

THE ORIGINS OF THE *FRUMENTARII*

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The Roman soldiers known as *frumentarii* are recorded on more than 100 inscriptions dating from the first to the third centuries AD. These men were all legionary troops seconded from their units to serve provincial governors as couriers, carrying messages between the governor and the emperor. Many are thus recorded at provincial capitals, but the majority are known from Rome itself. There they were attached to a special unit, the *numerus frumentariorum*, and were housed in a special camp on the Mons Caelius, the *Castra Peregrina* — the ‘foreign camp’ — which was probably built in the early second century. From that period at least, the *frumentarii*, when they were not carrying despatches, appear to have been employed by the emperors as a sort of secret police force, with their own centurions under the command of a senior centurion bearing the title *princeps peregrinorum*. They are recorded in literary texts acting as imperial spies and even as assassins, and by the Severan period the post of *princeps peregrinorum* had become highly influential¹. Three of

these men subsequently rose to be *praefecti praetorio*, and one of these, M. Oclatinus Adventus, refused the imperial throne on the death of Caracalla and became *consul ordinarius* and *praefectus urbi* under Macrinus². Eventually, according to Aurelius Victor, the *frumentarii* became so unpopular as a result of their espionage activities that they were disbanded by the emperor Diocletian³.

The origins of the *frumentarii* are, however, obscure, and it is not clear how men with this title came to be attached to provincial governors and used as couriers in the first place. The almost universal assumption has inevitably been that they originated as supply officers charged with obtaining corn (*frumentum*) for the legions, and it has often been claimed that this continued to be a regular part of their duties⁴, although there is no con-

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1. *Frumentarii*: BAILLIE REYNOLDS, P.K., “The troops quartered in the *Castra Peregrina*”, *JRS* 13, 1923, 168-89; SINNINGEN, W., “The origins of the *frumentarii*”, *MAAR* 27, 1962, 213-24; CLAUS, M., *Untersuchungen zu den principales des römischen Heeres von Augustus bis Diokletian. Cornicularii, speculatores, frumentarii*, Bochum 1973, 82-109; PASCHOU, F., “*Frumentarii*, agentes in rebus, magistriani, curiosi, veredarii: problèmes de terminologie” in *Bonner Historia-Augusta-Colloquium 1979-81*, Bonn 1983, 215-43; MANN, J.C., “The organization of the *frumentarii*”, *ZPE* 74, 1988, 149-50; RANKOV, N.B., “*Frumentarii*, the *Castra Peregrina* and the provincial officia”, *ZPE* 80, 1990, 176-82. *Castra Peregrina*: BAILLIE REYNOLDS, P.K., “The *Castra Peregrinorum*”, *JRS* 13, 1923, 152-67; COLINI, A.M., “Storia e topografia del Celio nell’ Antichità”, *Atti della Pontificia Accademia Romana d’Archeologia. Serie III. Memorie. VII*, 1944, 240-245; LISSI CARONNA, E., “Scoperte sotto S. Stefano Rotondo”, CESCHI, C. (ed.), *S. Stefano Rotondo. Atti della Pontificia Accademia Romana d’Archeologia. Serie III. Memorie. XV*, 1982, 175-83; MANN, J.C., “The *Castra Peregrina* and the ‘peregrini’”, *ZPE* 74, 1988, 148.

2. *Principes peregrinorum* rising to the Praetorian prefecture: D.C. 79.14.1-15.1; cf. RANKOV, N.B., “M. Oclatinus Adventus in Britain”, *Britannia* 18, 1987, 243-9.

3. Disbandment of *frumentarii*: AUR. VICT. *Caes.* 39.44.

4. *Frumentarii* as supply officers: HENZEN, W., “Discorso sui militi peregrini e *frumentarii*”, *Bulletino dell’Istituto di Corrispondenza Archeologica* 1851, 113-121; HENZEN, W., “Le castra peregrinorum ed i *frumentarii*”, *Bulletino dell’Istituto di Corrispondenza Archeologica* 1884, 21-29; NAUDET, J., “Sur la signification du mot *frumentarius*”, *CRAI* 1875, 144-151; MARQUARDT, J., *Römische Staatsverwaltung* vol. 2, 2nd. ed. Leipzig 1884, 476-477, 491-495; PARIBENI, R., “Dei milites *Frumentarii* e dell’approvigionamento della corte imperiale”, *MDAI(R)* 20, 1905, 310-320; FIEBIGER, H.O., “*Frumentarii*”, *RE* 7, Stuttgart 1910, 122-125, esp. 122; ROSTOVZEFF, M., “*Frumentum*”, *RE* 7, Stuttgart 1910, 126-187, esp. 181; CAGNAT, R., *L’armée romaine d’Afrique*, Paris 1912, 320-321; VAGLIERI, D., “*Frumentarius*”, De RUGGIERO, E. (ed.), *Dizionario epigrafico di antichità romane* 3, Roma 1922, 221-224, esp. 221; DE LAET, S.J., “Les pouvoirs militaires des préfets du prétoire et leur développement progressif”, *RBP* 125, 1946-1947, 509-554, esp. 533-536; STEIN, E., *Histoire du bas-empire*, 2e ed, Paris 1959, 113-4; SINNINGEN, o.c., esp. 214-215, 217-218, 223-224; WIERSCHOWSKI, L., “*Frumentarii*”, CANCIK, H.; SCHNEIDER, H. (edd.), *Der Neue Pauly Enzyklopädie der Antike* 4, Stuttgart, 1998, 685-6.

clusive evidence⁵. This explanation of their origins has perhaps been accepted rather too readily. It is true that the word *frumentarius* is on occasion used to describe men engaged in obtaining military supplies, but it is more regularly used to indicate a dealer in corn or a corn-merchant, both by itself as a noun and coupled as an adjective with *negotiator*⁶. An individual concerned with foraging is more appropriately described as a *frumentator*⁷.

The *officia* of the provincial *legati Augusti* developed considerably over the period of the Principate, and it is clear that they eventually became quite large and included very many specialist staff. The titles of the junior staff of the *officia* appear to reflect their specialisations and the roles they actually performed — *adiutores*, *exceptores*, *notarii*, *librarii*, *exacti*, *interpretes* — probably accrued to the *officia* as they developed. The titles of most of the more senior members, however, *cornicularii*, *speculatores*, *beneficiarii*, *frumentarii* are not obviously related to their attested functions under the Principate and therefore seem to derive from the earlier, Republican, period⁸. The exception which

proves the rule are the *commentarienses*, who were senior *officiales* ranking after the *cornicularii* and who kept the governor's judicial day-books (*commentarii*). The *commentarienses* are not epigraphically attested before the middle of the second century AD, and Haensch has argued convincingly in his detailed study of them that they may have been modelled on military *commentarienses* employed by the praesidial procurators in the equestrian provinces, who had supplanted the earlier use by these governors of *servile a commentariis* from the *familia Caesaris*⁹.

Of the remaining senior *officiales*, only the *speculatores* clearly derive their title from an actual function. Men with this title appear in the Caesarian corpus in the role of specially selected spies, as their name suggests¹⁰. Under the Principate, however, *speculatores* drawn from the legions are known to have acted as couriers and executioners serving the governors¹¹, and *speculatores* in the Praetorian cohorts as a special cavalry guard to the emperor¹². *Cornicularii*, on the other hand, seem to derive their title from a Republican military decoration, the *corniculum*, which was apparently a small horn granted for valour and, according to Livy, worn on the helmet¹³. This decoration was no longer awarded under the Principate, but *cornicularii* stood at the head of all military *officia*, including those of the provincial governors¹⁴. *Beneficiarii* were men who had been singled out by their commanders to receive the *beneficium* of being relieved of general duties¹⁵. In Caesar's *Bellum Civile* the Pompeian commander Petreius employs barbarian cavalry, who are described as

5. The main evidence cited for the involvement of the *frumentarii* with corn supply under the Principate is CIL VI, 3340: *Aurelius Lucianus / frumentarius (sic) / [in] legionem II Itali[cam] / [ad] frum[e]ntarias[...]* / [res curandas...] / [...]. The reading was suggested by Mommsen, but is extremely uncertain. Even if it is correct, the fact that the *frumentarius* specifically says that he was dealing with the corn supply would, if anything, suggest that this was not part of his normal duties. Better evidence for involvement with food-supply is provided by AE 1977,171 from Portus, on which a *centurio frumentarius* records that he set up the inscription on the instructions of the *praefectus annonae*. This is far from conclusive, however, since *frumentarii* and especially *centuriones frumentarii* are recorded on detachment from Rome to perform a large variety of special tasks, including, overseeing marble quarrying at Luna in Italy and porphyry quarrying at Djebel Dokhan, imperial building at Delphi and at Salona, and police duties in Asia and Africa; see CLAUSS, *o.c.*, 85-86, 95-109; RANKOV, *o.c.*, 1990, 177-178. In *P.Gen. Lat.* 1, recto II, 32, the phrase *exit cum frumentariis* is ambiguous, since it could in the context refer to ordinary *frumentatores* (see note 6) or even to ships rather than men.

6. *Frumentarius* meaning forager or supply officer: HIRT. *Call.* 8,35,4; *P.Gen.Lat.* 1, recto II, 32. *Frumentarius* meaning corn-merchant: PLAUT. *Pseud.* 188; *Cic. off.* 3,57; *Liv.* 4, 15, 6; 38, 55, 5.

7. *Frumentator*: *Liv.* 2, 34, 4; 22, 24, 2; 25, 14, 11; 31, 28, 8; *Tac. hist.* 4, 35.

8. Provincial *officia*: VON DOMASZEWSKI, A., *Die Rangordnung des römischen Heeres*, Bonn 1908, 2nd. ed., DOBSON, B., Köln, Graz 1967, xi-xiii, 29-37; JONES, A.H.M., "The Roman Civil Service (clerical and sub-clerical grades)", *JRS* 39, 1949, 38-55, esp. 44-46; HAENSCH, R., *Capita provinciarum. Statthaltersitze und Provinzialverwaltung in der römischen Kaiserzeit*, Mainz am Rhein 1997, 710-24; RANKOV, N.B., "The governor's men: the *officium consularis* in provincial administration", GOLDSWORTHY, A.; HAYNES, I. (edd.), *The Roman Army as a Community*. Portsmouth, (RI) 1999, 15-34; NELIS-CLÉMENT, J., *Les beneficiarii: militaires et administrateurs au service de l'empire (1er s.a.C. - VIe s.p.C.)*, Bordeaux 2000, 113-126, 211-217, 223-226.

9. *Commentarienses*: HAENSCH, R., "A commentariis und commentariensis: Geschichte und Aufgaben eines Amtes in Spiegel seiner Titulaturen", LE BOHEC, Y. (ed.), *La hiérarchie (Rangordnung) de l'armée romaine sous le Haut-Empire. Actes du Congrès de Lyon (15-18 septembre 1994)*, Paris 1995, 267-283.

10. *Speculatores* as spies in Caesar: *Caes. Gall.* 2, 11, 2-3; 5, 49, 8; *civ.* 3, 66, 1; 67, 1; *Bell. Hisp.* 28, 138, 1; 38, 3.

11. *Speculatores* as couriers: *Liv.* 31, 24; *Tac. hist.* 2, 73; *Suet. Cal.* 44, 2; as executioners: *Sen. benef.* 3, 25; *dial.* 3, 18, 4; *Ev.Marc.* 6, 27; *Dig.* 48, 20, 6 (Ulpian); *Act.Alexandrin.* 11, A2, 12; *Pass.Cypr.* 5; *Firm. math.* 8, 26, 6.

12. *Speculatores* in the Praetorian cohorts: DURRY, M. *Les cohortes prétoriennes*, Paris 1938, 108-10; CLAUSS, M., *o.c.*, 46-58; SPEIDEL, M.P., *Riding for Caesar. The Roman Emperors' Horse Guards*, London 1994, 33-35.

13. *Corniculum*: *ILS* 8888; *Suet. gramm.* 9; *Vir. ill.* 3,72,3; worn on helmet: *Liv.* 10, 44, 5. See MAXFIELD, V.A., *The Military Decorations of the Roman Army*, London 1981, 97-99.

14. *Cornicularii* at head of all *officia*: VON DOMASZEWSKI, *o.c.*, xi-xiv, xvii, xix, 17-18, 20-22, 29-41, 55-56, 58-59, 61, 63-68, 73-75; CLAUSS, *o.c.*, 17-45.

15. *Beneficiarii* and *beneficium*: *Fest.* p.30L: *beneficiarii dicebantur qui vacabant muneri beneficio*; cf. *Cic. fam.* 5,20,7; 7,5,3; *Liv.* 9, 30, 3; *CIL* III, 335; *Suet. Tib.* 12.3.

beneficarii sui, as a bodyguard, and Caesar also mentions 2,000 Pompeian *evocati* drawn from the *beneficarii* of his earlier armies¹⁶. Under the Principate, the *beneficarii* were the most common general grade in the military *officia*, and the *beneficarii* of the provincial governors, most of whom bore the title of *beneficarii consularis*, are very widely attested both performing a variety of duties at the provincial capitals and serving in outposts as the governor's representatives around the provinces¹⁷. What the origins of these three groups seem to have in common is simply that they consisted of men who had come into close contact with their commanding officer in one way or another, and this seems to be the best explanation for their eventually becoming associated with the *officia* of the army commanders.

How, then, do the *frumentarii* fit in? We may note first of all that the form of their name is more akin to those of the *cornicularii* and *beneficarii*, the recipients respectively of a *corniculum* and a *beneficium*, than with that of the *speculatores*, the men who were chosen to *speculari* on behalf of their commander. Since they were *frumentarii* and not *frumentatores*, there is thus a *prima facie* case for supposing that their role was not to *frumentari* for the army. On these analogies, we might expect that they were not the procurers but the recipients of *frumentum*.

The grant of extra foodstuffs for both men and horses is attested as a *de facto* mark of status in the Roman army, in particular from a well-known passage of Polybius. He tells us that while both Roman and allied infantry received 2/3 of a *medimnos* of wheat per month, allied cavalry received 1 1/3 *medimnoi* of wheat and 5 *medimnoi* of barley and Roman cavalry 2 *medimnoi* of wheat and 7 *medimnoi* of barley¹⁸. It is thought that the extra

rations would have allowed the allied cavalryman to maintain one groom or servant with the wheat and two horses with the barley, and the Roman cavalryman to maintain three grooms or servants and three horses. A grant of extra wheat would thus allow a soldier to maintain a servant (or more realistically perhaps a camp-follower, or just to convert the extra wheat into cash).

Livy specifically mentions the award of extra *frumentum* as an award for valour. He tells us that in 343 BC, the consul A. Cornelius Cossus Arvina presented a golden crown to the tribune P. Decius Mus for saving a Roman army which had been trapped in a ravine by the Samnites, while his men were rewarded *duplici frumento in perpetuum*¹⁹. The historicity of such a detail for this period is of course doubtful, but Livy shows considerable interest in military *dona* in his work and he was well acquainted with the various awards available to soldiers of different ranks in the late Republic. Perhaps more significant is the definition of *duplicarii* given by Varro in his *de lingua Latina*, written in the 40s BC after he had served with the Pompeian armies in the Civil War: *duplicarii dicti quibus ob virtutem duplicaria cibaria ut darentur institutum*²⁰. Under the Principate, *sequiplicarius* and *duplicarius* became the titles of junior officers in the auxiliary cavalry, acting as second- and third-in-command respectively of a *turma* of 30 men²¹. Most significantly of all, Caesar tells us that he granted double pay, wheat, clothing and food, as well as lavish awards of *dona militaria* to one of his cohorts which had distinguished itself at Dyrrhachium in 48 BC: *cohortemque postea duplici stipendio, frumento, veste, cibariis, militaribusque donis amplissime donavit*²².

The practice of awarding a double wheat ration for military courage is, finally, confirmed for us beyond any doubt by a well-known inscription. This is the famous bronze tablet, probably from the Capitoline in Rome and now on display in the Capitoline Museum, which records two decrees issued near Asculum during the Social War by Cn Pompeius Strabo, the consul of 89 BC and father of Pompey the Great²³. The tablet is now in two pieces and not quite complete, and three surviving

16. *Beneficarii* in Caesar: CAES. *civ.* 1, 75, 2 (Petreius); 3, 88, 4 (Pompey).

17. *Beneficarii*: HIRSCHFELD, O., "Die Sicherheitspolizei im römischen Kaiserreich", *Sitzungsbericht der Berliner Akademie* 1891, 845-877, esp. 862-863 (= *Kleine Schriften*, Berlin 1913, 576-612, esp. 595-596); VON DOMASZEWSKI, A. "Die Beneficiari-erposten und die römischen Strassennetze" *Westdeutsche Zeitschrift* 21, 1902, 158-211; SCHALLMAYER, E. *et al.* (edd.), *Der römische Weihebezirk von Osterburken I. Corpus der griechischen und lateinischen Beneficiari-erposten des Römischen Reiches*, Stuttgart 1990; *Der römische Weihebezirk von Osterburken II. Kolloquium 1990 und paläobotanische-osteologische Untersuchungen*, Stuttgart 1994; OTT, J., *Die Beneficiari-erposten. Untersuchungen zu ihrer Stellung innerhalb der Rangordnung des römischen Heeres und zu ihrer Funktion*, Stuttgart 1995; RANKOV, *o.c.*, 1999; NELIS-CLÉMENT, *o.c.*

18. Army rations according to Polybius: PLB. 6, 39, 13-14.

19. Award of *frumentum* to the troops of P. Decius Mus: LIV. 7, 37, 2.

20. Definition of *duplicarii* as men who received double rations: VARRO *ling.* 5, 90.

21. VON DOMASZEWSKI, *o.c.*, 1908, 2nd ed. DOBSON, *o.c.*, 53-56.

22. Caesar grants *frumentum* alongside *dona militaria*: CAES. *civ.* 3, 53, 5.

23. ILS 8888; cf. CRINITI, N., *L'epigrafe di Asculum di Gn. Pompeo Strabone*, Milan 1970.

nail-holes show that it was once probably attached to a wall. Both decrees on the tablet reward a troop of Spanish cavalymen, the *turma Salluitana*, for its bravery. The first decree grants the men of the troop citizenship in accordance with the *lex Iulia* of 90 BC:

[Cn(aeus)] Pompeius Sex(ti) f(i)lius Imperator / virtutis causa / equites Hispanos ceives [Romanos fecit in castr]eis apud Asculum a(n)te d(i)em XIV K(alendas) Dec(embres) / ex lege Iulia. In consili[o fuerunt]...

"Cn. Pompeius, son of Sextus, victorious commander, on account of their courage made Spanish cavalry Roman citizens in his camp near Asculum on 17th November [90 or 89 BC], in accordance with the Julian law. In his advisory council there were..."

followed by 59 Roman names, including those of Strabo's son Pompey (Cn(aeus) Pompei(us) Cn(aei) f(i)lius Clu(stumina tribu)) and of Catiline (L(ucius) Sergius L(uci) f(i)lius Tro(mentina tribu)).

There then follows the name of the troop, *turma Salluitana*, probably named after Salluvia or Salduba which later became Caesaraugusta and is now Saragossa, and the names and origins of the 30 troopers from ten different towns in Spain.

A second short decree is then recorded in the lower right-hand portion of the tablet:

Cn(aeus) Pompeius Sex(ti) f(i)lius Imperator / virtutis causa turmam / Salluitanam donavit in / castris apud Asculum / cornuculo et patella, torque / armilla palereis et faumentium [sic] / duplex

"Cn. Pompeius, son of Sextus, victorious commander, on account of their courage granted the *Turma Salluitana* in his camp near Asculum the little horn and plate, necklace, armband, discs and double corn"

The inscription contains a number of misspellings, but the latest editor of the inscription, Criniti, has noted that the engraver himself had attempted to correct *faumentium* to *frumentum*, albeit rather badly, and we can be sure that the last two words of the original decree were *frumentum duplex*²⁴. The words are certainly written in the same hand as the rest of the tablet, so they are not a later addition, and the switch from the ablative with *donavit* to the accusative may perhaps reflect the fact that the *frumentum duplex* was a reward in kind rather than one of the *dona* proper. The tablet bears the only epigraphic attestation of the award of *frumentum* in this way, but it equally bears the only epigraphic attestations of the award either of the *corniculum* or of the *patella* (which is otherwise obscure but is perhaps the same as the Greek *φιάλη* mentioned by Polybius)²⁵. If, however, we are right to see the origins of the *cornicularii* in soldiers who had been awarded the *corniculum*, and of the *beneficarii* in men who had been granted a *beneficium* (not to mention the origins of the *duplicarii* in men who had been awarded double rations, as Varro says), then there is every reason to see the origins of the *frumentarii* in men who had been awarded a double issue of *frumentum*, and to reject any attempts to associate them with the Roman army commissariat, either under the Republic or in the later period.

24. CRINITI, *o.c.*, 10, 26-7.

25. *Patella*: MAXFIELD, *o.c.*, 96-97; *φιάλη*; PLB. 6, 39, 3.