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Returning auxiliary veterans: some methodological considerations

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When, after the Marian reforms of the early 1st c. B.C., Augustus took the final decision to turn the Roman field army into a fully professional and standing army, it had dramatic consequences for the lives of individual soldiers. Ordinary soldiers no longer left home for just one campaign but, depending on the unit they were serving in, stayed away for at least 25 years. Though recruiting grounds for the Roman legions and the *auxilia* differed from each other and over time, generally soldiers were posted in garrisons far away from their home country.¹ An intriguing question is what happened to these men after they had been discharged from the army: did they return to the home country they had not seen for so long, or did they prefer to settle in the area where they spent the best of their lives?

The above questions on recruitment and veteran settlement patterns are not new; they have already attracted scholarly attention. Central to most of that work is the almost exclusive reliance on epigraphical evidence. Starting from a systematic survey of mostly funeral and votive inscriptions erected for or by legionary veterans, J. C. Mann established that, despite Early Imperial efforts to settle veterans in colonies in Italy and elsewhere, “the men themselves most frequently preferred to remain in the areas in which they had served”.² While for the *auxilia* similarly comprehensive studies of the stone inscriptions have not been carried out, the ever-growing data-set of military diplomas has been regularly exploited for the question of settlement preferences among auxiliary veterans. By comparing the findspot of a diploma with the province where, according to the certificate’s text, the recipient had concluded his term of service, scholars conclude that about 80% of the auxiliary veterans had stayed in the province of their last garrison, while 10% had settled in a neighbouring province, and another 10% in provinces far away from their last post — presumably their home country.³

Those figures, based on the documentary evidence, for settlement preferences among discharged auxiliaries should, however, be read with caution. First, they represent an overall average calculated on the basis of *all* extant diplomas from the whole empire insofar as diplomas have been preserved in a sufficiently complete state to be included. Regional differences, which may well have been significant, do not show up in such calculations. If we examine the evidence for just one province, the returning figures diverge from the calculated average: for the army of Mauretania Tingitana, 10 military diplomas have now been recorded from findspots, notably on the Lower Danube, far outside the province of military service.⁴ If the model would apply here, we would expect some 80 diplomas in Mauretania Tingitana, while in reality only 16 have been recorded.⁵ The comparatively high numbers that have come to light recently in Thracia and Lower Moesia seem to indicate that auxiliary soldiers recruited from the Lower Danube did not only return home more frequently than we have been assuming, but more frequently than soldiers levied from many other parts of the empire.

1 With increasing local recruitment in the area of the garrison from the end of the 1st c. A.D. onwards, this begins to change only gradually.

2 Mann 1983, 56 ff, esp. 61.

3 Raepsaet-Charlier 1978; Roxan 1997; Pferdehirt 2002.

4 Cf. Derks in press, Table 2.

5 Data on Mauretanian diplomas after Pferdehirt 2002, 241 ff., updated with two new finds from Thamusida (see E. Papi, *ZPE* 142 [2003] 257-66 and 146 [2004] 255-58). Explaining away the statistical differences by arguing that metal detectorists in N Africa are not nearly as common as they are today in Eastern Europe seems beyond the point. One could say that samples for individual provinces are still too small for such statistical analyses (Haynes 2001, 74), but, alas, this is the only kind of information we presently have.