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*On Carnuntum and the Historiography of the Roman Legions on the Danube Frontier*¹

The world as we have come to understand it is often divided and categorized along the lines of empire and province, of heartland and periphery, and in terms of their overall value, the latter are frequently seen as generally less important than the cores they support, or are relegated to obscurity and forgotten. There are few places where this would prove a greater misconception than in Pannonia and Moesia, the Danube Frontier, and the communities which would arise along the river's banks. For all that it was a contentious and militant border between the Roman Empire and the 'barbarians' beyond, it was equally important in terms of commerce and politics.

For historians, the communities which arose along the Danube Frontier, often around military forts, serve many functions. Their remains not only provide us with unique glimpses into the military-structure of the soldiers stationed within their bounds, but also more broadly into their lives and deaths, into the lives of the communities which developed around them, into the numerous cults and the shifting roles and values of those religions in the frontier, and into the broader political machinations of the Empire. Of these 'outposts' along the Danube Frontier, the fort at Carnuntum would prove to be one of the most important in many of the aforementioned spheres.

Stretching back to the reign of Augustus, Carnuntum was one of two Legionary fortresses established along the Danube Frontier², and key to both protecting newly annexed territories and eventually to controlling commercial traffic; the latter was possible because it was situated along

the 'Amber Road,' so named for some of the trade-goods which flowed into the Empire's bounds from the lands beyond, and by this combination of controlling both north-south access through the Moravian Gates and through east-west trade-routes, would come to occupy a unique position in terms of commerce³. It was far afield and a far cry from the seat of power in Rome, yet the community surrounding the fortress would come to be an economic and cultural powerhouse in the region in later centuries. It was both a staging-point for and a pool from which soldiers could be drawn for campaigns ranging from Augustus to the Dacian Wars under Trajan⁴, and a melting pot of imperial and provincial cultures. It was a point of conference between the empire's rulers in later years, and would see the declaration of Septimius Severus as emperor. Reaching an apex during the Severan period, its wealth and prominence are exemplary of the prosperity seen in region at that time.⁵

While it fell into decline in the fifth and sixth centuries A.D., the artifacts recovered from excavations over the last century cement its role as a treasure-trove of information; these artifacts range from epitaphs and funerary decorations to statues of and altars dedicated to a variety of gods, from the broad, stone-paved streets to the amphitheatre and temples, all of which provide insight into the nature of the empire and changes over the span of centuries. Trends may be observed in the shifts of the style of writing epitaphs and dedications, in how gods like Jupiter and Silvanus were depicted, and in the architecture, which incorporated elements from across the Empire.

At its height, Carnuntum was a cultural nexus on the outer-edge of an empire, but its worth to historians derives not only from its apex, but from its origin and its end. Through the artifacts left behind, scholars have been able to further our understanding of broader fields, including the lives and roles of legionaries and auxiliaries, the introduction, malleability, and

long-term worship or abandonment of deities, commercial and military expansion, and the upper echelons of power in the Empire. It is in this way that Carnuntum, and the Danube Frontier more broadly, is situated within its own context as a power in the periphery and an extension of the greater Empire.

Artifacts of Legionaries on the Danube Frontier

It is one of history's sadder ironies that of the writings which have survived from Roman Republic and Empire, wholly or in part, the greater portion of these artifacts are funerary or commemorative in nature,⁶ and this is especially true in considering the Danube Frontier. In attempting to explore the lives of individual soldiers, whether Legionaries or Auxiliaries, foot-soldiers or officers, it is more often than not that scholars are forced to rely on the burial markers and monuments to these soldiers to discern any significant insight. This approach is, by its very nature, profoundly limited, and presents a number of difficulties and issues to the historian striving to build any form of understanding on the subject. For most inscriptions, the message is brief and often without greater context, giving only the individual's name and position in the military or social structure; the age of the soldier, their pay, or the number of years served are not universal, but neither is such information uncommon. In other instances, a simple message wishing peace for the dead may be included, but for the most part, given the cost of producing stone-graven inscriptions, these messages were as short and utilitarian as possible. Because of this, dating the inscriptions can prove particularly problematic, and in the absence of broader context, such as the names of consuls or emperors at the time of death, historians are forced to rely on such cues as the style in which individual letters are carved or the ways in which words are spelled or abbreviated. In many instances, the rough dates or periods to which scholars assign these inscriptions are subject to debate and revision. In examples of older, more established, or

simply more well-connected individuals, the tombstones may include purely aesthetic decoration, more extensive inscriptions, or representative images of the deceased in some respect. All of these provide further clues towards deciphering what can be known of these soldiers' lives and their roles in their communities.

In the face of these difficulties, it is important to note that this approach is not without some benefits, both to the work of the individual scholar and to the broader scholarship. At once, historians of the subject have been forced to hone to a knife's edge their interpretive capacities and their familiarity with styles of carving in different periods and locales. The funerary monuments and inscriptions may often prove to be generic, but through such repetitive details may a grasp of broader trends and facts be established; if the greater number of legionaries' tombstones include the legion to which they belonged in life, the age at which they enlisted, and how long they served, then not only can their age at death be discerned, but through comparison the soldier's average lifespan, and at times how hazardous or safe it was to serve within any given legion. Carnuntum provides an extensive corpus of such artifacts for scholars to examine, and around which those scholars have constructed their understandings of such trends. One such example is Robert L. Dese's use of a funeral memorial to acknowledge and challenge a published perspective in dating; it is his assertion that the memorial of a soldier of the *legio I adiutrix* being dated to the first century A.D. is in error, and he draws from both the soldier's title, b(eneficarius) leg(ati) co(n)s(ularis), and to his origins in Savaria to make his argument; in the case of the former, he points out that this form of address did not come into use until the reign of Trajan, and in the case of the latter, that the legion mentioned did not recruit from Savaria until the same period.⁷ This usage of the funerary monument in furtherance of an argument is common.

Another example of the use of funerary artifacts in the exploration of trends is seen in Saller and Shaw's "Tombstones and Roman Family Relations in the Principate: Civilians, Soldiers and Slaves." In this essay, the authors address the broader questions surrounding soldiers and families across the empire, and draw on the Danube frontier in this context. They explore the role of family in soldiers in Pannonia by using funerary iconography; for their purposes, the funerary artifacts are divided along the lines of its dedicators, being family or comrades, and whether the icons depict the family as a whole, or the soldier alone and in detail. They found that of the tombstones sampled, markers dedicated by the family were more likely by far to depict the family as a whole, where those dedicated by peers universally depicted the soldier alone. They also make the point that this is comparable with the other frontiers.⁸ In "Pre-Flavian Forts and their Garrisons," Valerie A. Maxfield addresses differing forms of representation, with a specific example being the *lorica segmentata* in funerary depictions; the author points out that these are rare among tombstones, and provides an example of a more common depiction in the tombstones of the brothers Sertorii, who are both depicted in *lorica squamata*, or chainmail.⁹

Outside of corpus of funerary inscriptions, scholars do have opportunities to examine the rarer religious dedications paid for by soldiers; as a rule, such artifacts are connected with higher-ranking, and by extension wealthier legionaries, and therefore may provide more information on the dedicators. One such example is the sandstone pilaster discovered during the early excavations at Carnuntum; dedicated to the Iuppiter Dolichenis, which will be discussed later, this artifact also contains information on the career and times of the soldier responsible for its dedication, Amandianus of the legion XIII Gemina. In "The Career of a Legionary," Michael P. Spiedel examines the artifact with the intention of re-evaluating its translation and thus

arguing for a different interpretation.¹⁰ The pilaster contains information on the soldier's rank, the legion in which he serves, and datable information by mention of the emperor Maximus Thrax. Spiedel goes through the inscription, line by line, to re-interpret and engage the scholars Domaszewski and Mommsen on its meaning. A comparable effort is undertaken by J.E. Lendon in "Contubernalis, Commanipularis, and Commilito in Roman Soldiers' Epigraphy: Drawing the Distinction." In this instance, the author examines inscriptions from across the empire in comparison, reinterpreting the meaning of specific words, such as contubernalis and commanipularis; the author explores the subtle distinctions in their implications, specifically the degree to which the terms indicate 'membership' within a unit and, by extension, how these units were understood.¹¹ This understanding of the legion is also a subject of investigation for Ramsay MacMullen in "The Legion as a Society," which expands on the questions of how soldiers related to each other in terms of units and ranks, and the psychology of the legion more broadly.¹²

An even more expansive example of this brand of scholarship is found in Alan K. Bowman's *Life and Letters on the Roman Frontier*; with its primary focus in the border fortress and community at Vindolanda, *Life and Letters* draws from a more uncommon variety of artifact, namely the personal correspondences of common soldiers and their families. These wooden documents, ranging from grocery lists to personal letters, provide us with a unique understanding of life on one of the farthest edges of the empire, and by extension, how such isolated communities adapted to suit their needs. Bowman uses these letters to further his own arguments regarding life at the fort, exploring social relations among the rank and file, between soldiers and their wives and families, between different families, and between masters and slaves. The author also explores the community's high-self sufficiency and how its degree of separation leads to the

further social development as a true community, with its religious festivals and personal parties being particularly important. While both fortresses and their surrounding communities represent frontier existence in the Roman Empire, the contrast between the two is worth brief discussion, with one of the most important differences being in military activity and its ramifications. While both forts guarded frontiers against 'barbarian' populations largely beyond the empire's capacity to pacify, Vindolanda relied on Hadrian's Wall to separate the conquered territories from the unruly Scots; in comparison, Carnuntum and other forts in Pannonia relied on the Danube River as a line of demarcation, and this provided a frontier exponentially longer and subsequently more difficult to manage. Vindolanda was not cut off from the empire, but neither was it a source of great activity or concern, and its soldiers and civilians largely supported themselves. Carnuntum, in contrast, was a suburb on the edge of a warzone which saw frequent conflict from the time of Augustus for the better part of half a millennium. Historians of the ancient world rely on such distinctions to inform their arguments, and when they are fortunate enough to have artifacts such as have been preserved at Vindolanda and Carnuntum, they are able to further develop their perspectives on life in the empire.

Religion and Politics on the Danube Frontier

In considering the Roman world, it is important to remember that the arenas of religion and politics were often functionally inseparable, whether in the days of the Republic, of the early Empire, or with the later rise of Christianity. Senators and Consuls were just as often priests as commanders in the legion, if not somehow both. Altars, votive statuary, and temples were regularly funded and dedicated by public officials, and in so doing were these individuals able to establish and express their own piety and virtue publically, and by extension their popularity and authority. In the latter years of the Republic and the early years of the Empire, Rome was still the

unchallenged center of the Mediterranean world; there the greatest temples stood, the senators and consuls made the laws, and conferral of power took place. Yet in the decades to follow, with the changing of dynasties after Nero, the nature of power in the empire would shift: it was no longer necessary for an emperor to be declared in city of Rome itself, and the year of the Four Emperors was proof enough of that. The lessons of this tumultuous time were not lost on later generations, and while Rome would remain the heart of the empire for centuries, so too would the provinces, and the legions which defended them, rise in their own agency and prosperity.

The Danube Frontier provides us with numerous examples of both religious and political importance. In the case of the former, the artifacts from the frontier's cities illustrate the fluid nature and roles of religion in society over time; which deities were worshipped, by what name or in what capacity they were worshipped, and how these things shifted across the span of decades and centuries all can be explored to some degree by the statues and dedications left behind. In regard to the latter, Carnuntum stands apart for its contribution to the upper echelons of power in the empire, though it may never have been intended to reach such heights, and the man who would be emperor was appointed to governorship of Pannonia Superior precisely because he was considered mediocre in ability and unlikely to achieve much in his career.¹³ And yet, the fortunes of Carnuntum and Septimius Severus would be tied together, as each shaped the other. T.D. Barnes posits that it was because Severus was proclaimed emperor at Carnuntum that he was ultimately able to manipulate and out-manuever his opponents, for in being proclaimed at Carnuntum, the whole of the Danube Frontier's legions declared their support for him, providing him with a larger army than either of the other claimants.¹⁴ Throughout the following years of the Severan dynasty, Pannonia's cities, and Carnuntum in particular, would see pronounced and ongoing civil and military development.¹⁵

The excavations along the Danube Frontier are famous for their wealth of funerary monuments and markers, but just as important, if not as frequent, are its religious iconographies. Roman religion was far from monolithic; rather, it was an ever-shifting, evolving sphere, incorporating deities from across the empire in different periods, re-evaluating or redefining deities already worshipped within the empire, and abandoning or curtailing their worship in turns. A primary example of this would be the many facets of the god Jupiter, honored in numerous capacities and facets from region to region. While Jupiter is the stereotypical Roman deity, it is important to consider the implications of just how he was depicted. In a statue at Carnuntum, Jupiter is depicted outside of the traditional format; rather than typical Roman garb and a position atop a standing bull, he is depicted in “Eastern dress,” upon a bull lying with its face to the right, one foot upon its neck with the other before it.¹⁶ This difference in depiction is worthy of note in that it bears a resemblance to a depiction of Mithras, and a similarly uncommon one at that, from Doliche.

As important as this somewhat exceptional blending of eastern elements with a traditional Roman deity, especially at one of the centers of civilization along the Danube Frontier, proves in illustrating the degree to which ideas and beliefs were exchanged across the empire, so too must a more common example be acknowledged in the cult of Mithra itself. While the importance of Mithra as *fautor imperii* can be attested in the early reign of Diocletian, Carnuntum provides us with an example from the year 307 A.D. At a conference between Diocletian and the ruling Augusti, Galerius and Maximian, Licinius was elevated to the position of Augustus. The four present then rededicated and enlarged the Temple of Mithra to themselves; in his essay, “Diocletian and Mithra in the Roman Forum,” A.L. Frothingham makes the argument that by its

unrivaled size among those uncovered, the Mithraeum at Carnuntum marks that ‘permanent camp’ as a likely center for the cult in all of northern Europe.¹⁷

As much as trade can be said to foster the transmission of ideas, such cults were often spread across the empire by virtue of the legions; as legionaries were transferred from one legion to the next, or as the legions were themselves transferred from one post or province to another, they carried with them the cults of their homelands. In “The Distribution of Oriental Cults in the Gauls and the Germanies,” Clifford H. Moore argues that such was the case with the introduction of the cults of Mithras and of Iuppiter Dolichenus, also known as the Ba’al of Doliche, to the Rhineland through Pannonia; he furthers the argument that Carnuntum was likely a central nexus for their cults in the region.¹⁸

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¹ It should be noted, in the interests of scholastic honesty, that many of the sources referenced in this paper are woefully outdated, and extensive research has been conducted in more recent decades. More recent sources have been included when possible, but a great portion of this scholarship is written in German, and as such inaccessible for my purposes.

² E.G. Hardy, "The Movements of the Roman Legions from Augustus to Severus." *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (Oct., 1887), p. 629

³ Olwen Brogan, "Trade Between the Roman Empire and the Free Germans." *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 26, Part 2, (1936), p. 200

⁴ Edward Togo Salmon, "Trajan's Conquest of Dacia." *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, Vol. 67 (1936), p. 100

⁵ J.J Wilkes, "The Roman Danube: An Archeological Survey." *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 95 (2005), pp. 125-128.

⁶ Richard P. Saller, Brent D. Shaw, "Tombstones and Roman Family Relations in the Principate: Civilians, Soldiers and Slaves." *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 74, (1984), p. 124

⁷ Robert L. Dize, "Trajan, the Antonines, and the Governor's Staff." *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, Bd. 116 (1997), p. 277, note 23

⁸ Richard P. Saller, Brent D. Shaw, p. 141, Table D.

⁹ Valerie A. Maxfield, "Pre-Flavian Forts and their Garrisons," *Britannia*, Vol. 17, (1986), p. 68

¹⁰ Michael P. Spiedel, "The Career of a Legionary," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974-), Vol. 112 (1982), p. 211

¹¹ J.E. Lendon, "Contubernalis, Commanipularis, and Commilito in Roman Soldiers' Epigraphy: Drawing the Distinction." *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, Bd. 157 (2006), p. 272

¹² MacMullen, Ramsay, "The Legion as a Society," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (4th Qtr., 1984), pp. 440-456

¹³ T.D. Barnes, "The Family and Career of Septimius Severus." *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Bd. 16, H. 1 (Mar., 1967) p. 93

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p.107

¹⁵ J.J. Wilkes, "The Roman Danube: An Archaeological Survey." *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 95 (2005) p. 140

¹⁶ M.J. Vermaseren, "A Unique Representation of Mithras." *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Jul., 1950), p. 149

¹⁷ A.L. Frothingham, "Diocletian and Mithra in the Roman Forum," *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Apr. - Jun., 1914), p. 152.

¹⁸ Clifford H. Moore, "The Distribution of Oriental Cults in the Gauls and the Germanies," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, Vol. 38 (1907), p. 122, 123