

Picturing the Roman Army in Third-Century Egypt: Military Tombstones from Nicopolis.



Picturing the Roman Army in Third-Century Egypt: Tombstones from the military necropolis of Nicopolis

Necropolis of the military camp at Nicopolis

In the course of the 19th and 20th century, more than 120 tombstones from the military necropolis of Nicopolis turned up on the antiquities market. As a result, most of these tombstones are now found scattered in various American (New York, Baltimore) and European (Athens, Brussels, Bologna, Warsaw) museums, although the bulk of them is kept in the Graeco-Roman Museum of Alexandria. Of the more than 120 tombstones, 33 commemorate soldiers of *legio II Traiana fortis*, 18 soldiers of *legiones XXII Deiotariana* and *III Cyrenaica*, 5 auxiliaries and 9 soldiers whose units are unknown. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, however, the tombstones of women, children and freedmen far outnumber the military tombstones. Currently, an edition of these tombstones is prepared by the author. A clear distinction can be made between the military tombstones and those commemorating wives and children, both epigraphically and iconographically.

Military tombstones: Roman tombstones?

The military tombstones are predominantly written in Latin, in the standardized manner used in military inscriptions throughout the Roman Empire. After the initial formula, *Dis Manibus*, the name of the deceased, his rank, military unit, age at death and/or length of service follow. In most cases, the name of the commemorator and the *bene merenti fecit* formula are given at the close of the text (Fig. 4). What is unusual about the Nicopolis inscriptions, however, is the naming of the *centuria* to which the deceased belonged. The formula used for indicating the centurion's title (the cohort is indicated, numbered, and followed by the centurion's rank) is predominantly found on the Nicopolis tombstones. Scholars therefore speak of a „*legio II Traiana*“ pattern (versus a „*legio II Parthica*“ pattern, in which the symbol for *centuria*, followed by the number of the cohort and the rank of the centurion is used). Few military inscriptions are inscribed in Greek, but they distinguish themselves from the traditional Greek inscriptions. Many of them include information about the commemorator, reflecting a Roman influence. But the Latin inscriptions also show a Greek influence: in three inscriptions, the name of the deceased appears in the accusative rather than in the nominative, dative or, to a lesser degree, genitive.

Approximately half of the military tombstones from Nicopolis bear a representation of the deceased. It is conspicuous that all these tombstones can be dated to the second quarter of the third century, at a time when *legio II Traiana* was the sole legionary force in Egypt. At first sight, these tombstones seem to fit in with the standard representation found on military tombstones in the entire Roman Empire. When studying them more closely, however, the Nicopolis tombstones exhibit some local features. On almost half of the tombstones, the soldier is shown offering on an altar. Military tombstones from outside Egypt only rarely represent the deceased in an offering position (only civilians attached to the staff of a military unit stationed at Apamea in Syria were portrayed in this

manner). This type of representation was only popular among the soldiers stationed at Nicopolis: on the tombstones from Alexandria and Terenouthis, both located in the Delta, the deceased seldom appears offering on an altar. For some reason, the soldiers of *legio II Traiana* took to this type of representation. The „horned“ shape of the altar reflects a local influence, since this type of altar is predominantly found on artistic representations of the Greek East (Fig. 2). Contrary to the tombstones from Apamea in Syria, rider reliefs are exceptional in Nicopolis. The only known rider relief from Nicopolis was set up by the *eques* Marcus Valerius Omuncio for his seven-month-old son Valerinus, who is shown on a galloping horse, holding a spear in his hand. Despite some distinctive motifs, however, the military tombstones from Nicopolis are predominantly Roman in style. The **military tombstones** can therefore be considered as **Roman tombstones**!

Tombstones set up for women and children: Roman or Greek-Egyptian tombstones?

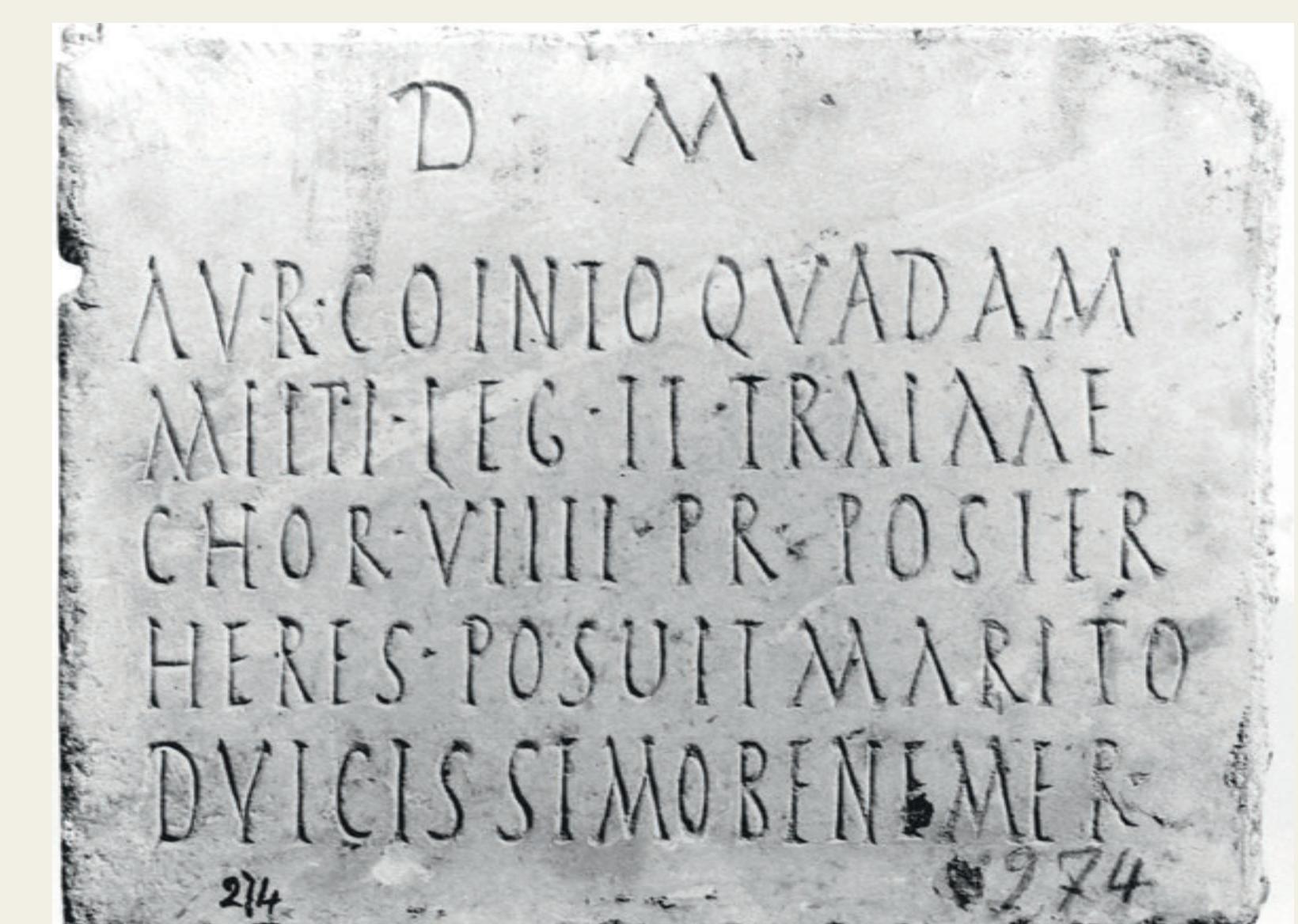
The tombstones commemorating women and children show much more variety, both epigraphically and iconographically. Most of the accompanying inscriptions are in Latin, but in some cases, the structure of the inscription is derived from Greek funerary inscriptions, mentioning only the name of the deceased, his or her age at death and the closing formula *bene merenti*. Two standard structures can be distinguished: the inscription either starts with the name of the deceased and the relevant information, ending with the name of the commemorator and the *bene merenti fecit* formula, or the name of the commemorator is given first, followed by the name of the deceased and the relevant information. The Greek inscriptions occasionally display Roman features, including information about the commemorator using superlatives to refer to the deceased (Fig. 1).

Iconographically, the tombstones of women and children are much more diverse than the military tombstones. The deceased could be reclining on a *klinē*, offering on an altar, riding a horse, standing with one hand raised in a greeting gesture, squatting on the ground holding a bird, etcetera. The bulk is, however, shown reclining on a banqueting couch, holding a *kantharos* in their hand or supporting their head on their hand (Fig. 1). Although this position is Greek in origin, tombstones with this type of representation from Alexandria or Terenouthis predominantly date to the Roman period. Although the Greek elements predominate the relief scene on most tombstones, distinctively Egyptian motifs such as the Anubis jackal, Horus falcon, winged solar disk and so-called youth side lock can also be found (Fig. 3). To sum up, since the execution of the tombstones set up for women and children appears to have been Roman, the representation is predominantly Greek and the decorative motifs are Greek or Egyptian, one can speak of **mixed style tombstones**.

(1) Funerary stela of Aurelia Artemeis (222-240)
Baltimore, The Walters Art Museum, inv. no. 26.2

(2) Funerary stela of Ares (189)
London, British Museum, inv. no. GRA 1973.4-22.1

(3) Funerary stela of Gaius Julius Valerius (222-250)
Brooklyn, The Brooklyn Museum, inv. no. 16105



(4) Funerary plaque of Aurelius Cointus (212-250)
Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum, inv. no. 274