

# *A Book of the Third Century Roman Military Innovations*

P. Elliot, *Legions in Crisis. Transformation of the Roman Soldier AD 192-284*, Oxford - Charleston, Fonthill Media 2014

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This hardcover monograph tries to represent how the main historical events and circumstances determined the transformation of Roman armour, weaponry and tactics in the years of the Severan Dynasty and soldier emperors.

Paul Elliott, the author has a degree in archaeology and ancient history, he writes books on military history (*The Last Legionary, Warrior Cults* etc.), and recently his articles have been published in the *Ancient Warfare* magazine. As an archaeologist Elliott has tested bronze casting and fabrication of Roman shields so he utilized the acquired experiences to his book. The *Legions in Crisis* was published in 2014 by Fonthill Media and the dust jacket itself already rouses the readers' interest: on the front as well as on the back we can see Elliott himself as a third century Roman legionary in cross-bracing helmet, ring-mail and *sagum* ("cloak").

On the first pages the author summarizes the main guide-lines of his research: after Commodus' death the Roman army gained the political power with the aid of Septimius Severus who was also the distributor of the new types of weapons, armours and tactics (*Introduction* pp. 7-8). This thesis is the starting point of Elliott's whole logical contexture which can be separated into three blocks. After a *List of Emperors* (pp. 11-12) from Trajan to Diocletian, chapters 1-3 (pp. 13-48) represent Marcus Aurelius' Marcomannic Wars as the first crucial period, the rise and military reforms of Septimius Severus whence the late imperial "defence in depth" tactics is originated by Elliott, and the contracted history of the Severan Dynasty and soldier emperors until 253, the accession to power of Valerian and his son, Gallienus. Chapters 4-8 (pp. 49-115)

constitute the book's true archaeological block: the author compares the third century Roman soldiers' appearance, weapons and armours with the early imperial types, and he also discusses military life in garrisons. Chapters 9-11 (pp. 116-142) conclude the book with the turbulent years of the 250s and 260s (including the siege of Dura Europos in 255 or 256), the empire's restoration by Aurelian in the 270s, the brief history of the last soldier emperors until Diocletian and finally with an outlook to the fourth century.

According to Elliott Septimius Severus played the biggest role in the whole third century crisis. But this role is not quite clear for me, and it seems that Elliott himself hesitates as well. First he advisedly does not nominate Septimius Severus to some kind of architect or establisher of the third century crisis. Denying the architect's role appears in the first pages: "although emperor Severus did not kick-start this transformation" (p. 8). However, we can read the opposite at other places. For example Elliott often reflects on Septimius' final advice to his sons ("give money to the soldiers, and scorn all other people," - pp. 7, 14, 23, 43; D. C. 76, 15) such as an adoptable method throughout the third century crisis. Namely the loyalty had to be paid after almost all of the soldier emperors had seized the power with supporting frontier armies. So the exercise of this soldiers' paying off was followed by the third century emperors and Severus became its architect without his knowledge: "Severus was changing the rules, closing the door to potential rivals. That was probably his intent at any rate but in doing this he was handing over the keys of the empire to the *miles*, the common soldier... The seeds of disaster were sown" (p. 23). After this Severus seems to me the architect rather than the promoter or contributor of the third century political transformation in Elliott's context. The author advisedly does not want to clarify his viewpoint, so the question of "architect or contributor" is still open.

But in the case of the military question Elliott begins to make a point: "seen over the course of succeeding centuries, his (Severus') changes in military organisation may have been fundamental in shifting the Roman military might from a strategy of static frontier defence to one of central reserve forces" (p. 24). This means that Septimius Severus is the architect of the third century military innovations and the fourth century "defence in depth" tactics. According to Elliott this can be proved by Severus' important military measures: the reconstruction of the Praetorian Guard from his loyal veterans and legionaries, and the foundation of *Legio II Parthica* (pp. 21-22). Therefore Severus' new Praetorian Guard became Rome's first mobile, imperial field army, it was combined with *Legio II Parthica* (based at Albanum, circa 34 km eastward from Rome), one of the Urban Cohorts, the *equites singulari Augusti* and auxiliaries (especially cavalries) in Italy, and the whole reserve army was numbered around 21 500 soldiers (pp. 28-30). Besides Severus' field army with additional *vexillationes* ("detachments") from various legionary cohorts of legions would provide a strong combat force for the third century emperors (p. 30). Though Elliott admits the Roman cavalry's continually increasing role in the third century, he denies that Gallienus' cavalry could be Rome's first mobile field army:

“more likely, the *equites* Dalmatae as well as two units of mounted Moorish javelin men (the *equites* Mauri) and Osrhoene horse archers, simply served as supporting cavalry forces. There is little evidence that they were at all independent or enjoyed the command of a senior general; they acted, as cavalry had always acted, as a powerful skirmishing force” (p. 31).

In my opinion Elliott overrates Severus’ Praetorian Guard and *II Parthica*, and he is totally wrong in the case of Gallienus’ cavalry.

Elliott states that the Praetorian Guard “was rarely deployed to a battle-front” (p. 29) in the first and second centuries. I think it was more often than rarely. Praetorians would fight time and time again in civil wars and against the barbarians. In 14 the rebellious Pannonian legions were defeated by Drusus, accompanied by two Praetorian Cohorts and most of the Praetorian cavalry under the command of Aelius Seianus *praefectus praetorio* (Tac. *Ann.* 1, 24). During the civil war of 69 the Praetorian Guard would support emperor Otho (Tac. *Hist.* 2, 11), but after his defeat Vitellius had disbanded the Guard and formed a new one. So the practice of disbanding the Guard was also used by the former emperors, and there were no outstanding military changes. Domitian’s *praefectus praetorio*, Cornelius Fuscus led a campaign against the Dacians and he was defeated and killed in 86 (Suet. *Dom.* 6, 1). Praetorian Cohorts would fight in Trajan’s Dacian expeditions and in Marcus Aurelius’ Marcomannic Wars during the second century. I think these former examples prove that the Praetorian Guard had already acted like a combat unit long before Septimius Severus. Of course when it was needed. So the third century praetorians’ duty did not differ much from the old ones’ service.

It is true that the *Legio II Parthica* was established by Septimius Severus and it was based nearby Rome in order to maintain the stability and crush the revolts in the absence of the emperor. Therefore, the protection of Italy against the foreign attacks was not primary yet. The empire was not threatened by the barbarians in the 190s and 200s as much as in the years of the Marcomannic Wars. The real danger occurred from the reign of Alexander Severus, so the *II Parthica* could only transform into Elliott’s visioned reserve force from the 220s. Of course Elliott is right when he says that “the *II Parthica* became the personal legion of the third century emperors and... could provide a reserve of troops for other legions if necessary” (p. 29) but other legions could act like that, too. For example the *VII Gemina*, based at modern León, Spain, far behind the *limes*.

Despite his concept of the Severan reserve army Elliott accepts that the main forces of the third century Roman army were the *vexillationes*. These effective combat detachments were named after the *vexillum* (“flag”), were mixed from various legions and were settled in the frontier garrisons to stop the enemies (pp. 26-28).

I think Gallienus’ cavalry more likely resembled a reserve force than Septimius Severus’ army. This mobile, fast-moving and light-armoured unit was a totally independent force, had its own high-ranked commander (the position of *dux equitum* first was filled by Manlius Acilius Aureolus who would bring so many victories to Gallienus time and time again, then by two later emperors,

Claudius II and Aurelian, the later emperor and *Restitutor Orbis*), and it was based at Mediolanum (modern Milan) whence the Alps' passes and whole Italy could be defended against the German tribes or the Gallic usurpers. It is true that this force was not so powerful like the fourth century cataphracts. However, the cavalry of Mediolanum had remained after Gallienus' death, and took part in defeating the Palmyrian Empire in 273. Some historians think it existed at least until the death of emperor Probus, 282. Elliott himself also admits that the faster Roman cavalry gained the battles at Immae and at Emesa for Aurelian (pp. 135-136) so it is understandable to me why Gallienus' cavalry is degraded by the author (p. 31).

In my opinion the book's most valuable parts are chapters 4-8 where Elliott compares the third century Roman soldier's appearance, weaponry and armour with the older imperial style. The comparison focuses on the Roman legionaries and auxiliary infantry. The cavalry and missile units (archers, slingers etc.) are also mentioned. At the end of the comparison the reader can see how *spatha*, ringmail or oval shields displaced the more familiar pieces, like *gladius*, *lorica segmentata* or *scutum*.

Elliott uses literary sources (Vegetius, Ammianus Marcellinus, Cassius Dio etc.), much archaeological evidence, the representations of Trajan's and Marcus Aurelius' Columns, the imagery of Septimius Severus' Arch, epitaphs of Roman legionaries and of course his own experiences for the illustration of his research. 39 spectacular colour plates represent the various armours, swords, military equipment and the author also gives an *Appendix* (pp. 143-148) for some of them. Most of the photos and sources are from the Dura Europos collection of the Royal Ontario Museum, Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums and the Dura collection of Yale University's Ancient Art Department. There are a few black-and-white pictures and detailed maps of the western and eastern frontiers as well (pp. 9-10, 126).

It is not surprising that the siege and fall of Dura Europos in 255 or 256 is represented by Elliott at the end of the book (pp. 124-129). Unfortunately researchers do not know much about the third century battles and wars; most of the literary sources are just short epitomes. But the siege of Dura Europos is well reconstructed by archaeological evidence. Anyway most of our knowledge about the third century military equipment and warfare is from the excavations of Dura Europos.

In the *Bibliography* (pp. 149-150) the list of the ancient and modern sources is not complete and errorless (it is probably the publisher's fault). Some mistakes: Cassius Dio is missing from the ancient sources (p. 149), Edward Gibbon from the modern authors, and the name of Lukas de Blois appears incorrectly (Le Blois, L., p. 150).

The *Endnotes* (pp. 151-156) are collected chapter by chapter but Elliott is not so consistent. For example some ancient sources are reflected, others like Cassius Dio or Vegetius are not (pp. 14, 114-115). The *Index* (pp. 157-160) at least is well constructed.

Despite some weak proofs on the existence of Severus' reserve army, the degradation of Gallienus' cavalry and the vanishing formal mistakes, the *Legions in Crisis* is a spectacular, detailed and enjoyable book which can add some new and interesting information to the bloody history of the third century downfall.