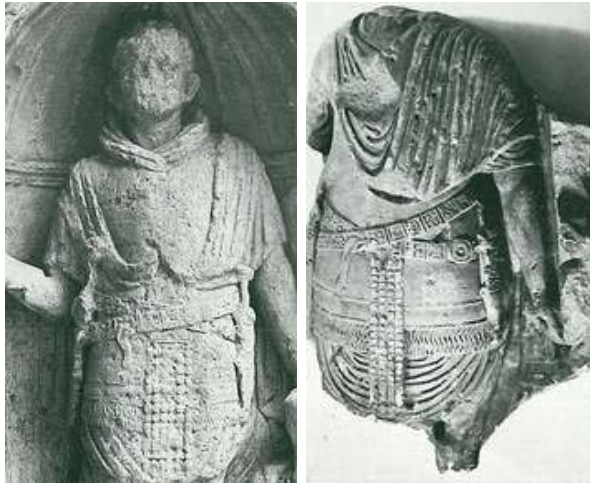


Auxiliary hamata covers?

I have been puzzled for a long time by the sculpted 'over-shirts' or 'jerkins' depicted on a few of the Rhineland tombstones of auxiliary soldiers.

Both Peter Connolly and Michael Simkins have illustrated auxiliaries (based on the tombstone of 'Firmus' of Cohors Raetorum, in the Landesmuseum at Bonn (CIL XIII 7684).

This tomb stone, and one other of an unidentified soldier that I have an illustration of handy, both show an over-shirt or 'jerkin' type of garment worn on top of the mail armour.



Both garments look almost identical, with a raised hem or border at the bottom with the mail showing beneath. Could the garment be an oiled leather cover to protect the mail from the effects of the weather and rusting? Or, could it be a woollen or linen shirt for some other purpose such as denoting a rank or specific unit designation?

The soldiers are obviously depicted in all of their military finery with pleated tunics and military belts, but equally important, it seems, was the rendering of the detail of the over-shirt/jerkin. It seems unlikely that the sculptor would not attempt to depict mail links, when they have shown equal detail on items such as the belts?

Russell Robinson of course argued that the smooth surface would have been painted to look like mail as it was tiresome for the sculptor to execute mail and this has basically been the accepted stance ever since. Clearly a lot of sculpted grave stones which depict mail have no detail of the links etc, but it is obvious that that is what it represents. (Centurio Facilis of LEG XX VV and Imagifer Genialis of COH VII Raetorum both being good examples. However, Robinson also stated that in some cases the mail was covered, such as the examples shown above, and the mail (the zig-zag) is therefore visible beneath.

One example of a tombstone which did survive with some paint in-situ is that of a cavalryman, 'Silius'

Attonis (great name!) from the Ala Picentiana now in Mainz. (CIL XIII 6277 = D 02497)

The paint has since worn off but was illustrated at the time of discovery. Unfortunately the cavalryman is shown un-armoured but his attendant holding his horse wears an identical garment to those illustrated here. The body was coloured green and the zig-zag fringe was red. These servants had more of a role than just as grooms, they sometimes took part in military actions and fought. Were they also armoured then? Occasionally they wear a helmet. This example, taken from the grave stele of Marcus Aemilius Durises of the Ala Sulpicia shows his servant wearing a variant of the familiar Weiler type helmet with embossing representing hair. (CIL XIII 8311 = RSK 255 = ILS 2502)



Roman sculptors did show mail quite often. One interesting piece is an ivory carving from Ephesus which shows a group of Trajanic soldiers. Two men standing close together deserve particular attention. One man wears a mail shirt with shoulder doubling well textured to look like mail. However nearby another man wearing a helmet holding a horse has a smooth garment looking similar to those on the Rhineland tombstones. Even ivories could be painted, so was this garment coloured to look like mail, had the artist got bored doing the mail on one figure and left the other one to be coloured? Or, could he have been wearing an over-shirt?

Then of course we have the fine depiction of mail on the Ludovisi sarcophagus.

I approached Graham Sumner with my questions, and following similar discussions regarding Robinson's thoughts, the conclusion was that the question can not be fully answered. He concluded;

"Myself, I see no objection to the idea of wearing a mail shirt with padding underneath and a cover as you describe. If the Romans did use them, I am pretty sure they would not leave it plain, it would be coloured in some way, that is one thing we do know about them".

So, if any of the Batavian brethren want to have a go at making one, please get in touch. I can supply patterns and drawings of details.