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The Official Religion of the Roman Army

The Roman religion in its developed form had a lot of in common with the Greek religion, although it also absorbed religious practices of other Italian peoples, as well as Etruscan and various other beliefs [1, p. 1113]. Roman gods reflected Greek gods: Jupiter – Zeus, Mercury – Hermes, Mars – Ares, Juno Hera, Neptune – Poseidon, Minerva – Atena, Diana – Artemis etc. The Romans had also a host of their own lesser deities. They prayed and made sacrifices to deities looking after households and their inhabitants (Lares and Penates) [2, p. 73–113]. Religious practices and rituals were closely connected with political life. The cult of Rome and the emperor spread in Italy and provinces, becoming a public and visible token of loyalty towards the state authorities [3, s. 204–216]. The practice of deifying dead emperors, worshipping them, and even erecting temples for them, initiated with Julius Caesar, became common (although not all emperors were included in a roster of gods) [4, p. 10].

Despite Christianity became a legal religion in the 4th century [5, p. 1–50], however, pagan beliefs and practices were at that time still strongly rooted, especially in areas that were far away from towns. The Christian church, not being able to eliminate Roman festivals or diminish significance of pagan shrines or sites, often invested them with Christian aspects [6, p. 25–30]. In the Roman Empire, all citizens were obliged to make sacrifices before the emperor’s statue. They were treated as a token of loyalty towards the state [7, p. 46–56]. Only the Jews, who treated making such sacrifices as idolatry, were exempt from this obligation [8, p. 56–74]. Julius Caesar was the first ruler of Rome who was proclaimed as God. Octavian August agreed to worship him as god in provinces. In Rome itself, he came across as God’s son. Since his times, almost all rulers who had been recognised as worthy became deified [9, p. 297].

The phenomenon of the official religion of the Roman army is closely related to creating a permanent professional army under the command of the first Emperor Augustus. Service in military forces of the Republic encompassed cult activities belonging to the sphere of national religion (e.g. “an official oath”, command auspices, processions or a triumph of victorious magistrate in Rome) [10, s. 24–27].

There was, however, lack of consistence in terms of regularity of cult dates provided in the calendar or synchronisation and simultaneous celebration of cult events, which were now, to a large extent, connected with the emperor’s cult as a core of state religion across the whole empire. Rituals had the function of creating, preserving and demonstrating loyalty to the highest imperial commander – the emperor’s cult was a centre of political integration covering the entire empire. At the same time it promoted discipline and emergence of “corporate” identity in each regiment and the professional army as a whole. Rituals aimed at strengthening and showing power. Irrespective of

the nature of the army, as a united military body belonging to the emperor, the plural “religions of the army” is well grounded. Below the level of “homogeneous” official army, provincial army due to their close relationship with civil population in garrison-provinces, developed their own unique and inimitable religious nature, determined, to a large extent, by native provincial cults. A central point of these cultural contacts were individual garrisons and places of deployment, where the army and civil population came into complex relationships connected not only with the area of cult [11, p. 249].

The cult of the emperor and cult of state gods were obligatory for all regiments. Besides, there were private cults of soldiers (“native gods from recruitment regions or deities from their former place of dislocation, as well as, the most visible, local gods in their present garrison place). They were practised both by groups of soldiers and individual soldiers. It stemmed from their essential need for protection. Group dedications on sources, which preserved until now, were characteristic of the first level, which reflected regiments or groups of soldiers. Individual dedications must be treated, most of all, as a token of private religious life.

There were various possibilities of contact between the army and civil population provided by both level of religion, not only because the emperor’s cult related to the whole population. A special case in this system were cult phenomena, which were characteristic for the army, such as patron deities, or the so-called cult of the flag. It was closely connected with the cult of emperor.

The nature of the official religion of the army, identical for each regiment of the Empire, from Britannia to Germania, as far as the Sahara and Euphrates, was clearly stated in a roll of papyrus found in the Mesopotamian garrison town Dura Europos. The so-called *Feriale Duranum* contains a festival section from the period January-September of the regiment of the 20th cohort Pamyrenorum. The papyrus came from the period between 225 and 227 AD, during Emperor Severus Alexander’s rule (years 222–235) and was a copy of the official standard list, commonly applicable, quoting dates and occasions of festival days, and stating what cult activities and sacrifices (wine and incense = begging, blood sacrifices = immolatio) had to be performed by the military unit and its commander. We can distinguish three different holiday occasions, namely festivals of state gods „4 days before the Ides of May: for the games of Mars, to Father Mars the Avenger a bull” [12, col. 2, vers 9] e. g. Mars Pater, Vestalia lub dies natalis urbis Romae, Rome’s “birthday”, festivals specific for the army such as rosaliae signorum and honesta missio, the ceremony of honorary release and celebrations of the emperor’s cult, i.e. dates referring to the reigning emperor, such as his birthday (dies natalis), the day of taking over power or significant dates of his deified predecessors. Due to the date of the document, Severans and Antonines were especially significant, but Caesar August and Germal, Tyberius’ stepson’s birthday was remembered not less that Trajan’s ascension day. The significance of the cult of emperor was the most important. Official military religions were shaped and determined by the cult of emperor that constituted the most the important point of reference for the military life. The calendar made the annual cycle a “political” ritual, symbolizing the interaction

between the emperor and the army. Its main function was strengthening loyalty of the army and creating “imperial awareness”, spread by military religion, that caused close relations between the soldiers and their emperor. Celebrations of festivals, rituals and ceremonies, such as parades, had an additional impact on discipline strengthening: “An army gathered together from different places occasionally raises a riot and, when in fact it is unwilling to fight, it pretends to be angry at not being led out to battle” [13, 3.4.3]. It was perceived, similar to religiousness, as a mystery of the Roman mastership [13, 1.1.2]. Its guarantor was the emperor. The existence of goddess “Disciplina” in Britain and North Africa, and its direct reference to the emperor’s dynasty as “Disciplina Augusti” were not a coincidence.

The span of the official festival calendar reaches back to the times of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Inscriptions from military provinces with exact dates of their dedications, which were correlated with those that were determined in *Feriale Duranum*, indicated that the calendar was updated by each government. It was determined centrally, binding for all regiments operating in the whole Empire: the birthday of Rome on 21st April was celebrated everywhere. The military calendar did not take into account ethnic and religious conditions in regiments or circumstances characteristic for a province in which regiments were dislocated. Being, in a sense, a carrier of imperial tradition, unity as *exercitus populi Romani*, the army contributed to spreading concepts that were of Italian or Roman (i.e.) from the city of Rome in origin. Although the army calendar did not meet the specific goal of “Romanisation”, it contributed to the emerging “identity”. It did not touch upon religious traditions of individual soldiers or “regiment traditions” originating from their original area of recruitment, which could have been found in units with a certain level of ethnic homogeneity at the moment of their creation. They belonged to a different level of the army’s religion and to strengthen combat morale they were supported by commanders.

Numerous details from military life illustrated a close relation between the army and the emperor, as it was reflected in the army’s calendar. Most of all, a pledge of allegiance to the emperor existing in the religious law undertaken before regiment colours should be quoted [13, 2.5], and it had to be formally sanctioned during a solemn ceremony. Further on, equipping with regiments colours by the emperor, imperial names in regiment names, omnipresence of the emperor’s image on equipment and flags, the emperor’s image held in one’s imagination. What was more, we must think about the emperor’s image on common currency, presented to soldiers by regular payments or as donation or as the emperor’s gift.

The cult of emperor ensured liaison between the provincial folk and the army. Garrison towns were the central point of contact. Consequences were different in various fields, including religion.

Indirect evidence for the routine nature of rituals were the names of officers repeated several times within one series. A probable occasion for dedication was nuncupation *votorum* from the army’s calendar (taking an oath for the emperor’s well-being, stability of the state and renewal of the official oath) on the 3th of January each year. The places

where some stones with a dedication indicated that the ceremonies took places near parade areas or in special areas of cult near military camps.

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Private religious cults in the Roman army

In the Roman Empire, as it turns out, private religious cults in addition to cult practiced by the local population were also visible in the Roman army and they were not homogeneous, because the Roman Empire was a vast creation. So cults as well as the gods and the ways to implement the cults differed depending on which provincial lands the soldiers came from. The legions varied from each other in the way of cult and the type of cults religious.

In addition to the official Roman religion that was in force in the Roman Empire, there were private religious cults that any Roman soldier could cult. These cults were