**FEMALE NETWORKS IN MILITARY COMMUNITIES IN THE ROMAN WEST: A VIEW FROM THE VINDOLANDA TABLETS**

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**Introduction**

This paper seeks to illuminate the character of the communities that surrounded military units in the Roman West by taking a close look at the Vindolanda tablets and the individuals represented in this corpus. Attention is given particularly to the women that appear in the Vindolanda community and how their presence can be reconciled with the traditional view of the Roman army. Latin literature provides an image of the Roman military that prioritizes masculine power consolidated by expertise in battle and unequaled readiness to fight. Classical authors make clear that a female presence would have been anathema to proper military function and discipline.\(^1\) Certainly a straggling train of non-essential personnel and a large number of non-combatants would slow down an army on the march; however, it is just as certain that this did not hinder some soldiers from maintaining and creating relationships during their military career.\(^2\) Numerous such individuals are mentioned from Polybius to Vegetius, who describe a variety of non-combatants following the column of soldiers, including women, children and slaves.\(^3\)

\(^1\) I extend special thanks to Anthony Birley, who first discussed the presence of women in the Vindolanda writing tablets with me and provided me with the initial list of occurrences of female names in the corpus, and also for reading early versions of this paper in 2010. I would also like to thank Amy Richlin for commenting on these ideas at a UCLA conference in 2010 and for her encouragement to publish this material. Much appreciated feedback was given from the editors of this volume, which improved this paper significantly. All errors remain my own.


Grooms accompanying cavalry are discussed as early as in Polybius (6.40.7); Livy *Ab. Urb.Cond.* 43.3.1 debates the problem of camp children in reference to events of 171 BC; Dio
Tacitus’ depiction of Agrippina and other women leaving the camp of the rebelling German legions provides a palpable image of families in camp: “a miserable column of women, the leader’s wife as a refugee, carrying her little son at her breast, surrounded by the lamenting spouses of friends, who were being dragged off in the same way. And no less sad were those who stayed behind.” This image of a large number of women leaving their military home can be attributed to literary trope; however, we know that Agrippina did indeed accompany Germanicus to the northern frontiers and that she resided with her children within the military community in the beginning of the first century CE. Dio attributes partial blame for the loss of Varus’ three legions in 9 CE to the straggling train of women, children and servants that brought up the rear of the column. The practice of elite wives joining their political-military husbands in the provinces has been attributed first to the tumultuous period of the late Republic, when a trip to the provinces realistically may have been the only escape from the political tumult in Rome, but this does not explain the numerous non-combatants described by Dio, particularly non-elites. Whether literary trope or reported fact, this passage confirms that women and children were broadly considered a weakening element of a typically masculine domain, but at the same time that their presence was quite real.

Though work has been done on the archaeological and historical evidence for women and children in the military environment, it remains striking how little we know of the character of this social group as a whole. It has been common in broad examinations of the Roman army to state

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Cass. 56.20.2 describes the many women, children and slaves following Varus’ legions in 9 CE; Veg. Epit. 3.6.13 describes the best marching order including calones (soldier’s servant); Tac. Hist. 3.33.1 discusses the numerous non-combatants with the Flavian army at Cremona.

4 Tac. Ann. 1.40.4: Incedebat muliebre et miserabile agmen, profuga ducis uxor, parvulum sinu simul gerens, lamentantes circum amicorum coniuges, quae simul trahebantur; nec minus tristes qui manebant.

5 The rhetorical nature of this passage has certainly not gone unnoticed by scholars. In 1.40.4 alone, Koestermann (1963) 165, has noted myriad devices used to heighten the sense of wrongdoing by the revolting soldiers, including chiasmus, rhythm, alliteration, and metaphor. “Die ganze Szene ist pathetisch aufgezogen, stilistisch mit allen rhetorischen Steigerungsmöglichkeiten versehen ...”


7 Dio Cass. 56.20.2.

8 Marshall (1975) 11, argues that this practice was then adopted by the Julio-Claudian house, hence Agrippina’s extensive presence in the military environment.

9 See above note 2; cf. Jung (1982); Roxan (1991); Debrunner Hall (1996); Speidel (1997); Wells (1997); Wesch-Klein (1998); Palao Vicente (2000); Phang (2001; 2002a; 2002b); Maxfield (2002); Stoll (2006); Brandl (2008).