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WINDS OF CHANGE.
THE SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF ROMAN CAVALRY DEVELOPMENT IN THE FOURTH CENTURY

Abstract: A number of processes deeply rooted in the Principate accelerated or reached their peak in late antiquity. A good example are cavalry units, which went from auxiliary status to being one of the main components of the army in the course of 600 years from the times of Augustus. The change of military doctrine resulted not only from external factors, that is, enemy combat techniques, but also from the internal situation of the empire. The present text focuses on the fourth century, in which the cavalry as such and the riders themselves assumed a significant role.

Key words: Late antiquity, Roman army, Roman cavalry, tactics, social status

The history of the Roman Army[1] is the sum of a number of processes, the roots of which often go back to the Principate and in some cases even to the times of the Republic. Apart from external stimuli, such as the need for greater flexibility in the face of the opponent's different types of forces and battle technique, internal processes were also of significance. Together they set trends and determined the pace of change of war doctrine, raising the importance and prestige of the cavalry over time.

The first milestone was Augustus's revolutionary[2] reform of army structure, which called for organizing a permanent and professional armed forces divided into two main types: legions, recruited from the citizens and *auxilia*, which were made up initially of people without Roman citizenship.[3] Most of the horseback riders belonged to the latter category,[4] serving in *alae* and *alae militares* as well as cavalry units called *cohors equitata* and *cohors equitata militaria*.[5]

The gradual but continuous expansion of the role of cavalry forces in the Roman military effort was one of the more important processes initiated with Augustus's reform of the army. In the first century AD, cavalry participation in military expeditions increased slowly but regularly, from 5% in AD 7, which marked the highest intensification of military activities in the *bellum batoniarium*, to 12–13% at the Battle of Mons Graupius in AD 83/84, during Agricola's campaign in Britain.

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[2] A term in Roman historiography coined by Ronald Syme (Syme 1939).

[3] For more on military reforms of Augustus, see e.g. Raaflaub 1980, pp. 1005–1025; Keppie 1984, chapter 6; Eck 1988, chapter 12; Speidel 2009, pp. 19–51.

[4] For more on cavalry in the structure of the Roman army, see Narloch 2018, pp. 25–73.

[5] Despite the same sources, there is no agreement concerning the number and strength of the units; see Breeze, Dobson 2000, p. 161; Hodgson 2003, pp. 86–90; Hayes 2013, p. 53.

The process is best illustrated, even if the methodology behind the calculation is not commonly accepted, by comparing the changing percentage of cavalrymen in regular cavalry units: 222 to 243% between the reigns of Augustus and Trajan and 199% between that of Vespasian and Trajan.[6]

Another important process that was taking place in the first and second centuries was the increasing presence of citizens in the auxiliary forces, which were supposed to be recruited from the *peregrini*. Konrad Kraft was the first to note this trend based on his analysis of epigraphic sources, including diplomas, reflecting the make up of auxiliary units, both *alae* as well as *cohortes*, stationed on the Rhine and the Danube.[7] His findings were confirmed by further studies.[8] At the dawn of the Imperial period, the *auxilia* were dominated by *peregrini*, mostly of barbarian origin. This changed especially between the reigns of Vespasian and Marcus Aurelius and by the turn of the second century Roman citizens had gained a majority in the auxiliary forces, showing a marked preference for cavalry units. The trend is thus clearly visible regardless of the disputed methodology, the size of the sample and potential differences of the results across periods, regions and even specific units.

Moreover, one of the last testimonies of the practice of decapitating the defeated enemy dates from the Trajanic period, which is the latest that Kraft noted a dominance of the *peregrini* over citizens in the auxiliary troops. The practice was attributed to auxiliary troops whose savagery[9] and usefulness only for war[10] was stated by Tacitus. Scenes of decapitation of the enemy are shown on Trajan's Column,[11] the Trajanic Grand Frieze initially decorating his forum[12] and the *Tropaeum Traiani* at Adamclisi.[13] The less Romanized relief from Adamclisi is a particularly telling illustration: a rider holds up a head, while the decapitated body of an enemy warrior is shown in the background.[14] Ritual decapitation of the defeated opponent was popular with most peoples of northern Europe[15] and was practiced especially by the Gallic tribes.[16]

The next significant and observable stage in the development of the cavalry took place in the third century,[17] particularly during the reign of the emperor Gallien. The period was exceptional in Roman Imperial history, giving rise to many of the phenomena and socio-political processes that would define late antiquity.

Gallien took power following the unprecedented capture of his father, the Emperor Valerianus, by the Persians. His fairly long reign (until 268) introduced some calm despite the usurpation of Postumus, loss of control in the East and numerous raids by barbarians, encouraged by their earlier successes and the Roman army's failing prestige.

The establishment of new equestrian units was intended, among others, as a means of saving the situation and was dictated by a new military elite connected with the command headquarters in Sirmium. Its emergence and rise to power can be divided into three stages.[18] The first stage starts with Philip the Arab after his return from the war against the Carpi at the turn of 247/248[19] and

[6] Colombo 2009, pp. 96–117.

[7] Kraft 1951, pp. 69–99.

[8] Alföldy 1968, pp. 105–110; Arnaud-Lindet 1977, pp. 291–292.

[9] Tac. *Ann.* 2.46; *Hist.* 2.22.

[10] Tac. *Germ.* 29.

[11] Scenes 57, 58, 60, 140, 183, 184, 302, 303. More on the column and the frieze, see Lepper, Frere 1988.

[12] Leander Touti 1987, pp. 67, 70. The soldier with decapitated head was identified as a rider by his armament: Goldsworthy 1996, p. 272.

[13] Metope 7. More on the monument, see Florescu 1959.

[14] Goldsworthy 1996, p. 272.

[15] Strab. 4.4.4–5.

[16] Polyb. 3.67; Livy 10.26, 23.24; Green 1992, pp. 116–118.

[17] The literature concerning the period is quite extensive and presents different points of view, e.g. Alföldi 1939, pp. 165–231; Loriot, Nony 1997; and a monumental attempt at a comprehensive approach to the issue: Johne, Hartmann, Gerhardt 2008.

[18] Brizzi 1978, pp. 98–108.

[19] Zos. 1.21.2; Mócsy 1974, p. 204.

lasts through Galien's enthronement in 253.[20] From that point there is indeed no evidence of any other high-ranking commanders in Illyria.[21] Perhaps at this early stage the group had not yet formed or was still weak, which would be confirmed by the absence of any organized actions against Valerianus's dynastic plans. A new phase in the history of this group started with Gallien's co-rule with his father and his rise to the Sirmium command. The careers of Claudius II, Aurelian, Heraclius and Probus (all of whom would rise to supreme leadership within the next 20 years) gained momentum at this time. Some of them would be involved in the coup against him later.

The high position of the cavalry as well as the fact that their commanders shaped the policy of the day is confirmed by the events connected with the plot against Gallien, who may have given the impulse for the development of mounted units. When Aureolus turned against Gallien in the spring of 268, first conniving unsuccessfully with Postumus in Gaul[22] and then proclaiming himself emperor in Milan, he was claimed by Zosimos[23] and later by Zonaras quoting Zosimos[24] to be a commander of the cavalry. According to Aurelius Victor, however, Aureolus when he rebelled was marching to Italy at the head of legions from Raetia (*cum per Raetias legionibus praeesset*) as *dux exercitus*, and was forced to retreat to Milan.[25] The second version is more probable with the reservation that cavalry units were probably a sizable component of his troops,[26] considering that he was returning from a victorious expedition. The plot against Gallien's life, when he arrived in Milan to deal with the rebellion, appears to have been initiated by the praetorian prefect Heraclius,[27] in collusion with Claudius,[28] a tribune at the time,[29] staying in nearby Ticinum with his legion; Zonaras titled him as commander of the cavalry in his work.[30] Gallien's real assassin was a man called Cecropius or Ceronius, a commander of a Dalmatian cavalry unit in the rank of *dux Dalmatarum*.[31] Summing up, the plotters are all referred to in the available sources with the title of cavalry commander. The implication is that in the third century an equestrian career in the army had become an important opportunity of advancement.

The third and last stage of development of the new ruling group started after Aurelian's death in 275. The murder of the emperor may have been the effect of a personal grudge rather than political plotting by the equestrian commanders from Sirmium as no successor was appointed. The choice was left to the Senate. The reign of successive rulers is referred to in the sources as *interregni species*.[32] The end of the soldier emperors came with Diocletian's ascension to power;[33]

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[20] A new kind of cavalry *equites promoti* is first mentioned in AD 293: Fink 1971, no. 86, l. 1; *equites Stablesiani* were formed probably by Aureolus, a Milan commander of a contingent of Gallien's army, whose titles included *stabulensis*, see Speidel 1974, pp. 541–546; *equites Scutarii* are first mentioned in connection with the events of AD 285 (Lactant. *De mort. pers.* 19.6), but their formation is attributed to Aurelian or even Gallien, who was to do it while forming his own unit of *protectores*, see Speidel 1975; *equites Dalmatae* were first reported in connection with the events of AD 268 when they defeated a force of Goths and Herules about 3000 strong (Zosimos 1.43.2).

[21] Mócsy 1974, p. 205.

[22] Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 33.17; Zos. 1.40.1; Zonar. 12.25; for more, see Alföldi 1967, pp. 1–15; Drinkwater 1987, pp. 31–33; Watson 1999, p. 41; Goltz, Hartmann 2008, p. 288.

[23] Zos. 1.40.1.

[24] Zonar. 12.25.

[25] Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 33.17.

[26] Simon 1980, pp. 439–443.

[27] SHA *Gall.* 14; Zos. 1.40.2–3.

[28] SHA *Gall.* 14.1–9, 15.2.

[29] Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 33.28.

[30] Zonar. 12.26.

[31] SHA *Gall.* 14.4–9; Zosimos (1.40.2–3) does not mention his name, nevertheless describes him as a commander of the Dalmatian cavalry.

[32] Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 35.12; SHA *Tac.* 14.5, this excerpt concerns Florian: *duo... principes ... quasi interreges inter Aurelianum et Probum*; for more, see Polverini 1975, pp. 1018–1023.

[33] Brizzi 1978, pp. 106–107.

as leader of the group formed around the *protectores*, he shared power with perhaps the biggest number of individuals from the ruling group, managing in effect to play down the personal ambitions of high-ranking army commanders and stabilizing internal state policy. During his reign, as well as later under the Tetrarchy, the process of forming new cavalry units and at the same time increasing the number of cavalrymen accelerated.

A new quality in the traditional approach was expanding the troops to include new cavalry units.[34] The titulature of the regiments formed by the Tetrarchs was coined either from their own names or form the names of their protector gods;[35] another form was to add *nova* to a name.[36] The most important novelty was a formal and administrative division into *legio* and *vexillatio*.[37] Two edicts issued at the turn of the third century introduced a legal differentiation between the two terms, referring *vexillatio* specifically to new cavalry units and not legionary detachments as before.[38]

Credible data on the size of troops deployed to a specific region comes from the Thebais in the province of Egypt where, according to a papyrus from Panopolis,[39] the army in AD 300 consisted of 1000 soldiers from auxiliary troops of the older type, that is, *cohors I Apamenorum equitata* and *cohors XI Chamavorum*, and about 1600 cavalrymen from the new *ala II Herculia dromedariorum* (300)[40] and *ala I Hiberorum* (300), the *equites promoti legionis II Traianae* (700) as well as *equites sagittarii* (300). Legionary troops in garrison numbered about 6000 *vexillationes* from the *III Diocletiana* and *II Traiana* legions, as well as about 1000 soldiers derived from eastern legions.[41] papyrus probably does not mention all the troops stationing in the province and the numbers are estimates anyway, the data demonstrate the percentage of cavalry units to be about 20%, similarly as in the time of Trajan. One should keep in mind that Egypt in late antiquity was hardly central to mainstream political events and consequently the information about troop size and composition, as well as the ratio of infantry to cavalry need not be representative of the whole empire.

Another papyrus from Egypt, specifically from Oxyrhynchus, dated January 295, provides further data on troops used by Tetrarchs during their war campaigns. The papyrus is damaged in the initial parts, but it still gives the names of units sent by Galerius against the rebelling cities of Busiris and Coptos.[42] Specifically, the Romans mobilized about 10,000 soldiers from the older *sacer comitatus*, including cavalry from the *comites domini*, *equites promoti dominorum nostrorum* and the *protectores*. Additionally, there were the cavalrymen from the *ala II Hispanorum*, who were most probably *quingenaria* and at least one unit of *dromedarii*, in total 1000 cavalrymen. The infantry was made up of *vexillationes* from 18 Danubian legions, each consisting of 1000 soldiers. In total, about 29,000[43] soldiers, including 4000[44] cavalry, accounting for nearly 14% of

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[34] These were situated in the East, for example: *equites promoti indigenae* and *equites sagittarii indigenae*, *Not. Dig.*, *Or.* XXXII 20, 22–26, 29; XXXIII 18–20, 27; XXXIV 23–27, 29; XXXV 18–23; XXXVI 23–28; XXXVII 18–20, 23; Brennan 1998, pp. 238–244; Lewin 2001, pp. 293–304; Lewin 2004, pp. 230–234. On the cavalry of the time, see Letki 2012: Narloch 2014, pp. 53–69.

[35] *Diocletiana, Iovia* or *Herculia*.

[36] *Not. Dig.*, *Or.*, XXXVI 32; Speidel, Pavkovic 1989, p. 153.

[37] *Cod. Iust.* 7.64.9, 10.55.3.

[38] Parker 1933, p. 188; Speidel 1975, p. 221.

[39] Skeat 1964.

[40] Numbers in brackets present assessments of unit size that are the most popular with researchers.

[41] Rocco 2012, p. 206.

[42] The presence of Galerius in Egypt from AD 293 is confirmed by a papyrus written in Caesarea in Palestine, but found in Egypt, see Rea, Salomons, Worp 1985, pp. 101–113.

[43] Eutr. 9.25.1; Fest. *Brev.* 25.2: Galerius had an army of similar size (25,000) at his disposal three years later, during the campaign against the Persians.

[44] Grenfell, Hunt 1898, 43 recto; for more about this expedition and the work done by Galerius's legionaries, see Leadbetter 2000, pp. 82–94; Leadbetter 2002, pp. 85–89.

the total. The numbers are estimates and reflect the strength of the cavalry only on paper. A lower number for the cavalry indicates perhaps that they were deemed of lesser usefulness when laying siege to cities and envisioning street fighting.

The next stage in the development of the cavalry was the rule of Constantine the Great, who introduced his own ideas beside continuing the line taken by his predecessors. Cavalrymen and cavalry units played a significant role in the new political and social order that he organized. The cavalry had an important place in army structure to judge by the *Notitia Dignitatum*, assuming that it reflects the real situation of his reign, even though it dates from later times. Most of the units among the *comitatenses*[45] were *vexillationes equitum*,[46] and a significantly higher percentage of cavalry units was in the forces commanded by the *duces*, which were classified as *limitanei*.[47]

The most significant change at the administrative-structural level was the introduction of two equivalent[48] commanders of the highest rank: *magister equitum* and *magister peditum*. Both were part of the imperial court and when the empire was ruled by more than one Augustus each of them had his own pair of *magistri*.[49] The formal division of the highest rank commanders was the last step toward the independence of the cavalry from the infantry.[50]

The formation of a new horse guard was extremely important for the prestige of the service. *Scholae palatinae*[51] were formed in the place of the *equites singulares Augusti* dissolved after their role in the battle of the Milvian bridge in 312. The new units took over from the earlier *comitatus* as far as their function is concerned, remaining close to the ruler and constituting part of his court. They formed a separate structure within the Roman armed forces,[52] ensuring numerous privileges to those serving in these units.[53]

Many of these equestrian soldiers in the fourth century were of barbarian origin, mostly Germans and especially Franks to judge by the official iconography and the few extant written sources. The tribunes came from tribal aristocracy.[54] Romans could serve in these units as well and often it was a trampoline to higher offices, including imperial purple, as was the case of Jovian[55] and Valentinian.[56]

The *scholares* fulfilled administrative assignments beside having an official representative function and acting as an escort for state dignitaries and members of the imperial family. They were also a policing tool, the ruler's armed hand in implementing policy.[57] On the battlefield, their role was an elite cavalry reserve under the emperor's direct command and his last defense line in case of personal danger.[58] This proximity to the power center, position in society and tasking with utmost responsibility toward the welfare of the state and emperor made them an elite service. Their status was expressed in their armor and particularly in the way that it was decorated.

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[45] *Not. Dig.*, *Or.* V–IX; *Occ.* V, VII.

[46] It is not to be excluded that some of the units were stationed along the borders at the time. The main source of the categorisation, *Notitia Dignitatum*, was prepared much later.

[47] Treadgold 1995, pp. 50–52; Coello 1996, p. 16.

[48] For more on the late nineteenth/early twentieth century discussion regarding the superiority of one commander over another or their equal position, see Mommsen 1889, pp. 260–265; Mommsen 1901, pp. 516–524; Ensslin 1930, pp. 307–313; Ensslin 1931, pp. 115–123, 145; Hoepffner 1936, p. 484.

[49] Hoffmann 1974, pp. 381–397.

[50] Such a situation took place at least at the beginning of the division.

[51] According to *Not. Dig.*, *Or.* XI 4, 10; *Occ.* IX 4–8, there were 12 such units, five in the western part of the empire and seven in the eastern one.

[52] *Cod. Theod.* 7.4.23; Frank 1969, p. 49.

[53] *Cod. Theod.* 14.17.9–10.

[54] Barlow, Brennan 2001, pp. 237–254.

[55] Amm. Marc. 25.5.4.

[56] Amm. Marc. 26.1.5.

[57] Frank 1969, pp. 103–126.

[58] Ammianus Marcellinus (31.10.14) describes Emperor Gratian's guard on the battlefield as *comitatus*; see also Amm. Marc. 19.11.8–12, 24.5.6, 26.8.7, 27.10.10–12, 27.10.16, 30.1.11, 31.13.14–15.

In the fourth century, a new system of state workshops producing armament for the army was set up. Changes in production introduced a new kind of helmet, the so-called ridge helmet, which now became part of army equipment. The ones worn by emperors were decorated with gemstones. This form of adornment was reserved for the ruler, ordinary cavalrymen satisfying themselves with more common materials, like appliqués made from glass paste as demonstrated by the Deurne/Berkasovo-type helmets in particular [Fig. 1]. Ornamentation of this kind was not typical just of the cavalrymen from the *scholae palatinae* as almost all of the known ridge helmets were found along the borders of the empire.[59]

Fig. 1. Helmet from Berkasovo (photo K. Narloch)

[59] Miks 2014, pp. 185–186, fig. 114.

The way in which the cavalry was treated in the written sources also underwent a major turnaround from what was the norm in the Principate period. Being for the most part from the privileged classes of society, authors from the times of Augustus devoted their attention to the legions, which were comprised of Roman citizens, rather than the cavalry units, which consisted mainly of soldiers of barbarian origin. By the end of the third century, social changes and a new fighting doctrine imposed by the barbarian threat led authors like Ammianus Marcellinus to acknowledge the cavalry of Constantius II as extremely formidable units.[60] Others seconded him in this opinion, linking the development of the Roman armed forces to the growing importance of the cavalry.[61] In the fifth and the sixth centuries, cavalrymen drew more and more attention from the authors of the day.[62] This process reflected the growing popularity and prestige of the cavalry and individual equestrian soldiers. Theirs was an elite service, close to the rulers and the imperial court. Their role in discharging public office made them stand out increasingly in society and this newly gained popularity was extended to the frontier army. The need for a more elastic army, capable of a quick and determined response to a much more varied set of opponents than before, also raised the prestige of the cavalry.

In view of the described changes, a key issue to be discussed is could the Romans adjust their traditional approach to the military to the requirements of a military doctrine increasingly dependent on equestrian troops. An army manual assigned to Emperor Maurice, the *Strategikon*, put together the broadest description of available tactics. In the sections devoted to the cavalry, troop position was described depending on the size of the army. The main difference was the number of units and hence the number of soldiers deployed in the second line,[63] which was charged with supporting the front line and giving cover or coming to the rescue in case of need.[64] The only recommendation for deploying the cavalry in one line in this manual was for hunting animals.[65]

The units in each line consisted of *koursores* and *defensores* in different proportions. The former were tasked with harassing the enemy, forcing a reaction and in certain cases giving chase to a retreating enemy. The latter fought in a more compact formation, their duties being to provide cover for other units and to charge the enemy lines, if the circumstances allowed. This division became common probably in the sixth century.[66] The flanks were protected by auxiliary troops, which were charged also with counteracting enemy ambushes, organizing their own ambushes and protecting the spare horses and camp. When supporting the infantry in combat, the cavalry was supposed to be deployed in front of the infantry, preferably in two lines.[67] According to the *Strategikon*, this would prevent the formation from breaking up under fire and helped to conceal part of the troops. In case of a retreat, the riders were supposed to ride behind and on the flanks of the infantry in order not to disorganize the battle order. Other roles for the cavalry included protection of the flanks and preventing envelopment; whenever enemy lines were shorter or of the same length, these cavalry units would join the main formation.[68] When the goal was to envelop the enemy, the *Strategikon* called for these units to take up position on the right wing of their forces, hidden behind the lines, then charge with the goal of creating the greatest confusion in the enemy formations, thus increasing the chances for a successful charge of their own army. Cavalrymen were also used as a reserve, deployed to reinforce or lengthen their own lines.

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[60] Amm. Marc. 16.12.17: *formidabile genus armorum.*
[61] Lib. *Or.* 18.206; Julian *Or.* 1.37b–38a, 2.57b–c; Veg. *Mil.* 1.20.1, 3.26.34.
[62] See e.g. discussion: Kaldellis 2004–2005, pp. 189–218; Petitjean 2014, pp. 255–262.
[63] The biggest armies used a third line as well.
[64] *Strategikon* 3.10.
[65] *Strategikon* 12D.

[66] Syväne 2004, pp. 121–122.
[67] *Strategikon* 20A.3, 12B.23.
[68] *Strategikon* 2.13, 3.5–13.

The *Strategikon* emphasized the role of ambushes and unexpected attacks on the unprotected flanks of the opponent and even their back, including camps. Intelligence was the main target of such forays, which were also intended to create confusion back of the enemy lines in preparation for the final attack.[69] Wolf traps and caltrops were also recommended in order to protect retreating cavalry and troops.[70] Their use was limited by the need to prepare them earlier and conceal them from the enemy.

Instructions for commanders in the *Strategikon* regarding deployment of the cavalry against the infantry called for caution when engaging large numbers of cavalrymen and emphasized the efficiency of close infantry formations in combat against the cavalry.[71] The success of a frontal charge depended mostly on the preparation and experience of both formations. Clashes of this kind were very brutal and did not last very long. If the charge broke the infantry line, the battle was over and the fleeing foot soldiers were annihilated as a rule. If the line did not break and the cavalry charge lost its impetus, the infantry gained an advantage in melee fighting. The proper preparation of a charge was of utmost importance, whether by sending in equestrian archers to loosen the formation and lower morale, or by attacking unprotected flanks and pressing the enemy.

The author of the *Strategikon* emphasized the role of the cavalry in battles where the infantry played a prime role as protection of the main forces from flanking or back attacks and chasing a retreating enemy to prevent regrouping. A relatively small cavalry unit that was initially the main commander's guard acted as a reserve in case of need.

The position and tasks of cavalry units in infantry battles depended on the terrain, the opponent and the assumed battle plan. How the cavalry was used depended on the personal experience and capabilities of the commander, the training of the riders and their morale. Cavalry in such battles could be a decisive factor, both winning and losing. It could be an incredibly efficient tool when taking advantage of its mobility, but it could also suffer beyond measure as a result of insensible maneuvers. A key element of the tactics as well as the battle plan was to provide proper conditions for action, as well as essential protection, because without the support of the main troops it was easily defeated.

Two battles from the fourth century are among the best documented Roman combat encounters. Their analysis enables a recognition of Roman cavalry tactics in this age and an evaluation of whether they were able to use riders in battle to full advantage. The first battle was fought in August 357 at Argentoratum[72] [Fig. 2]. The main written testimonies are those of Ammianus Marcellinus,[73] Libanios[74] and Zosimos.[75] The Romans commanded by Julian faced off the united forces of the Alemanni in the conclusion of Julian's year-long campaign against the tribes. The barbarians had managed to slip between two Roman armies and ravage the region of Lugdunum,[76] whereas court intrigues, instigated in Gaul mainly by one Barbation, forced Julian to fight with a depleted man force and not enough provision.[77] His preparations encompassed negotiations during which time he reinforced the positions of his army and gathered intelligence. Then the actual battle started. On the battlefield, his vanguard of light infantry and cavalry formed a cordon, behind which Julian deployed his main forces in three lines. All the cavalry was concentrated on the right side,[78] far from the river, in an area allowing easy maneuvering (according to Libanios it took position on both flanks).[79] Infantry units led by Severus stood on the left flank. Julian commanded the main forces. The main force of the Alemanni was grouped opposite the Roman infantry with

[69] *Strategikon* 2.5, 3.16, 4.
[70] *Strategikon* 4.3.
[71] *Strategikon* 12A.7, 12B.23.
[72] For a more traditional interpretation of the battle, see Narloch 2014, pp. 165–170.
[73] Amm. Marc. 16.12.

[74] Lib. *Or.* 18.
[75] Zos. 3.3.
[76] Amm. Marc. 16.11.4–5.
[77] Amm. Marc. 16.11.11–12, 16.11.14; Lib. *Or.* 18.51.
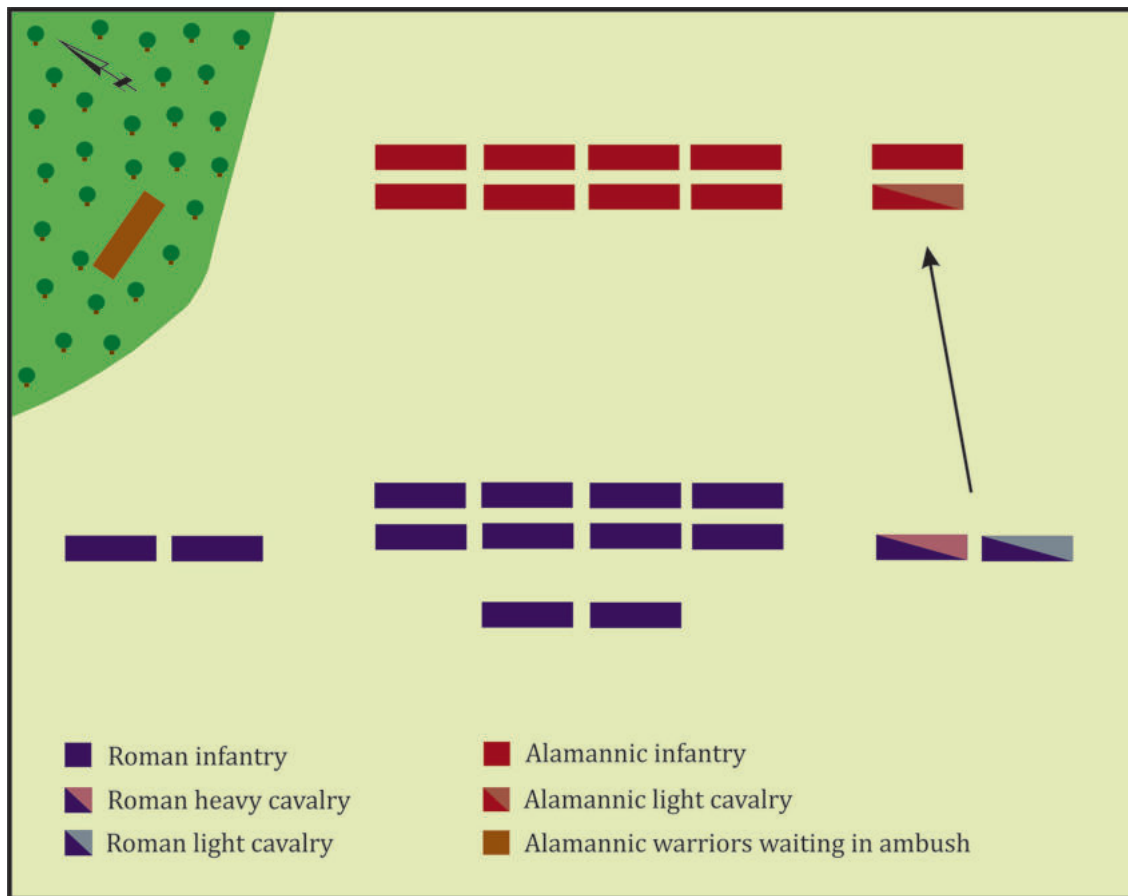[78] Amm. Marc. 16.12.7, 16.12.21, 16.12.27.
[79] Lib. *Or.* 18.54.

Fig. 2. Battle of Argentoratum, initial phase (drawn by A. Momot)

the barbarian cavalry and some units of light infantry on the left flank.[80] Infantry units waited in ambush on the right wing.[81] In light of this one should think that Roman strategy was entirely predictable to the barbarian warriors who concealed some infantry also on the left flank, behind their riders. The Roman heavy cavalry charged, probably following some pre-battle harassment by equestrian archers, but failed to break the barbarian formation and was forced into a shameful retreat, leaving the right flank of the main forces unprotected.[82] Indeed, the Romans probably did not even make contact. Seeing the ambush, they must have fled for their lives, because otherwise they would have been annihilated by the enemy infantry. As it was, they managed to regroup and return to the battlefield.[83]

The situation on the other flank was much more dangerous. Expecting the classic formation of the Roman cavalry on both flanks, the Alemanni had hidden a part of their soldiers in the forest in an effort to provoke an attack on a seemingly unprotected wing of their forces, after which they would envelop the enemy. The plan might have worked had the Romans not decided against positioning their cavalry also on this side because of the difficult terrain. Nonetheless, the Romans were not expecting the ambush, which was shown by their uncertain movements and the fact that Julian's reserve guard had to be sent in to support the infantry standing on this side.[84]

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[80] Amm. Marc. 16.12.22.
[81] Nicasie 1998, p. 226.
[82] Amm. Marc. 16.12.38.

[83] Amm. Marc. 16.12.38–41; Zos. 3.3.4.
[84] Lib. *Or.* 18.56.

The other battle was that of Adrianople[85] [Fig. 3] at the culmination of the war with the Goths waged from AD 376 due to earlier Roman policy of treating barbarians living inside the empire.[86] This encounter was presented in ancient historiography as a tragic event in the history of the Romans, hence the scarcity of military detail in the descriptions of military nature. The main source is again the work of Ammianus Marcellinus[87] supplemented with comments by Zosimos[88] and Orosius.[89] The battle was viewed as a final settlement of the conflict with the Goths. Valens chose Adrianople as his headquarters upon returning to Constantinople after the end of the conflict with the Persians and suppressing the uprising of Queen Mavia at the end of May. He was supposed to wait for reinforcements led by Gratian,[90] but decided to enter battle based on the collected intelligence.[91] On August 9, the army marched out of camp at dawn, leaving behind *impedimenta* and the imperial insignia under the protection of legionaries.[92] Apparently, the Romans knew exactly where the army of the Goths was.[93]
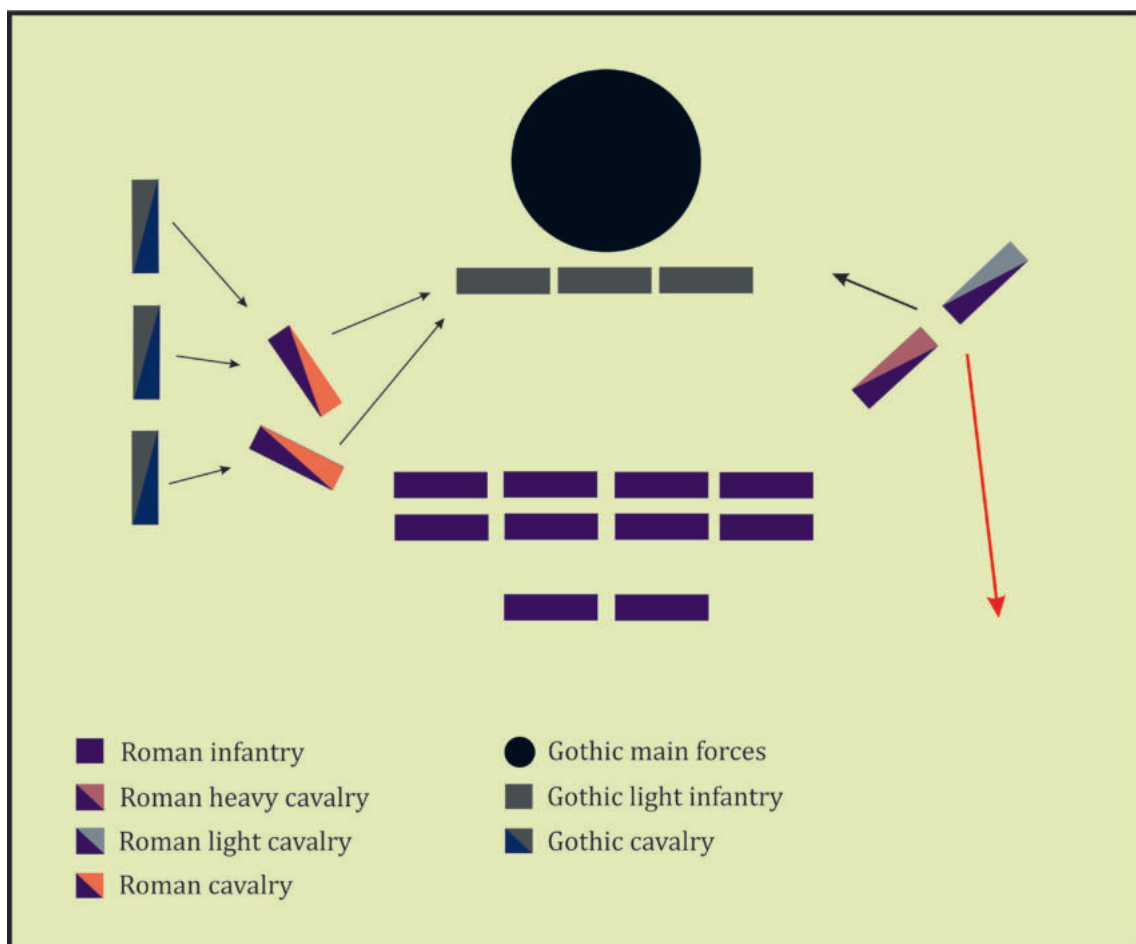

Fig. 3. Battle of Adrianople, cavalry maneuvers (drawn by A. Momot)

[85] More on this battle, see Narloch 2014, pp. 171–178.
[86] For the relations between the Romans and the Goths, see e.g. Heather 1991; Burns 1994; Barbero 2010, pp. 125–139.
[87] Amm. Marc. 21.12–13.
[88] Zos. 4.24.1.
[89] Oros. 7.33.14.
[90] Amm. Marc. 31.11.5; Zos. 4.23.5.
[91] Amm. Marc. 31.12.5–7; Zos. 4.24.1.
[92] Amm. Marc. 31.12.7; Zos. 4.24.1.
[93] Amm. Marc. 31.12.11; Nicasie 1998, p. 244; Burns (Burns 1994) is of a different opinion.

The cavalry of the Goths was absent from the battlefield, but it is hardly possible that they were surprised by the arrival of Valens's army. Indeed, the Goths knew the Romans much better than the Alemanni and the testimonies of ancient authors should be seen as clearly biased in an effort to show the barbarians as less clever than the Romans. Extended negotiations started by the Goths were meant to convince the Romans that the enemy was weak. Either Valens's soldiers were deluded into insensible action or the aim was a surprise attack of the right-wing cavalry on the fortified position of the barbarians. The attack was a disaster and the troops retreated in disarray.[94] On the other flank an ill-prepared Roman cavalry attacked the main forces of the Goths and was in turn broken up by the barbarian cavalrymen riding in from the left side;[95] the Goths then attacked the unprotected left wing of the Roman infantry. A counterattack of the main Gothic force completed the catastrophe.

The sudden appearance of the Gothic cavalry at the best possible moment of the battle can hardly be a lucky coincidence. It was not a hurried return, but a perfectly planned ambush. Their horses were rested, so they had not ridden from afar, but even if they had, they had spare horses ready at the battlefield, which again means that the ambush was planned. The success of this strategy highlights the limitations of the Roman conservative approach to military doctrine and the role of the cavalry. In both of the described battles, the cavalry was only on the lookout to charge, a limited strategy ruthlessly taken advantage of by the Goths at Adrianople.

Traditional Roman military doctrine remained enamored of the infantry despite the rise in numbers of cavalrymen, and their growing status and prestige in the fourth century. Tactics and maneuvers described in the *Strategikon*, for example, had no place in the Roman theater of war. In the two battles discussed here, the Romans displayed limited predictability, failing to match their opponents in various tactics designed to confuse the enemy. Even a manual as schematic and orderly as the *Strategikon* recommended and even expected commanders to improvise and think outside the box.[96] Time had to pass before Romans put their trust in their cavalry. In the sixth century, the number of cavalrymen increased considerably, especially under Belisarius as *magister militum*.[97] From the reign of Justinian cavalry units became more versatile in terms of arms as well as tactics. Riders could fight at close range as well as at a distance using spears and bows. Pinpointing the moment when the Roman cavalry started to move away from standardization is not easy. Actually, it may have started in the fourth century with the *cataphracti* and the *clibanarii* being charged with different tasks.[98]

The fifth and the sixth centuries also witnessed a new trend to complete the biggest possible number of riders, leading to the formation of whole armies just of cavalry. According to Olympiodoros of Thebes,[99] the first battle between mounted units alone was that between Aetius and Aspar. From the second half of the sixth century, Romans preparing for a military campaign would tend to gather cavalry units, particularly the elite formations, in order to ensure greater efficiency in battle. This strategy proved successful in the 580s in the East and then again at the end of the century in the Balkans.[100]

Summing up, the fourth century witnessed the intensification of several processes, some of which were initiated already in the first decades of the Principate. Despite the growing number of cavalry units, and the prestige inherent in the service as well as status of equestrian soldiers,

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[94] Amm. Marc. 31.12.16.
[95] Amm. Marc. 31.12.2; Oros. 7.33.13.
[96] *Strategikon* 3.15, 9.4.
[97] Graetrex 1998, p. 38; Ravegnani 1998, pp. 48–62.
[98] The idea was first introduced by Mariusz Mielczarek (Mielczarek 1993, pp. 41–50) based on a comparison with the tactics of Polish cavalry in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.
[99] Olymp. 9.
[100] Syväne 2004, p. 41.

the Roman mounted units brought little new to the battlefield. The Romans continued to view warfare in a traditional light with the infantry retaining the position of the main force in the field. Roman commanders in battles like that of Argentoratum and Adrianople were unwilling to take on risk and apply tactics making use of the cavalry's biggest advantage, which is mobility. For these reasons, battles fought by the cavalry, either alone or as a majority force in the field, did not become common until later centuries when horse archers became a prevailing factor in warfare.

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Streszczenie

Czas zmian.
Społeczne podłoże rozwoju rzymskiej kawalerii w IV w. n.e.

Historia rzymskich jednostek jazdy to suma wielu procesów, których korzenie bardzo często sięgają pryncypatu, a w niektórych przypadkach zjawiska, które determinowały rozwój tych sił, miały miejsce w czasach republiki.

Milowym krokiem w systemowej organizacji rzymskich sił zbrojnych była reforma Oktawiana Augusta. W nowej strukturze armii gros jednostek jazdy stanowił część *auxilia*, które w założeniach miały składać się z ludzi nieposiadających rzymskiego obywatelstwa.

Niemal od pierwszych dekad pryncypatu Rzymianie coraz częściej i śmielej wykorzystywali konnicę w toczonych wojnach, co przełożyło się bezpośrednio na wzrost liczby jednostek jazdy. Jednocześnie ten rodzaj służby był chętnie wybierany przez obywateli i na przełomie II i III wieku stanowili oni większość jeźdźców w wojskach pomocniczych. Powodem tej sytuacji były lepsze warunki materialne oraz większe szanse na objęcie bardziej eksponowanych stanowisk. Tym samym rósł prestiż zarówno służby w konnicy, jak i samych jeźdźców. W III i IV wieku ludzie związani z jazdą stanowili grupę, która miała duży wpływ na politykę imperium.

Oprócz bodźców wewnętrznych na rozwój rzymskiej jazdy miała oczywiście wpływ sytuacja zewnętrzna, a głównie wrogowie, z którymi trzeba było się mierzyć, co wymuszało tworzenie coraz bardziej zróżnicowanej i elastycznej armii.

Nowe rozwiązania nie szły jednak w parze ze zmianą doktryny wojennej, która u Rzymian cały czas opierała się na piechocie. Wojska piesze stanowiły zdecydowaną większość, a kulminacyjnym momentem bitew było właśnie zderzenie się piechurów. Jazda pełniła jedynie funkcje pomocnicze, polegające przede wszystkim na ochronie flank głównych sił oraz próbach okrążenia przeciwnika.

W dwóch bitwach stoczonych w IV wieku, pod Argentoratum i Adrianopolem, które prawdopodobnie są najlepiej udokumentowanymi starciami w pierwszych czterech wiekach naszej ery, Rzymianie nie wykorzystali potencjału swojej jazdy. Ich tradycyjne podejście do roli konnicy wykluczało zastosowanie taktyki opisanej np. w *Strategikonie*, która była znana już wcześniej. Zostało to wykorzystane przez ich przeciwników.

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