

## Military Textile Supply in the Roman Empire: a look at the inscriptional evidence

Based on an examination of the epigraphic sources broadly defined as writings on wooden tablets, metal, or stone, this paper contributes to a better understanding of clothing acquisition for the military in the Roman Empire in the first three centuries. The central questions to be addressed include the following: How was textile especially clothing supply for the military organized? Who were responsible for supplying the military with textile products, private craftsmen/tradesmen or the State? Were textile products supplied locally or over long distance?

Military textile supply has remained a rather marginal interest in the discussion of the logistics of the Imperial Roman army or military supply in general, the focus of which has, not surprisingly, always been food—especially grains (e.g., Roth 1999; Erdkamp 1998 and 2002; Elton 1996). Granted, the ancient writers hardly informed us of the supply mechanisms. The importance of outfitting the military, however, was clearly understood by the Romans: clothes were listed along with armors, shoes, food, and money as the essentials that would keep a soldier content (e.g., SHA, *Alex.* 52). Indeed, military accounts from the Imperial period show that a large percentage of a soldier's *stipendium* went to clothing (*Rom.Mil.Rec.* 68=*P. Gen. Lat.* 1 recto). Apart from outfits, the military also needed a wide range of textile products including blankets, arming caps, socks, bags, horse saddles, protective coverings for war machines, and so on. There is no evidence that soldiers produced their own clothing. Although soldiers only constituted perhaps 1% of the total population of the Roman Empire, they represented large concentrations of non-producers. The pressure the military demand for textile products exerted on the pre-industrial economy of the Roman Empire should not be underestimated. J. P. Wild (1976)'s study of *gynaecea*, or state-run establishments for woolen production, and J. A. Sheridan (1998)'s investigation of *vestis militaris*, however, are the only works that are directly relevant to clothing supply. The former focuses on the late antique period (after the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D.), while the latter depends on papyrological materials from Egypt, leaving geographical and chronological gaps to be filled.

This paper represents an attempt to fill these gaps in the light of the non-papyrological materials, especially the Vindolanda tablets (e.g., *T.Vindol.* II. 255 and 154), and inscriptions mentioning craftsmen and tradesmen with military ties (e.g., *AE* 2006. 1827; *ILS* 7315). The conclusions are twofold. First, the epigraphic evidence suggests that soldiers were directly involved in obtaining clothing, that legionary detachments may have needed to take care of their own supply, that acquisition of clothing from some distance was not unusual, and that civilians played important roles in the supply chain. None of these observations contradicts what we have learned from the papyrological evidence from Egypt. The epigraphic sources, therefore, confirm the value of the papyrological sources for the general understanding of military supply. Second, the epigraphic sources offer new insights in that they allow us to identify certain supply centers in the Western provinces, and how the impact of the military demand was felt far and wide.