

Auxiliary swords worn on the left.

There has been a lot of discussion between the members of the auxilia recently, regarding the wearing of swords on the left. Traditionally thought to have been a reserve of the Centurionate. We have been looking at evidence that some auxiliaries *may* have also worn their swords on the left.

The Centurionate

Numerous tombstone reliefs show centurions with their swords on the left. The Adamklissi monument, or *Tropaeum Traiani* (dating from the reign of the emperor Trajan) also depicts two *centuriones* (One with his vine stick) in undress order wearing their scabbards on the left. Another, second metope shows what at first glance also appear to be *centuriones* but this time both carrying what look to be scrolls. Again the sword hangs on the left side. Could they actually be auxiliary soldiers? They wear the traditional *Sagum* of the auxilia (as seen on Trajan's Column) as opposed to the *paenula*



Standard Bearers

The monument also shows reliefs of standard bearers. Two distinct types can be seen. The officers on the left, all wearing mail, both *signifier* and two *vexillarii*, wear their cloaks slung back over their shoulders and have their swords on the right side. The two *vexillarii* on the right have a different appearance with no armour, different cloaks and tunics. Both wear *their* swords on the left.



What of the auxiliary troops? Let's look at evidence for auxiliary soldiers wearing their swords on the left. Continuing with the reliefs of the Adamklissi monument, there are *metopes* of auxiliary soldiers, many of cavalrymen and another of three auxiliary infantrymen showing baldrics slung over the right shoulder.

The first example is *Metope 14*. It clearly shows three soldiers with mail shirts carrying oval clipeus-type shields (Legionaries on the monument are all depicted with curved rectangular *scuta*) wearing their scabbards on the left side. The three Roman soldiers advance towards the right with swords drawn. A midrib is depicted on the swords. They wear helmets with deep neck guards and thigh-length, short-sleeved, mail shirts over short tunicae (typical of all the auxiliary soldiers depicted on Trajan's Column) with no *pteruges*. Also just visible are *femenalia*. They all have baldrics over their right shoulders, with the mouths of their scabbards visible under their left arms. They do not appear to have any belts (again, like the auxiliaries on Trajan's Column). The soldiers may also have been from a part-mounted *cohors equitata*, which may explain the wearing of the sword high up on the left. (I shall discuss why during the examination of metope 1).



Metope 14

Pantera raised the question, "Are the 'baldrics' actually shield straps?" (The shields appear quite high on the bodies) Well in my opinion, if this was the case, then there is no other apparent method for securing the scabbard to the soldier. There are no belts visible on the relief.

Another point raised was with regard to the 'scabbards' being too high under the arm of the soldier. I have at home a gladius with a baldric fitted for wearing on the left (dillusions of centurionate grandeur perhaps!) and I tried adopting battle stance with shield etc with the sword suspended at various heights to see how much harder it would be to draw from the left with a raised shield. There was no difference in the difficulty of unsheathing it from any height.

There is another point to be mentioned regarding the height of the scabbard in relation to the second auxiliary example from the Adamklissi monument. *Metope 1* shows a mounted cavalryman wielding a lancea/hasta who also has his sword slung on the left with no other visible means of supporting a scabbard, such as a belt. The pommel of the sword is depicted under the soldiers left arm.



Metope 1

Having ridden a little, I can see why this would be practical. If you were holding your lance, the sword would be well out of the way of your weapon arm hanging as depicted, on the left. The scabbard on the metope is also slung VERY high, almost under the armpit. This is also depicted on the cavalry troops on the friezes of the Arch of Constantine. I raised this question with Censor, a trained military cavalryman and also whilst observing the arch at Rome with David Pinder, from LEG II AVG, they both stated that if your sword hangs too low, it would smack the rump of the horse in effect 'geeing-it-up'. If you are pulling up on the reins to slow the horse down, the animal gets very confused, as it is still being tapped on the backside by the scabbard, making it think it should go faster! Having the sword tucked up under the 'static' left arm holding the

reins and shield, this will not happen, which is why I think the soldiers on foot from *metope 14* may be dismounted troops for a *cohors equitata*. Other depictions from the monument with cavalry wearing their baldric and scabbards on the left are as follows:



Regarding the depictions on the Adamklissi monument, it looks like we have sculptural reliefs of auxiliary soldiers, both infantry and cavalry, showing the wearing of scabbards on the left hand side. As these examples show the soldiers facing to the right there is always the possibility that, whoever did the carving, couldn't be bothered to undertake the time consuming detail required to reproduce the scabbard on the right face. However, this can be discounted by the fact that all of the other Metopes do have this detailing, and more. Are we actually seeing a first-hand account that some regular auxiliary troops wore their swords on the left?

Crispus pointed out Josephus' statement,

'The infantry are armed with breastplate and helmet and carry a blade on each side; of these by far the longer is the one on the left, the other being no more than nine inches long.'

p. 196 in the Penguin classics translated by G.A. Williamson, revised by E.M. Smallwood.

Crispus also added;

"Josephus does not tell us whether the soldiers are auxiliaries or legionaries. If they were auxiliaries, then that would match well with the Adamklissi metopes. Tacitus, having described the legions, then says that he will not describe the auxilia because the auxilia present such complexity and variety that he cannot afford to devote the necessary space to the subject. He does however say that the auxilia retain their native arms. It is worth noting that Tacitus was actually writing at about the same time Trajan was campaigning in Dacia so we may be seeing in the Adamklissi metopes some of the variety he was referring to".

The point Crispus refers to in Tacitus, is supported by a building stone of the First Aelian Cohort of Dacians, showing a Dacian falx on its face. (**RIB 1914**, from Birdoswald, in the Newcastle Museum of Antiquities.)



RIB 1914

Most people's impressions of the Roman auxiliary soldier are derived either from Trajan's column or from the Rhineland tombstones, and it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that either one represents the

'true' picture, whereas the probability is that the Rhineland tombstones show the reality of the soldiers based in the Rhineland and Britain during the mid 1st century AD, but not necessarily everywhere else, and that Trajan's column is the impression sixty years later by a series of artists who may never have seen the real thing, but did have access to sketches drawn by someone who had, in a completely different area of the empire.

Trajan's Column

As mentioned previously, most of our reconstructions are based on the reliefs shown on Trajan's Column. Virtually all of the scenes that feature auxiliary troops depict the wearing of the sword on the right hand side. However, there is one particular scene showing auxiliary soldiers defending their fort from a Dacian attack, and all of the soldiers that have their baldrics visible are clearly wearing their swords on the left side. At first I thought that the image had been produced in reverse, but after double-checking against others it is not. As you can see, the shields are being held in the left hand.



The last example is from a tomb relief in the Hungarian National Museum, Budapest. It is from an early second century context and shows two soldiers, each in mail with shoulder doubling and pteruges, carrying oval clipeus-type shields. Clearly the baldrics are suspending the scabbard on the left. Although the soldiers could possibly represent *centuriones*, the crest type is certainly not of the transverse type.



This raises the question whether wearing the scabbard on the left could possibly be a 'unit identifier'? What if certain units, perhaps elite troops, were selected to perform certain tasks, (such specialist troops could have included *exploratores*, *frumentarii* or *speculatores*) and, as a badge of their particular unit, they wore their swords on the left to distinguish them from regular units. We know that this 'unit pride' in the dress of a particular corps or regiment still exists today within the modern armed forces. Looking at the shield blazons on the example from Trajan's Column, it would appear that all the shields are different. One would naturally assume that if the soldiers were all from the same unit, they would all carry the same shield design(?)

We cannot say that many ordinary soldiers wore their swords on the left but that the evidence clearly shows that some did, including auxiliaries. Although few in number, there seems to be enough sculptural evidence to back up what Josephus writes and as such, it is presented to the Society for further discussion.

I would like to reassure the Society that I am **not** suggesting any sweeping change to the look of the Batavian element of our drill squad, and that this article is not intended to be a launching pad for all the auxiliaries to suddenly switch to wearing their swords on the left.

Peronis