CHAPTER FIVE

EVIDENCE FOR THE PRESENCE OF CHRISTIANS IN THE ROMAN ARMY

Christianity in the army

To date, the process of Christianizing the Roman army has elicited commentary from some of the leading historians of the Roman military, but no specialized studies. One such scholar, G. R. Watson, while acknowledging that there were always some Christians within the army, maintains that Christianity was never popular within military circles during the first three centuries of the Christian era and that, even with the coming of the Christian Roman empire, the army was slow to convert and remained a bastion of paganism for a long time. Watson attributes this situation to the fact that the army was largely recruited from the provincial peasantry, who tended to be pagan, and believes that the turning point in the Christianization of the army probably came after the reign of Julian the Apostate (361–363). In addition, Watson notes that the evidence for Christianity among the army troops in Britain, which he seems to rely upon for his discussion of the army in general, is very rare.\(^1\) The assumption that the army remained largely pagan until at least the end of the third century is shared by scholars such as Gabba, MacMullen, Webster, and Liebeschuetz.\(^2\) A. H. M. Jones also acknowledges the presence of Christians in all walks of Roman life before the reign of Constantine, including the military, but concludes that, given the recruitment basis of the army (sons of veterans, peasants, and barbarians from outside the empire), there must have been

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very few Christians in the army when Constantine adopted Christianity as his religion on the eve of the battle of the Milvian Bridge.³

The foregoing analyses present several problems, chief among which is the assumption that the social and ethnic origins of individual Roman soldiers were the most significant factors in determining their religious identity for their entire careers. Historians of the Roman army tend to place too much emphasis on the background of the men who entered the army as a barometer of their religious convictions and fail to consider the possibility of religious change once these men were placed in a different environment. As we saw in an earlier chapter, the Roman army celebrated a wide range of religious cults which had few counterparts in civilian life. Even some of the unofficial cults, such as Mithraism, were almost exclusively associated with the military. The army was characterized by a religious environment in which recruits, torn from the familiar surroundings of home, family, and village, suddenly found themselves placed in a world where everything was disorienting and alien. Cut off from the culture of his homeland, the soldier lost his bearings and was forced to adopt a new spiritual identity, and so became more receptive to the prevailing religion of the army. For most of imperial period, this meant soldiers would have been expected to participate in the cults of the emperor, the standards of the unit, and the traditional gods of the Roman state.

Under a succession of Christian Roman emperors, the general tone of the army must have become more and more emphatically Christian, which would have caused a realignment in the official religious practices of the military. Soldiers would now have been expected to adjust to the new state of affairs by displaying reverence to the Christian God and his symbols, a transformation which would have carried over into the personal lives of the rank and file. This, in turn, would have an impact on the next generation of military recruits as the sons of soldiers and veterans would have been brought up in the new faith. Even those barbarians and peasants originating from areas outside the normal venues for military recruitment would have been rapidly indoctrinated and absorbed into the prevailing religious culture of the army. With the formal adoption of Christianity as the official religion