

Roman Standards & Standard-Bearers (1)

112 BC–AD 192



RAFFAELE D'AMATO

ILLUSTRATED BY PETER DENNIS

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Series editor Martin Windrow

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ROMAN STANDARDS & STANDARD-BEARERS (1)

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INTRODUCTION: THE MEANING OF THE STANDARDS

The standards of the Roman army, the *signa militaria*, were not only a practical means of locating and recognizing different units on the battlefield, of providing a rallying point, and of relaying movement orders. They were so central to the military consciousness that in Latin the term *signa* was

synonymous with ‘troops’ or ‘army’. The standards also symbolized the pride and power of Eternal Rome, and had a religious significance that linked the army to the *Res Publica Romana*. They have left a powerful legacy: over the intervening centuries a fainter echo of the reverence with which they were regarded by the soldiers who fought under them has passed down into the flags presented by rulers to military regiments throughout the Western world. On countless battlefields, hard-pressed soldiers have been inspired to ‘rally to the colours’ in a way that would immediately resonate with a Roman legionary.

It is well documented that the cult of the standards had a central position in Roman military worship. As soon as a standard was adopted by a particular unit it became a holy object, attracting veneration. At the end of the 2nd century AD the Christian writer Tertullian

Augustan-period funerary monument of the auxiliary soldier Tiberius Julius Pancuius of the part-mounted *Cohors III Lusitanorum Equitata*, from Neuss, Germany. Alföldi proposes a Hispanic origin for this veteran's name; he died aged 55, after 27 years of service. He is described in the inscription simply as a *miles* (soldier), and only the carved standard identifies him as a *signifer*. The shaft of his *signum* is decorated, from top to bottom, with a small spearhead (invisible here); a tablet ‘unit nameplate’ with hanging side-straps; a *phalera* of saucer-like *patera* type, but showing radiating lines; a *lunula* crescent moon, and a *tufa* hand-protecting tassel. Note his muscled cuirass, and at his upper arm two ranges of *pteryges*, the lower one apparently fringed; these are attached to a *subarmalis* or ‘arming doublet’ worn under his armour. (Photo courtesy of Dr Cesare Rusalen)



complained about the devotion of Roman soldiers to their standards (*Apol.*, 16, 8): ‘The camp religion is all about worship of the standards; oaths are taken upon the standards, which are set above all the gods.’

The *signa*, through their divine power, might reveal important auspices before a battle, which superstitious Romans regarded as good or bad omens. For instance, Cassius Dio writes that when Crassus was about to lead his army across the Euphrates one of the legionary eagles ‘was unwilling to join him in his passage [...], and stuck fast in the earth as if rooted there, until many took their places around it and pulled it out by force, so that it accompanied them quite reluctantly’. In thus ascribing to the *aquila* a quasi-human personality, he underlines its importance as the embodiment of the legion’s collective identity. On this occasion, the *vexilla* (flags) were also said to have shown a similar unwillingness, spontaneously falling off the bridge into the river. Unable to interpret these omens, however, Crassus pressed on, leading his army to ruin.

The religious meaning of the *signa* was impressed upon the Roman soldier from the moment of his enlistment. In a military assembly the *tiro* (new recruit) met the *signa*, the gods of the legion; from this moment on they were to take the place of the gods of his home (*lares*), the cults of his family and of his native city. Tacitus (*Ann.*, II, 17) calls the *aquilae* the ‘guardian spirits of the legions’ (*propria legionum numina*). Josephus (*BJ*, III, 6, 2) calls the legionary *signa* ‘the holy objects’. Numerous inscriptions record individual soldiers making dedications to the standards in the hope of winning the favour of the gods: e.g., *CIL VII, 1031*, inscription of AD 175–178 at Lanchester, Northumberland, to the *Genius* and *Signa coh(ortis) I F(idae) Vardul(lorum) c(ivium) R(omanorum) eq(uitatae) m(illiariae)* (‘To the Soul and the Cohort Standards of the 1st Faithful Part-Mounted Thousand-Strong Cohort of Vardulian Roman Citizens’, from north-central Spain). Roman soldiers feared divine anger if misfortune befell the standards, as when rebellious legions of the Rhine garrison could not save theirs from being carried away by a tempestuous storm and flood; in consequence, Tacitus (*Ann.* I, 30) calls their military camp ‘luckless’ (*castra infausta*).

The sacred nature of the standards was such that oaths might be pronounced in front of them (Tac., *Ann.*, XV, 16: ‘a sworn guarantee was given by Paetus, in the face of the standards and the presence of witnesses deputed by the king ...’). Even enemies acknowledged the sacred character of Roman standards (Suet., *Vit.*, II, 4: *ad veneranda legionum signa pellexit*). During the reign of Caligula, ‘Artabanus ... King of the Parthians, [when] crossing the Euphrates, paid homage to the Roman eagles and standards and to the images of the Caesars’ (Suet., *Cal.*, XIV, 3; also Cassius Dio, LIX, 27). Tacitus (*Ann.* XV, 29) describes the impressive ceremony of submission



Legionary *signiferi* of the Dacian Wars. The staff of the *aquila* is undecorated. The other *signa* are all surmounted by a hand in a wreath, identifying manipular/centurial standards carried within a cohort; two of them each have four *phalerae*, suggesting centuries from two different cohorts. (Trajan's Column, scene LXXVII; cast in Museo della Civiltà Romana, Rome; author's photo, courtesy of the Museum)

of Tiridates, King of Armenia, in front of Nero's statue and the parading army of Corbulo: '... columns of legionaries standing amid a glitter of eagles and standards and effigies of gods, which gave the scene the character of a temple; in the centre, the tribunal supported a magisterial chair, on which was a statue of Nero. To this Tiridates advanced, and ... lifted the diadem from his head and placed it at the feet of the image.' The phrase *in modum templi* emphasizes the sacredness of the moment, in which the presence of the standards was an essential component.

Being holy objects, the eagles and other standards were 'anointed [with unguents] on festive days' (Pliny the Elder, *HN*, XIII, 4). Josephus attests to one episode of the direct worship of the standards by Roman soldiers. When the legionaries entered the courtyard of the Temple at the climax of the battle for Jerusalem, with the sanctuary already blazing, they 'brought their *signa* to the Temple and set them over against its eastern gate; and there they did offer sacrifices to them, and there they [acclaimed] Titus [as] Imperator' (*BJ*, VI, 6.1).

There was no shame more disgraceful than for a legion or cohort to lose its standard on the battlefield. Sometimes commanders gambled on this and threw them into the enemy's lines, to incite the soldiers to protect them at all costs (*Caes*, *BG* V, 37; *BC* III, 64). The *signiferi* were picked warriors, expected to be ready to die to defend the standards. Caesar quotes an occasion when they failed in this duty in order to emphasize the extraordinary degree of panic that gripped his troops. At the battle of Dyrrhachium his army attacked Pompey's camp, but were caught by surprise by an enemy counterattack, and fled. In the confusion, many *signiferi* threw away their standards in order to ease their flight, 'and everywhere was full of disorder, panic, and flight, so much so that [even] when Caesar grasped the standards of the fugitives' he could not stop the rout (*BC*, III, 69, 71).

One consequence of the sacred importance attached to Roman standards is that they were seldom lost or abandoned, so in modern times archaeological finds have been very rare.

A

LATE CONSULAR PERIOD

(1) *Vexillarius* of a magistrate, c. 80 BC

This man, reconstructed from a figure on an Etruscan urn, is a member of the staff of a political office-holder (perhaps – judging from his white sash – a consul) in the time of Sulla. He carries the ceremonial flag identifying a particular group, and his sky-blue *caerulea tunica* indicates a member of the magistrate's *apparitores*. The tunic's construction, copied from a specimen from Ballana in ancient Nubia, is simply two rectangles of cloth sewn together and shallowly hemmed with zig-zag stitching, leaving wide slits for the head and arms. When laid flat it is actually wider than it is long, c. 1.4m x 1.27m (4ft 8ins x 4ft 2ins). The elaborate boots are noteworthy.

(2) *Aquilifer* of *Legio X*; 55 BC, Britannia

The famous eagle-bearer of Julius Caesar's favourite legion is reconstructed using archaeological evidence from his time, and the monuments in Gallia Narbonensis celebrating *Legio X* and the Gallic Wars. Under the lion pelt he wears a simple bronze helmet notable only for its figure-of-8 cheek-guards. His muscled cuirass (*thorax stadios*) is made of bronze; it is

worn over a leather jerkin (*subarmalis*) showing a line of lappets at the bottom edge, and stiffened linen *pteryges* below this and on the upper arms. His legs appear to be wrapped with puttees, and his footwear are hobnailed hide *calcei* boots. The legionary eagle is reconstructed from coins struck in 82–81 BC by Valerius Flaccus and A. Postumius Albinus; characteristics are the upraised wings, the crosspiece (here a fore-and-aft yoke shape, sometimes a bundle of lightning-bolts), and undecorated shaft.

(3) *Signifer* of a *manipulus* of *Legio III*, 43–31 BC

Late Consular funerary monuments often show *signa* as part of a panoply of arms and armour (instead of a uniformed figure) on the tombstones of standard-bearers. This *signifer* of a manipule in Octavian Caesar's *Legio III*, during the period of civil wars against Marcus Antonius, is reconstructed partly from a monument at Sora. He is equipped with a Hellenistic *cassis* helmet adorned with crests in whitened pheasant feathers and horsehair; a hardened leather muscle-cuirass and *pteryges*, and an articulated leather *galerus* or *manica* on his right arm; and a large, heavily decorated oval *scutum* shield.

