CHAPTER 14

Military Epitaphs in Mogontiacum and Carnuntum in the First and Early Second Centuries CE

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Introduction

Sometime in the second half of the first century CE, one Lucius Plotidius Vitalis, a perfectly ordinary first-born son from the north Italian town of Bononia, decided to enlist in the Roman army. At the age of twenty-seven, he was substantially older than the typical legionary recruit – most of his fellow-soldiers had enlisted around the age of twenty.1 Presumably, he had first tried civilian life and a regular occupation in his hometown, but having found no opportunities for advancement, decided to try his fortunes elsewhere. Enrolled in the Legio xv Apollinaris, which recruited heavily in the region, L. Plotidius then spent the remaining twenty-three years of his life searching for fortune, excitement, and love – all while in the service of Rome.2 While it is unclear whether he found the first two, he certainly did find love. When he died at the age of fifty, while stationed with the rest of his legion in the military fort of Carnuntum in Upper Pannonia, one Annia Maxima paid for his epitaph, which she dedicated “to her dearest husband” (viro suo carissimo).3

The depth of detail inscribed on L. Plotidius’s gravestone made it possible for anyone who came across his epitaph to learn a general outline of his life-story. Indeed, the length of the epitaph, combined with the quality of the inscription, might have suggested that he was a man of significance in the Roman

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1 On average ages of recruitment see above in this volume, chapter 13, by S. Tuck, 212–29. For the abbreviations used in citing the sources of legionary epitaphs, see the list at the end of the Appendix, p. 244.

2 Bononia was likely a site of especially heavy recruitment for both the legions the navy, as it was a location of strategic importance for access to the Danube frontier and had a naval base (Wilkes 2005: 148 and 153).

3 For the complete text of the epitaph, see Vorbeck 1980: 77. Like many of the inscriptions discussed in this paper, this epitaph is not included in cIL. Notably, as the wording of the epitaph suggests, Annia Maxima (and, presumably, Lucius Plotidius), were undeterred by legal technicalities: until the late second century CE, legionaries were not permitted to marry. Cf. Campbell 1978.
army. Nothing could be further from the truth. As his epitaph clearly states, L. Plotidius was merely a miles – a common soldier. Moreover, little is remarkable about this particular inscription. Epitaphs of this nature, with abundant details about the life of the deceased and found in military forts throughout the Roman empire, show a widespread preference by soldiers for burial at their place of service, close to their new military “family,” rather than at or near the homes they left. L. Plotidius could have been a veteran – he had served for twenty-three years, three years longer than required for retirement – but he evidently died while still in service. Inscriptions of this sort are one of the best sources available for studying the Roman army in war and in peace, as well as the army’s interaction with the civilian population in provincial forts. While these documents have received a significant degree of scholarly attention over the past few decades, there is still much information that can be gleaned from them by applying a different methodological approach and asking some new questions.

At the Second International Congress of Greek and Latin Epigraphy in 1952, Eric Birley delivered a paper on the state of the epigraphy of the Roman army as a discipline at the time, and the work that could still be done with the available evidence. The topics to which Birley urged his fellow epigraphists to turn concerned mainly the logistics of the Roman army at war: put simply, how did the Roman army work? What were the functions of the troops of different ranks, and what was the shape of their careers? In answering these questions, Birley emphasized the significance, inter alia, of epitaphs. Since Birley’s memorable call-to-arms, however, the academic community has experienced the rise of the “new” military history. As socio-cultural approaches to the ancient military have taken flight, epigraphical studies of the Roman army have undergone a corresponding transformation. A majority of recent studies of the epigraphic record of Roman legions has followed the same methodology: scholars select

4 The authoritative study of the family-like relationship between soldiers in the Roman legions remains MacMullen 1984. For the different types of family relationships acknowledged on Roman imperial epitaphs, see Saller and Shaw 1984. See also Keppie 1997: 100 for a discussion of the increasingly common preference of Italian-born legionaries, already under the Julio-Claudians, not to return home after completing their terms of service. The same image emerges from Alföldy’s 1964 study of the taxation of veterans in Dalmatia: veterans were eager to retire where they had served.

5 For a cavalryman of Legio XV, also buried in Carnuntum sometime in the first century CE, who had served for twenty-five years at the time of death, see Stiglitz 1985. More generally on the phenomenon of soldiers in the early Empire staying in the legions beyond their regular term of service, see Southern 2007: 99.

6 The essay has been republished as Birley 1988. Birley 1988: 5.