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MICHAEL P. SPEIDEL

## Trajan's Comites Guard and Tacitus' Germania

### 1. A letter by a comes Augusti

The writing tablets found in the fort of Vindolanda at Hadrian's Wall greatly add to our knowledge of the Roman army. One of them, astonishingly, reveals that Trajan's horse guardsmen bore the title *comites Augusti*, 'companions of the emperor'.

The tablet, from the early years of Trajan's reign, holds a letter written in ink on pinewood. Addressed to a soldier, very likely of cohorts VIII Batavorum stationed at Vindolanda, the letter reads:<sup>1</sup>

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*ut remittat meos denarios  
cum assic ... citra  
conscientiam praefecti  
sui. Saluta Verecundam  
et Sanctum, Lo.um, Capito-  
nem, et omnes cives et  
amecos cum quibus opto  
bene valeas.*

(on the back):

---

*mentori,  
ab Ascanio, comiti Aug(usti).*

«... so he will send my money ... without the knowledge of his prefect. Greet Verecunda and Sanctus, ..., Capito, and all countrymen and friends, with whom I wish you to be in good health. [To] ..., surveyor, from Ascanius, *comes Augusti*.»

The reading of the last line, reviewed once more by the editors, is certain but for the underdotted letters.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A. K. BOWMAN – J. D. THOMAS, *The Vindolanda Writing Tablets*, vol. 3, 2003, no. 650. For the ablative ending -i, instead of -e in *comiti*, the editors cite parallels at Vindolanda itself.

<sup>2</sup> J. D. THOMAS in a letter to Dr. R. HAENSCH, editor of this journal, states 'I think also that M, and I before Aug., are very good readings.'

The writer, being friends with many people at Vindolanda, is clearly a man of the same station in life as those he is addressing and greeting. The editors of the tablet rightly take it that his ‹fellow countrymen› are Batavians, which makes him a Batavian and very likely a soldier as well.<sup>3</sup>

Ascanius was *comes Augusti*.<sup>4</sup> By Trajan's time, this title was used for high-ranking senators and knights who served as friends and advisors of the emperor in the field.<sup>5</sup> The low-ranking Ascanius cannot have been such a companion of the emperor.<sup>6</sup> How, then, did he come by his title? As a Batavian, and very likely a soldier, accompanying Trajan on his travels, he must have been one of the emperor's horse guardsmen of the newly-raised *Equites Singulares Augusti*.

As a *comes Augusti*, Ascanius was a horse guardsman, for papyri and inscriptions of the later third century call the *Equites Singulares Augusti Comites Domini Nostri*.<sup>7</sup> Under Trajan *comes* many still have been an unofficial title; two hundred years later it had become the horse guard's official name.<sup>8</sup> As for its form, the title can be compared with *equus singularis Augusti* which is even older than *singularis imperatoris Traiani*.<sup>9</sup> The high-ranking *comites Augusti* did not take this informal title of the horse guards so serious as to drop their own use of the title, quite different from later high-ranking *protectores* who dropped their title because lower ranks also were called *protectores*.<sup>10</sup>

The unit's name of *Comites Augusti* throws light on why the *Equites Singulares Augusti* used the special term *adlectus* for being transferred to the guard. When a legionary joined the Praetorian guard, he was simply *translatus*, ‹transferred›, but

<sup>3</sup> An Ascanius at Vindolanda: Tab. Vindol. II, 183,3 – perhaps the same soldier. The name may derive from Germanic Ask- ‹spear›, cf. E. FÖRSTEMANN, *Altdeutsches Namenbuch I*, 1900, 147f; H. REICHERT, *Lexikon der altgermanischen Namen I*, 1987, 77.

<sup>4</sup> The reading, as the editors report, is owed to A. BIRLEY – they might have welcomed, in their preface, BIRLEY's outstanding contributions.

<sup>5</sup> Hyginus, *De munitionibus castrorum*, 10; 33; 39; *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae III*, 1777; A. VON DOMASZEWSKI, *Die Rangordnung des römischen Heeres*, 21967, 184; M. LENOIR, *Pseudo-Hygin, Des fortifications du camp*, 1979, 55; F. MILLAR, *The Emperor in the Roman World*, 1977, 43; H. HALFMANN, *Itinera Principum, Geschichte und Typologie der Kaiserreisen im römischen Reich*, 1986, 92–103.

<sup>6</sup> Thus rightly W. ECK, *Militärisches und ziviles Leben am Hadrianswall*, *JRA* 18, 2005, 667.

<sup>7</sup> M. P. SPEIDEL, *Roman Army Studies II*, 1992, 379–384. Add Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum* 38,5f and *Sancti Christopheri Martyris acta Graeca antiqua*, *Analecta Bollandiana* 1, 1882, 121–148, esp. 1,10 (AD 302).

<sup>8</sup> For the change over time in such titles from *Aug(usti)* to *imp(eratoris) n(ostri)* and then to *d(omini) n(ostri)* see M. P. SPEIDEL, *Die Denkmäler der Kaiserreiter*, 1994, 25f; idem, *Riding for Caesar*, 1994, 44. For the addition of *Augusti*, etc. to soldiers' ranks see also M. CLAUSS, *Der Magister Officiorum in der Spätantike*, 1980, 35.

<sup>9</sup> *Augusti*: SPEIDEL, *Denkmäler* 1994, 684 and 1 (A.D. 118); *Traiani*: SPEIDEL, *Denkmäler* 1994, 20; 21.

<sup>10</sup> M. P. SPEIDEL, *Das Heer*, in: K.-P. JOHNE, *Handbuch der Soldatenkaiserzeit*, 2006, forthcoming.

when an auxiliary, such as a Batavian, joined the horse guard, he was *adlectus*, 'chosen to join'<sup>11</sup> – the term for knights chosen to join the senate and for officers to join the emperor's staff.<sup>12</sup> A centurion's career inscription therefore reads *adlectus in comitatu imp(eratoris) Commodi Aug(usti)*.<sup>13</sup> The horse guardsmen, then, like staff officers, were 'chosen to join' the emperor's *comitatus*.

The *Equites Singulares Augusti* used the term *adlectus* so consistently on their altars and gravestones that they are likely to have had official sanction for doing so. When in AD 98 Trajan raised the new horse guard of the *Equites Singulares Augusti* on the lower Rhine – mostly from Batavians – he, as well as they, thus saw their relationship as one of *princeps* and *comites*.<sup>14</sup> In their own tradition, Germani will have understood this as the bond between lord and followers.

## 2. Tacitus' Germanic *comitatus*

In his *Germania*, written in the year 98, Tacitus uses the terms *princeps* and *comites* to describe Germanic lords and their warband (*Gefolgschaft*).<sup>15</sup> As a leading Roman senator who had been consul only the year before, Tacitus clearly kept an eye on Trajan's doings in Lower Germany, the decisive province for the new emperor.<sup>16</sup> He must have written his praise for the Batavians, and his account of the bond between Germanic *princeps* and *comites*, in the knowledge that the emperor was choosing, just then, a thousand Germanic *comites* for his horse guard.

To Tacitus, the warband of *princeps* and *comites* is the fundamental military-political institution of the Germani. On this, scholars agree, though some doubt whether Tacitus' report truly reflects the social, political, and military reality at the time.<sup>17</sup> Warbands, however, are what anthropologists and comparative his-

<sup>11</sup> SPEIDEL, *Denkmäler* 1994, 453; idem, *Riding* 1994, 90. The oldest dated inscription to record this is from A. D. 219: CIL VI 31162; DESSAU, ILS 2188; SPEIDEL, *Denkmäler* 1994, 62.

<sup>12</sup> H. DEVIJVER, *Prosopographia Militarium Equestrum* III, 1980, 102f; AE 1949, 38; G. ALFÖLDY, *Römische Heeresgeschichte*, 1987, 329f; SPEIDEL, *Riding* 1994, 90.

<sup>13</sup> AE 1949, 38. The centurion was perhaps not a *comes Augusti*, but rather *agens sacru comitatu*, see M. P. SPEIDEL, *Roman Army Studies* I, 1984, 397ff.

<sup>14</sup> Trajan raising the *Equites Singulares Augusti*: SPEIDEL, *Riding* 1994, 38ff.

<sup>15</sup> Tacitus, *Germania* 13–14. *Comitatus* were at least part-mounted, as the phrase (14, 2) *bellatorem equum* shows.

<sup>16</sup> RMD IV, 216; Cf. W. ECK, *Neue Diplome für die Heere von Germania superior und Germania inferior*, ZPE 148, 2004, 259–268; idem, *Köln in römischer Zeit*, 2004, 223ff.

<sup>17</sup> E.g. A. A. LUND, *Gesamtinterpretation der Germania des Tacitus*, ANRW II, 33, 1991, 1899. Cf. A. K. G. KRISTENSEN, *Tacitus' germanische Gefolgschaft*, 1983; R. WENSKUS, *Die neuere Diskussion um Gefolgschaft und Herrschaft in Tacitus' Germania*, in: *Beiträge zum Verständnis der Germania des Tacitus II*, ed. G. NEUMANN – H. SEEMANN, 1992, 311–331; D. TIMPE, *Zum politischen Character der Germanen in der Germania des Tacitus*, first published in 1987, reprinted in: *Romano-Germanica*, 1995, 145–168.

torians would expect in archaic societies of this kind,<sup>18</sup> they are what archaeologists find,<sup>19</sup> and they constitute the fundamental institution of later Germanic society.<sup>20</sup> FRANK STENTON writes:<sup>21</sup> «Everywhere in the Germanic world the ruler, whether king or chief, was attended by a body-guard of well-born companions. No Germanic institution has a longer history. The phrases in which Tacitus describes the retinue of a first-century chief can be applied to the companions of King Cynwulf of Wessex in the eighth century and to those of Earl Byrthnoth of Essex in the tenth. Much that is characteristic of the oldest Germanic literature turns on the relationship between the companions and their lord. The sanctity of the bond between lord and man, the duty of defending and avenging a lord, the disgrace of surviving him, gave rise to situations in which English listeners were always interested until new literary fashions of Romance origin displaced the ancient stories. There is no doubt that this literature represented real life.»

One can hardly wish better proof for the historical truth of Tacitus' description. Since 1945, however, some scholars have felt a need to deny the existence of such an institution among the ancient Germani, fraught, as it is, with ideals abused by the Nazis.<sup>22</sup> For some fifty years it has thus been the fashion to deny Tacitus' credibility, especially in the central issue of the warband (*Gefolgschaft*). DIETER TIMPE, who has brought to light Tacitus' stream-of-consciousness style in writing the *Germania*, argued that Tacitus' *comitatus* is the least specific term a Roman could find, and that therefore Tacitus cannot mean a specific institution.<sup>23</sup> Ascanius' letter, however, shows that for Trajan his guardsmen as *comites Augusti* were a very specific institution and hence also for politically and militarily aware senators like Tacitus. When a master of the well-chosen vagueness like Tacitus<sup>24</sup> uses a term as specific as *comites*, he assuredly means a specific thing.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>18</sup> WENSKUS 1992, 327.

<sup>19</sup> H. STEUER, Interpretationsmöglichkeiten archäologischer Quellen zum Gefolgschaftsproblem, in: NEUMANN – SEEMANN (n. 17) 203–257.

<sup>20</sup> W. SCHLESINGER, Herrschaft und Gefolgschaft in der germanisch-deutschen Verfassungsgeschichte, HZ 176, 1953, 225–275 = idem, Beiträge zur deutschen Verfassungsgeschichte des Mittelalters I, 1963, 9–52; W. KIENAST, Germanische Treue und Königshilf, HZ 227, 1978, 265–324; CH. LANDOLT – D. TIMPE – H. STEUER, Gefolgschaft, RGA 10, 1998, 533–554.

<sup>21</sup> F. STENTON, Anglo-Saxon England, <sup>3</sup>1971, 303.

<sup>22</sup> TIMPE 1995, 145: «Der Zusammenhang zwischen Zeitgeist und Deutung der *Germania* ist ebenso eindrücklich wie offenkundig». For a history of research opinions see A. SCHWARCZ, Die politische Vorstellungswelt der Germanen, in: Pipers Handbuch der politischen Ideen, ed. I. FETSCHER – H. MÜNKLER, 1993, 17–40.

<sup>23</sup> TIMPE 1995, 162, following, it seems G. PERL, *Gnomon* 57, 1985, 240, cf. WENSKUS 1992, 324.

<sup>24</sup> See e.g. WENSKUS 1992, 327.

<sup>25</sup> The same specific term for the same specific institution recurs in Ammianus 16,12,60, cf. R. MUCH, *Die Germania des Tacitus*, 1957, 224f. Even in Tacitus, *Germania* 21,2 *comes*

This not only knocks a major prop out from under the argument of those who deny Tacitus' accuracy in this matter, it greatly strengthens the argument that Tacitus' description reflects the historical truth. Tacitus' accuracy need not surprise. He certainly was well-informed about such matters, for not only did the politically interested at Rome have contemporary, direct information about the free Germani,<sup>26</sup> but Germanic nations who, like the Batavians, lived in the Roman provinces of Germany were known even better.<sup>27</sup> Besides, Tacitus must have heard many times the first-hand account of his father-in-law Agricola, who had conquered northern Britain with Batavian troops, and who knew them and their fighting skills better than anyone – surely a rich and competent source of information.<sup>28</sup>

### 3. *Emperors' comites guard and the Germanic \*gasinþ- warband*

That Tacitus used such information, and that he described the Germani warband of his time accurately and reliably, is borne out by the fact that the emperors' Batavi horse guard shared many salient features with the Germanic warband of the time. Indeed, comparison between the two guards is almost as good a means as Ascanius' letter to get beyond mere opinion in assessing the historical reality of Tacitus' Germanic *comitatus*.

Although a full comparison between the Germanic warband and the Roman horse guard still awaits scholarly treatment, enough characteristics shared by the two guards are known to make it clear that they were much alike. Followers kept faith with their lord,<sup>29</sup> swore an oath to defend him,<sup>30</sup> feasted with him,<sup>31</sup> included noblemen from other nations,<sup>32</sup> and strove for the rank of being the first of the guard.<sup>33</sup> Mereley by being keen and strong, both guards attracted embassies and quashed wars before they broke out,<sup>34</sup> and in both guards some warriors were re-

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means 'guard', rather than just companion, see Caesar, BG 6,23 and MUCH, 1957, 303 contra PERL, loc. cit.

<sup>26</sup> J. B. RIVES, Tacitus, *Germania*, 1999, esp. pp. 56–66. Tacitus may even have served as a legionary commander in Germany (ibid. 43).

<sup>27</sup> Batavians seem to have been the model for Tacitus' Germani: W. ADLER, *Studien zur germanischen Bewaffnung*, 1993, 235.

<sup>28</sup> For Agricola see now A. R. BIRLEY, *The Roman Government of Britain*, 2005, 71–95.

<sup>29</sup> Suetonius, Galba 12. SPEIDEL, *Riding* 1994, 40. For not returning from battle if their lord fell, see also Ammianus 16,12,60.

<sup>30</sup> Epictetus 1,14,15. SPEIDEL, *Riding* 1994, 129.

<sup>31</sup> Dio 77,17,4. SPEIDEL, *Riding* 1994, 65; 138.

<sup>32</sup> Tacitus, *Annals* 2,9f and 11,16f (Italicus). SPEIDEL, *Riding* 1994, 26f; 80.

<sup>33</sup> CIL III, 3676 = DESSAU, ILS 2558. M. P. SPEIDEL, *Lebensbeschreibungen traianisch-hadrianischer Gardereiter*, in: K. VÖSSING (ed.), *Biographie und Prosopographie*, 2005, 73–89.

<sup>34</sup> Dio 69,9. SPEIDEL, *Riding* 1994, 46f; cf. Tacitus, *Agricola* 18,4–5 (Batavi).

markably youthful in contrast with the older men.<sup>35</sup> It follows that Tacitus' description of the Germanic warband, like most of what he says about the Germani, «represents real life».<sup>36</sup>

Not only does Tacitus describe the Germanic warband accurately, he also gives it its right name. Traditionally scholars took it that his terms *comes* and *comitatus* reflect Germanic words from the stem *\*gasinþ-*, which in later Germanic languages supplies the words for «retinue», «followers», and «warband», as in Old High German *gasindi* and old English *gesīð*. This was all the more plausible as both *comes* and *\*gasinþ-* originally meant «travel companion»,<sup>37</sup> ancient travel being, more often than not, an undertaking of war.

Against this, J. LINDOW argued that, Latin being poor in words for «retinue», Tacitus in his *Germania* had little choice but to use the term *comitatus*, and once he had adopted that term for the warband, *comes* was inevitable for warband members.<sup>38</sup> Now, however, that we know *comes* was for guardsmen in Trajan's time, it is clear that Tacitus' *comes* does not merely follow from his *comitatus* and is not a figment of his mind. LINDOW was wrong also in claiming that Latin *comes* had lost the original meaning of traveling together. That it meant «travel companion» is clear from the title *comes imperatoris expeditionis*, given to high-ranking senators whom the emperor appointed as his followers for specific campaigns.<sup>39</sup> The traditional view was right, therefore: Tacitus' *comes* translates Germanic *\*gasinþ-*.<sup>40</sup>

Tacitus description of the Germanic warband and its key role, it follows, is an authentic account of early Germanic society.

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<sup>35</sup> Tacitus, *Germania* 13,2–14,2: *Adulescentuli, iuvenes; robustiores ac pridem probati*. W. SCHLESINGER, *Beiträge zur deutschen Verfassungsgeschichte des Mittelalters I*, 1963, 19. See e.g. Trajan's Column, scene 16, with C. CICHORIUS, *Die Reliefs der Trajanssäule*, Textband I, 1896, 82. CICHORIUS was unsettled by the guards' lack of weapons, but guards hide their weapons when with the emperor among friends: A. ALFÖLDI, *Die monarchische Repräsentation im römischen Kaiserreiche*, 1970, 103.

<sup>36</sup> See STENTON, above, n 21. Tacitus being more reliable than his detractors allow: SPEIDEL, 2005, 82; 98f; 113; 120; 129f; 146f; 160; 176–179.

<sup>37</sup> E.g. MUCH 1957, 224f.

<sup>38</sup> J. LINDOW, *Comitatus, Individual and Honor*, 1976, 12ff, esp. 17. For a discussion see KRISTENSEN 1983, 67.

<sup>39</sup> E.g. J. B. CAMPBELL, *The Emperor and the Roman Army*, 1984, 355ff.

<sup>40</sup> For a discussion see KRISTENSEN 1983, 67.