

NOVENSIA 32

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Studia i materiały
pod redakcją naukową

Piotra Dyczka

NOVENSIA 32



Ośrodek Badań nad Antykiem
Europy Południowo-Wschodniej

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Numer finansowany z programu „Inicjatywa Doskonałości — Uczelnia Badawcza” Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego oraz programu „Rozwój Czasopism Naukowych” Ministerstwa Nauki i Szkolnictwa Wyższego.

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Południowo-Wschodniej
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Warszawa 2023

ISSN: 0860-5777
e-ISSN: 2720-2941

Wydanie I
Druk: Hussar Books

SPIS TREŚCI / CONTENTS

SEBASTIAN LELKO

- The political emancipation of the plebs in 366 BCE 7

SZYMON CZERSKI

- Supply of war horses to the Roman military in the last days of the Republic and the Principate 31

ANDRIJ KORČAK

- The cult of Sabazius in the northern Black Sea littoral: monuments and their interpretation 37

EMZAR KAKHIDZE, KAKHABER KAMADADZE, SHOTA MAMULADZE

- The Pontus-Caucasian frontier: the Roman and Byzantine fortification system in the southeastern Black Sea littoral 51

URSZULA IWASZCZUK, MARCIN MATERA

- Man's best friend on the borders of the Greek *oikumene*: the so-called dog burials and the role of dogs in Tanais 75

PAWEŁ GOŁYŹNIAK, ALFRED TWARDECKI

- Athlete, Hymen or Meleager? An intaglio from Olbia 109

JAN NIEMYSKI

- The *gladius Hispaniensis* revisited — a small sword with great implications 125

DOMINIK MIKOŁAJ STACHOWIAK

- The Christian funeral rite in Late Antiquity — an overview 139

MATEUSZ ŻMUDZIŃSKI

Ludwika Press in the light of documents from the archives of the University of Wrocław	163
Oświadczenie o etyce wydawniczej i niewłaściwych praktykach	173
Informacje i wskazówki dla autorów	175
Publication ethics and malpractice statement	181
Guidelines for authors	183

Szymon Czernski

SUPPLY OF WAR HORSES TO THE ROMAN MILITARY IN THE LAST DAYS OF THE REPUBLIC AND THE PRINCIPATE

Abstract: Whence came the war horses that the Roman used for their endless expensive campaigns? This article explores issues connected with the horse supply for the Roman cavalry in the last days of the Republic and during the Principate, that is, horse breeding, military training, casualties and care for the mounts. Horse transport and different breeds of horses popular among the Romans are also considered.

Keywords: *equites*, Roman horsemen, Roman horsemanship, Roman horses

Introduction

The literature on the Roman army, the infantry in particular, is extensive, suffice it to mention a few of the most recent studies like Adrian Goldsworthy's and Michael Whitby's *Rome at War: Caesar and His Legacy*, which concentrates on the topic in the context of the fall of the Republic and the times of the Principate,¹ and Yann Le Bohec's *The Imperial Roman Army*, which is focused on the Principate.² Pat Southern explored the subject in her *The Roman Army: A Social and Institutional History*.³ Despite the breadth of these studies, significantly less attention is paid to Roman horsemen and the question — poorly known because of a lack of sources — of acquisition of horses for the mounted forces.

The quality of horses is an issue of utmost importance for an army with cavalry units in its structure and it depends on where the mounts came from, their training and how losses were replaced. Of interest also is the role of the war horse compared to other animals and everything that can be discerned from the sources on the measures taken to keep the animal healthy, well-trained and fit for combat.

Horse acquisition

Being fond of equine sports, the Romans were well versed in the kinds of horses depending on geographical origin,⁴ yet remained surprisingly reticent with regard to the sources from whence came the supply of war horses for their cavalry. Ammianus Marcellinus speaks of a specific sta-

¹ GILLIVER, WHITBY, GOLDSWORTHY 2005.

² LE BOHEC 2000.

³ SOUTHERN 2007.

⁴ DIXON, SOUTHERN 1997, pp. 161–162.

bleman being sent to check on the quality of horses at a given location,⁵ whereas Tacitus notes horses being part of the contributions sent from the different provinces.⁶ Cassius Dio speaks of mounts being acquired as tribute.⁷ What is missing from these mentions are the details.

The most valued stud farms existed in Cappadocia, Spain, Sicily, Gaul and Berberia.⁸ African horses are also mentioned in general, coming apparently from the said Berberia, but also from Numidia and Libya;⁹ studs of this kind of horse were available all through the Republic and under the Empire. The Romans also drew comparisons between different kinds of horses based on their specific qualities: Italian horses were no match for the efficiency of Spanish animals, while horses from Sicily were considered particularly appealing in appearance. In turn, the Berber horses were characterized by a small size,¹⁰ which, however, was not perceived as a fault.

One cannot but wonder whether the Romans interbred different kinds of horses in order to obtain individual animals better suited to specific activities. Caesar recalls that the Germanic tribesmen, with whom he came into contact, did not let their horses breed with others.¹¹ This observation may be an indirect suggestion that, unlike the Germans, the Romans and Gauls did not object to mixing horse breeds. The division into Spanish or Sicilian seems very general at best, although without ancient sources dealing more specifically on the matter, there is little the modern scholar can say. Nonetheless, it seems fair to assume that horsemen of the late Republic and the Principate had a much more diverse range of different breeds of mounts than is revealed from a study of the surviving written sources.

Training horses for military service

Not every horse is suitable for cavalry use, hence efforts on the part of breeders to prepare the animals for potential military use. Knowing that the mounts were already fit for the army would have encouraged officials in charge of horse acquisition for the cavalry units in a given province.¹² Thus, breeders tended to look after an animal until the age of three, making sure that the horse got used to human presence and did not run wild before it was purchased.¹³ Owners of studs were aware of the army's preference for steady, not excitable horses. For this reason mares were more desirable¹⁴ than stallions.¹⁵ It is not certain whether horses were prepared in any way for their role in the army before purchase. It seems that the adaptation to battlefield conditions took place only after the animal had reached a given military unit. The mounts had to be trained not to react with fear to sudden loud sounds or when the bugle call was sounded. The animal also had to be able to respond appropriately to signals. The best trained war horses were able to "dance" to the rhythm of a chanted melody. The *hippica gymnasia* with its colorful, even festive setting, constituting a combination of military maneuvers and a parade, provided opportunities for such exercises. Overly aggressive, fearful or vicious animals were obviously of no interest to the military.¹⁶

While it is difficult to say which specific skills a mount gained before or after acquisition by the army, it was certainly an animal already partly prepared for its future tasks.

⁵ Amm. Marc. 29.3.5.

⁶ Tac. Ann. 1.71.

⁷ Cass. Dio 72.11.

⁸ ANGELA 2013, p. 317.

⁹ DIXON, SOUTHERN 1997, p. 165.

¹⁰ RUSZCZYŃSKI 2012, pp. 172–174.

¹¹ AZZAROLI 1985, pp. 155–172.

¹² DIXON, SOUTHERN 1997, pp. 161–162.

¹³ Columella, *Rust.* 6.29.14.

¹⁴ Varro, *Rust.* 2.7.15.

¹⁵ RUSZCZYŃSKI 2012, p. 169.

¹⁶ Strabo 7.4.8.

Army purchase of war horses

The sources reveal several ways in which cavalry units were supplied with new mounts,¹⁷ demonstrating the flexibility of operations in the Roman army. It was most certainly not just going to the market to buy supplies.

Horsemen stationed in the non-border provinces were dependent on the local Roman governor responsible for keeping a sufficient number of war horses in the territory under his administration.¹⁸ This involved ensuring that local breeders did not sell their animals outside the province. The governor was not alone in this task, having at his disposal a number of officials charged with matters related to the supply of mounts for the troops.¹⁹ One of these was the *equisio/equiso*, recognized by Karen R. Dixon as an official tasked with caring for the governor's personal stable and generally taking care of matters related to providing local troops with mounts.²⁰ The provincial administration is known to have selected horses on the grounds of their suitability for service,²¹ thus suggesting that the officials in question had the necessary professional knowledge to be able to make the choice.

In times of peace, cavalry units notably did not have a full roster of mounts.²² This highlights the issue of fixed costs generated by horse upkeep: proper fodder, regular access to pasture and, not the least, space in the form of a stable for housing the animals. The army naturally preferred to maintain a certain core number of horses, although it is impossible to estimate, based on the available data, what the actual number of mounts in relation to the potential demand of a given squad was in terms of percentages. It is worth noting, however, that there were most likely differences in this respect resulting from regional specificity and standing threats. The border provinces are a good example, the cavalry units stationed there buying their horses from the neighboring tribes.²³

In time of war, regardless of the historical period, even the highest military standards tend to be suspended. Wherever cavalry units were engaged in combat, faster and more effective methods of obtaining horses had to be implemented. Deprived of the protection of the provincial administration, Roman cavalymen relied solely on themselves to take care of the condition of their mounts.²⁴ This often led to cases of neglect, horse diseases, injuries caused by carelessness, and theft. Indeed, theft of animals, possibly perpetrated by soldiers from neighboring units, was a scourge of the Roman military campaigns.²⁵ Obvious losses included battlefield casualties, quickly reducing the number of operational war horses. At Tauromenium, for example, Octavian did not have a single horse for the 500 equites under his command.²⁶

To minimize the mortality of the animals, it was essential to ensure the best possible living conditions, including an abundance of fodder and water, which was more often than not a key issue for Roman commanders on the campaign trail.²⁷ During the battle of Dyrrachium, Pompey, cut off from sources of drinking water, was faced with the necessity of killing his pack and draft animals in order to save the cavalry horses from dying of thirst.²⁸ Difficult climatic conditions also demanded of army riders that they take care of the well-being of their mounts. For instance, horses suffering from low temperatures had their muzzles washed with salt water, while sour water was considered a remedy for hot weather. They were given wine diluted with olive oil, which was heated in winter or cooled in summer depending on the season.²⁹

¹⁷ DIXON, SOUTHERN 1997, p. 156.

¹⁸ Amm. Marc. 29.3.5.

¹⁹ IDZIAK 2009, p. 71.

²⁰ DIXON, SOUTHERN 1997, p. 157.

²¹ Amm. Marc. 29.3.5.

²² DIXON, SOUTHERN 1997, p. 156.

²³ ROCHAŁA 2011, p. 96.

²⁴ RUSZCZYŃSKI 2012, p. 170.

²⁵ DIXON, SOUTHERN 1997, p. 153.

²⁶ App. B. Civ. 5.110.

²⁷ SOUTHERN 2002, p. 137.

²⁸ GOLDSWORTHY 2006, p. 416.

²⁹ RUSZCZYŃSKI 2012, p. 171.

There is no information on whether Roman units had reserve animals during military operations. It is to be assumed that such practices were rather not in force.³⁰ Successive losses incurred in the course of a campaign resulted in soldiers having to disperse in order to obtain horses and fodder.³¹ Sometimes civilians would offer the army new mounts, but for the most part, it was a matter of confiscation of horses, often causing problems with the indigenous population, especially if large numbers of animals were thus conscripted. In extreme cases, this could lead to a complete depletion of the horse population in a given province.³²

Problems with mount supply ended with the successful conclusion of a campaign, the Romans taking control of enemy horses to make up for their losses and to send to other provinces if necessary. It is not entirely clear how these activities were organized, but they certainly required temporary supply bases in the form of fenced plots of land equipped with drinkers or in close proximity of water.³³ Horses would also be obtained by having the defeated agree to deliver set quotas of animals over a specified period of time as part of the peace agreement.³⁴ Long-term deliveries would be changed sometimes into a one-time, correspondingly larger, tribute to Rome.³⁵ The terms of the peace agreement could also call for the defeated to supply a certain number of armed riders. This compensated for the cost of horses lost in battle against the Barbarians, and helped to replace losses of both men and animals.³⁶

Horse “harvesting” thus took on different forms depending on the conditions: purchase in peacetime, seizure from the local population in war,³⁷ and spoils of victory afterwards.³⁸

Horse transport

After the end of hostilities, the cavalry would be moved to a new location. The surviving animals, the captured horses as well as the mounts of the new barbarian riders had to be transferred, sometimes to a different part of a war-torn borderland,³⁹ perhaps even on the distant fringes of the Empire.⁴⁰ Another option, which also required transport, was a period of rest in a quiet province far from the border.

The journey was often across land where the lack of roads necessitated the use of waterways. Vessels adapted for horse transport across the sea were called *hyppagus*. The deck on this type of ship was reduced to the smallest possible size, leaving most of the space in the hold open.⁴¹ Most likely, the cavalymen traveled with their mounts on the same vessels, charged with, among other things, loading the animals on board.⁴² Departures could be delayed, if the cavalymen were not used to this form of travel as was the case mainly with new auxiliary units in the Roman army.⁴³

River crossings were accomplished with pontoon bridges built of connecting boats, an innovation that allowed quick movement, distracting the enemy.⁴⁴ Shallower water reservoirs could be overcome by riders without any special innovations. However, efforts were always made to limit potential losses. For this reason, the cavalry usually landed only after the captured coast had been secured by the infantry.⁴⁵ It follows that although the Roman infantry is generally believed to have

³⁰ DIXON, SOUTHERN 1997, p. 158.

³¹ GOLDSWORTHY 2006, p. 290.

³² DIXON, SOUTHERN 1997, pp. 158–161.

³³ DIXON, SOUTHERN 1997, p. 158.

³⁴ Cass. Dio 72.2.

³⁵ Cass. Dio 72.2.

³⁶ Cass. Dio 71.16.

³⁷ FINK 1971, no. 63.

³⁸ Cass. Dio 72.11.

³⁹ DIXON, SOUTHERN 1997, p. 159.

⁴⁰ BYRA 2019, pp. 67–68.

⁴¹ ROYAL 2002, p. 126.

⁴² GOLDSWORTHY 2006, p. 279.

⁴³ ROMANOWSKI 2018, p. 135.

⁴⁴ Cass. Dio 71.2.

⁴⁵ ROMANOWSKI 2018, p. 183.

been more important than the cavalry, the safe transport of the cavalry was often accomplished even at the cost of legionary lives.⁴⁶

Horse breeds in cavalry units

To return to the topic of breeds preferred by the Roman army, it is more than likely that the choice of animals for a given unit was often determined by chance. A unit with Berber horses, for example, could have had its line of animals supplemented with Germanic mounts after the end of a war campaign. Animals dying naturally would be replaced with new mounts wherever a unit was stationed, sometimes far away from a previous place of stay. For example, in the second century, the *ala I Hispanorum*, about 500 horsemen strong, was stationed in Dacia. The same goes for the unit *ala III Thracum*, which occupied the territory of Syria at that time. In this way, one unit could have mounts from several sources and thus have several different breeds.⁴⁷ It would, therefore, be a mistake to suggest that there was one single breed of horses most characteristic of the armed forces of Rome. The more turbulent the times, the greater the variety of breeds present in the cavalry units.⁴⁸

Summary

Provision of horses to the Roman *equites* exemplifies the workings of a highly flexible army administration that was capable of dealing quickly and efficiently with even severe losses, allowing the cavalry to regain its initial potential. Horsemen were a valuable resource, appreciated by Roman commanders, hence care was taken not to bleed the cavalry without reason. Depending on geopolitical conditions, horse acquisition and organizing replacements followed certain procedures, either through efficient administration or decisive, often ruthless command. The mounted forces were often a very colorful and diverse formation thanks to the different breeds of horses in the service.

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⁴⁶ WILCZYŃSKI 2018, p. 39.

⁴⁷ SPAUL 1994, pp. 144–146.

⁴⁸ RUSZCZYŃSKI 2012, p. 127.

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