



History: Cohors I Batavorum

The Auxilia. From the early days of the Republic, the Roman army had supplemented its strength with auxiliary (literally “help”) troops. When people think of the Roman Army there is a tendency to think of the legions themselves and to forget the considerable contribution made to the Roman war machine by the numerous auxiliary cohorts that provided vital support in a number of areas. While the Roman legions were undeniably the most effective fighting force of their age, the Romans themselves had never managed to successfully develop their military forces beyond the legionary formations. Accordingly the lack of cavalry, archers, slingers, etc. was made good by recruiting non-Roman peoples into cohorts of 500 (*quingenaria*) and 1000 (*milliaria*) men. These tended to be one of three types; light infantry, cavalry or combined units of cavalry and infantry.

Auxiliary troops were levied from the conquered provinces and were named after the locality of origination. The period of service for an auxiliary soldier was roughly 25 years after which time he could be discharged with a small gratuity and, most precious of all, a diploma conferring Roman citizenship on himself and his heirs. For acts of bravery it was more likely that citizenship, either for individuals, or for the unit as a whole, was awarded. Cohorts and *Alae*, like the Legions, could be given honorary awards such as "VICTRIX" or carry an Imperial family name. Some units, for example COHORS I BRITTONUM MILLIARIA ULPIA TORQUATA PIA FIDELIS CIVIUM ROMANORUM, or COHORS I FIDA VARDULLORUM MILLIARIA EQUITATA CIVIUM ROMANORUM, could amass many titles.

Auxiliary units lacked the specialised skills and equipment of the larger legions and were paid proportionately less. Moreover, they tended not to be among the recipients of the large donatives handed out to the legions and the Praetorian Guard by successive emperors desperate to retain the loyalty of their troops. Stationed in small forts along the frontiers the auxiliaries were mainly used for garrison and policing duties. When major campaigns were launched against the barbarians massed beyond the Empire's defences the auxiliary cohorts would be drawn on to provide support arms for the main legionary force.

Like their comrades in the legions, the auxiliary troops were divided into centuries of 80-100 men commanded by a centurion. The centurions were most likely to be Roman citizens in the time-honoured tradition of Roman officers being placed in command of native troops. Such an appointment might represent a promotion for an officer from one of the legions. It might be a direct appointment provided under the patronage of a provincial governor, or even the Emperor himself. Certainly many of the centurions were drawn from the same native stock as the rank and file. Command of an auxiliary cohort was often the reward conferred on outstanding legionary centurions who had proved deserving of independent command. Ranked above such centurions, however, was the commander of the *quingenaria* cohort - the *Praefectus*, an officer of equestrian status. The rank of prefect was a senior one and commanded respect across the army. The command of a *cohors milliaria* or *civium Romanorum* was usually in the form of a *Tribunus*. Attached to today's Fourteenth legion, as in the Roman past, is a unit of provincial auxiliaries from the lands around the mouth of the Rhine, the First Cohort of Batavians, Citizens of Rome, loyal and faithful.

The Batavians. The Batavians lived along the great rivers in the Netherlands on a large island between the rivers Waal Meuse, and Rhine. The Batavi peoples came originally from the Chattan tribes from the northern banks of the Rhine and probably colonised the island in the time of Drusus. A civil dissension among the Chatti, a powerful German race within the Hercynian forest, resulted in the expatriation of a portion of the people. The exiles sought a new home in the empty Rhine island, called it "Bet-auw," or "good-meadow," and were themselves called, thereafter, Batavi. Their name lives on in the present name of the island, Betuwe. The Batavians' "capital" was Noviomagus Batavodurum (present day Nijmegen).

It has not been satisfactorily ascertained who were the island's aboriginal inhabitants. The historical record does not reach beyond Caesar's epoch, and he found the territory on the left of the Rhine mainly tenanted by tribes of Celtic origin constituting the bulk of the population.

The Batavian island was a relatively poor country not easily exploited financially by the Romans (it was used as the basis of operations for the Classis Germanica in the wars with

Gaul, Germany, and Britain however). Consequently, the Batavi contributed only levies of men and arms to the Empire: eight auxiliary units of infantry, one squadron of cavalry, and the mounted bodyguard of the emperor until this force was dismissed on Galba's succession to the purple after Nero's suicide (the troops were reinstated as bodyguards by the Emperor Trajan). The Batavian cavalry became famous throughout the Republic and the Empire. They had been the favourite troops of Gaius Julius Caesar, for good reason as it was their valour that turned the tide of battle at Pharsalia. The Batavi were accounted not merely as the best riders and swimmers of the army, but also as the model of true soldiers. Indeed, the privileged status and good pay of being the imperial bodyguard, as well as allowing Batavi nobles to serve as officers commanding Batavi cohorts (until at least the reign of Vespasian), provides considerably proof of their loyalty to the Empire.

There is currently no evidence that the Batavi took any part in the preparations or execution of the Varian disaster in AD 9. Yet the Emperor Augustus' initial reaction to the terrible news was to discharge his Batavian guard. Fortunately he soon became aware that his suspicions were groundless and the troop was reinstated shortly thereafter. Roman commentators almost always spoke of the Batavi with respect. According to Tacitus, for example, they were the most noble and brave of all the Germans. Despite that the Romans had conquered the Belgians, had forced the free Frisians to pay tribute, they called the Batavians friends. Tax-gatherers never invaded their island and an honourable alliance united Batavi and Roman alike.

The Chatti, of whom the Batavi formed a portion, were a pre-eminently warlike race. "Others go to battle," says the historian, "these go to war." Their bodies were described as more hardy, their minds more vigorous, than those of other tribes. The young men cut neither hair nor beard until they had slain an enemy often pausing in the midst of the carnage and plunder of battle to bare their faces for the first time. For the Batavi warriors only the cowardly and sluggish remained unshorn. Each man is described as also wearing an iron ring around their necks until they had killed in battle - a symbol they then threw away as the emblem of sloth.

The Batavians were renowned for their skill crossing wide bodies of water en-masse, such as the River Ems during Germanicus' campaigns in Germany and the River Po in the civil wars of AD 69. Several foot soldiers would swim alongside a single cavalry soldier and his horse, presumably keeping their weapons above water by using the horse as a kind of living raft. The tactic was used by Aulus Plautius during the Battle of the Medway in AD 43 to flank the opposing Britons, as attested by Cassius Dio:

"The barbarians thought the Romans would not be able to cross this [the River Medway] without a bridge, and as a result had pitched camp in a rather careless fashion on the opposite bank. Aulus Plautius, however, sent across some Celts who were practised in swimming with ease fully armed across even the fastest of rivers. These fell unexpectedly on the enemy".

Cassius Dio: The History of Rome.

Again, the Batavi most likely performed the same feat under the command of Governor G. Suetonius Paulinus when auxiliary troops are recorded as crossing the Menai Straits to seize the Isle of Anglesey and destroy the druids' stronghold. It is thought that in the army of Plautius there were eight Batavian units, each five hundred strong. The historian Cornelius Tacitus (c.55-c.120) records:

"He therefore prepared to attack the island of Mona which had a powerful population and was a refuge for fugitives. He built flat-bottomed vessels to cope with the shallows, and uncertain depths of the sea. Thus the infantry crossed, while the cavalry followed by fording, or, where the water was deep, swam by the side of their horses."

Tacitus: The Annals of Imperial Rome.

"Depositis omnis sarcinis lectissimos auxiliarium quibus nota vada et patrius nandi usus, quo simul seque et arma et equos regunt, ita repente inmisit, ut obstupefacti hostes, qui classem, qui navis, qui mare expectabant, nihil arduum aut invictum crediderint sic ad bellum venientibus".

"After dropping all baggage he quickly sent the most elite of the auxiliaries, who were familiar with shallows and traditionally used to swimming in such a manner that they kept control over arms and horses, to the effect that the flabbergasted barbarians, who expected a fleet, who expected a ship across the sea believed that nothing was hard or insurmountable to those who went to war in this fashion".

Tacitus: Agricola (18.4).

The late Roman period author, Vegetius, gives us some insight as to how the Batavians achieved such feats:

"Expediti vero equites fasces de cannis aridis vel facere consueverunt, super quos loricas et arma, ne uidentur, inponunt; ipsi equique natando transeunt colligatosque secum fasces pertrahunt loris".



“Battle ready horsemen though have been accustomed to make bundles from dry reeds or, on these they put the body armours and weapons, in order that they do not get wet; they themselves and their horses cross by swimming and they draw the packed bundles along with them with leather straps”.

Vegetius: Epitoma rei militaris (3.7).

Cassius Dio comments upon the rigorous training that the Emperor Hadrian insisted on for his troops. In one passage Dio refers to the Batavians (presumably the Emperor’s personal horse guards) and their river-crossing abilities:

“So excellently, indeed, had his soldiery been trained that the cavalry of the Batavians, as they were called, swam the Ister with their arms. Seeing all this, the barbarians stood in terror of the Romans, they employed Hadrian as an arbitrator of their differences”.

Cassius Dio: Book LXIX (9.6).

Again the implication is that the Batavians possessed a unique skill. However, there is a gravestone of a certain Soranus, a Syrian trooper in a Batavian *cohors milliaria*, possibly the Emperor’s personal horseguard. Soranus’ epitaph records that in AD118 he, before the Emperor Hadrian, swam the Danube and performed the following feats:

Ille ego Pannoniis quondam notissimus oris inter mille viros fortis primusq(ue) Batavos Hadriano potui qui iudice vasta profundi aequora Danuvii cunctis transnare sub armis emissumq(ue) arcu dum pendet in aere telum ac redit ex alia fixi fregique sagitta quem neque Romanus potuit nec barbarus unquam non iaculo miles non arcu vincere Parthus hic situs hic memori saxo mea facta sacra viderit an ne aliquis post me mea facta sequ[a]tur exemplo mihi sum primus qui talia gessi

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“The man who, once very well known to the ranks in Pannonia, brave and foremost among one thousand Batavians, was able, with Hadrian as judge, to swim the wide waters of the deep Danube in full battle kit. From my bow I fired an arrow, and while it quivered still in the air and was falling back, with a second arrow I hit and broke it. No Roman or foreigner has ever managed to better this feat, no soldier with a javelin, no Parthian with a bow. Here I lie, here I have immortalised my deeds on an ever-mindful stone which will see if anyone after me will rival my deeds. I set a precedent for myself in being the first to achieve such feats”.

The Batavians were therefore a notable addition to the forces of the Roman army from the reign of Augustus Caesar, until the reign of Romulus Augustulus. They played an important role supplementing the legions and the overall success of the Roman army. Our Batavian unit honours these men and perpetuates their fine tradition.

Cohors I Batavorum. In AD 43, the First Cohort of Batavians were associated with Legio XIII Gemina for the invasion of Britain. They are thought to have been part of the force of auxiliaries which crossed the river at the Battle of the Medway that year and later in AD 60/61, Mona Insula, (at this time, they were a *cohors quingenaria* unit). Sometime during AD 64 the *Legio XIII Gemina*, now with the honorific titles *Martia Victrix* (warlike and victorious), was withdrawn from Britain by the Emperor Nero and stationed on the Rhine frontier. It is thought that all eight Claudian units of Batavi were similarly redeployed to the continent at this time. They are certainly attested in Germania, where they were almost certainly involved in the revolt of Julius Civilis in AD 69. Civilis, a Batavian noble, had served as an officer in command of some Batavian auxiliaries, perhaps in Britain with *Legio II Augusta* under the command of Vespasian. When Vespasian made his bid for imperial power, his supporters encouraged Civilis to revolt on their behalf and cause trouble for the rearguard of Vespasian’s opponent, Vitellius. Unfortunately, the Batavians had grievances of their own, chief amongst which were the Roman methods of recruitment and how according to Tacitus, young good-looking lads were dragged off to satisfy the lusts of the recruiting officers! After initial successes, the rebellion was quashed by the forces under command of Q. Petilius Cerialis. Despite this, after the revolt, four Batavian cohorts, I, II, III, and VIII, were reinstated at *milliaria* strength.

One of the first acts of Vespasian upon his arrival in Rome in AD 70 was to appoint a new governor for Britain. Cerialis, who had ably demonstrated his command ability in crushing Civilis’ Batavian revolt, was seen as the perfect choice to command the campaign against Venutius of the Brigantes. As mentioned above, Cohors Prima Batavorum were the first of four one-thousand strong units levied from the Batavi following the revolt and shipped to Britain with governor Cerialis. There is no evidence that the units were *equitata*, or “part-mounted”.

In AD 84, Cohors I Batavorum probably took part in the battle of Mons Graupius in Caledonia, under the command of Gnaeus Julius Agricola. According to Tacitus, the battle, fought entirely by auxiliary soldiers, used four units of Batavian auxiliaries.



"Agricola ordered four battalions of Batavi and two of Tungri to bring things to the sword's point and to hand-to-hand fighting;... when the Batavi began to exchange blows hand to hand, to strike with the bosses of their shields, to stab in the face, and, after cutting down the enemy on the level, to push their line uphill, the other battalions, exerting themselves to emulate their charge, proceeded to slaughter the nearest enemies".

Tacitus 'The Agricola' (xxxvi.1-2)

There is also evidence that the first cohort of Batavians was also involved in building part of the Vallum of Hadrian's Wall near Castlesteads. (RIB 1823, RIB 1824). Later the first cohort was either used in the Antonine occupation of Scotland, or as reserve in Wales or Southern England prior to being transferred sometime before AD 116 (possibly around AD 85/86) with Legio II Adiutrix, when the latter left for the Danube. Cohors I Batavorum were transferred to their new station in Upper Pannonia, between Romita and Brusturi, and later Solva. It was during this period, i.e. before 20th February AD 98, that the unit was granted the title "Pia Fidelis" ("loyal and faithful") for their loyalty during a revolt of the Danubian forces after the murder of Emperor Domitian. (Diplomas CIL 16, 00042 from Pannonia Inferior and RMD-03, 00144 from Moesia superior).

The "Civium Romanorum" ("Citizens of Rome") suffix, entitling the entire unit to full citizen status, was granted during the Dacian campaigns of the Emperor Trajan. A diploma from Raetia (RMD-02, 00086) found at Regensburg (Castrum Regina) details the full honorific titles granted to the cohort, as does another diploma, provenance unknown. (AE 1997, 01782).

The cohort was transferred to Solva and later *Dacia Porolissensis*. The province of Dacia was eventually surrendered in the third century AD, when it is possible that the unit was at Salonika in Macedonia. Subsequently, during the early third century AD, Cohors I Batavorum was transferred back to Britannia and stationed at the fort at Carrawburgh (*Brocolitia*) on Hadrian's Wall. The cohort remained there from around AD 222 until the time of the *Notitia Dignitatum*, early in the fifth century AD. Indeed many inscriptions from Carrawburgh detail the names of soldiers from the unit and their prefects.

