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THE TRIBUNES' CHOICE IN THE PROMOTION OF CENTURIONS

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The strength of the legions remained unbroken, says Vegetius, so long as soldiers were promoted for bravery (*virtus*) and hard work (*labor*) rather than by scheming (*ambitio*) and favors (*gratia*). One way to choose centurions was to give the candidates command of an outpost and to listen, afterwards, what the soldiers would say about them. The verdict of the soldiers, established in a formal poll or acclamation (*suffragatio*), carried much weight in the emperor's decision.¹ But, as revealed by an inscription found not long ago at Novae, there was also a formal officers' poll about a candidate, and it might be decisive.

Carved on a statue-base whose top is now missing, only two-thirds of the inscription from Novae are preserved:²

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et nova ordinatio[ne]
promotus ex opt(ione) tri[b(unorum)]
inpositus in ordine[m]
 5 *leg(ionis) I Ital(icae), factus p(rimus) p(ilus) leg(ionis)*
s(upra) s(criptae) ex vot(o) pos(uit). Felix
leg(io) I Ital(ica) victrix pia
semper ubique.

The monument, set up by a centurion in the headquarters building of the fortress of *legio I Italica*, was to celebrate the man's rise to the lofty rank of primuspilus. By mishap, however, his name and the beginning of his career vanished when the top of the stone broke off. As it stands, the text begins with a startling phrase, read by the first editor as *ex nova ordinatio[ne] promotus, ex opt(ione) eq[q(uitum)]*. Yet the photograph (fig. 1) leaves little doubt that in lines 2 and 3 one has to read *et*, rather than *ex*, and *tri*, rather than *eq*. While it is true that the R at the end of the second line differs from other Rs in that it seems to have a horizontal bar in the middle, it is nevertheless clearly an R and not at all joined to the following letter - hence the new reading, given above.

Ordinatio can mean many things: battle order, rank order, or appointment. Here, in a career, the likeliest meaning is 'appointment', or better still, 'appointment day', as in a phrase of Suetonius about Domitian (4,2): *sibi visum esset ordinatione proxima Aegypto praeficere Mettium Rufum*. Were there appointment days in the Roman army? Inscriptions from Lambaesis show the *optiones* of the second cohort moving up as a group, becoming

¹ Vegetius 2,3. Outposts: M.P.Speidel, *Roman Army Studies II* (= *Mavors* 8), Stuttgart 1992, 124-128.

² T.Sarnowski, 'Nova Ordinatio im römischen Heer des 3. Jh. und eine neue Primus Pilus-Weiherung aus Novae in Niedermoosien', *ZPE* 95, 1993, 197-203. Sarnowski was right to exclude the phantom post of *optio tribuni*.

the *optiones* of the first cohort.³ Since these men advanced together, their promotions are likely to have taken place on the same day. Their replacements, too, must have been promoted on that day - and so did no doubt the *optiones* of the other cohorts as well as their centurions: a true appointment day. We do not know how often such a new *ordinatio* came around. If it came every two years, the centurions of the tenth cohort had to wait twenty years to reach the first cohort, too long to get there before retirement, unless leapfrogging sped up their careers.

If it is true that *nova ordinatione* meant 'in the next round of appointments', then here is no need to contrast this phrase of our inscription with Vegetius' *antiqua ordinatio*, the description of the legionary organization during the High Empire. The likelihood that *nova ordinatione* refers indeed to an incident in the centurion's career rather than to a new framework for the legions is strengthened by the phrase *promotus ex opt(ione) trib(unorum)*, 'promoted by the tribunes' choice'. It seems that all six, rather than just one, of the legion's tribunes are meant, for an inscription recording the award of military decorations spells the phrase in full as *ex optione tribunorum*.⁴

The tribunes, it follows, met as a committee to decide the promotion of soldiers to centurions. Although this is new to our knowledge, it fits well with the known tasks of legionary tribunes, above all with their care for the men and their committee to judge individual soldiers' proficiency in training. Knights, too, played a telling role in the legions.⁵

As a way of keeping the legions sound and strong by promoting the best men to the centurionate, the tribunes' choice thus widens our understanding of the centuries-long success of the Roman army.

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³ CIL VIII 2554 and 18072, see A.v.Domaszewski, *Die Rangordnung des römischen Heeres*, Bonn 1908, 2nd. ed by B.Dobson, Köln 1967, 43 and XIV.

⁴ CIL X 135 = Dessau 2719; see K.Strobel, 'Optio tribunorum legionum quinque - ein Phantomposten der römischen Militärgeschichte', *ZPE* 75, 1988, 235-6.

⁵ H.Devijver, *The Equestrian Officers of the Roman Imperial Army*, I (= *Mavors* 6) Amsterdam 1989, 1-37. Committee: Vegetius 1,13.