

Roman Scotland and Roman auxiliary units

by R W Davies

In Roman Scotland the auxiliary units played a prominent role and it is these infantry battalions (*cohortes*) and cavalry regiments (*alae*) that frequently provide the information for its history. Thus the decisive battle of Mons Graupius in AD 84 was fought and won, not by legionaries, but by auxiliary units, especially cohorts of Tungrians and Batavians.¹ The altar of the *ala Augusta Vocontiorum* at Newstead is evidence for the control system over the Lowlands (RIB 2121), the dedication by *cohors V Gallorum* at Cramond for Severan campaigning (RIB 2134), that of *cohors I Fida Vardullorum*, found re-used at Jedburgh, for long-range scouting patrols beyond Hadrian's Wall (RIB 2118), an activity carried out north of the Antonine Wall by the *ala exploratorum* which, I have suggested, was based at Auchendavy (RIB 2179 with Davies 1976). The tombstone of Ammonius at Ardoch is probably the earliest auxiliaryman known by name in North Britain (RIB 2213).

One of the most significant developments in the *auxilia* was the innovation of units nominally 1,000 strong (*milliariae*) by doubling quingenary (500) units or creating new larger ones. In Britain the *ala Petriana milliaria* became the crack unit of the 50-plus auxiliary units in the province, though there is no proof that it was ever stationed at Dalswinton or Newstead (Birley 1966, 56; 1961, 137, 149–50); in the 2nd century there were at least seven milliary cohorts.² The earliest evidence for the latter type is the fort of Fendoch, whose plan shows that it was designed for a *cohors milliaria peditata*, probably for *cohors I Tungrorum*, the only known British unit of that classification then in existence. If the epitomator of Cassius Dio is using the correct terminology for the commanding officer (Dio 66, 20; Tacitus *Agricola* 28), then the *cohors Usiporum*, which mutinied while under training in Scotland, was a milliary creation (Ogilvie and Richmond 1967, 78, 245–9, 323–4). The importance of Birrens is emphasised by its successive garrisons of *cohors I Nervana Germanorum milliaria equitata* (RIB 2093) and *cohors II Tungrorum milliaria equitata* (RIB 2092). These milliary units were introduced, not merely to provide units larger than the standard *alae* and *cohortes quingenariae* but to create units of superior combat efficiency; their commanders were regarded as the pick of the equestrian officers (Birley 1966, 57–65).

From time to time the Roman authorities succumbed to the temptation of dividing the milliary cohort into two, thus creating effectively a quingenary cohort and a detachment (*vexillatio*) not far short of another quingenary cohort; they thus gained two units for the price of one without seriously damaging the efficiency of the army. This policy of dividing a milliary cohort into two parts is known in various provinces on the Continent (Davies 1967, 109; 1977a; Roxan 1972, 247–50). However, it is perhaps best attested among British units by *cohors II Tungrorum milliaria equitata*; diplomas for Raetia attest a *cohortis II Tungrorum milliariae vexillatio* in 121/5, 147, and almost certainly in 125/8, 139/41, and 153 but not in 153/7 or 157 (Kellner 1968, Beilage I). The rump cohort in Britain will have been the same size and status as a standard quingenary cohort. The missing vexillation had returned to Britain by 158 at latest, when the cohort, having now reverted to milliary status, rebuilt the headquarters at Birrens (RIB 2100).

A not dissimilar case can be demonstrated for the sister unit, *cohors I Tungrorum milliaria peditata*; it is specifically described as milliary in the British diploma of 103 but lacks that title in the diplomas of 122 and 124 and in documents from Vindolanda of the early 2nd century. It had lost a vexillation to Noricum, where a diploma of 128/38 attests the presence there of a *cohortis I Tungrorum milliariae vexillatio*. The rump cohort, as the British diplomas clearly show, was now the equivalent of a *cohors quingenaria*; it is attested building at Carrawburgh in the latter part of Hadrian's reign (Davies 1967, 109–10) and may well have been the garrison there. In the 3rd century *cohors II Tungrorum* may have been permanently divided with one part at Castlesteads, where the senior officer (*princeps*) was regularly associated with the commanding officer in official dedications (Davies 1967, 108) and presumably was in charge of that part.

Various inscriptions record both the Tungrian units in Scotland. A lost and misread altar from Cramond should be assigned to *cohors II Tungrorum* (RIB 2135 with Davies 1969, 96–7). It is worth noting that the unit is not accorded the title *milliaria* and that it made the official dedication under the direction of a member of *legio XX Valeria Victrix*, perhaps a centurion or a senior non-commissioned officer. These facts would best fit a time when the cohort was quingenary, that is after c. 142 and before 158. *Cohors I Tungrorum* is clearly attested (RIB 2155; Davies 1967, 110):

‘A dedication-slab from the fort at Castlecary on the Antonine Wall records: IMP.CAES.T. AEL.ANT./AVG.PIO.P.P./COH I TUNGRO/RVM.FECIT.∞. This presumably is to be dated to c. 142, when other auxiliary units are attested engaged in the construction of forts on the new frontier. It should be noted that the vexillation had now returned from abroad and that the cohort, now back to its full strength, was called *milliaria* once again. The detachment was presumably brought back for the invasion of Scotland and the subsequent reoccupation, when more forts would have to be built and more troops would be needed to garrison them. The position of the milliary sign (∞) is unusual, and it is perhaps worth wondering if the unit had become unaccustomed to the normal position.’

However, the convincing demonstration recently by Brian Hartley (1972, 36–41) that the Antonine I occupation of Scotland ended shortly before 158 and the Antonine II reoccupation started very soon after means that *cohors I Tungrorum* could have been the unit in garrison in the second, not the first occupation. The comment on the odd position of the milliary sign still remains valid.

An altar at Castlecary is an official dedication to Neptune by *cohors I Fida Vardullorum civium Romanorum equitata milliaria* under the command of Trebius Verus, *praefectus* (RIB 2149; Jarrett 1972, 209). The full implication of this altar does not seem to have been generally appreciated. Such a milliary cohort should have been commanded by a tribune, not a prefect; normally it is only a *cohors quingenaria* that is commanded by a *praefectus*. *Cohors I Fida Vardullorum* is attested by the British diplomas of 98, 105, 122, 124, 135, 146, and 159/60. Clearly only the last two are relevant to its stay on the Antonine Wall; the former (CIL XVI 93), found at Chesters, does not describe the unit as milliary; the latter (CIL XVI 130), found at Colchester, was issued to a member of this very cohort, which is specifically described as milliary, under the command of an officer named Verus. The diploma and other evidence shows clearly that the title *milliaria* was regularly dropped when the unit was reduced in size. There is another inscription which refers to a *praef(ectus) coh(ortis) primae Fidae Vardullorum*; he is Sittius, who died, aged 50, at Cirta in Numidia (CIL VIII 5532; Jarrett 1972, 208–9). This is the only post he held and this fact, plus his age, strongly suggests that he had retired from military life after this one appointment; this would naturally be the *militia prima*, that is prefect of a quingenary cohort; significantly, the epitaph,

which is quite fulsome, does not call the cohort milliary. Circa was also the home of Lollius Urbicus, the governor responsible for the construction of the Antonine Wall. It consequently seems highly attractive to suppose that Lollius used his powers of patronage to confer a post in the *militia prima* on Sittius; it is known that a governor had the right to appoint a man to command a quingenary but not a milliary unit (Birley 1966, 64). As the diploma of 135 specifies that the cohort was milliary, the following sequence may be suggested to fit the evidence. The cohort was milliary in 135 but within a few years was divided into two; Lollius stationed the rump cohort at Castlecary, where it will have been commanded by Sittius and at some later date by Trebius Verus; the unit inaccurately gave itself the title *milliaria* on the altar. In c 157 the rump cohort will have evacuated Castlecary; in c 159 the fort was reoccupied by *cohors I Tungrorum*, which may, from the unusual position of the milliary sign, have only recently recovered its missing vexillation. It is possible that the vexillation of Vardulli, like those of the Tungrian cohorts, was sent to another province to meet some need. There is evidence to show that in the last years of Hadrian's reign troops were sent from Britain to Judaea (perhaps including a vexillation of *cohors I Hispanorum*, Davies 1977a) and to Noricum, others now or later to Lower Germany, and early in the reign of Pius others to Mauretania (perhaps including the *ala exploratorum* from Auchendavy, Davies 1976). It has long been recognised that many of the forts on the Antonine Wall were far too small to have housed a whole unit and many must have contained only detachments; possibly the vexillation was stationed at some fort in Scotland as a *de facto* separate unit (Breeze 1974, 144-54). However, an altar (RIB 1421) found outside milecastle 19 on Hadrian's Wall in a 2nd-century context was set up by a *vexillatio cohortis I Vardullorum*; conceivably while the rump cohort was at Castlecary, the vexillation was on the southern frontier.

It thus appears that at Castlecary an auxiliary unit was responsible for construction work in the Antonine II phase. However, Kenneth Steer's thesis (1964, 21-39, especially 26-7) that the other two building stones should also date to this time seems too sweeping (cf Gillam and Mann 1970, 21-4; Davies 1977b). The building-dedication (RIB 2170; cf Gillam and Mann 1970, 22) at Bar Hill proudly gives the unit the title *cohors I Baetasiarum civium Romanorum ob virtutem et fidem*, while the unit's Roman citizenship is also commemorated on an altar from the *aedes* (RIB 2169). This justified and advertised pride strongly suggests that the unit had possessed this distinction for a comparatively short time; none of the diplomas as late as 135 records the unit with Roman citizenship and early in his reign Pius imposed severe restrictions on the award of citizenship to auxiliaries. It would make best sense to suppose that the cohort earned *en bloc* citizenship from Pius for heroic action during the campaigns that led to Pius accepting in 142 the sole acclamation of *imperator* in his reign for military success (Davies 1977a). This strongly points to *cohors I Baetasiarum* being the first garrison and consequently *cohors I Hamiorum* the second at Bar Hill (RIB 2167, 2172; cf Breeze and Dobson 1970, 115; Gillam and Mann 1970, 23-4; Barber 1971). At Rough Castle it is more probable that the dedication-slab (RIB 2145) commemorating the building of the *principia* and the altar (RIB 2144) to Victoria (referring to 142?), both set up by *cohors VI Nerviorum*, belong to the Antonine I occupation of some 15 years rather than the Antonine II of some 4. The same argument would suggest that *cohors IV Gallorum* was at Castlehill in the first phase (RIB 2195). It is probable that the *ala I Tungrorum* was the first garrison at Mumrills (RIB 2140), *cohors II Thracum* the second (RIB 2142; Breeze and Dobson 1970, 115-6). An unknown cohort is now known to have been building at Bothwellhaugh (*Britannia*, 7 (1976), 304-5, 382). *Cohors I Ulpia Traiana Cugernorum civium Romanorum* is now known to have been constructing roads near Ingliston in 140/4 (RIB 2313 with *Britannia*, 4 (1973), 336-7 (b)). If *cohors I Baetasiarum* is the Antonine I garrison at Bar Hill, then the recently discovered altar of this cohort to Iuppiter Optimus Maximus at Old Kilpatrick

(*Britannia*, 1 (1970), 310–1; Barber 1971) will belong to the Antonine II period.³ This altar is unique in Britain in that a legionary centurion, Iulius Candidus, is associated with the *praefectus cohortis* in making the dedication. What is more interesting is that the centurion was not a member of a British legion but of *legio I Italica* from Moesia. It is perhaps worth noting that Staius Priscus, probably the most outstanding general of his day, was sent to Britain in 161 from Upper Moesia. It is not impossible that with Priscus came reinforcements from the Danube provinces, legionaries with Candidus, and the *cives Italici et Norici* represented in a detachment of *legio VI Victrix* at Castlecary (*RIB* 2148), to meet the needs of the reoccupation of Scotland (Davies 1977c). Similarly, it may be suspected that it was Iulius Verus who, a few years earlier, was responsible for the detachments rejoining the milliary cohorts and for legionary reinforcements (*RIB* 1322) and probably auxiliary *dilectus* to come from Germany, when he dealt with the situation that caused Pius to abandon Scotland; the *cives Raeti* (*RIB* 2100) attested at Birrens are probably the missing vexillation, newly returned, and the men of the *pagi Vellaus* (*RIB* 2107) and *Condrustis* (*RIB* 2108) hastily recruited reinforcements for *cohors II Tungrorum* (Davies 1978). The only parallel for a legionary centurion involved in such an official dedication seems to have been when he was acting as a transit-officer, helping to supervise the transfer of an auxiliary unit from one province to another (Davies 1977a, n. 23). Although there is as yet no evidence for it elsewhere, it is not impossible that *cohors I Baetasiarum*, because of its distinguished record in the invasion of Scotland *c.* 140, was subsequently transferred temporarily for service elsewhere and was brought back to meet the growing military need for troops in Britain; it will not be forgotten that three Batavian cohorts were transferred after their success at Mons Graupius for Domitian's Danube campaigns. In the early 160s Pertinax, the future general and emperor, was promoted for military successes to Britain, served as *tribunus legionis VI Victricis*, and then was specially retained to command *cohors I* or *II Tungrorum milliaria* (Birley 1966, 64–5). If the dedication by the legionary legate at Kirkcandrews-on-Eden (*RIB* 2034) and the conversion of the Turf Wall of Hadrian also date to this time (cf Breeze and Dobson 1970, 117), then clearly trouble was expected from SW Scotland and countermeasures taken, including stationing a milliary cohort at Birrens.

It must also be borne in mind that it is not impossible that the Romans raised some auxiliary units in Scotland. The lower part of an altar (*RIB* 2152) found at Castlecary reads]*Britton/vsllm*. Sibbald thought this was part of a fragmentary altar (*RIB* 2147) also from Castlecary, dedicated to the Mother Goddesses by *milites vexillationis*]. Collingwood and Wright, following Horsley, reject this identification and comment:

‘It is highly unlikely that the Brittones, in whatever case they were mentioned, belonged to a unit serving in this province . . . but Brittones were levied in the north and this text may have something to do with officials connected with them.’

However, one might perhaps note an altar (*RIB* 2335*) from an unknown site, recorded in 1658, dedicated to a variety of deities by C. Verius Fortis, *tribunus cohortis I Aeliae Britonnum*; this is condemned as false, apparently only because ‘the cohort in line 12 is unmatched in Britain’. However, this is a situation that applies to many other British units; as the Auchendavy altars (*RIB* 2174–9; Davies 1976) show an officer dedicating to many deities, and as it seems unlikely that in 1658 a man could forge the identity of a unit not attested in Britain, the condemnation may seem very harsh on inadequate grounds. It must be considered a possibility that Fortis was the commander of a milliary cohort raised under Pius and that this (or even a sister unit) appeared on the Castlecary stone; the unit will soon have been transferred (like the Usipi) from its country of origin to another, in this case Noricum, where it is well attested.

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NOTES

- 1 In his description of the battle Tacitus (*Agricola* 35-7) records that there were 8,000 auxiliary infantry including two cohorts of Tungrians and four of Batavians. Ogilvie and Richmond (1967, 78, 274) assume that *cohortes I, II, III Batavorum* and *I and II Tungrorum* were already all milliary. The fourth Batavian cohort, the only one not to be posted from Britain afterwards, was always quingenary (*CIL* XVI 69) and probably was not stationed at Castlecary (*RIB* 2154 apparatus) unless one assumes the numeral *I* ligatured with *CO]HĪ* or a misread *coh(ors)] II Batavorum*.
Ogilvie and Richmond (1967, 78, 251) argue that *cohortes I* and *II Brittonum* both fought at Mons Graupius and were both already milliary. However, it should be noted that *cohors I Britannica* was quingenary in 80 and 84 but was doubled in size by 85 (*CIL* XVI 26, 30, 31; Birley 1966, 60-1). As all of the other eight known 1st-century *cohortes Brittonum* were quingenary, it is quite possible that *cohortes I* and *II Brittonum* were quingenary and subsequently doubled. It is clear that the equation of Ogilvie and Richmond (1967, 271, 274) that the 8,000 auxiliary infantry were eight milliary cohorts is mathematically inaccurate. However, Tacitus (*Agricola* 29) may simply mean that Britons were recruited into *existing* units, as with Nectovellius *nationis Brigans* in *cohors II Thracum* at Mumrills later (*RIB* 2142) and also *rrius* from Gloucester (*CIL* XVI 130). There is no necessity to believe that Tacitus records any *cohortes Brittonum* at the battle.
- 2 The presumed or earliest dates attested for the units being milliary are: *I Aelia Dacorum* presumably Pius after 146; *I Nervana Germanorum equitata* presumably Nerva 96-8; *I Aelia Hispanorum equitata* Hadrian 117-38, probably early; *I Tungrorum* 103, perhaps recently; *II Tungrorum equitata* 121/5; *I Vangionum equitata* 103, perhaps recently; *I Vardullorum equitata* between 105 and 122.
The alleged milliary cohorts at Burgh-by-Sands, Bowness, and Maryport (*RIB* 2042, 2057-8, 812) are not proved; Birley 1961, 208, 211, 216; *contra* Davies 1977a, n. 61. The 'unidentified but possibly non-oriental *cohors milliaria sagittariorum*' at Housesteads is unlikely, *pace* Smith 1968, 290-1.
- 3 The archaeological evidence at Bar Hill proffered by Steer (1964, 27) is capable of other interpretations: the arrowheads could have been lost while being sharpened in Antonine II phase by *cohors I Hamiorum*, who put the inscriptions of their predecessor, plus other stones and equipment, in the well on abandoning the fort, but took their own altars with them. Note that the altars of three successive garrisons at Maryport were put mingled together in pits when the site was abandoned for subsequent redevelopment.

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