

Roman Standards & Standard-Bearers (2)

AD 192–500



RAFFAELE D'AMATO

ILLUSTRATED BY ANDREY NEGIN

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Series editor Martin Windrow

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ROMAN STANDARDS & STANDARD-BEARERS (2)

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INTRODUCTION

Bronze maritime *signum*, 2nd–3rd century AD, from a merchant shipwreck off Trieste. Although recovered from a civilian find site (the ship was carrying glassware), this well-preserved archaeological specimen does show features very reminiscent of military standards: the *lunula* crescent moon, the disc-shaped *phalera*, and, hanging from the crossbar, a hexagonal miniature shield pendant. (Civico Museo del Mare, Trieste, Metropolitan area of Venezia and Belluno, Padua & Treviso Provinces; author's photo, courtesy of the Museum)

Evolution of the cult of the standards

Until the late 5th century AD Roman military *signa* or standards remained recognizably linked to the classic military traditions of the Early Empire – albeit with some foreign introductions, and, from the second decade of the 4th century, with new Christian motifs adopted during the reign of Constantine the Great (r. 306–337).¹

As before, they both fulfilled a tactical role on the battlefield, and were the revered symbols of the unit, the legion, and Rome itself. They had always been the objects of a cult, and in this later period they assumed even more sacred significance. They were simultaneously a tangible sign of the Divine presence with the army, and an expression of Imperial power. Some of the *signa militaria* in each unit served as a physical substitute for the presence of the emperor himself, and as a day-to-day reminder to the troops of their duty faithfully to serve his cause. This, as argued by Hebblewhite, was particularly

pronounced in the turbulent period AD 235–395, during which the Roman Army demanded that the emperor should be, above all else, an effective military leader. Throughout the 3rd century the standards retained their inherently sacred status, although latterly, as suggested by Domaszewski, this was gradually overlaid by the Imperial cult.

We have many mentions of the practice of the cult of the *signa* in the dedication of altars to the standards. For instance, in AD 224 M. Aurelius Iustus, chief centurion of Legio I Italica Severiana at Novae (Moesia Inferior), dedicated a limestone altar to the '*dii militares, genius, virtus, aquila sancta, signa*' ('The military gods, the soul [of the unit], [its] manhood, the sacred eagle, [and the] standards.'). According to the Bulgarian scholar B. Gerov this altar was dedicated on



1 The son of the Tetrarch Constantius Chlorus (see Plate D commentary), Constantine campaigned in the East as a tribune under the emperors Diocletian and Galerius. He was acclaimed emperor at York by the troops in Britain on his father's death. However, civil wars against Maxentius and Licinius prevented him securing sole rule until AD 324.



20 September 224, the legion's 'birthday' (*dies natalis legionis*). However, in the same Severan period standard-bearers are also found dedicating altars to other gods; e.g., also at Novae, the *signifer* L. Cultius raised one to an unknown deity (his legion is not specified, but was almost certainly Legio I Italica again). At High Rochester (Britannia), an altar was erected between AD 238 and 244 with a dedication to the '*signa Cohors I Vardullorum*' and '*genius domini nostri*' by Egnatius Lucilianus, *legatus pro-praetor* for Cohors I Vardullorum and the scouts of the Numerus Exploratorum Brem(enensium), under command of the tribune Cassius Sabinianus (*RIB, I, 1262*).

The alien image of the dragon became an object of veneration when it took the form of the *dracones* standards carried by some units from the 2nd century and much more widely thereafter (see below, 'The *draco*'). We lack the evidence to trace in detail evolving differences in the cult worship of individual types of standards; but of the *dracones*, we might hypothetically suggest that sacred properties resided not only in their embodiment of unit identity, but also in their intimidating impact on the enemy, as the wind hissed through their metal jaws and their 'windsock' bodies writhed in the air.

With the adoption of Christianity, military flags assumed an increasingly important sacred function as icons of the new religion. From the reign of Constantine the Great, the presence of *labara* bearing the Christian monogram (*chi-rhō*) was believed to have the power to revive the courage of soldiers who might be faltering in battle, and even to render its bearer invulnerable. Its sacred power was even recognized by superstitious enemies: Eusebius (*Vita Cons.*, II, 16) writes that Constantine's opponent Licinius forbade his soldiers to look at it. 'Having learned by experience the divine and mysterious power which resided in the [flag], by means of which Constantine's army had become accustomed to victory, [Licinius] admonished his soldiers never to direct their attack against this standard, nor even incautiously to allow their eyes to rest upon it, assuring them that it possessed a terrible power, and was especially hostile to him, so that they would do well to carefully avoid any contact with it.' The psychological importance of standards in the Late

Vexilla around the emperor: scene of *adlocutio* from the Arch of Septimius Severus, AD 202–203. The upper part of a relief depicting the capture of Ctesiphon during Severus's Parthian campaign a few years previously, this shows the emperor at left centre, with one flag to the left and four to the right. Damage prevents us making out any details of the *vexillarii*, some of whom should be part of the command group and the others associated with the surrounding troops. Each *vexillum* shows a fringed cloth and an approximate semi-circle or disc at the top of the staff. (*in situ*, Rome; author's photo)

Roman period is also attested, for example, by a reference from Ammianus Marcellinus to a standard lost in Persia which was recovered in AD 363. In Ammianus (*Hist.*, XXIX, 5,15) the *signa militaria* are mentioned in specific connection with priestly crowns (*coronae sacerdotales*).

It is illuminating that among the anti-Christian measures taken by the Emperor Julian ‘the Apostate’ (r. 361–363) was the removal of Christian imagery from the standards of Roman legions; Christ’s cross and monogram were temporarily replaced with symbols of the Sun and of the old Roman traditions. When the Christian standards were restored they provided a redoubled inspiration for the army: as symbols of the faith, and of God’s legitimisation of the new regime. A passage of St Ambrose (*Amb. Ep.* 72a and *de Fide*. 2.16.141–2), addressed to the Emperor Gratian (r. 367–383), may be interpreted as saying that although the eagles still led the army physically, it was now faith in Christ that was the army’s greatest strength: ‘Turn again, O Lord, and set up the banners of Thy faith. No military eagles, no flight of birds, here lead the van of our army, but Thy Name, Lord Jesus, and Thy worship’ (*‘Convertere, Domine, fideique tuae adtolle vexilla. Non hic aquilae militares, neque volatus avium exercitum ducunt, sed tuum, Domine Jesu, nomen et cultus’*).

Sources for research

As for the Early Imperial period, the study and reconstruction of standards of the 3rd–5th centuries AD is mainly based on the iconography of monuments, on details of coins, and on the few surviving archaeological fragments. Unfortunately, given the perishable nature of the materials employed, only a few pieces of Late Roman standards have survived, although in recent years the remains of some exceptional artefacts, such as the Palatine and Aventine finds in Rome, have shed new light on the topic. Sometimes the archaeology linked to the abandonment of a military site helps us with dating, as in the case of the rare fragments found at Niederbieber, left by the Romans in AD 259–260. Inevitably, however, our reconstructions rest mainly on conjectural comparisons between literary and iconographical evidence. Such research is made even more difficult by the state of publication regarding some archaeological finds which might be interpreted as relating to *signa*

A

THE SEVERAN PERIOD, 3rd CENTURY AD

(1) Praetorian *signifer*; Rome, AD 203–204

This Guardsman carries one of the three *signa* depicted on the Arch of the Argentarii, with the image of Geta restored so that it displays those of Septimius Severus between both his sons. Surmounted by an eagle and a *vexillum*, the *signum* also displays a *corona muralis*, and *lunulae* alternating with actual and scaled metal tassels (*tuffae*). It probably served as a combination of *vexillum cohortis* and *imago cohortis* for all the Praetorian cohorts. The bearer is wearing the usual Praetorian standard-bearer’s distinction of a lion’s pelt over a *squama*, the scale armour in use by the Praetorian Guard throughout the 3rd century AD.

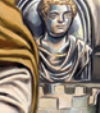
(2) Titus Flavius Surillio, *aquilifer* of *Legio II Adiutrix Pia Fidelis*; Byzantium, AD 214

For a photo of this eagle-bearer’s funerary stele see page 8. Standing by an altar dedicated by a centurion of his legion, he

wears a short, long-sleeved *tunica militaris* woven or embroidered with blue-purple *clavi*, *bracae* trousers, closed *calcei* boots, and a *sagum* cloak. Note the hint of a ‘sceptre’ design in the pedestal on which the *aquila legionis* sits. The short-staffed standard is supported by a carrying-sling fitted with a decorated socket. The dimensions of the shield fit well with those of the standard-bearers’ shields shown in the iconography of previous centuries, worn underarm or slung on the left side of the body.

(3) Alexandrus, *signifer* of *Cohors II hastati prioris, Legio II Trajana Fortis Germanica*; Nicopolis, c. AD 200–225

This *signum cohortis* is surmounted by a hand, and displays on the staff seven *phalerae* of *patera* or ‘saucer’ shape, slightly varying in size. Note the bearer’s typical ring-buckled belt of the period, worn together with a baldric that supports the *spatha* sword on the left side of the body. The colour and decorative *loroi* of his tunic are copied from contemporary military portraits from Luxor and original tunics..



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