



The University of South Carolina
A Re-Examination of the Insignia of the Notitia Dignitatum

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RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

I - INTRODUCTION

The Notitia Dignitatum; circa 395 AD, closely resembles today's American Military Order of Battle books. Both list commanders, staff elements, locations of command, and probably most important to this paper unit designations with illustrations. Military Units have always needed some sort of unit identifiers to distinguish themselves from their enemies and the Roman Army units were probably no different. The Eastern and the Western Empire of Rome needed some kind of "Order of Battle Book" for the commanders to know who was who, where they were and how to identify each other.¹

"A Passage from Tacitus describing the second battle of Cremona tells us how two legionaries picked up shields from their fallen enemies and, hiding behind

these, managed to infiltrate the enemy lines and put a catapult out of action. As this was at night with only the moon shining, it suggests that the motifs painted on the shields were a way of identifying a unit. ²

Just how the insignia in the Notitia Dignitatum was displayed is still a mystery. Several historians believe that the Insignia, if accurately depicted were used on soldier's shields while others feel that the insignia in the Notitia was completely made up.

II - BACKGROUND & OVERVIEW

Countless of articles and books reference the Notitia and nearly all without exception reference it as being accurate or the closest thing to being accurate of commands and unit designations.

Hugh Elton, visiting professor of Trinity College and author of Warfare in Roman Europe AD 350-425, believes that the Notitia "shield patterns" to be accurate. He says that the divisions of the army into various types of regiments indicate some kind of accuracy. "The Notitia has generated a considerable body of secondary literature." ³

"A document that has been discussed by modern authors for many years is the Notitia Dignitatum, ...Used with caution, however, the Notitia is invaluable, simply because there is nothing to match it for the study of the late army," states Pat Southern and Karen Dixon.⁴

Yale University's Geoffrey Parker, states, "The manuscript Notitia Dignitatum reproduces the only surviving 'order of battle' for the later Roman empire (c.430). All units are represented by shield insignia...such insignia presaged medieval usage."⁵

On the opposite end of the spectrum there are scholars who believe that the insignia in the Notitia "were largely ad hoc fabrications" such as Robert Grigg. He believes that contemporary art work "were of course represented in later Roman art, but the decorations of the shield were not necessarily intended as the distinctive emblems of particular military units...one assumes that the shield emblems were included to provide a practical tool for distinguishing the emblem of one unit from that of another. Quite clearly, the emblems did not meet that standard of utility, nor surely were they intended to."⁶

With so many "trains of thoughts" out there about the illustrations of Roman Army Units, it is difficult to surmise if the insignia in the Notitia are accurate depiction's of units or merely "ad hoc fabrications."

III - METHODOLOGY

This is an attempt to look at a narrow part of the Notitia; the insignia, and discuss the possible accuracy of the designations as presented in the copies of the existing manuscripts, i.e. 1551 and O. Seeck's 1876 version.

Certainly; while this is not a first attempt, this approach will be from a number of different perspectives including the traditional ones.

One approach is based on exclusively observing similarities and deviations of the insignia artwork itself using new technology by enhancing the slides of the 1551 version of the Notitia.

Another method used is a database, look for any reoccurring pattern or themes that could lead to some tentative findings that would allow at least the formulation hypothesis to do with accuracy military functional uses or task organizations within a command.

Of course all of this will be conducted against a back drop of uncertainty. Because the actual 'smoking gun' in this case may be in the form of an independent piece of evidence that would marry-up an insignia in the Notitia and its unit designation with an actual Roman Army unit in the field at the time.

Also, an examination of period art, artifacts and architecture, mosaics and even coins looking for anything that depicted military themes-concepts is included as well as a comparison of the Notitia insignia and 20th Century Military Identification which seems to be distanced but in actuality is not since there are so many carry-overs from the Roman Army to the Modern Army. Additionally, and examination of religious symbols from the period, especially the symbols used by the Catholic Church, was also used in this inquiry.

IV - ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

After reading and examining the period art, there were some very distinct findings.

There were some very convincing evidence that suggest that the Insignia in the Notitia were accurate. An article by M. Speidel suggests that a Moesiaci legion noted in the Notitia (Oc. V,7 = 150 = VII,8) stationed at Aquileia left behind a grave stone marble tablet. On the tablet a shield is seen with the markings of its unit also represented in the Notitia as seen in Otto Seeck's book, page 115, Insignia number seven. "Only two out of the 277 shield drawings in the Notitia have a somewhat similar design, hence coincidence can be excluded."⁷

Another rather convincing piece of evidence is found in Pat Southern and Karen Dixon's book, The Late Roman Army. A glass beaker found in Cologne, Germany shows four soldiers with shields. One of the shields looks similar to the Notitia emblem number 20 on page 115 of O. Seeck's book. The name of the unit is Mattiaci, which is a town near Wiesbaden, Germany. Because of the coincidence of the geography of both unit name and the glass beaker, this certainly lends support to the notion that the insignia are accurate.⁸

One more clear example of the insignia's possible accuracy is seen on Trajan's Column. On a section of the relief where Dacian soldiers are shown attacking a Roman fortress, many shields are clearly seen with emblems. There is one shield in particular that has a cross similar to number 110, page 120 of Seeck's book. The unit is named for a province north of Syria; Commagene, which might suggest a possible match of the name of the unit, the emblem match and geography.⁹

Other evidence; that is not as strong as the former, suggests the insignia to be just as accurate but the proof is harder to pin down. One of these examples is an Amazonian shield worn by the statue of Commodus as Hercules. The shield has a head of an eagle on either side with a face in the center. The detail of Commodus' shield is not as important to the insignia in the Notitia as much the shape of the shield is. The design of the shield can be seen throughout the Notitia. Several examples are on page 12, number 18 and number 9 on page 15 of Seeck's book.¹⁰



Page 12 Insignia No. 18 - Angleuarii
Page 16 Insignia No. 13 - Sagittii seniores Orientales
Page 20 Insignia No. 11 - 14 Amazonian Shield
FIGURE 1. Example from ICON DESIGN OCCURRENCE CHART

Also, the broken, metal plate depicting Theodosius I in 388 AD dividing the Empire between his two sons, has two shields, one of which bears a remarkable pattern resemblance to emblem number 90, unit Lanciarii in the Notitia. The other shield has no match.¹¹

The other approach used for testing the accuracy of the insignia in the Notitia was to look at the actual pictures from the 1551 version. Using a cross-color, channel analysis and digital enhancement of slides of the insignia revealed several interesting markings and patterns.

Using page imposition techniques suggest that some of the revealed markings were probably the result of applied pressure to the reverse vellum surface while templating (i.e., circles). Other patterns seemed to be clearly a result of color bleed-thru from the opposite side insignia. However, there are some instances where it appears that the artist made corrections and or changes. If changes were made, this would strongly suggest careful, accurate detailing was being attempted by the artist or that some type of 'quality control' measures were taken with regard to the insignia drawing.

V - SUMMARY & CONCLUSION

While the weight of the body of research seems to come down on the side of the argument that supports the accuracy of the insignia, definitive proof is difficult without a 'one-to-one' match up from independent sources. However, this has been done in a number of instances.

Clearly, the arguments made by Grigg that the drawings were mere fabrications on the part of the artist fly in face of the evidence provided by many authors attesting to the accuracy of specific unit insignia. Also, the Grigg argument ignores the present use by many modern military organizations of insignia which often have many repetitive patterns, design features, shapes and icons - usually based upon task organization, unit affiliation, function of the unit and the application of display (i.e. on the headgear, on vehicles, on uniforms, or equipment). We can safely assume that this may well have been the case in the Roman Army.

At this point of my research, I believe that there is an abundance of evidence that strongly support the theory that the Insignia in the Notitia Dignitatum are accurate representations of unit identification emblems. I base my opinion on a number of factors ranging from the body of research done by other authors; the possible matches I have made in this paper; and the digital examination of the British Museum's 1551 Notitia artwork that I have have conducted which indicates a high degree of care and preparation that went into the finished work.

I am in the process of a more thorough look at this subject and have a number of documents and artwork currently on order. At that time I intend to make a more robust report of my findings of the insignia of the Notitia Dignatatum.

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APPENDICES

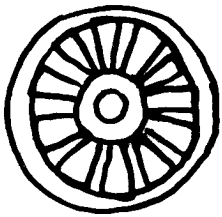
EXTRACT - Insignia Illustration Database
EXTRACT - Icon Design Occurrence Chart
ICON NUMERICAL DESIGNATION - Insignia Design Patterns Chart
NOTITIA SLIDE DIGITAL SCAN - Slides Provided by Dr. R. Mathisen
IMAGE DETAIL - The Aquila Tablet; TIFF IMAGE SCAN

IMAGE DETAL - The Ludovisi Sarcophagus

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Bunson, Matthew A Dictionary of the Roman Empire, (New York: Oxford University Press), 1991; p.297.
- ² Connolly, Peter The Roman Army, (London: MacDonald Educational), 1975; reprint ed., Morristown, NJ: Silver Burdett Company, 1978), p. 50.
- ³ In an E-mail message, Elton clearly states “the divisions of the army ignor the various types of regiments (aux pal, vex pal, etc.) “but if analysed in these terms produce different results.”
- ⁴ Dixon, Karen R. and Pat Southern, *The Late Roman Army*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 1996, p.1.
- ⁵ Parker, Geoffrey, ed., *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Warfare: The Triumph of the West*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1995, p. 66
- ⁶ Grigg, Robert, *Inconsistency and Lassitud: The Shield Emblems of the Notitia Dignitatum*, Journal of Roman Studies 73 (1983): 132-141.
- ⁷ M. Speidel, *The Army at Aquileia, the Moesiaci Legion and the Shield Emblems in the Notitia Dignitatum*, Roman Army Studies, v. 2 (Amsterdam, 1988) Mavors 8. p.414-418.
- ⁸ Pat Southern and Karen R. Dixon, *The Late Roman Army*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 1996, p.101-103.
- ⁹ Peter Clayton, *Treasures of Ancient Rome*, (Greenwich, CT: Brompton Books Corporation, 1986; reprint ed., New York: Barnes and Noble Books 1997), p.103.
- ¹⁰ Niels Hannestad, *Roman Art and Imperial Policy*, trans. P.J. Crabb (Hojbjerg, Denmark: Jutland Archaeological Society), 1986, p. 247-48.
- ¹¹ It’s important to note that the shield in the Seeck book does not look like the 1551 artist’s version.

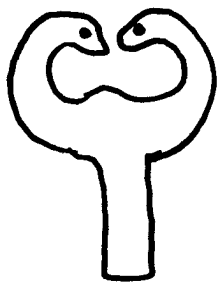
TABLE - NOTITIA DIGNITATUM - ICON DESIGN OCCURRENCE CHART



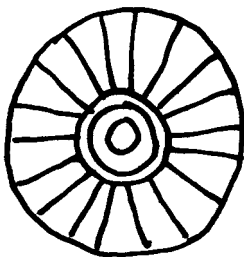
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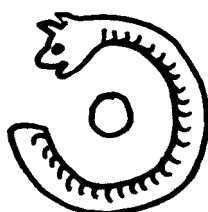
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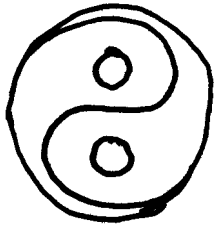
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Rising Sun



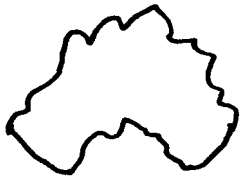
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Yin and Yang



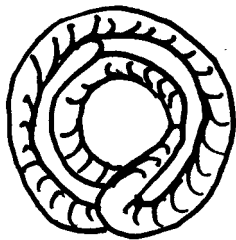
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Pelt or Skin



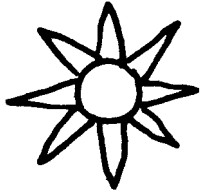
Pouch or Bag



Rope Coil



Bird & Eagle



Starburst



Hourglass



Amazonian Sheild



Comeandgo Dog



Stick Man



Disc



Leaping Fido



Crescent



Winged Spirit



Heart



Double Dogs



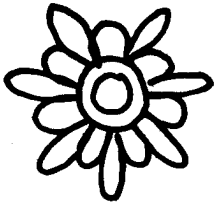
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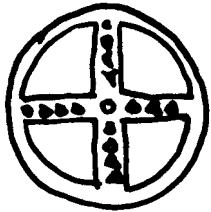
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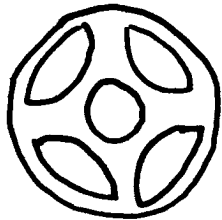
Concentric Circles



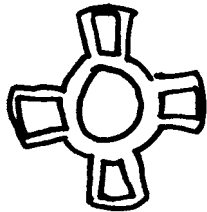
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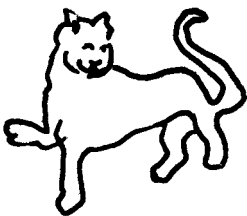
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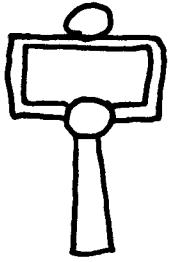
Cookie Cutter Cross



Maltese Type Cross



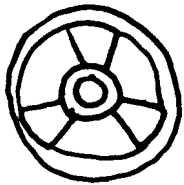
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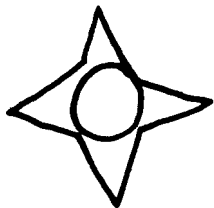
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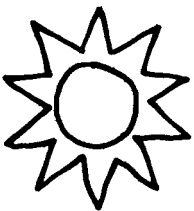
Horns



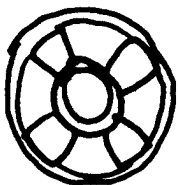
Radiation Fan



Compass Rose



Sunburst



Propeller



Small Crescent



Small Amazon Sheild



Small Diamond



Small Circle



Small Rectangle



Small Chi-Ro or Star