,
col. i, line 13.


12 Tully 2002:143.
however, is that it requires us to believe that standard legionary cohorts formed for battle with no one higher in rank than a ‘pilus prior’ at the same time that legionary vexillations of identical size were commanded by senatorial tribunes. Indeed, since the latinalian tribune was not only a senator designate but also second-in-command of his entire legion, it is difficult to believe that a command over a mere 480 legionaries would have been judged worthy of his station. Nor does it seem especially likely that the detachments in the treatise were commanded by ‘tribuni angusticlavii’, because equestrian commanding officers of independent units, such as the auxiliary regiments, were normally accommodated in the tent lines of their own alae or cohorts (De munit. castr. 16). The fact that the author of the treatise makes no mention of space for the leaders of the detachments seems to infer, therefore, that they were simply the most senior centurions in each vexillation, and were therefore accommodated within the tent lines of their detachments. If so, the fact that the treatise was written as an example of castration for a ‘model army’ would also imply that centurions might even have been the ‘usual’ commanders of detachments of up to 500 men.

Further indications that centurions may have been used in this way can be found in literary and epigraphic evidence associated with the Roman force assigned to shore up the client kings of Armenia. These sources suggest, firstly, that the structure of the Armenian-based force remained more or less unchanged from the time of Corbulon through at least to the reign of Marcus Aurelius, and, secondly, that the two (?) legionary vexillations therein were normally led by centurions. The evidence, best viewed in chronological order, dates back to AD 51, when the Roman ‘praesidium’ was commanded by a prefect and a (legionary) centurion. No details are provided about the size of the garrison on this occasion, but we do hear that some three years later it consisted of ‘a thousand legionaries, three cohorts of auxiliaries and two regiments of cavalry’: nulò legiones, tres secersiones cohortes duumqve equitum alae (Tac. Ann. 14.26). Later, perhaps under Trajan, a vexillation of unknown strength of I Italia and possibly another of VI Ferrata are recorded on the same tombstone from Artaxata (SAFE 1968, 511). Finally, an inscription from Kainopolis records, at some time in the reign of Marcus Aurelius, that the garrison consisted of legionary vexillations of XII Fulminata and XV Apollinaris, this time under a tribune of an auxiliary cohort and a legionary centurion of XV Apollinaris (JLS 9117). The text reads:

12 There is at present only one known example of a latinalian tribune in command of a single legionary vexillation, i.e. CIL 14.3612 = ILS 1025.
13 Tac. Ann. 12.45. For the identification of the centurion as legionary, see Tac. Ann. 15.5 and Saddington 1991:3501, as well as other evidence on the Roman ‘praesidium’ in Armenia (see below).
Imp(erator) Caes(ar) M(arco) Aurelio(um) Antonino Augusto(um) Germ(anico), vexillatorius legionum XV Ap(o)li(linaris) et XII Fulminatorius fecerunt sub Glauco Arrio Antonino (sic) pr(aeses) pro(nuncio). Popilius Macrini(um) tr(ibuni) Anax(um) Cl(audii) Eger(atum) Clav(ium) Rom(ani)orum et Tr(i(i)u) Surielius Varus (centurio) Leg(ionis) XV Ap(o)li(linaris) pr(ii)eposuit

For the Emperor Caesar Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus, conqueror of Germany, the vexillations of the legions XV Apollinaris and XII Fulminata made this under Gaius Arrius Antoninus, governor of the province. Popilius Macrinus, tribune of the part-mounted Cohort of Roman Citizens, a thousand-strong, and Titus Aurelius Varus, centurion of the Fifteenth Legion Apollinaris, put in charge

The text is especially important because it reveals that both legionary detachments were under the overall command of a tribune of an auxiliary regiment and a centurion of XV Apollinaris, that is the same legion that supplied one of the two detachments. That the garrison included two legionary detachments, i.e. ‘vexillatio(s)’, as opposed to a single composite ‘vexillatio(s)’ of men from both legions is suggested by a further text dated eight to ten years later and set up by a detachment of XV Apollinaris alone (CIL 3.6032 = ILS 394):

Imp(erator) Caes(ar) M(arco) Aureel(io) Antonino Aug(usto) [[Commodi]] Germ(anico) Sarm(anico) Max(eino) tri(i)unicia pot(estato) imp(eratori) VII co(i)v(all) IIII p(atri) p(atriae) vexillatorius Leg(ionis) XV Apol(linaris) sub Caelio Calvino leg(iano) Aug(usti) pr(ii) pr(ae)curum agentem Licinio Saturnino trib(uno) et Aurele(io) Labra(ce) (centurione) leg(ionis) eiusdem

For the Emperor Caesar Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus [[Commodus]], greatest conqueror of Germany (and) Sarmatia, with tribunician power, saluted as victorious general seven times, consul four times, father of his country, the vexillation of the Fifteenth Legion Apollinaris under the charge of Caius Calvus, legate of Augustus with the rank of proconsul, (and) in the care of Licinius Saturninus, tribune, and Aurelius Labraeus, centurion, of the same legion (set this up).

Once again, the detachment is said to be under a tribune and a legionary centurion. The evidence as a whole, therefore, seems to show that from AD

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51 the 'praesidium' normally consisted of two legionary detachments supported by up to five auxiliary alae and cohorts, and that the strength of each legionary detachment was about 500 men or about the same strength as a regular cohort, that is if the combined number of legionsaries in the guard remained at the 'mille legionarii' reported by Tacitus (An. 14.26). The commanders of the guard itself are recorded three times as either a prefect (without further qualification) or a tribune (once specifically identified as the commanding officer of a auxiliary regiment), and in each instance the officer's name is followed by the name of a legionary centurion. For this reason, it does not seem that the prefects/tribunes shared joint command of the force with the centurions. The names of the legionary centurions always come after those of the prefect or tribunes, just as the names of these officers always come after the name of the governor. Rather, what the inscriptions seem to reveal is the chain-of-command, that is the governor, then the commander of the Roman garrison, and finally the commander of the legionary component of that garrison. It may be, therefore, that the overall commander of the force was simply the senior officer out of those prefects or tribunes in charge of the auxiliary units present, and that the centurion was the senior of the two centurions who commanded the legionary detachments. Despite the fact that the force is twice referred to by Tacitus as 'a guard' ('praesidium'), it is clear, from both the purpose of the guard and the strength of its vexillations (about 1000 legionsaries), as well as the number of auxiliary regiments present, that the guard was a sort of battle-group or task force. Its mission was to defend Rome's interests, and to fight if necessary, as indeed it did on at least one occasion (Tac. An. 12.45). Thus, the importance of the evidence pertaining to the Roman guard in Armenia is that it reinforces what is implied by pseudo-Hyginus, that is that legionary fighting-detachments of quislingary strength were led by centurions, only, in the examples from Armenia, one has the additional information that the detachments came under the overall command of an officer of equestrian rank.

Further support for the idea that centurions led fighting-detachments appears to come from an altar found at Fedjana in Mauretania Caesariensis. Set up by a cavalry detachment of the Ala Augusta, based in Norticum, the text reads as follows (AE: 1975, 951):

I(ovi) O(ptimo) M(aximo), Victoriae, Noreiae tac(tam), vexellatio (sic) Al(ae) Aug(ustae). Sen[ti]o(sus Exoratus, Spectatus Viator, decuriones exercitus Norici, quibus praecet l(a)sus) Primus (centurio) Legionis) XIII(III) G(erminalis), v(otum) s(olvunt) t(ribentes) m(ertis).

Sacred to Jupiter, Best and Greatest, to Victory, and to Norica, the detachment of the Ala Augusta (set this up): Senator Exoratus (and)
Spectatus Viator, decurions of the army of Noricum, whom Julius Primus, centurion of the Fourteenth Legion Gemina, commands, willingly and deservedly fulfilled their vow.

The inscription records the names of two decurions, Sentius Exoratus and Spectatus Viator, both of whom were under a legionary centurion of XIV Gemina, Iulius Primus, detached from the army of Upper Pannonia. Speidel appears correct in assigning the text to the Moorish revolt in the reign of Antoninus Pius (c. 144-150).24 But it is less certain whether the cavalry vexillation was led in person by the legionary centurion, as Speidel believes. Another altar, this time from Rome and probably associated with the same conflict, provides a parallel to this type of unit. Set up by a cavalry detachment of the First Ala of Inurneas, the text records, once again, the names of two decurions, but this time there is no mention of a centurion in charge, despite the fact that the cavalrymen were serving outside their home-province of Pannonia inferior (CIL 6.421 = ILS 2546).25

E(o)wi O(ptimo) M(aximo) Heliopolitano, vexillato Alae Inur(a)eorum, praebentibus Civ(adii) Rufino et Ursione, decuriones posuerent.

To Heliopolitan Jupiter, Best and Greatest, the detachment of the Ala of Inurneas, with Claudius Rufinus and Ursio offering, decurions set this up.

Since a decurion was the normal commander of a ‘tumma’ of 32 men (De munit. castr. 16), the inscriptions from Fediana and Rome suggest that cavalry detachments were, perhaps, regularly structured on two ‘tummae’ or approximately 64 men.26 It is hard to suppose, then, that such a diminutive cavalry unit, already with two decurions, really required an infantry centurion to lead it. Rather, the immediate commander in each instance was more probably the senior of the two decurions (that is in similar fashion to the senior legionary centurion in the Armenian garrison above), for other inscriptions prove that

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25 This Inurnean detachment was probably or suit to the same war, for a diploma of 150 from Pannonia superior/inferior (CIL 16.99) reads ‘equibus ... in alis V, [quae] appellantur ... I Avg(ustae) Inur(a)or(um) Sagr(taurorum), quae sunt in P[ann(onia)] inferior(e) sub C(mino) Secundo, quint(i) et vicern pis(have) stip(endia) emec(tis) dim(issis) honest(a) miss(ione) per Porciunem Venetus[ium proc(uratore)bus], cum essent in expedition(e) Mauretan(iis) Caesarens(iis).’
26 I.e. as first suspected by Kennedy (1985:158 n. 17) when commenting on ILS 2546.
decisions did, in fact, led cavalry detachments on occasion.\textsuperscript{17} As indicated by the verb ‘praecest’, the detachment at Fedjama was certainly under the overall authority of the legionary centurion Primus. But another explanation for the presence in Mauretania of this Pannonian-based centurion might be that Primus was in charge of a larger unit, perhaps a detachment of his own legion, XIV Gemina, and that the Norican cavalry unit was attached under his command to provide the legionaries with cavalry support. This interpretation would accord well with the type of low-level operations one might expect to be conducted in the vast expanses of North Africa, where, as in the war against Tacfarinas, an army might be ‘divided into numerous detachments under centurions of proven courage’.\textsuperscript{18} If so, then Primus’ command was perhaps only part of a still larger legionary force under a senatorial or equestrian leader. This scenario is made all the more likely by a number of second-century tombstones found in Mauretania and set up to men not only of Primus’ Pannonian-based XIV Gemina but to soldiers of all of the legions of both Upper and Lower Pannonia.\textsuperscript{19} It is possible, therefore, that, in answer to the Moorish revolt, each of the legions of the two Pannonias contributed a quingenary detachment led by an experienced centurion, and that the task force as a whole was entrusted to an as yet unidentified senatorial or equestrian officer. This interpretation of the Fedjama-text would also accord better with the magnitude of the revolt; it was so serious that it necessitated the drawing of forces from as far away as Britain, Noricum and both Pannonias.\textsuperscript{20}

Finally, some attention should be given to the special command of T. Pontius Sabinus – an equestrian prefect and tribune who transferred to the centurionate and afterwards rose to chief centurion of III Augusta and was thereafter put in charge of vexillations of three legions sent to Britain in about 122. He is commemorated in an inscription from Ferentino that reads (CIL 10.5829 = ILS 2726).

\textsuperscript{17} E.g. CIL 2.2555 = ILS 9128; CIL 8.9045 = ILS 2766, ILS 9131; AE 1985, 849.
\textsuperscript{18} This type of combined force was commonly employed at an even lower level in the garrisoning of North Africa in the later 2d and 3d centuries. A number of inscriptions from North Africa record century-sized legionary detachments supported by detachments of eight to ten cavalrymen, e.g. AE 1948, pp. 83 and 86.
\textsuperscript{20} For evidence of troops from Britain, see AE 1900, 28: ‘(Dis) M(arianus), Sex(io) Flavio Sex(ti) f(ilio) Quir(ina) Quaeto, p(unico) p(atro Leg(ionis) XX V(aleriae) V(ictorius) missu cum exerc(itu) in exp(editione) Maur(ianiae) ab Imp(erator) Antonino Aug(usto).’}

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Tirinus Pontius Sabinus, son of Titus, of the voting constituency Palatina, prefect of the First Par-Mounted Cohort of Pannonians and Dalmatians, composed of Roman citizens, military tribune of the Sixth Legion Ferrata, decorated in the Parthian expedition by the deified Trajan, centurion of the Twenty-Second Legion Primigenia, centurion of the Thirteenth Legion Gemina, chief centurion of the Third Legion Augusta, put in charge of vexillations comprising three thousand men of the legions Seventh Gemina, Eighth Augusta and Twenty-second Primigenia on the expedition to Britain, tribune of the Third Cohort of the Watch, and of the Fourteenth Urban Cohort (and the Second Praetorian Cohort, chief centurion a second time, procurator of the province of Narbonensis, member of the board of four for the administration of law in the year the census was taken (i.e. joint mayor at Ferentium), municipal priest, town patron.

Since the detachments under Sabinus came from legions in Spain and Upper Germany, it is possible that, after completing his stipit as chief centurion of III Augusta, Sabinus left Numidia and proceeded north through Spain and Upper Germany, and that he rendezvoused with each vexillation et mactae.23 Unfortunately, we are not told the rank/s of the officers in charge of each detachment; certainly, they were not senatorial tribunes, for their leader Sabinus was of equestrian rank. One possibility is that they were more junior equestrian tribunes. However, ‘tribuni angusticlavi’ were, on present understanding, senior in rank to a chief centurion.24 It is therefore unclear whether equestrian tribunes

would have been placed under an ex-chief centurion (that is a "primipilari") who had not yet reached the rank of camp prefect. Perhaps, in this instance, there was no particular problem, since Sabinus had earlier served as a prefect and tribune himself. However, one cannot at present discount the possibility that the military detachments under Sabinus were led by men who ranked below chief centurion, that is by experienced ordinary centurions.33

Admittedly, none of the evidence adduced proves by itself that centurions led legionary detachments in wartime. When viewed together, however, the sources suggest that, from perhaps as early as the mid-first century AD, centurions were the usual tactical leaders of single fighting-detachments of up to quingenary strength, but only, it would seem, when their detachment was part of a larger force under overall senatorial or equestrian command. As we have just seen, it is conceivable that on certain occasions very experienced centurions may have led even milliary-sized detachments within larger vexillation-groups perhaps during administrative re-deployments, although this last hypothesis is far less certain. In summary, therefore, it would appear that the qualities of the battle-hardened legionary centurion were not over-looked when it came to selecting the leaders of fighting-detachments. Strategy and tactics would no doubt come from those better qualified by birth and study of the military treatises. At the cohort-sized, tactical-unit level, however, it was courage, steadfastness and personal skill at arms that mattered most, and in this regard the Romans seem to have identified the perfect man for the job.

33 It is unclear whether the vexillation-soldiers were sent to Britain as reinforcements for losses incurred in 117-119, or as builders of Hadrian's Wall in 122, or as protectors of those building the Wall. For the different points of view, see Birley 1952:53 and 1963:648; Dobson 1978:235-36; Holde 1982:42; Freer 1991:125 and Birley 1997:125 and 1999:248 n. 40. For evidence of fighting in Britain c. 117-119, see H.4 Hadr., 5:2: "Brittaniae inveni sub Romana dicion non poterunt" and BMC III 412, a coin showing a figure of Britannia and dated to 119-120.
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