MILITARY COLONISATION IN THE NEAR EAST AND MESOPOTAMIA UNDER THE SEVERI

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents arguments in favour of a hypothesis that during the rule of the Severi organised groups of Roman veterans were settled in the Near East and Mesopotamia. The hypothesis is based on the numismatic and epigraphic evidence.

Establishing veteran colonies was a practice used from the time of Gaius Marius. Most scholars believe that it ceased completely after Hadrian.¹ Thereafter, they maintain, the colonial status granted to various cities was simply titular and had nothing to do with the settlement of veterans.² Yet there is cause to question the validity of this approach. Firstly, it is difficult to imagine that military colonisation, for centuries an important part of social policy, should suddenly cease and be wholly abandoned. Secondly, not all the pertinent evidence has been considered. For this reason, the question of the existence, or absence, of military colonisation after Hadrian deserves reconsideration. Discussion here will be limited to the Severan period since a relatively large body of evidence can cast more light on whether or not organised military settlement existed in the second half of the 2nd century and the first half of the 3rd century AD.

The coinage from colonial mints offers important evidence as to whether these cities were veteran settlements or merely had titular or honorary colonial status. Apart from the Latin legends, common to all colonial coins, some distinct differences can be discerned on the reverse types of coins issued in military colonies. As a rule, the reverse of coins of

² A full list of colonies and cities in the Roman Empire’s eastern provinces which gained colonial status either before or after Hadrian is given in Millar 1990:10-12; Sartre 2001:112-19.
almost all veteran colonies feature *signa militaria*. Particularly popular was the *vexillum*. Its inclusion, sometimes with the name of the legion or legions, in which the colonists had served, emphasised the military background of the settlers. Repeated occurrence of such imagery over time undoubtedly reinforced the message that must have been important to the colony's community. Many believe that, since the establishment of veteran colonies had stopped after Hadrian, any instances of such *vexilla* thereafter should indicate the presence of military garrisons rather than a military colony.³

This point of view is difficult to share. The reverse type showing the *vexillum* combined with the Capitoline wolf first appeared towards the end of the 2nd century and continued in the first half of the 3rd century. The sheer gravity of both iconographic elements suggests that this combination could not have been accidental. The she-wolf emphasised the colony's strong links with the metropolis on the Tiber, of which the colony was supposed to be a small copy. It must be emphasised that the she-wolf/*vexillum* combination is known from coins of only a few colonies, mainly those which obtained their colonial status long after Hadrian. Since some of those coins have a *vexillum* with a legion's name, and since we know that they were part of the first known issues of those colonies, they are more likely to present evidence that these cities were populated by veterans of a given legion, and not by having one stationed there.⁵ Furthermore, the *vexillum* reverse type should not be interpreted as evidence for a garrison at a given location. In the entire Roman Near East and Asia Minor, the practice of commemorating legionary garrisons on coins, whether issued by cities or colonies, was never very popular. (Scholars are eager to find in the coinage of cities and colonies such iconographic elements as would confirm the presence of Roman garrisons. Given the ambiguity of such elements, there is not always sufficient argument in favour of such speculations. For this and other reasons, I believe that my earlier statements about numismatic sources as being useful in locating legionary camps need revising.⁶ A different opinion on this matter is presented by O. Stoll.⁷ Colonia Aelia Capitolina is the only

³ Arguments against such interpretation have been addressed by me elsewhere: see Dąbrowa 2004a:394-96.
⁴ Cf. Dąbrowa 2004b.
colony in the coinage of which elements may be perceived relating to the legion stationed nearby. However, it cannot quite be ruled out that some of them echo the first settlers’ military background.

Another type of image common on colonial coins was a foundation scene. This type of reverse, called ‘the founder type’, shows a priest with a team of oxen ploughing a furrow to mark the colony’s borders (sulcus primigenius). During the Early Empire, it was common practice in nearly all colonies to feature this scene on the reverse of their first coins. In most cases, such iconography followed an almost unchanged pattern, except for slight alterations of secondary importance. The same scene also appears on the coinage of those cities which obtained colonial status after Hadrian. Every colony, whether an actual veteran settlement or a titular colony, had a right to place such imagery on the reverse of its coins. Supporters of the view that after Hadrian all cities in Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Syria and Judea with colonial status were simply titular colonies ignore an important distinction: the presence of the vexillum, sometimes with a legion’s name above it, in the founding scene. This cannot be pure accident. The presence of a signum can only be justified if colonial status was awarded when the city became a veteran settlement. This interpretation of the founder-type reverse suggests that in the second half of the 2nd century and first half of the 3rd century AD, groups of veterans were settled in Tyre, Sidon, Rhesaina, Singara, Caesarea ad Libanum (Arca) and Damascus. It should be noted that, among these cities, only Damascus owed its colony status to Philip the Arab, while all the others obtained it from the various Severi. It poses no great difficulty to establish an approximate chronology of the award of colonial status with its accompanying settlement programme. Tyre became a colony c. 198 under

9 This reverse type most often appeared on early colonial issues, even if a long time had passed since the colony was founded. See Dąbrowa 2004c:215-16; Dąbrowa 2005:37; Papageorgiadu-Bani 2004:35-37; Katsari & Mitchell 2008:231-32.
9 Other than on coin reverses, the colony-founding scene is only known from two reliefs; cf. Brusin 1931:473 fig. no. 10 (Aquileia); Franken 2001:485-87 (Cologne).
10 For more on titular colonies as a legal category, see Vittinghoff 1952:27-29, 31-32.
12 See Dąbrowa 2001:77-78, 80; 2003b:131-33; Dąbrowa 2005:38-41. A similar position is also taken by Ziegler 1978:512-13 n. 113 and Sartre 2004:312. Cf. Rebuffat 1998:410. As to the cities Acco-Ptolemais and Caesarea Maritima, which had obtained their colonial status before the mid-2nd century AD, the founder-type coin they issued in the period in question should be seen as evidence for some new veteran groups being settled there.
Septimius Severus. During the same reign, colonies were established in Rhesaina and Singara. During the reign of Elagabalus, colonial status was extended to Sidon (c. 221) and Caesarea ad Libanum (Arca), and a new group of settlers was dispatched to Acco-Ptolemais.

As already mentioned, the *vexillum* on the reverse of some colonies’ coinage occurs with a legionary name. This clue helps trace the origin of veteran groups in the respective colonies. An organised settlement programme applied mainly to veteran legionnaires formerly stationed in Mesopotamia, Syria and Judea: legio III Parthica, III Gallica and VI Ferrata.

To gain fuller insight into this programme, it is worth considering how many veteran groups from each of these legions were sent to start new colonies or strengthen existing ones. It would be particularly useful to determine whether colonisation was meant to ensure a livelihood to successive groups of ex-soldiers or was geared rather to other needs or circumstances.

Based on available data for the Severan period, we may say that veterans of legio III Parthica only helped found the Rhesaina colony. Ex-soldiers from legio III Gallica made up the first settler groups in Tyre and Sidon and joined the colonial communities in Acco-Ptolemais and

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13 AE 2006, 1584, 1606; Dąbrowa 2001:77.
17 Dąbrowa 2001:80.
18 Rouvier 1901:222 no. 1032; Kadman 1961:122 nos. 157-59; Dąbrowa 2001:76 n. 16.
19 The iconography of coins from Singara suggests that the original settlers consisted of veterans of legio I Parthica; cf. Dąbrowa 2004a:402-03. For Stoll 2009:324-25, it is rather an argument in favour of this legion having its fortress there.
20 Cf. Castelin 1946:14-16; Pollard 2000:273-74; Dąbrowa 2004c:217-18. Contra Stoll 2009:268-69, 305-14. He presents arguments in favour of the opinion (against that proposed by other scholars, who suggest that leg. III Parthica was dislocated at Nisibis; cf. Dąbrowa 2004a:401-03; Stoll 2009:275 n. 139) that leg. III Parthica had its fortress at Rhesaina. According to him, strong proof of this is the presence of the name of the legion and many military symbols on the coins of Rhesaina.
Caesarea Maritima. A group of veterans of *legio VI Ferrata* was dispatched to Tyre. Moreover, inscriptions tell us that veterans were settled in various regions of the Near East and Mesopotamia, even if their numbers are difficult to determine. Nor is it always possible to determine their service in specific legions, since inscriptions do not mention their names. Evidence of veteran groups from one unit being settled in various locations during the Severan era is an important argument to confirm that the rulers did pursue a settlement programme. A further clue comes from those colonies which could not have developed without an inflow of settlers. More evidence for Severan colonisation by veterans comes from cartographic data, aerial photographs and epigraphic evidence. Based on an analysis of aerial photographs and maps of selected areas in Syria, researchers have concluded that the present landscape of these areas has preserved distinct traces of lotting division and centuriation. According to these scholars, at least some of those remains date back to Roman times.

Although any conclusions are conjectural, since they have not been supported by field research, they are still worthy of consideration. One case, without question, shows centuriation: near the city of Homs, or ancient Emesa, from which Septimius Severus’ wife hailed. Emesa won its colonial status during the reign of Caracalla. Its coinage shows no military symbols; it was therefore a titular colony. According to scholars, its purely honorary colonial status meant that no characteristics of a regular colonising programme were in place. Yet the traces of centuriation detected

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24 Rouvier 1901:222 no. 1032; Kadman 1957:128 no. 157; 134 no. 185; 140 nos. 213-14.
26 One example of such a colony is Philippopolis in Arabia. Before it received its colonial status from Philip the Arab, it was a large but insignificant settlement (*Epit. de Caes.* 28.4); cf. Dąbrowa 2003a:79; Darrous & Rohmer 2004:17-19; Oenbrink 2006:248-50. Without a settlement programme and substantial means from the imperial treasury, it had no chance to become the city (Aur. Vict. 28.1) whose imposing remains still inspire awe; cf. Amer & Gawlikowski 1985:1-15; Freyberger 1992:293-95; Freyberger 1999:263-65; Darrous & Rohmer 2004:6-8, 26-28, 31-33; Oenbrink 2006:253-55. Regrettably, no fuller information is available on the social composition or background of Philippopolis’ inhabitants, which makes the settlement process there the subject of pure speculation.
contradict this claim. Taking into consideration the cases of Emesa and Philippopolis, we may venture the claim that efforts were made also in respect of titular colonies to increase their number of inhabitants and to offer them conditions favourable for development. In the absence of any chronological evidence, it is impossible to date the centuriation around Emesa, even approximately. According to M. Abdulkarim, it might have happened around the mid-2nd century AD. However, a lion’s share of the inscriptions found near Emesa, and referring most probably to settlers, comes mainly from the end of the 2nd century and the first half of the 3rd century. It can hardly be imagined that the first settlers would only appear there decades after centuriation. Tombstone inscriptions from around Emesa confirm that the settlers included, in addition to civilians, a significant number of veterans. Perhaps their choices were influenced by some particularly favourable settlement conditions in that location: it cannot be ruled out that Julia Domna’s links with Emesa gave that city special favours with the Severan rulers. It is highly likely that the centuriation around Emesa occurred under Caracalla and was closely connected to his grant of colonial status to Emesa.

In this context, it is worth considering other evidence to confirm Severan military colonisation: specifically, a passage from the biography of Alexander Severus, in the Historia Augusta, and a reference in the 2nd to 3rd-century jurist Julius Paulus (Dig. 21.2.11). The Historia Augusta tells us:

(4) Sola quae de hostibus capta sunt, limitaneis ducibus et militibus donavit, ita ut eorum essent, si heredes eorum militarent, nec umquam ad privatos pertinerent, dicens attentius eos militaturos, si etiam sua rura defenderent. (5) addidit sane his et animalia et servos, ut possent colere quod acceperant, ne per inopiam hominum vel per senectutem possidentium desererentur rura vicina barbariae, quod turpissimum ille ducebat.

(\textit{HA Alex. Sev. 58, 4-5})

The lands taken from the enemy were presented to the leaders and soldiers of the frontier-armies, with the provision that they should continue to be theirs only if their heirs entered military service, and that they should never belong to civilians, for, he said, men serve with greater zeal if they are defending their own lands too. He

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29 Abdulkarim 2007:266.
30 Cf. IGLS 5.2096, 2097, 2115, 2132.
31 In our opinion, Abdulkarim 2007:265-66 is wrong to exclude a connection between both events.
added to these lands, of course, both draught-animals and slaves, in order that they might be able to till what they had received and that it might not come to pass that, through a lack of inhabitants or the old age of the owners, the lands bordering on the country of the barbarians should be left uninhabited, for this, he thought, would be most discreditable. (tr. D. Magie).

The text implies that its author attributes to Alexander Severus the decision to develop a military settlement programme in order for the lands won from barbarians to be inhabited and farmed. In this way, soldiers in frontier units and their families would have means of subsistence, and the rulers a ready source of army recruits. The passage suggests that the programme was to include soldiers in active service and veterans alike, and that it applied to most of the core units in the Roman army.

An important issue here is whether such a programme can really be attributed to Alexander Severus. If so, the next problem is to determine when it came into force and to what areas it applied. This passage may arouse incredulity since the Historia Augusta has been for more than a century the subject of dispute among scholars as to its authorship, date of writing and purpose.\textsuperscript{32} Insofar as biographies of second-century AD emperors are considered reliable, any information about those occupying the throne in the 3rd century merits only limited trust. Since any such reforms by Alexander Severus did not resonate in later tradition, we may further question their historical truth. However, before dismissing the credibility of this account, we must consider Julius Paulus’ mentioned ruling on a certain veteran from Germania.\textsuperscript{33} The status there described for that particular veteran resembles that planned for soldiers of frontier units from the time of Alexander Severus. Since the ruling comes from the same

\textsuperscript{32} It seems that Rostovtzeff 1957:426, 724 n. 50, followed and quoted by others, unquestioningly accepts the credibility of this account.

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Dig.} 21.1.11:

Paulus \textit{libro sexto responsorum} Lucius Titius praedia in Germania trans Renum emit et partem pretii intulit: cum in residuam quantitatem heres emptoris conveniretur, quaestionem rettulit dicens has possessiones ex praecepto principali partim distractas, partim \textit{veteranis in praemia aassignatas} (…) [my emphasis].

Paul, \textit{Replies, Book 6}: Lucius Titius bought lands in Germany beyond the Rhine and paid part of the price. His heir, when sued for the balance, put up the defence that by imperial command, part of the land involved had been sold and part assigned to veterans as their reward (tr. A. Watson).
period, we may assume that the plans introducing new solutions concerning military resettlement must have been implemented, at least to some extent, in the 3rd century, if they merited legal regulation. There are no grounds to believe that the Near East and Mesopotamia should be excluded from such designs, even if their effects in the area remain unknown to us.34

Our knowledge of any colonial activity by the Severan dynasty is sufficient to try to assess the various aspects of their decisions in this respect. Especially noteworthy are those of Septimius Severus. Some of his decrees may be treated as supporting the Roman presence in newly conquered areas in Mesopotamia, others as instrumental in the quick reconstruction and recovery of some Syrian cities destroyed during the civil war against Pescennius Niger. Still others may be thought part of a social policy to ensure decent living conditions for veterans and their families. A desire to strengthen some cities can also be deduced in settlement programmes introduced by Caracalla and Elagabalus.35 Compared to the Early Empire, the extent of military colonisation of the Severi, of course as seen through the lens of our knowledge, may seem very modest. Still, there is no reason to understate its importance, especially considering the grave financial and social challenges the Severi had to face in attempting to pursue their colonising endeavours. For this reason, the favours shown by Septimius Severus and his successors to individual veteran settlement, or establishment of veteran colonies, must be seen as an expression of their appreciation of soldiers, best seen in the military reforms of Septimius Severus.

Abbreviations

AE – Année Épigraphique (Paris 1888-).
BMC – British Museum Catalogues.
IGLS – Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie (Beyrut – Paris 1929-).
RE – Paulys’ Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft (Stuttgart 1894-1972).
SNG – Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum.

34 Rostovtzeff 1957:724-25 n. 50-52 cites sources he believes confirm that, at least in Africa, Germany and on the Danube, the colonisation programme mentioned by the biographer of Alexander Severus was actually implemented.
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