THE PRAETORIAN GUARD, ROME'S INTELLIGENCE SERVICE

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Abstract: *Rome was a kingdom, then a republic, and culminated in a militaristic empire. For this, the city of Mars invented, perfected and organized efficient institutions to carry out its plans, which extended it from the Italic Peninsula throughout the world on which Rome had a say. One of the most efficient institutions, the essence of the Roman executive power, was not the **Princeps**, but the **Praetorian Guard**, a military and police institution, at the same time political, economic, but especially with the powers of a secret service, being one of the forerunners of European secret services, surpassing all that had existed until its functioning, not being matched to this day in terms of efficiency and impact in the life of a civilization. When founding the Principate, the Praetorian Guard was the one which transformed the imperial dream of Rome into a historical reality. The “wings of the Roman eagle” that spread over the world conquered by the Romans were Praetorian, if we consider that this institution was coordinated by **ordo equester**, the tagma of Rome’s career officers, its headquarters, but also the government of Rome, the praetorian prefect also fulfilling the function which today we would call prime minister, the second man in the hierarchy of the Roman state, of course after the **princeps** (the first of the citizens). Although as a military structure, the Praetorian Guard appeared with the professional Roman army, it reached its peak with the Principate, initially having a guard function for the Roman military commander, it became in time the most effective secret service of classical Antiquity. This success was due to the fact that the Romans were inspired by the Spartans (especially the Ephorian magistrates), but also by the Persians (from the administrative organization of the satrapies, the 10,000 immortals, and especially the royal postal service of Persia), the Roman creation being the most complete, therefore the etymology of the word “information” is Latin. From a military perspective, the Praetorian Guard was organized at all levels of a global society, such as Rome, covering informatively, politically, militarily, economically, but also diplomatically all Roman interests in the world controlled by Rome, being a true intelligence service. It was the first informative outpost in non-Roman territories, which had to be transformed into Roman territories, as was the case of Dacia.*

Keywords: Rome, elite military, secret service, intelligence, expansion.

1. Introduction

Rome was a special state from its very beginnings, its kings were elected and it later innovated a typical representative democracy, *Res publica Romana*, in which the decision-making power was held by aristocrats, grouped in *ordo senatorius* (those who could go through *cursus honorum*, the steps of the public dignities of

the Roman state), and the executive power was held by *homines novi* (people with new ideas, the progressists) grouped together with the professional officers, in *ordo equester*, those who administered the Roman state. Just as for *ordo senatorius* there was a peak of their career, namely the Consulate, so was for *ordo equester* a peak of their career/rank, namely the Prefectures

(which could be both military functions, involving the command of units of 500 or 1000 people, or the command of garrisons such as *Praefectus Urbi* or *Praefectus Praetorii*, as well as militarized administrative functions such as the Prefecture of Egypt, supplies, post office - we can say that of communications -, customs, finance, etc.), the equivalent of the consul of aristocrats was for the knights the prefect of the Praetorian Guard.

At the beginning of the Principate, the Praetorian Guard was the headquarters not only of *ordo equester*, but of the Principate itself, achieved by Augustus, but imagined by Caesar, the first to imagine the borders of Rome throughout the whole world. Augustus would build the Principate with *ordo equester*, because he could command them in his capacity as the supreme commander of the army, *Imperator*, and the upper echelon of the army, at the same time the elite of the Roman army was represented by the Praetorian Guard. The apogee of the Principate and its political success are due to the Roman army and especially to the Roman officers, who were the ones who best administered the new power, and the gray eminence of these officers was the Praetorian Guard, coordinator of the entire Roman imperial executive power. The Praetorian prefect was not only the head of an elite military troop, a guard troop for the emperor and his family, but also the head of the Roman government (the second of the citizens, because *Princeps*, the first of the citizens, was the emperor himself) and the coordinator of a true intelligence service, unique, very well developed, very well organized, operating in both *Urbs* (Rome) and *orbs* (the world controlled by Rome and the world to be controlled by Rome).

Our study aims to demonstrate the importance of the Praetorian Guard and its contribution with regard to the European secret services, as the best organized and efficient secret service in European Antiquity. The lack of specific

bibliographic sources regarding this function of intelligence service of the Praetorian Guard, challenged us in our research and urged us to give back the merit of this structure in terms of tradition for the European part of the history of secret services. Through this study, we also intend to show that in the European part the secret services appeared, evolved, were coordinated and acted for the good of the state they served, the Praetorian Guard is not inferior to the secret agents theorized by Sun Tzu's *Art of war*, representative of the Ancient East, in particular the Far East.

In the western part of classical Antiquity, the Praetorian Guard was the equivalent of Sun Tzu's "secret agents", but they were organized in an elite service that managed information for the defence of the state they served, both in peacetime and wartime. It is no coincidence that the basic concepts in the field of secret services have Latin etymologies.

2. The history of a Roman word and secret service

Most informative and military terminology has Latin origins. Along the same line, numerous notions in the field of security were not only conceptualized by the Romans, but also put into practice by the Eternal City. Thus, such notions as information, informative, operative, security, secret services, intelligence services, etc. were not only defined, but also operationalized by the Romans, as one of the secrets of an *Urbs* which became an *Orbs*.

This organization of the Roman army does not come from nothing, it has a strong Indo-European tradition, but not only. Just like in all Indo-European societies, the Romans had a class of warriors, and so did the Spartan ephors who controlled everything in Sparta, one of the most militarized states in the ancient world, the Romans also had a function of control by the armed forces in Roman politics, since they came as a result of institutional reforms, the most profound being the census reform of Servius Tullius,

as the Persians of Darius the Great had a royal guard, and also a special troop, the 10,000 Immortals, so was the Praetorian Guard conceived. Rome was inspired by the Persians, whom it could never conquer, militarizing the roads and the postal service, precisely to ensure the security of the Roman state.

We will present the main Latin terms mentioned above, in order to better understand the history of a word which has become an institution:

Informație/ ‘information’ from *informatio, -onis* f.n.1. *idea, notion*; 2. *plan, sketch*; and from the vb. *Informo* = to form, to shape; fig. to represent [1].

Inteligent (servicii inteligente)/ ‘intelligent (intelligence services)’ from *intellegentia, -ae* f.n. *skill, understanding, knowledge* and from the vb. *Intellego* = to understand, to get, to realize [2].

Operații, (servicii operative, operații speciale)/ ‘operations (operational services, special operations)’ from *opera, -ae* f.n.1. *work, activity, effort*; 2.

Servicii/ ‘services’; 3. (special) *respite*; 4. *employee...* and from the vb. *Operor* = to deal with something [3].

Secret/ ‘secret’ from *secretum, -ii* n.n. = 1. *lonely place*; 2. *secret conversation*; 3. *secret, mystery*; and from *secreto* adv. *secretly, in private, away from the others* [4].

Securitate/ ‘security’ from *securitas, -atis* f.n. 1. *lack of worries (lack of fear)*, 2. *safety*; and from *secure* adv. = *carefree, quiet*, and also from *securis, -is* f.n. *axe*, 2 (figuratively) *authority, Roman power* [5] (it is a word of Etruscan origins, most likely if we consider the fact that the symbol of the authority of kings, then of Roman consuls, was represented by the fasces and axes carried on the shoulders of the lictors - our emphasis).

Servicii/ ‘services’ from *servio* vb. ...2. (figuratively) *to serve, to put oneself in the service, to take into account...*[6].

So it is not wrong to say that the Praetorian Guard was the Roman secret service, because it shaped a new global Rome along

with, of course, its supreme commander, the emperor. The Praetorian Guard was an intelligence service because it not only collected information, but also interpreted, used and organized it in accordance with the interests of the Roman state. Moreover, the Praetorian Guard was the one that carried out numerous operations in the interest of the Roman Empire, it ensured the care of the entire Roman world, it was employed by the Roman state, body and soul, 24 hours a day. While serving the Roman state, the Praetorian Guard ensured the military rigour and discipline, being, however, an elite force of the Roman army, an institution as such. Like the Roman state, its special force evolved with it, perfecting its units, methods and performance, including in Roman politics.

3. The Praetorian Guard, evolution and structure

The name of *praetorium* comes from the commander’s tent, placed in a Roman camp, always in the middle of the camp, at an equal distance from all four exits from the camp, exits situated in the four cardinal points, the commander’s tent or *praetorium* lying at the intersection of the two coordinates N-S and E-W in the military camp site.

In the Roman army there was always a *cohors praetoria*, an elite military unit, having the role of physical guard of the commander of a legion and his headquarters. The Praetorian prefect, as a rank close to the ruler of Rome, was created in 2 BC by Augustus, and the effective force of the Praetorian Guard and the Rome Garrison amounted to about 4500 soldiers, just like any legion. The title of *praefectus* for the leader of this special military unit was granted by *Princeps*, as a reward, but also as a demonstration of his military authority, because the Praetorian Guard was closest to the *princeps*, in his capacity as the supreme leader of the army [7].

In order to reach this authority of the Praetorian Guard, Augustus reinvents *ordo*

equester, giving it the rule of Rome, which becomes a “ruling *ordo*”, and *Praefectus Praetorio* becomes the pinnacle of the equestrian career.[8] At the same time, in order to ensure *Pax Romana* which presupposed the safety of Rome, whether it was *Urbs* or *Orbs*, Augustus militarizes the most important sectors of economic life, the model being initiated by Caesar. Thus, *ordo equester* had the main vital services such as Egypt, the private domain of the imperial person, but also the main grain supplier of Rome, the supplies and especially the post office. At the head of all these services, militarized or prefectures, was the Praetorian Guard. The four great prefectures, as well as the hierarchy of *ordo equester* were in the following hierarchical order: *Praefectus Praetorio* = Prefect of the Praetorian Guard, *Praefectus Annonae* = Prefect of Supplies, *Praefectus vigilum* = Rome’s police commander (including firefighters - our emphasis) and *Praefectus Aegypti* = The Governor of Egypt.[9]

So the Praetorian Prefect managed a complex system, which involved economy, diplomacy, public safety, but above all, he was an elite soldier. The coordination of the Roman post office ensured the Roman communication security. Thus *praefectus a vehiculis* (prefect of the Roman post) belonged to *ordo equester*, too. Although there are some hypotheses that Augustus was inspired by Egypt’s secret service in creating his own secret service[10], the structure of the Praetorian Guard is much more like the 10,000 immortals and Persian satrapies than Egypt. Thus, Rome perfected the Persian system, combining the satrapies, administrative functions with an elite force and the royal guard of the 10,000 immortals. Somehow, Rome merged two entities into one, better than both together. Like the 10,000 immortals, the Praetorian Guard participated in wars with the emperor, but like the satraps it informed the emperor about everything that was happening in Rome, no matter where it was, after becoming a world power. Thus, the

establishment of the Roman postal service was, without any doubt, conceived according to the Persian model, the Roman post office was militarized, and this was the first step towards “monopolizing the transmission of information” [11].

The Roman innovation in the military field was perhaps the legacy of the military profession, including the Praetorian one, because *ordo equester* was the coordinator of an army of professionals, a hereditary profession [12].

The Praetorian Guard, like any secret service, was predominantly military. In addition to providing physical security for the emperor, it also provided state security, supervised the imperial family, ensured the security of the city through the Rome Garrison, subject to the Praetorian Guard, collected information, and also accompanied the emperor in his military campaigns (see the case of Dacia), but besides these military attributions, of elite force, the Guard received other powers from the emperor, such as the civil ones, carrying out his policy, being the best instrument of his policy and of his accomplishment.[13] Thus, there appears the term *praetorianism* which referred to “the rule of the state by the military”[14].

Augustus, and after him other emperors, such as Tiberius, reformed and added new structures to the Praetorian Guard, which did not exist until then, such as a *centuria speculatorum* = century-100- of spies or lookouts.[15] In addition to this unit of lookouts, which were probably sent on campaign in advanced positions to observe the enemy and its actions, Augustus established several special units in 27 BC such as the bodyguard (*corporis custodes*, originally composed of Germans, due to their athletic constitution – our emphasis) of 100 people, therefore a century and perhaps the most special of all Roman military forces, the 100 *equites singulares*, an equestrian century.[16] The number of the Praetorian Guard’s effective troops was somewhere around IX or X cohorts

(between 500 and 1000) to which was added the Rome Garrison, thus reaching the strength of a legion (4500-6000). The Guard's forces were predominantly infantry, but the elite of the elites was the Guard's cavalry force, namely *Equites singulares Augusti*. The commander of the Guard had the same authority as a civilian consul [17].

The special character of the Praetorian Guard as an elite force, but also as the general staff of the entire Roman army was also visible by the fact that the salary of a Praetorian *miles* (soldier) was three times higher than that of a legionary *miles*, and the military service lasted only 16 years [18].

Politically, the Guard represented the government of Rome, the delegate of imperial power as "a symbol of its *imperium*." [19] This was the most efficient, special, militarized solution to put into practice the government of the Roman world, being held accountable only by the emperor himself, at whose command it was responsible and whose order it carried out. [20] Therefore, the Praetorian Guard was not only an institution of force, it was also a diplomatic and civil institution, especially economic because it was the first to ensure social peace, which provided the Roman people with *panis* (bread), safe roads, fair prices and especially the unity and privileges of *pacis Romanae*. The Praetorian Guard also informatively monitored all foreigners in Rome, to thwart plans against it, and it was one of the first anti-terrorist military forces of Antiquity [21], acting according to the old Roman principle: *Hospis, hostis (est)* - *The guest is an enemy* – our transl. Roman law was guarded and enforced in the "Praetorianism" of Rome, many Praetorian prefects being the most brilliant jurists of Rome.

4. The Praetorian Guard and the Dacia mission

A typical case of the operation of the Praetorian Guard as a secret service is the

conquest of Dacia. In the two Dacian wars, the Praetorian Guard was the spearhead of Rome. In the first of them, the command of the troops that invaded Dacia was held by the praetorian prefect, who prepared the ground for the second Dacian war, commanded by the emperor himself, even if he was no longer the same.

Although there was no clear winner in the first Dacian war, we can say that from a military point of view both belligerents lost, the Romans won the case from an informative standpoint, because through the armistice concluded with the Dacians they were able to infiltrate in the territory of the enemy and collect the necessary information so that *Dacia capta* [22] *sit* - Dacia could be conquered. So, even if Rome lost two legions, this does not necessarily mean that its soldiers were eliminated on the battlefield by the Dacians, but it lost its eagles, the symbols of the legions (which led to the abolition of the legions), but it still exploited informatively this defeat, learning from it. It thus left here observers able to offer compensation to the Dacians through the construction of objectives, of course most of them were *speculatores* (the word literally means *to watch*) obtaining for the Romans valuable information about the Dacian cities, about the water sources of Sarmisegetusa, about the possible collaborators, but especially about Dacia's economic and strategic potential for Rome.

We also consider that in Dacia it was the *equites singulares* that distinguished themselves (the translation of the phrase would be *lonely knights*, perhaps one of the most elitist military forces of Antiquity, each acting alone, such a knight was equivalent to an army), those who eliminated one by one all the actions of Dacia to wage wars in other parts of the Roman Empire, as in the world of the Parthians, always in conflict with the Romans, but also with the Celts, just to divide the Roman troops. According to Philip Matyszak [23], the messengers sent

by Decebalus (who perfectly intuited the danger of the armistice with the Romans) to the above-mentioned nations so that they would also trigger, at the same time, conflicts with Rome for a division of the great power's troops, never reached the destination, a proof of the efficiency of the service of these elite soldiers who were *equites singulares*, true forerunners of the commando troops.

Therefore, the conquest of Dacia was, from an informative point of view, a success for the Praetorian Guard, even when the Roman army lost two legions, thus explaining the Roman success in the second Daco-Roman war. Moreover, the Praetorian Guard, as an intelligence service and also a bodyguard of the emperor and government of Rome, secured Dacia through its agents sent on a mission to Dacia after the second Daco-Roman war, so that the emperor would come safely and be successful. It was no coincidence that all the attacks carried out by the Dacians regarding Trajan's safety were thwarted, it is a proof that the Praetorian Guard did its duty.

Romanization was an extraordinary process which transformed non-Roman worlds into Roman ones, and the main agent was the Praetorian Guard, because it drew up the "plan" of military action and then the administrative plan for organizing conquests. We consider that the Dacia mission represented the best example of professionalism and action as a real secret service into which the Praetorian Guard had been transformed. The provincial organization of Dacia and the exploitation of its assets were coordinated by these shadow professionals of Rome, which ensured the economic recovery of the vast Roman world, because the riches in the soil and subsoil were a state monopoly, i. e. militarized, supervised by the Roman

government, represented by the same Praetorian Guard.

5. Conclusions

The Praetorian Guard was the most complex Roman military structure, becoming the most efficient secret service of the ancient European world, which had no rival, in measure, in the ancient Western world, (especially in front of the Greeks, innovators in so many areas). It had the structure of a pre-existing military unit and other civilian structures, such as economic, diplomatic and political ones, were added to it. Although there are many conflicting opinions regarding the loyalty of the Praetorian Guard toward the emperor, (because it even imposed some emperors, slightly changing the hierarchy of command), it always remained loyal to Rome and its power. This genuine institution was ready for anything, so that Rome's interests would triumph, from coups d'état in the states that were to become the satellites of Roman power, to ensuring the order and safety of Roman citizens, from exploiting resources, to organizing the judiciary, from the military campaigns to the implementation of *Pax Romana*, nothing was impossible for the Praetorian Guard in the service of the Eternal City. It was the one that carried out Rome's "plan", putting all its "knowledge", skill, "effort" into fulfilling this "commitment", most often "secretly". In its operations, as any part of the Roman military force, it complied with the principle stated by the census reform, which provided that *those who defended that country must lead it*, the Praetorian Guard introduced a new paradigm to this principle, which became, during the imperial apogee and later on, the following: *Those who defend the country must lead it and expand it*.

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