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ETHNIC UNITS IN THE LATE ROMAN ARMY?

THE CASE OF THE *EQUITES DALMATAE*

Abstract

The article relies on the case study of the equites Dalmatae to analyse the relationships between Late Roman military unit naming conventions and the recruitment patterns of the era. Of special importance is the question of the extent to which the army employed ethnic units, recruited from a particular population and using their own, traditional fighting styles. The conclusions are reached through a combination of historical and onomastic study, with special regard to the possible meanings of the term Dalmatae and the entities and identities it could have represented.

Key words

Late Roman army, Dalmatia, recruitment, identity

While even the recruitment patterns and the resulting composition of the Roman army during the Principate are relatively ill-known, except of course for the original place of enlistment in the case of units bearing names of peoples, even less can be said with certainty about its Late Roman iteration. Among the unit names, one can find a wide range of ethnic and geographic names, but the puzzle of the true nature of their relation to peoples and regions remains in many cases completely unsolved. This paper looks at the specific case of the *equites Dalmatae*, a numerous cavalry formation, and aims to resolve the problem of their relation to the eponymous province Dalmatia and its inhabitants, in an attempt at determining whether they could have had any qualities of an „ethnic unit”¹, or if the origin and the meaning of their name should be explained otherwise.

Of all unit names in the Late Roman army, most attention has probably been given to the Germanic tribal names of several Late Roman regiments, mostly belonging to the prestigious class of *auxilia*. The fact that there are mostly single units with a particular ethnic name suggests a high probability that they were indeed formed out of members of a single tribe, presenting a high possibility of the inclusion of true „ethnic units” within the Late Roman army². This was probably true at least initially, regardless of later recruitment – which rather unfortunately triggered a heated, long-lasting and, due to the limited nature of evidence and sources, probably irresolvable debate about the levels (and precise timeframe) of „barbarization” and „Germanization” processes within the Roman armed forces. Fortunately, the debate is moving away from the contemporary Roman (literary) concepts of „Roman” and „German”³, following the recent advancements in the studies

¹ The term popularised chiefly by the influential article by M.P. Speidel, *The Rise of Ethnic Units in the Roman Imperial Army*, [in:] H. Temporini (ed.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 2, 3, *Politische Geschichte. Provinzen und Randvölker: Allgemeines; Britannien, Hispanien, Gallien*, Berlin-New York 1975, pp. 202-231.

² A. Alföldi, *Cornuti: A Teutonic Contingent in the Service of Constantine the Great and its Decisive Role in the Battle at the Milvian Bridge*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 13, 1959, pp. 169-179; M.P. Speidel, *Raising New Units for the Late Roman Army: „Auxilia Palatina”*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 50, 1996, pp. 163-170.

³ C. Zuckerman, *Les „Barbares” romains: au sujet de l’origine des auxilia tétrarchiques*, [in:] F. Vallet, M. Kazanski (eds.), *L’armée romaine et les Barbares du III^e au VII^e siècle*, Rouen 1993, pp. 17-20; T.S. Burns, *Barbarians within the Gates of Rome. A Study of Roman Military Policy and the Barbarians, ca. 375-425 A.D.*, Bloomington 1995; A. Gardner, *Identities in the Late Roman Army: Material and Textual Perspectives*, [in:] G. Davies, A. Gardner, K. Lockyear (eds.), *Proceedings of the Tenth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference*, Oxford 2000, pp. 35-47; M.J. Nicasie, *Twilight of Empire: The Roman Army from the Reign of Diocletian until the Battle of Adrianople*, Amsterdam 1998, pp. 97-110; P. Rance, *The Fulcrum, the Late Roman and*

of ancient identities and the realization of the subtle interplay between Roman terms, their modern understandings, and the identities of peoples thus described. In regard to the composition of army during the Principate, the crucial shift consisted in the realization that soldiers' cultural identities were not just direct equivalents of their ethnicity – the very term „ethnicity” being moreover a rather modern notion – but that they could combine different elements, be they more peregrine or Roman in origin, or even appear only afterwards, during subsequent interaction. This is true even though the very course and nature of those contacts remains heatedly disputed, revolving around the various attempts at reinterpreting Romanization or even replacing it with a new interpretative paradigm⁴. Additionally, it has been observed that the military itself exhibited a kind of a unifying social identity, which in some aspects set it apart from the civilian population⁵. Besides, the army not only could exploit the existing situation and regional differences, something even the ancients were fully aware the Romans were masters of, but also affected the development of identities among the provincial populations with the aim (to what extent such interference was conscious is a matter for an altogether different discussion) of creating groups that could provide recruits with high *esprit de corps* and martial capabilities, as best exemplified by the celebrated case of Batavians⁶.

In this context, it is most interesting to consider some of the cavalry formations of the Late Roman army. There are several categories encompassing groups of several, similarly named units. While some clearly point to the armament of the formation in question (*equites sagittarii*, *equites scutarii*) or reorganization as the source of soldiers for the newly instituted corps (*equites*

Byzantine Testudo: the Germanization of Roman Infantry Tactics?, *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 44, 3, 2004, pp. 265-326.

⁴ G. Woolf, *Becoming Roman. The Origins of Provincial Civilization in Gaul*, Cambridge 1998; D. Mattingly *Being Roman: expressing identity in a provincial setting*, *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 17, 2004, pp. 5-25; J. Webster, *Creolizing the Roman Provinces*, *American Journal of Archaeology* 105, 1-2, 2001, pp. 209-225.

⁵ I. Haynes, *Introduction: the Roman Army as a community*, [in:] A. Goldsworthy, I. Haynes (eds.), *The Roman army as a community*, Portsmouth, Rhode Island 1999, pp. 7-14; S. James, *Soldiers and civilians: identity and interaction in Roman Britain*, [in:] S. James, M. Millet, *Britons and Romans: advancing an archaeological agenda*, York 2001, pp. 187-209.

⁶ N. Roymans, *Ethnic Identity and Imperial Power. The Batavians in the Early Roman Empire*, Amsterdam 2004; T. Derks, *Ethnic identity in the Roman frontier. The epigraphy of Batavi and other Lower Rhine tribes*, [in:] T. Derks, N. Roymans (eds.), *Ethnic constructs in antiquity. The role of power and tradition*, Amsterdam 2009, pp. 239-282.

stablesiani)⁷ a number of such names allude to peoples' or tribes' names and as such offer the possibility for an analysis of the possible interconnections between soldiers' identities, ethnicity, recruitment patterns, regionalisms, a particular fighting style and naming conventions. Such an analysis is all the more needed as those groups are very large indeed, with more than 10 units per formation. Regardless of the stance one takes in the discussion concerning the strength of Late Roman military units⁸, the formations accounted both for a high proportion of the total manpower and large bodies of troops themselves. The futility of any attempt at a precise determination of their strength is best shown by the discrepancy in the reconstructions of the unit class of *cunei*, ranging from 300 up to 1,200 soldiers⁹. To this one can add the growing number of voices that perhaps the Late Roman army not only did not keep the units up to paper strength, which was probably present already in the better organised Principate predecessor, but maybe even did not have any permanent unit strength standards¹⁰. However, regardless of all those differences in calculations, the most numerous cavalry formations totalled at least several thousand troops, perhaps even exceeding 10,000 or 20,000 men. Should the units with „ethnic” names be established as ethnic formations, this would mean a huge scale of mobilization and militarization of the groups in question. In this context, probably the most puzzling case are the Dalmatian horsemen, *equites Dalmatae*. In the *Notitia Dignitatum*¹¹, a Late Roman list of offices and military commands from the turn of the fourth and fifth century¹², 47 individual unit names and garrisoned forts are enumerated. Of course, the number should not be taken at face value, as the different provincial lists and chapters on the field armies were compiled and changed at different points in time, plus the relations between the entries are not always clear. In fact, it is possible that the high number of entries is rather

⁷ D. Hoffmann, *Das spätrömische Bewegungsheer und die Notitia Dignitatum*, Düsseldorf 1969, pp. 251-252; M.P. Speidel, *Stablesiani: the raising of new cavalry units during the crisis of the Roman Empire*, *Chiron* 4, 1974, pp. 541-546.

⁸ T. Coello, *Unit Sizes in the Late Roman Army*, Oxford 1996.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 44; M.J. Nicasie, *Twilight of Empire*, p. 74; L. Varady, *New Evidence on some Problems of Late Roman Military Organisation*, *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 9, 1961, p. 358 and 369-371; *idem*, *Additional Notes on the Late Roman Dalmatian Cunei*, *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 11, 1963, pp. 391-406.

¹⁰ M.J. Nicasie, *Twilight of Empire*, p. 74.

¹¹ Abbreviated in the current article as ND Occ. for the western and ND Or. for the eastern part.

¹² For the different views on how the document should be used as a historical source cf. especially D. Hoffmann, *Das spätrömische Bewegungsheer*, J.C. Mann, *The Notitia Dignitatum – Dating and Survival*, *Britannia* 22, 1991, pp. 215-219; M. Kulikowski, *The Notitia Dignitatum as an Historical Source*, *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 49, 2000, pp. 358-377.

a result of division of some units between several forts¹³. But even if it had not been the most numerous cavalry formation of the Late Roman army, it was still one of the largest and moreover one that included some units of high status¹⁴. This makes it striking that it was named after inhabitants of an area with few equestrian traditions. As such, it offers a perfect case study for analysing the relationships between Late Roman unit naming patterns and the composition of the units in question, that is the ways and extent to which the Late Roman army could have employed ethnic recruitment and ethnic units.

To begin with, there are the obvious exceptions among the Late Roman army units: the few cases of units surviving from the earlier period, with names testifying to their initial recruitment areas¹⁵. During the Late Empire they no longer had any connection to the ethnicity preserved in their name, which even during the creation of the unit did not denote that the first recruits were from that particular tribe only, but was more of an umbrella term for several peoples from a larger area. After several centuries, the name just pointed to the long-lived military traditions within the regions not affected much by the Diocletianic, Constantinian and later military reforms. The number of units with pre-Diocletianic names in a particular province thus serves in this case as a sign of military-political developments in the turbulent third and fourth century that resulted in the need for re-organizing the defences, such as barbarian incursions, but also – if not mostly – the withdrawal of troops from the frontier for deployment in internal conflicts, disbandment or reduction of status of disloyal formations and similar changes. However, there is no possibility of any unit of Dalmatian horsemen having survived from the era of the Principate, as only infantry and mixed (*equitatae*, which included a small contingent of horsemen) cohorts were raised in the Dalmatia¹⁶. The exact number of mixed units remains disputed. Conjectures put the number at 3 out of 10 units of *Delmatae* and a single

¹³ T. Dziurdzik, The Role of the Equites Dalmatae in the Late Roman Danubian Defense Systems, [in:] Bridging the Danube, forthcoming.

¹⁴ For an excellent overview of the history of the units, especially those belonging to the class *vexillationes equitum Dalmatarum*, see R. Scharf, Equites Dalmatae und cunei Dalmatarum in der Spätantike, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 135, 2001, pp. 185-193.

¹⁵ M.M. Roxan, Pre-Severan Auxilia named in the Notitia Dignitatum, [in:] R. Goodburn, P. Bartholomew (eds.), *Aspects of the Notitia Dignitatum*, Oxford 1976, pp. 59-79.

¹⁶ G. Alföldy, Die Auxiliartruppen der Provinz Dalmatien, *Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 14, 1962, pp. 259-296; J.J. Wilkes, Army and Society in Roman Dalmatia, [in:] G. Alföldy, B. Dobson, W. Eck (eds.), *Kaiser, Heer und Gesellschaft in der Römischen Kaiserzeit. Gedenkschrift für Eric Birley*, Stuttgart 2000, pp. 327-328.

non-mixed unit of *Liburni* (short-lived and later renamed as *cohors V Delmatarum?*)¹⁷. There is also the mixed *cohors I Pannoniorum et Delmatarum equitata c.R.*; as for the latter, varying opinions are advanced regarding whether it was or was not a result of amalgamating one of the Dalmatian units with another from Pannonia. However, Spaul's list is incomplete, as there is enough evidence to prove that at least one more unit included a mounted detachment; probably its twin unit – raised at exactly the same moment – was organized in the same way¹⁸. However, it is very interesting to note the existence of a particular pattern – two mixed units of Dalmatian origin are attested in Mauretania, where the very nature of the frontier called for much more frequent deployment of mounted detachments and units¹⁹, while the other units are only attested as *equitatae* in the second century or later. This may mean that the decision to include a mounted component was of a secondary nature, a result of urgent necessities and needs changing over time rather than a deliberate employment of available manpower and recruits' local specialities to their best use. Just a single pre-Severan Dalmatian unit survived the third and early fourth century changes, and it is attested in the section of *Notitia Dignitatum*²⁰ listing the units under the command of *dux Britanniarum*, in *Magnis/Magnae* (Carvoran in northern England), its long-lasting home base since the Principate. An additional unit named after Dalmatia (*milites Dalmatarum*) is listed among the formations in northern Gaul commanded by a *dux tractus Armorican*²¹. It is named similarly to several formations withdrawn from the abandoned provinces and added to the lists in the last updates of the *Notitia*, which are sometimes recognizable through their nicknames as legions, auxilia and cavalry²². Whether that particular unit was a renamed Dalmatian mounted unit – if so, probably withdrawn from Pannonia²³ – is currently irresolvable, as the name might as well stem from the fact that it had been transferred

¹⁷ J. Spaul, *Cohors 2. The evidence for and a short history of the auxiliary infantry units of the Imperial Roman Army*, Oxford 2000, pp. 301-314.

¹⁸ N. Cesarik, I. Glavaš, *Cohortes I et II milliaria Delmatarum*, [in:] D. Demicheli (ed.), *Illyrica antiqua II. In honorem Duje Rendić-Miočević. Proceedings of the International Conference Šibenik 12th-15th September 2013*, Zagreb 2017, p. 215.

¹⁹ I am indebted to the reviewer of the present article for the suggestion of this idea.

²⁰ ND Occ. XL, 43.

²¹ ND Occ. XXXVII, 22.

²² D. van Berchem, *On Some Chapters of the Notitia Dignitatum Relating to the Defence of Gaul and Britain*, *The American Journal of Philology* 76, 2, 1955, p. 138.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 141.

from Dalmatia at some point of its existence. As such, it is safe to assume that this was most probably a unit of infantry²⁴.

The most interesting fact about the *equites Dalmatae* is that they were named after the inhabitants of a province well known not for cavalry, but rather for its sailors and – as far as land forces are concerned – for light infantry. Meanwhile, among the Late Roman cavalry units with „ethnic” names there are mostly those that evoke groups famed in antiquity for their horsemanship and particular fighting style, be it Saracens, Batavians, or – in the best studied case of the *equites Mauri*²⁵ – the Moors. The result of the earlier analyses suggests that this particular name should be viewed more as a denomination of a particular armament and fighting style (which could tentatively be summarized as constituting a kind of a particular class of cavalry in the eyes of the Roman military authorities), derived from the tactics of the people mentioned in the name, rather than as an indication that the whole formation had an ethnic character. Most probably it was the result of large scale mimicking of a smaller group of warriors belonging to the group (seen by the Roman eyes and termed *Mauri*) that had been successfully employed in Roman service. Indeed, the *Mauri* could well represent the best such case, living on and beyond the frontier and as such never fully Romanized or even pacified, and having both a reputation for their military capabilities, a well-known riding and fighting style²⁶, and a long history of service in the Roman military forces as a formation that was not fully integrated in the army organisation. They are both represented on the Trajan’s Column in Rome as well as known from written and epigraphic sources to have participated not only in Trajan’s wars under their own (semi-tribal) leadership, but even later remaining in a kind of a special position, belonging most probably to the units closest to the emperors themselves, having been possibly stationed in the Severan era at *Castra Peregrina* as one of the quasi-household units²⁷. One can but wonder to what extent this special role could have played a part in the very construction of Moorish identity.

²⁴ R. Scharf, *Equites Dalmatae*, 185, n. 4.

²⁵ M.P. Speidel, *The Rise of Ethnic Units*, 208-220; idem, *Mauri Equites. The Tactics of Light Cavalry in Mauretania*, *Antiquités Africaines* 29, 1993, pp. 121-126.

²⁶ A. Hyland, *Equus: The Horse in the Roman World*, London 1990.

²⁷ A. von Domaszewski, *Die Rangordnung des römischen Heeres*³, Köln-Wien, 1908/1981, p. 164; however, this assumption might be somewhat biased by von Domaszewski’s notorious hatred of Septimius Severus and his paranoid search for „African”, „Oriental”, „Barbarian”, and above all, „Semitic” connections of this emperor and his dynasty.

On the other hand, another well-known and to some extent discussed case are the Parthian units, which are considerably more problematic. At the time when the *Notitia Dignitatum*, our most important source for the study of Late Roman army naming conventions was being compiled and re-edited, Parthia was a somewhat obsolete term; at least some units bearing the designation were created after the Parthian rule had already been replaced by the Sasanian Persia. Still, the Romans were not too strict in describing foreign peoples and would sometimes employ antiquated names, such as calling the Goths „Scythians”, for the sake of imitating earlier literary works and traditional styles. It is however very difficult to determine the exact meaning of all the unit names related to Parthia, as they probably had very different origins. In fact, a few units were probably successors of legions dubbed *Parthica*, raised in preparation for one of Rome’s numerous Parthian wars. The other probably used the allusion to Parthians as a means of describing the armament or tactics. There is also a possibility that the units were in fact from Armenia²⁸, ruled by the Arsacid dynasty of Parthian origin. This strongly underlines the necessity to closely examine any „ethnic” or geographic names of Late Roman units from different perspectives, as the reasons why a single particular toponym or ethnonym was used could vary even from case to case.

To fully understand the question why the Late Roman army termed some of its cavalry „Dalmatian”, one should compare the name of the formation with the naming conventions during the Principate. Firstly, it should be noted that in the beginning, although one can find some variation (or just spelling mistakes, especially in the epigraphic material), the spelling *Delmatae* pertains in general to members of a particular tribe, one of the strongest, but still very far from being a majority within Roman Dalmatia, while *Dalmatae* should be viewed as a broader term, created after the name of the province²⁹. The interplay between those two terms is an important factor in the expressions of identity in the period, especially in relation to the Roman administration and Roman understanding of the local conditions and composition of the population. For example, the first auxiliary units recruited in Dalmatia were named after the strongest tribe of the area, the *Delmatae*, even though they included recruits from other tribes (as evidenced by their

²⁸ E.L. Wheeler, *The Army and the Limes in the East*, [in:] P. Erdkamp (ed.), *A companion to the Roman army*, Malden 2011, p. 258.

²⁹ G. Alföldy, *Bevölkerung und Gesellschaft der römischen Provinz Dalmatien*, Budapest 1965, 7, n. 1.

grave inscriptions, mentioning the precise origin and tribal affiliation). This perfectly fitted within the typical Roman framework of the period, with the military quite oversimplifying the pre-existing divides in preference of an organisation that would be easier to administrate. It may also be connected to the fact that the *Delmatae* were the major force opposing Roman rule, meaning both that they were among the best known and recognized tribes, as well as possibly most liable to conscription of young men to prevent further trouble. A kind of a „larger” identity, on the other hand, is observed among the sailors recruited in the area³⁰. Their grave inscriptions often feature the phrase *natione Dalmata*, pointing to their origin stated in terms of their home province. Again, the internal divides of its multi-ethnic population are left aside, as regardless of their importance for the inhabitants of Dalmatia itself, they played little role for those by whom the inscriptions were meant to be read, i.e. other members of the fleet and the population of the areas where the ships were stationed. This may have been also a reflection of a broader regional identity and a sort of a corporate identity among the sailors recruited from a particular milieu, as the Dalmatians and Pannonians constituted a major complement within the Roman fleets (noted by Tacitus³¹ and evidenced by epigraphic sources as well³²). It is important to note that when Marcus Aurelius raised two new cohorts in *Dalmatia* circa 169 CE, they were again named *cohortes Delmatarum*. Little is known about their ethnic composition, except for the fact that according to the *Historia Augusta*³³, the units (as well as those raised in Dardania) were recruited from bandits (*latrones etiam Dalmatiae atque Dardaniae milites fecit*), hence most probably the recruitment was no longer connected to tribal divisions – if they were indeed strong enough to matter at this point in time in a province which (mostly in its coastal part) was already strongly urbanised and Romanized. It was interpreted as related to the safety of the mining districts³⁴. Since at the time of Marcus Aurelius the name *Delmatarum* was

³⁰ D. Džino, Aspects of Identity-Construction and Cultural Mimicry Among the Dalmatian Sailors in the Roman Navy, *Antichthon: Journal of Australasian Society for Classical Studies* 44, 2010, pp. 96-110.

³¹ Tacitus, *Historiae* III, 12.

³² A. Domić-Kunić, *Classis Praetoria Misnatium s posebnim obzirom na mornare podrijetlom iz Dalmacije i Panonije*, *Vjesnik Arheološkog Muzeja u Zagrebu* 3.S. 25-29, 1995-1996, p. 55.

³³ *Historia Augusta*, *vita Marci* XXI, 7.

³⁴ S. Dušanić, *Army and Mining in Moesia Superior*, [in:] G. Alföldy, B. Dobson, W. Eck (eds.), *Kaiser, Heer und Gesellschaft in der Römischen Kaiserzeit: Gedenkschrift für Eric Birley*, Stuttgart 2000, p. 348.

still used in the name of the units, it is interesting to consider the inscriptions in this regard, among which already in the late first, but more often in the second and third century a growing number references to the province using forms beginning with *Delm-* are to be found, suggesting a possibility that the different spellings were increasingly used interchangeably and no longer recognized as signifying two different entities, the province (and, by extension, its inhabitants), or a particular tribe. This could have proceeded hand in hand with the changes and the emergence of new social structures within the provincial population itself. It is very difficult to reconstruct whether and to what extent a unifying „Dalmatian” identity existed among the population of the province in the Late Roman period. Not only is there less evidence quantitatively, but also in terms of quality, as in the case of epigraphic monuments, which are largely centred on the capital city *Salona*³⁵, while the changes in formulas and in status expressions mean there is less information available on the origins and renditions of identity of the persons mentioned in inscriptions.

Only a few members of the *equites Dalmatae* are known to us. Merely one was mentioned in a literary source: an officer referred to as *dux Dalmatarum*, bearing the name of *Cecropius* (or *Ceronius*, depending on the source), who personally killed the emperor Gallienus³⁶. His command is interpreted as the first attestation of the *equites Dalmatae*, but the accounts do not provide much detail. All other members of the unit are known from inscriptions, the earliest originating only from the period of the first tetrarchy. As such, they cannot contribute much to the discussion on the origin of the formation, as by the time those inscriptions were made the formation had undergone significant changes, continuous redeployment, and the original recruits would have no longer served in the ranks. Only a single „Dalmatian horseman” had his origin stated on the tombstone; interestingly enough, he was from *Ambianum* in northern Gaul³⁷. An analysis of the names of the subsequent generations of „Dalmatian horsemen” reveals only a single soldier bearing an Illyrian name of *Plaianus*³⁸; the Illyrian or, more precisely, Dalmatian origin of the soldier was suggested already by Géza Alföldy³⁹.

³⁵ A. Mócsy, Zur Bevölkerung in der Spätantike, [in:] G. Alföldy, Bevölkerung und Gesellschaft der römischen Provinz Dalmatien, Budapest 1965, pp. 212-226.

³⁶ Historia Augusta, vita Gallieni XIV, 4-9; Zosimos, Historia nova I, XL, 2-3.

³⁷ CIL III 7415.

³⁸ CIL XIII 3458.

³⁹ G. Alföldy, Die Personennamen in der römischen Provinz Dalmatia, Heidelberg 1969, p. 266.

Interestingly enough, he served in Gaul; while there are numerous units much closer to Dalmatia – in the Balkan provinces and especially along the Danube – the whole region yielded no evidence of soldiers with clearly Dalmatian background in the formation. The names of all other soldiers attested are mostly names that (as often is the case in Late Roman onomastics) cannot be assigned to any ethnic groups or regions, including, mostly in the later fourth century, a number of Christian names. The rest are names popular in the areas where the soldiers in question served, especially in the Danubian provinces, showing that regardless of the origin of the formation, the later units were recruited locally⁴⁰. This tallies with the account of Synesius of Cyrene who, in a letter of 411 CE, wrote about a group of the *equites Dalmatae* that they were all native of *Ptolemais*⁴¹. The presence of a single Dalmatian within a formation of „Dalmatian horsemen” could moreover be a mere coincidence. The unit in question belonged to one of the field armies; such high-status units were assigned the finest available recruits, and in the fourth century the Illyrians were presumed to provide some of the best soldiers. What the Romans understood as Illyria at that point in time is however a completely different matter, as the designation had come to encompass a much larger area. Due to the political importance of the Balkans in the third century and the emergence of a self-conscious group of military officers connected with the Danubian army, some of whom attained political power as the so-called „Illyrian emperors”, the „Illyrian” identity in the third century and in the Late Roman army has probably been overemphasised both by ancient literary sources (created in the cultural core and playing on the stereotypes of what was Roman and Barbarian) and by modern scholarship. This was especially popular among some late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century authors, with their own agenda bordering on racism, as they entertained the conviction that the „wild Illyrian soldiers” were the only ones whom the Late Roman empire could almost successfully employ against the superior military race of the Germans⁴². It is interesting how an appellation which had originally been applied to a particular people later changed its

⁴⁰ T. Dziurdzik, The Relation of Late Roman Equites Dalmatae to Dalmatia, [in:] D. Demicheli (ed.), *Illyrica antiqua II*, pp. 227-230.

⁴¹ Synesius, *Epist.* 87.

⁴² R. Grosse, *Römische Militärgeschichte von Gallienus bis zum Beginn der byzantinischen Themenverfassung*, Berlin 1920; A. von Domaszewski, *Geschichte der römischen Kaiser 2*, Leipzig 1921, p. 247.

meaning, both in terms of areas and populations it was meant to describe⁴³, and how the attitudes of those using it shaped their understanding: Late Roman Dalmatia being viewed sometimes as one of the most Romanized provinces, and at other times as a source of semi-barbarous, Illyrian warriors.

As regards the identity of the *equites Dalmatae*, perhaps it would be more important to analyse the later significance of the name rather than the circumstances in which the unit was formed or the origins of individual soldiers, as relevant evidence is regrettably lacking (especially relating to the crucial, initial phase). It seems safe to assume that the unit was never meant to exploit the particular qualities of Dalmatians, as in the light of lacking evidence and the local conditions (demographic, social and geographical) it would be too optimistic to expect that the province had a hidden, so far militarily unused population potential⁴⁴, or even that it included tribal groups able to join the ranks of the military with their own horses and equipment⁴⁵. As such, the initial connection to the province and the genesis of the name was probably tied to Dalmatia, being the location where it was organised, maybe from the former garrison of the province⁴⁶. In the turbulent third century its central location, still quite remote from the trouble zones, could have served as a perfect regrouping and reorganization area. The sobriquet of the formation could thus be understood as resulting from the circumstances and location where the first corps was assembled. However, as the unit became famous both through its involvement in the assassination of Gallienus and successes on the battlefield, the byname of Dalmatians became a well-established denomination of a class of cavalry. As for analysing the signification of „ethnic“ unit names in Roman eyes, it would be most interesting to consider the additional name of several units of the *Dalmatae* in the East, i.e. *Illyriciani*. While it is obvious that this title was meant first and foremost to distinguish them from locally raised troops (the *indigenae*), the units that were transferred from the Balkan army⁴⁷ probably before 298

⁴³ G. Alföldy, Die „illyrischen“ Provinzen Roms: von der Vielfalt zu der Einheit, [in:] G. Urso (ed.), Dall'Adriatico al Danubio. L'Ilirico nell'età greca e romana: atti del convegno internazionale, Cividale del Friuli, 25-27 settembre 2003, Pisa 2004, pp. 207-220.

⁴⁴ A. Alföldy, The Crisis of the Empire (A.D. 249-270), [in:] The Cambridge Ancient History 12, Cambridge 1939, p. 216.

⁴⁵ P. Southern, The Roman Empire from Severus to Constantine, London-New York 2001, p. 89.

⁴⁶ M. Junkelmann, Die Reiter Roms. Teil II: der militärische Einsatz, Mainz am Rhein 1991, p. 76.

⁴⁷ E. Ritterling, Zum römischen Heerwesen des ausgehenden dritten Jahrhunderts, [in:] Festschrift zu Otto Hirschfelds sechzigstem Geburtstag, Berlin 1903, pp. 346-347; D. Hoffmann, Das spätrömische Bewegungsheer, p. 255.

CE⁴⁸, it raises questions as to how the appellations were used and how they should be understood and interpreted by scholars today. Firstly, military administration could have combined two designations into a single unit name that would have hardly been understood properly by anyone unfamiliar with the regiment's history (or even two designations that are quite puzzlingly conflicted when taken at face value, such as the „Illyrian Moors”). Secondly, the various „ethnic” and geographic names of Late Roman units, especially cavalry ones, may have had very different origins, and it is the fault of modern scholarship that they have often been understood as ethnonyms, while in fact they are frequently closer to commemorative titles or nicknames than names of peoples or tribes. Altogether, this shows that the naming conventions and practices were so far from an organised and regulated system that each case should, if possible, be analysed independently, and the search for possible „ethnic” units or even imitations of „ethnic” fighting styles should be conducted very cautiously. In the particular case of the *equites Dalmatae*, the question of what was „Dalmatian” about this formation of cavalry should be answered as follows: it was a well-established name detached from its unknown, original roots. It achieved its own significance through the formation's exploits, quickly becoming a customary title completely unrelated to the province it commemorated.

Summary

The article analyses the name of the Late Roman cavalry formation *equites Dalmatae* in an attempt to determine its origin and meaning, especially whether the corps could have been raised as an ethnic unit out of particular population, had a special identity and possibly its own armament and fighting style. This question is of special importance, as the formation in question was the most numerous of all Late Roman cavalry types, and if indeed it had been an ethnic unit, it would imply massive recruitment in a province with minor equestrian traditions. The analysis addresses the history of the formation, the probable origins of its complement, delves into the possible reasons for naming the corps after the inhabitants of the province and the provenance of analogically named Late Roman units. Additionally, the question of ethnic identities, self-expression and outside categorisation in Dalmatia and in the Late Roman army is also taken into account. It is argued that with the evidence available, it is impossible to see the formation as an ethnic unit.

⁴⁸ R. Scharf, *Equites Dalmatae*, p. 186.

The name is likely to have owed to the circumstances and place of its creation rather than ethnic composition or fighting style. Moreover, in the later period of the formation's existence, the name was so well-established and removed from its initial context that it became a customary title with its own, new meaning.

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