

# The water bag of Roman soldiers

Marquita Volken

Trajan's Column is one of the chief iconographical sources for the costume and kit of legionary soldiers of the early 2nd c. A.D. In the departure scene, a legion, represented by two rows of men carrying shields and equipment, leaves a town through a gate and crosses a bridge of boats over the Danube.<sup>1</sup> Seen in the background above the heads of the marching soldiers are 10 sets of travelling gear, suspended from stakes which appear to be carried on the left shoulders (fig. 1); two more sets can be seen above the shoulders of the two men inside the city gate. The travelling gear suspended on the stakes consists of sacks, pots and pans, and a string bag. A second representation of the travelling kit (fig. 2) appears in later scenes of the army crossing the Danube by boat.<sup>2</sup>

The personal kit used by the Roman army is conventionally called a *sarcina*.<sup>3</sup> One of the earliest attempts to describe the pack is found in Darenberg Saglio IV, 1063-64, s.v. *sarcina* (R. Cagnat); it includes an engraved illustration of the departure scene on the column accompanied by a list of objects carried on the stake.

On y voit des légionnaires en marche: ils tiennent de la main gauche, reposant sur leur épaule, une perche que termine, à sa partie supérieure, une traverse; à cette traverse pendent différents objets que des liens retiennent les uns aux autres: une outre pleine d'eau, en haut; un havre-sac suspendu au moyen de cordes croisées, un filet contenant de la viande, une marmite et une cuiller (*trulla*).

The first full photographic documentation for Trajan's Column, published by C. Cichorius in 1896, also established the definitive numbering sequence for each scene. Subsequently, K. Lehmann-Hartleben in *Die Trajanssäule* (1926) presented an art-historian's commentary, though without offering an exact description of the objects. Cichorius and Lehmann-Hartleben were used to great advantage by I. A. Richmond in his *Trajan's army on Trajan's Column* (1936), the first work to compare the images on the column with the known body of archaeological material. Richmond's description of the gear in the departure scene avoids the term *sarcina*, referring instead to soldier's kit:

Over their left shoulder rides the stake carrying the kit. This consists of five objects: a string bag, for forage, a metal cook pot and a metal *patera*, for cooking and eating; a tightly filled sack, containing either rations or clothing; and a satchel reinforced with straps, very like a tool kit, and probably indeed containing the tools which a legionary carried.<sup>4</sup>

Richmond's experience as an archaeologist and his keen powers of observation allowed him to present pertinent archaeological materials, including a mention of the then-unpublished satchel from Bar Hill on the Antonine Wall,<sup>5</sup> the Bar Hill find confirmed the existence of leather tool bags, and more have been found since.<sup>6</sup>

In L. Rossi's *Trajan's Column and the Dacian Wars* (translated by J. M. C. Toynbee), "satchel" is used to describe both bags hanging from the stake in the departure scene. Later, under the heading of personal baggage used on the 1985 re-creation of the crossing of the Alps, M. Junkelmann included a leather satchel for carrying small items, as well as a cloak bag; he gave the weight of a packed *sarcina* as at least 16.6 kg.<sup>7</sup> Ancient sources describe the soldier's kit bag and its carrying method as a bag carried on a forked object (*furca*) fitted with a small shelf (*tabella*) that supported the burden.<sup>8</sup> The nickname 'Marius's mules' for soldiers is explained

1 C. Cichorius, *Die Reliefs der Trajanssäule* (Berlin 1896) IV, 12-14.

2 Cichorius XXXIV, 34.

3 J. Roth, *The logistics of the Roman army* (Leiden 1999) 72 with n.25 for a complete list of sources.

4 I. Richmond, "Trajan's army on Trajan's Column," *PBR* 13 (1935) 8 (reprinted London 1982).

5 *Ibid.* p. 11 n.27.

6 L. Keppie et al., *Bar Hill: a Roman fort and its finds* (BAR 16, Oxford 1975) fig. 28, but see C. van Driel-Murray, "The leatherwork from the fort," in H. E. M. Cool and C. Philo, *Roman Castleford, excavation: 1974-85*, vol. I. *The small finds* (West Yorkshire Archaeology Service 1998) fig. 139, for larger tool bags.

7 M. Junkelmann, *Die Legionen des Augustus* (Mainz 1986) 196-200.

8 Roth (*supra* n.3) 76 with n.52.