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Storia Militare Antica

a cura di
Marco Bettalli ed Elena Franchi

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Antefissa in maiolica del II/III secolo d.C. col nome della Legione XX Valeria Victrix e un cinghiale, simbolo legionario, proveniente da Holt, Clwyd, Galles. British Museum, Londra. Numero di registrazione PE 1911,0206.1. Foto AgTigress, 2010, CC AS 3.0 Unported (Wikipedia Commons).

Early Roman Cavalry (8th- 4th centuries BCE), A Reappraisal

by Jeremy Armstrong and Gianluca Notari

Abstract. This article reassesses the nature and importance of Rome's early cavalrymen, the archaic *equites*, in the light of new models for understanding early Italian warfare. Although the *equites* have always been understood to have represented Rome's social, political, and economic elite, militarily their role is thought to have been limited. On an ancient battlefield traditionally thought to have been dominated by massed heavy infantry, cavalry actions were typically considered little more than aristocratic display. But with the recent reinterpretations of the nature of ancient battle in Italy, and a resultant decline in the importance of massed infantry and a rise in clan-based raiding, Rome's archaic cavalry is due for a reappraisal. This article suggests that, in this new context and contrary to the traditional models, Rome's archaic *equites* may have been a vitally important and highly effective part of Rome's early armed forces down through the fourth century BCE. Their elite status, already accepted in the social, political, and economic realms, may have also been reflected in the military sphere as well.

Keywords. Cavalry; Equites; Rome; Regal; Early Republic.

Early Roman cavalry has always occupied an interesting and somewhat marginal place in the historiography of the Roman army. Although clearly of social and political importance and entrenched as the preserve of the elite in the literary tradition from the time of Romulus (Livy 1.13; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom*. 2.13; etc.), the cavalry is typically not thought to play a particularly important role in Regal or early Republican warfare. Duels between elites on horseback, like that between L. Junius Brutus and Arruns Tarquin at the start of the battle of Silva Arsia in 509 BCE (Livy 2.6), were important for the broader narrative and political context, but are usually considered peripheral to the battle itself. With a military system supposedly focused on heavy infantry, equipped with *aspides* (thick, circular, wooden shields covered in bronze) and bronze armour and assumed to operate in a manner comparable to contemporary Greek forces, the norms usually associated with Greek-style hoplite warfare were

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thought to apply. In this context, cavalry action was often described as being a somewhat performative activity done by the elite, before the 'real battle' was actually decided by the massed heavy infantry of the phalanx.

Recently, however, the centrality of the hoplite phalanx in Greek warfare has been questioned,[1] and its very existence in archaic Italy has been challenged, opening the door for new and more diverse military models for early Rome – many of them featuring private or clan-based forces focused on raiding, in contrast to the traditional focus on state-based forces bent on conquest and control of territory.[2] In this new environment, however, the role of cavalry has yet to be properly reassessed.[3] Although core organizing principles of Roman warfare have been challenged, many of the traditional assumptions about the composition of the Roman army – based on the Romulean and Servian 'constitutions' – seem to have been maintained by most scholars.

Given the problematic nature of our evidence for this period and, in particular, our reliance on the anachronistic literary tradition for so much of our detail, the continued acceptance of these assumptions is superficially forgivable. However, there is certainly more we can say on the subject. Far from being peripheral, warriors on horseback dominate many of the battle descriptions relating to early Rome and feature prominently in the iconography, while chariots and other pieces of equipment pertaining to horses form vital components of funerary assemblages for many of the archaic Central Italian elite. Indeed, from everything we know (or think we know), it is clear that warfare was effectively an elite monopoly in archaic Rome, and both warfare and horses (and likely horse-based warfare) were incredibly important to the men of this group.[4] The present article is part of a broader reappraisal of the early *equites* and offers an initial reassessment of the evidence, position, and importance of early Roman cavalry (eighth through fourth centuries BCE)[5] in light of recent shifts in our understanding of both early

1 See Mihajlov (2018) amongst many others.

2 See, for instance, Armstrong (2016), Drogula (2020), Helm (2021), etc.

3 The main work on the Roman cavalry of the Republic remains McCall's 2002 study, now joined by the excellent work of Petitjean (2022). Most other books on Roman cavalry focus on the better-documented late Republican and Imperial periods (e.g. Speidel [2002] and Dixon and Southern [2013]).

4 This has been a long-standing issue in scholarship. See Momigliano (1969) 385-388.

5 The second half of the fourth century BCE has long been understood to be a significant transitional period for Roman warfare, with the dramatic expansion of Rome's citizen and

Roman society and warfare, exploring the implications for this enigmatic group. We will explore the specific role and responsibilities of early Roman cavalry on the archaic battlefield in a future publication.

Literary Evidence

Early Roman cavalry, including the Roman *equites*,[6] suffer from the same evidential problems as everything else in the archaic period. Looking first to the literary evidence, the very late start to Rome's native historical tradition *c*. 200 BCE, the cryptic and fragmentary nature of the evidence utilized by Rome's early historical writers, and indeed the enigmatic, adaptive, and flexible genre of early Roman history itself, all result in a collection of literary sources for Rome's archaic period which has consistently defied a unified methodology.[7] No two modern scholars of the period ever seem to agree on how to approach our extant sources, or indeed the elusive 'sources of our sources', which has resulted in a myriad of different positions for their reliability.[8] The variability has proved frustrating for those interested in topics like the 'Early Roman Cavalry', as the modern scholarly positions on this group range from the traditional, tacit acceptance of at least the basics of their origins and early organization as presented in the works of authors like Livy (1.15) and Dionysius (2.13) – who, it must be admitted, present a generally consistent picture which is supported by a range of other works (Var. *LL* 5.91, Plin. *NH* 33.8, etc.) – to those who argue that, despite the agreement of the literary sources, there is no way this type of information could have been transmitted intact and that the very concept of a highly organized and regimented cavalry

alliance networks throughout Italy – most recently see Helm (2021) for discussion. This expansion fundamentally changed the composition and nature of the Roman army, especially its cavalry, which is why it was selected as an endpoint in this study.

6 It must be noted that 'the *equites*' is not entirely synonymous with 'the Roman cavalry', although these groups certainly overlap. In the literature, the *equites* were part of a distinct social and political category, while 'cavalry' is a practical, and indeed tactical, designation. Although the *equites* seem to have made up the majority of the Roman cavalry, it is possible that Roman forces (i.e. not including the allies) contained men on horseback who were not part of the *equites*.

7 See Raaflaub (2005b) and Cornell (2005) in Raafllaub (2005a) for an overview of the core issues and positions. More recently see Armstrong and Richardson (2017) for discussion.

8 Cornell (1995) arguably represents the default position in modern Anglophone scholarship, although more optimistic (e.g. Carandini [2011]) and pessimistic approaches (e.g. Raaflaub [2005b]) certainly exist.

contingent, or indeed a 'Roman army' (at least as presented by the sources), in the Regal or early Republican periods is highly unlikely.[9]

But despite this variability in analysis, there is at least agreement on the actual literary evidence that exists. The literary sources are unanimous in attributing the creation of Rome's cavalry, the *equites*, to Romulus (Livy 1.13, Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom*. 2.13, Var. *LL* 5.91, Plin. *NH* 33.9, Festus *Celeres*). As part of the organization of his newly founded city, Romulus supposedly created a group of 300 *equites*, which were often labelled the *Celeres* – a name deriving from the Latin *celer*, meaning swift or fast. In order to form this group, each of Rome's three archaic tribes (the Ramnes, Tities, and Luceres) supposedly contributed 100 members, which was further broken down to 10 from each *curia*.[10] The three tribal centuries of *equites* were then distributed into 10 *turmae* of 30 men each, with each *turma* containing 10 men from each of the tribes.[11] The cavalry was led by a magistrate called the *Tribunus Celerum*, which seems to have been closely associated with the office of the *rex* and may have had legislative powers (famously L. Junius Brutus held the office in 510 BCE, and he supposedly used the position to convoke the *curiae*, possibly to pass a '*lex tribunicia*', Livy 1.59). The cavalry supposedly underwent a series of expansions under subsequent *reges*, with Tullus Hostilius evidently doubling their number to 600 following his conquest of Alba Longa (Livy 1.30), and Tarquinius Priscus doubling it again to 1200 (Livy 1.36).[12] The first expansion merely involved doubling the number of men in each

9 For the former, see for instance Keppie (1998) 14-17. It must be admitted that the present authors are likely closer to the latter position. See Armstrong (2016) for a more comprehensive discussion.

10 The archaic *curiae* are both fascinating and enigmatic as, while we know very little about them, they seem to have represented the foundation of archaic Roman society. The early city was evidently divided into 30 *curiae*, with each of the three tribes of Romulus supposedly containing 10. Their assembly, the *comitia curiata*, was the main assembly of the archaic community and elected/confirmed the *rex* as well as granted him *imperium*. While the *curiae* were gradually superseded by other entities, they survived down into the late Republic, albeit in a vestigial manner.

11 The origins of the word *turma* are ambiguous. Varro (*LL* 5.91) suggests that it was derived from the unit being composed of three groups of 10 men. Zair (2017, 263) suggests it may be connected to the same root found in the Vedic *tvárate* 'hurry', and so perhaps connected to the cavalry's speed.

12 There is some ambiguity in the sources about the final number after the reforms of Tarquinius Priscus. Given the suggested math, the number of equites *should* be 1200, although this number is never given, and indeed some manuscript traditions suggest 1800 instead – a number which may have been derived from the explicit testimony of Cicero (Cic. *Rep*. 2.20).

century to 200,[13] while the reform of Tarquinius Priscus supposedly involved the creation of three new tribal centuries (in contrast to the later centuries of the Servian system), labelled *posteriores*, with one for each of the three tribes.[14]

The cavalry, along with the rest of Rome's armed forces, were then completely reorganized as part of the so-called 'Servian Constitution,' supposedly instituted by Rome's sixth *rex*, Servius Tullius in the middle of the sixth century BCE. In these reforms, which are also often associated with a shift away from previous tribal/kinship associations and towards a more community-based military ethos, Rome's archaic tribal structure was reformed into four new urban tribes and an expanding number of rural tribes (possibly 17 originally, then increasing in 387 BCE and 241 BCE to the final total of 31), in addition to a new set of property classes.[15] The new tribes formed the basis for Rome's new *comitia tributa*, while the property classes were utilized for Rome's other new assembly, the *comitia centuriata*. Each of the seven property classes in the 'Servian Constitution' was associated with a particular military panoply and contained a certain number of 'centuries' which were employed for both recruiting and voting. At the top of the classes in this new system, were the *equites*, which were required to be of "highest birth" (Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom*. 4.18), or the "principal men of the State" (Liv. 1.43), although, the text does seem to imply a required level of wealth as well – presumably at least comparable to the first class.[16] Out of the "*primoribus civitatis*", Servius Tullius supposedly created 12 centuries of *equites*, which he combined with the 6 centuries of *equites* (the *sex suffragia*) that had previously existed. This created a cavalry contingent of 18 centuries, with each century supposedly contributing 200 men, for a nominal cavalry force *c*. 550 BCE of 3600.

There are, of course, varying traditions as well. Cicero famously attributed the most substantial reforms of the *equites* to Tarquinius Priscus, and indeed suggested that he gave the cavalry the organization which was retained until the late

13 As with the centuries of infantry (see Armstrong [2016] 76-86), while some traditions associate the unit with 100 men initially, this does not hold for long and it is clear that the authors of our sources assumed that, by the start of the Republic, a 'century' could contain any number of men.

14 Although we do not have the time to explore this here, the label *posterior* (lit. 'behind') is an intriguing one, as it may hint at a tactical designation and is shared with later centurions – although there is seems to relate to rank and prestige and not tactics.

15 Cornell (1995) 173-175.

16 See Armstrong (2016) 74-86 for more detailed discussion.

second century BCE (Cic. *Rep*. 2.20).[17] According to Cicero, the elder Tarquin's reforms involved doubling the number of *equites* from 900 (how this starting number was achieved is uncertain) to 1800. All of this is made somewhat problematic by the fact that the organization that Cicero was describing likely related to the political structure of the *equites* and not the military organization, as by the mid-second century the citizen cavalry had evidently ceased to exist as a military entity.[18] However, it does represent an interesting parallel tradition.

In every tradition though, the archaic *equites* seem to have existed somewhat outside of the normal military order: their classification in the census was ambiguous and seemed to include non-economic factors; even in the middle Republic they retained regal vestiges in their organization; when mobilized under a dictator they were assigned their own commander (*magister equitum*); at least some of the cavalry were also evidently supplied with a horse and fodder at public expense (the *equus publicus*), which ran counter to the longstanding tradition in Rome of each soldier providing his own equipment. Rome's archaic cavalry was therefore clearly exceptional in many ways.

The literary evidence for how the archaic *equites* were equipped and actually fought is almost non-existent. Our best evidence is very late, in the form of Polybius (6.25.3-8), which suggested that early Roman cavalry (although here, 'early' likely means late third century BCE) were lightly armed and armoured. Polybius notes:

> ὁ δὲ καθοπλισμὸς τῶν ἱππέων νῦν μέν ἐστι παραπλήσιος τῷ τῶν Ἑλλήνων· τὸ δὲ παλαιὸν πρῶτον θώρακας οὐκ εἶχον, ἀλλ᾽ ἐν περιζώμασιν ἐκινδύνευον, ἐξ οὗ πρὸς μὲν τὸ καταβαίνειν καὶ ταχέως ἀναπηδᾶν ἐπὶ τοὺς ἵππους ἑτοίμως διέκειντο καὶ πρακτικῶς, πρὸς δὲ τὰς συμπλοκὰς ἐπισφαλῶς εἶχον διὰ τὸ γυμνοὶ κινδυνεύειν. τὰ δὲ δόρατα κατὰ δύο τρόπους ἄπρακτ᾽ ἦν αὐτοῖς, καθ᾽ ἃ μὲν ᾗ λεπτὰ καὶ κλαδαρὰ ποιοῦντες οὔτε τοῦ προτεθέντος ἠδύναντο σκοποῦ στοχάζεσθαι, πρὸ τοῦ τε τὴν ἐπιδορατίδα πρός τι προσερεῖσαι, κραδαινόμενα δι᾽ αὐτῆς τῆς ἵππων κινήσεως τὰ πλεῖστα συνετρίβετο· πρὸς δὲ τούτοις ἄνευ σαυρωτήρων κατασκευάζοντες μιᾷ τῇ πρώτῃ διὰ τῆς ἐπιδορατίδος ἐχρῶντο πληγῇ, μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα κλασθέντων λοιπὸν ἦν ἄπρακτ᾽ αὐτοῖς καὶ μάταια. τόν γε μὴν θυρεὸν εἶχον ἐκ βοείου δέρματος, τοῖς ὀμφαλωτοῖς ποπάνοις παραπλήσιον τοῖς ἐπὶ τὰς θυσίας ἐπιτιθεμένοις·

17 "*Deinde equitatum ad hunc morem constituit, qui usque adhuc est retentus*…" ("Then he established that organization of the knights which we still retain..." [trans. Keyes, 1928, Loeb Classical Library).

18 McCall (2002) 100ff.

> οἷς οὔτε πρὸς τὰς ἐπιβολὰς ἦν χρῆσθαι διὰ τὸ μὴ στάσιν ἔχειν, ὑπό τε τῶν ὄμβρων ἀποδερματούμενοι καὶ μυδῶντες δύσχρηστοι καὶ πρότερον ἦσαν καὶ νῦν ἔτι γίνονται παντελῶς.[19]

This description is corroborated by Varro (*LL*7.57), who also seemed to hint that at least some early Roman cavalry was effectively 'light cavalry', suggesting that cavalry were called *ferentarii*, a term commonly used for light infantry in the second century BCE, noting *ferentarii equites hi dicti qui ea modo habebant arma quae ferrentur, ut iaculum*.[20] Additionally, there is a tradition of the early Roman cavalry being closely associated with the *velites*, with Isidore of Seville (*Etym.* 9.3.43) claiming that the *velites* were thusly named from their habit of sitting on the back of a horse and 'flying' into battle (*volitando*) – although this etymology is obviously fraught.[21] Other aspects of their equipment are harder to decipher with any certainty. It is possible that early Roman cavalry was accustomed to bringing extra mounts (Festus 247L), an innovation which the imperial writer Granius attributed to Tarquinius Priscus (26.2) – a point which will be returned to later. However, it is entirely uncertain how early one can push any of these descriptions. It is likely that many of these accounts likely refer to the

19 "The cavalry are now armed like that of Greece, but in old time they had no cuirasses but fought in light undergarments, the result of which was that they were able to dismount and mount again at once with great dexterity and facility, but were exposed to great danger in close combat, as they were nearly naked. Their lances too were unserviceable in two respects. In the first place they made them so slender and pliant that it was impossible to take a steady aim, and before the head stuck in anything, the shaking due to the mere motion of the horse caused most of them to break. Next, as they did not fit the butt ends with spikes, they could only deliver the first stroke with the point and after this if they broke they were of no further service. Their buckler was made of ox hide, somewhat similar in shape to the round bossed cakes used at sacrifices. They were not of any use against attacks, as they were not firm enough; and when the leather covering peeled off and rotted owing to the rain, unserviceable as they were before, they now became entirely so." (trans. Paton, revised by Wallbank and Habicht, 2010, Loeb Classical Library).

20 "Cavalry were called *ferentarii* who bore only those weapons which are used up, such as the javelin" (trans. adapted from Sage, 2008). Varro hints that the word is derived from the Latin '*ferre*,' meaning 'to carry', and is not strictly applied to the cavalry. Indeed, it should be noted that Cato (Fr. 6) and Sallust (*Cat*. 60.2) hint that *ferentarii* were not always cavalry, and indeed they are often considered simply 'light-armed troops'. See also Non. Marc. 520.10M.

21 Sekunda and de Souza (2008). It is worth noting that Livy (26.4.4-9), in the context of the siege of Capua in 211 BCE, discusses the creation of the *velites,* claiming they originated as a unit of light infantry who would ride with the cavalry and leap down to fight when needed. This bears a striking resemblance to Polybius' account of the *ferentarii*, which both supports the existence of this type of troop/unit and also the fluidity of terminology and deployment in the army.

Roman cavalry as they existed *c*. 300 BCE, and indeed there may be some corroborating evidence for at least aspects of these descriptions in the account of the Pyrrhic War. For instance, when describing the battle of Heraclea, Plutarch (*Pyr*. 16. 6-10) makes particular note of the Roman and Italian cavalry operating in a highly fluid and independent manner.

> οἱ δέ, ἅπερ ἐκεῖνος ἔγνω περιμένειν, φθῆναι σπεύδοντες, ἐνεχείρουν τῇ διαβάσει, κατὰ πόρον μὲν οἱ πεζοί, πολλαχόθεν δὲ οἱ ἱππεῖς διεξελαύνοντες τὸν ποταμόν, ὥστε δείσαντας τὴν κύκλωσιν ἀναχωρεῖν τοὺς Ἕλληνας... Ἔνθα δὴ Λεοννάτος ὁ Μακεδὼν ἄνδρα κατιδὼν Ἰταλὸν ἐπέχοντα τῷ Πύρρῳ καὶ τὸν ἵππον ἀντιπαρεξάγοντα καὶ συμμεθιστάμενον ἀεὶ καὶ συγκινούμενον, "Ὁρᾷς," εἶπεν, "ὦ βασιλεῦ, τὸν βάρβαρον ἐκεῖνον, ὃν ὁ μέλας ἵππος ὁ λευκόπους φέρει; μέγα τι βουλευομένῳ καὶ δεινὸν ὅμοιός ἐστι. σοὶ γὰρ ἐνορᾷ καὶ πρὸς σὲ τέταται πνεύματος μεστὸς ὢν καὶ θυμοῦ, τοὺς δὲ ἄλλους ἐᾷ χαίρειν. ἀλλὰ σὺ φυλάττου τὸν ἄνδρα." καὶ ὁ Πύρρος ἀπεκρίνατο, "Τὸ μὲν εἱμαρμένον, ὦ Λεοννάτε, διαφυγεῖν ἀδύνατον· χαίρων δὲ οὔτε οὗτος οὔτ᾽ ἄλλος τις Ἰταλῶν εἰς χεῖρας ἡμῖν σύνεισιν." ἔτι ταῦτα προσδιαλεγομένων ὁ Ἰταλὸς διαλαβὼν τὸ δόρυ καὶ συστρέψας τὸν ἵππον ὥρμησεν ἐπὶ τὸν Πύρρον. εἶτα ἅμα παίει μὲν αὐτὸς τῷ δόρατι τοῦ βασιλέως τὸν ἵππον, παίει δὲ τὸν ἐκείνου παραβαλὼν ὁ Λεοννάτος. ἀμφοτέρων δὲ τῶν ἵππων πεσόντων τὸν μὲν Πύρρον οἱ φίλοι περισχόντες ἀνήρπασαν, τὸν δὲ Ἰταλὸν μαχόμενον διέφθειραν. ἦν δὲ τῷ γένει Φρεντανός, ἴλης ἡγεμών, Ὅπλακος ὄνομα.[22]

The sources are hopelessly muddled with regard to the tactics and combat duties of archaic Roman cavalry. The vast majority of early battle narratives are so inexorably intertwined with myth that extracting even the vaguest morsels of

22 "The Romans, however, anxious to engage the forces of Pyrrhus, who had decided to await, attempted the passage. The Roman infantry crossed the river by a ford, and their cavalry dashed through the water at many points so that the Greeks, fearing that they would be surrounded, withdrew...Here Leonnatus the Macedonian, observing that an Italian was intent upon Pyrrhus, and was riding out against him and following him in every movement from place to place, said: "Do you see, O King, that barbarian over there, riding the black horse with white feet? He looks like a man who has some great and terrible design in mind. For he keeps his eyes fixed upon you, and has his whole mind focused on reaching you, paying no mind to anybody else. So be on your guard against the man." To him, Pyrrhus made this reply: "What is fated, O Leonnatus, it is impossible to escape; but neither he, nor any other Italian shall come to close quarters with me with impunity." While they were still talking, the Italian levelled his spear, wheeled his horse, and charged at Pyrrhus. Then, at the same instant, the barbarian's spear struck the king's horse, and his own horse was struck by the spear of Leonnatus. Both horses fell, but while Pyrrhus was seized and rescued by his friends, the Italian, fighting to the last, was killed. He was a Frentanian, by race, captain of a troop of horse, Oplax by name." (adapted from Perrin, 1923, Loeb Classical Library).

'factually accurate' information is extremely difficult – even as late as the Pyrrhic war incident offered above. It may be possible to suggest, following Oakley's analysis of single combat in the Roman Republic, that the strong tradition of duelling between aristocrats on horseback may represent an accurate historical memory – although this is little more than a supposition for Rome's earliest periods.[23] Moving slightly later, there seems to be a distinct tradition of Roman cavalrymen dismounting and fighting on foot – explicitly recorded by Dionysius in his description of the battle between Rome and the army of Pyrrhus at Ausculum (Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom*. 20.2) – which generally supports the narrative of Polybius cited earlier.[24] While it is difficult to know what to make of this in these early periods (some analysis will be given in a future article), the literary tradition seems clear that cavalrymen were expected to operate both off and on horseback – hinting that the ability to move between was important. This is something we will return to later in this article.

In general, then, as noted previously, the literary evidence seems to suggest that archaic Roman cavalry represented an aristocratic accompaniment to the main infantry army which, although symbolically important, had minimal importance when it came to the real flow of ancient battle. Elites on horseback would fight and duel, utilizing what seem to be light (and seemingly ineffective) armour and weapons, typically for personal glory in a mode of combat wholly out of touch with the norms of the battle, at least as they would exist in the second and first centuries BCE when our extant literary sources begin. Indeed, as Polybius notes, by his own time, the Romans had finally adopted cavalry arms and armour following the Hellenistic model, which included a heavier spear and shield, which were presumably deployed in a more Hellenistic mode of fighting.[25] But early Roman cavalry was remembered as being a very different type of entity – an archaic throwback that still seemed to preserve vestiges of Rome's regal past well into the mid-Republican period.

23 Oakley (1985).

24 McCall (2002) 69–72.

25 Polybius's use of the Hellenistic model is problematic here, as he generally used Hellenistic terminology and paradigms to describe the Roman army. This was not a singular, descriptive comment, but part of a wider approach. While Polybius had first-hand experience of both Roman and Hellenistic armies in the field, and evidently felt the comparison apt, the idealized nature of his military descriptions and their overtly comparative character raises some worries.

Archaeology

The archaeology for archaic Roman cavalry does not, unfortunately, provide the answers one might wish for after looking at the literary evidence. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the archaeological evidence offers virtually nothing that can be used to flesh out and explain the structural questions offered up by the literary sources, while at the same time raising a whole new set of questions regarding the role and importance of cavalry in archaic Roman and Central Italian society.

The archaeological record suggests that horses formed an integral part of the archaic Central Italian economy. It is likely that the Romans, and other Central Italian peoples, used horses in agricultural contexts and quite a few scholars have suggested that the horse may have been the most important animal on Central Italian farmsteads during the Archaic period.[26] During the course of the Republic, the draught duties of horses seem to have been slowly taken over by oxen – which are arguably the more efficient animals for this type of work – but during the earlier periods of Rome's history, it is likely that the horse represented an important part of landed wealth (although, perhaps, not exclusive

26 Harrison (2013) 1091.

Fig. 1. Winged horses from the Ara della Regina. Museo archeologico nazionale tarquiniense. Photo by J. Armstrong.

to it).[27] Additionally, horses have a long tradition of being associated with symbols of prestige and wealth in Central Italy, which fits perfectly within the elaborate and ostentatious culture of display that seems to have accompanied elite warfare in the Archaic period.[28] In contrast to the general disregard for cavalry expressed in the literary evidence, horses, chariots, and cavalry all seem to have formed a significant part of elite military identity in archaic Central Italy. Horses, like the famous winged horses from the pediment of the Ara della Regina at Tarquinia (Fig. 1.), played an important role in archaic Central Italian art – although the reasons are obviously varied. Often associated with particular gods and heroes like the Dioscuri, horses also carried connections with themes like mobility, exchange, and travel – key elements in elite Central Italian society.[29]

Warriors on horseback, or in chariots, also feature prominently in the iconographic evidence from archaic Central Italy, although, given the religious or mortuary contexts for the majority of the examples, the problems of interpretation are obvious.[30] Indeed, it is entirely uncertain whether the depictions that have survived reflect the reality of warfare in archaic Central Italy or merely artistic conventions, Greek ideals, mythic narratives, or some combination thereof.[31] However, some broad observations may be possible. First, perhaps surprisingly, the iconographic evidence from archaic Rome actually seems to support the picture offered by Polybius for the majority of cavalry being lightly armed and armoured, and carrying a circular shield. For instance, the sixth-century frieze fragments

27 Goldsworthy (1998) 294.
28 Bernardini and Camporeale (2004) 134.
29 Harrison (2013) 1092.
30 See Stary (1981) and Winter (2009) 223-310 in particular.
31 See Winter (2009) for detailed discussion.

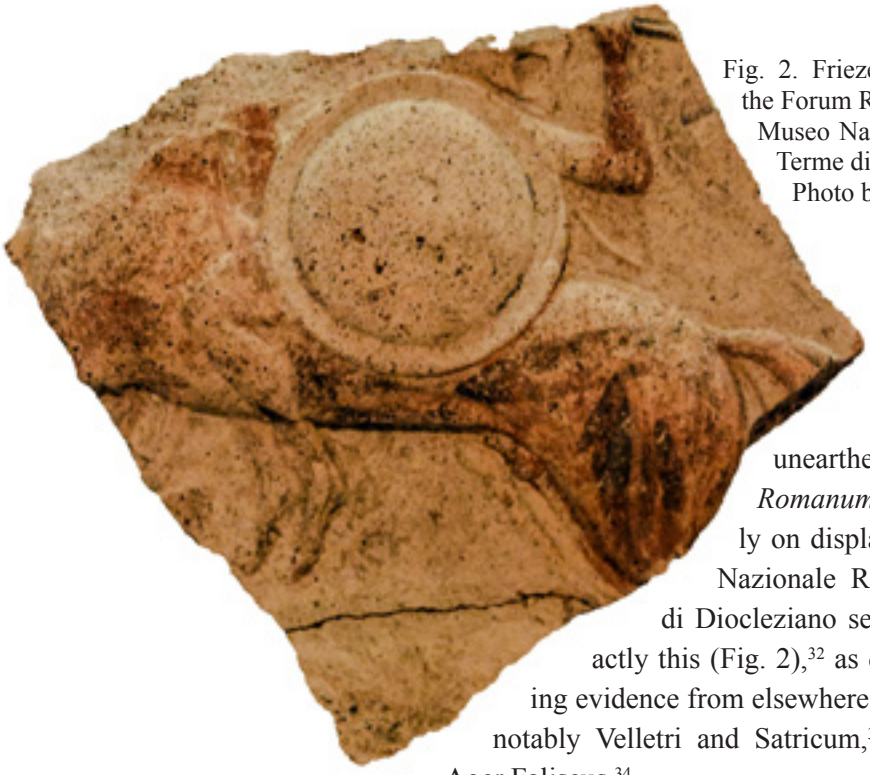

Fig. 2. Frieze fragments from the Forum Romanum. Museo Nazionale Romano - Terme di Diocleziano Photo by J. Armstrong.

unearthed in the *forum Romanum* and currently on display in the Museo Nazionale Romano - Terme di Diocleziano seem to show exactly this (Fig. 2),[32] as does corroborating evidence from elsewhere in Latium, most notably Velletri and Satricum,[33] and even the Ager Faliscus.[34]

Although many of these depictions have been interpreted as lightly armed horsemen and seem to support the literary mode, they have been somewhat confusing for archaeologists as they seem to illustrate an alternate façade to Central Italy's elite from that which is normally visible in the archaeological record. In funerary contexts going back to the early Iron Age, there is a consistent association between Central Italy's elite and 'heavy' bronze military equipment.[35] Given that there is also a strong connection between Central Italy's elite and cavalry, one might therefore expect to find an association between the cavalry and bronze arms and armour in the related artwork – but this is not the case.

The possible explanations for this disjunction are many and varied, with per-

32 Stary (1981) Taf. 43.

33 *Ibid*. Taf. 46-47

34 *Ibid*. Taf. 49.

35 For elite bronze armour going back to the early Iron Age (and beyond) see Bietti Sestieri (1992) for discussion. It is worth noting, though, that the bronze armour was not physically heavy – with most examples weighing under 2kg (see Armstrong and Harrison [2021/2023] for discussion).

haps the most obvious relating to artistic conventions (particularly from the Greek world). Indeed, it is possible that some burials of bronze armour from across Central Italy, commonly assumed to be of heavy infantry, may, in fact, be horsemen.

Fig. 3. Reverse of a silver didrachm from Taras (Roman: Tarentum, modern: Taranto) in Italy, one of the only colonies founded by Sparta. The coin was likely minted c. 280 BCE. Coin from the University of Auckland Lacey Collection (Inv. G00). Photo by G. Morris.

Perhaps the most famous warrior burial from archaic Latium, that from Lanuvium, is a prime example. Containing a bronze muscled cuirass and helmet, *kopis* (curved sword), and spear points, it is often assumed to be of an infantryman equipped in the classic 'hoplite style'. However, as will be touched on again below, it is noteworthy that the disc buried with the warrior contains the image of a *desultor* (lit. 'one who leaps down', a warrior who leaps down from, or between, horses), while the reverse – the side usually seen by museum patrons – shows the disc thrower. While the mirror hints at a possible connection to horsemanship, it is actually the *kopis* that presents the more compelling evidence. While *kopides* were used by both infantry and cavalry, by the late fourth century BCE longer versions of the weapon were increasingly favoured by cavalry[36] – and the example from Lanuvium, at almost 90cm in

36 The evidence for this is not definitive, as the *kopis*-style sword was used across the Mediterranean in a wide range of contexts. However, as Quesada Sanz (1997) and Verčík's (2011) work has shown, the average length of *kopides* seems to grow between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE, from 55-60cm in the sixth century BCE up to 80cm by 400 BCE, possibly in response to its changing role and the increased reach necessitated by use on horseback. Also in the fourth century BCE, we start to have explicit references to a *kopis* being used by cavalry in both literature – most famously by Xenophon (*Eq*. 12.11) – and in art.

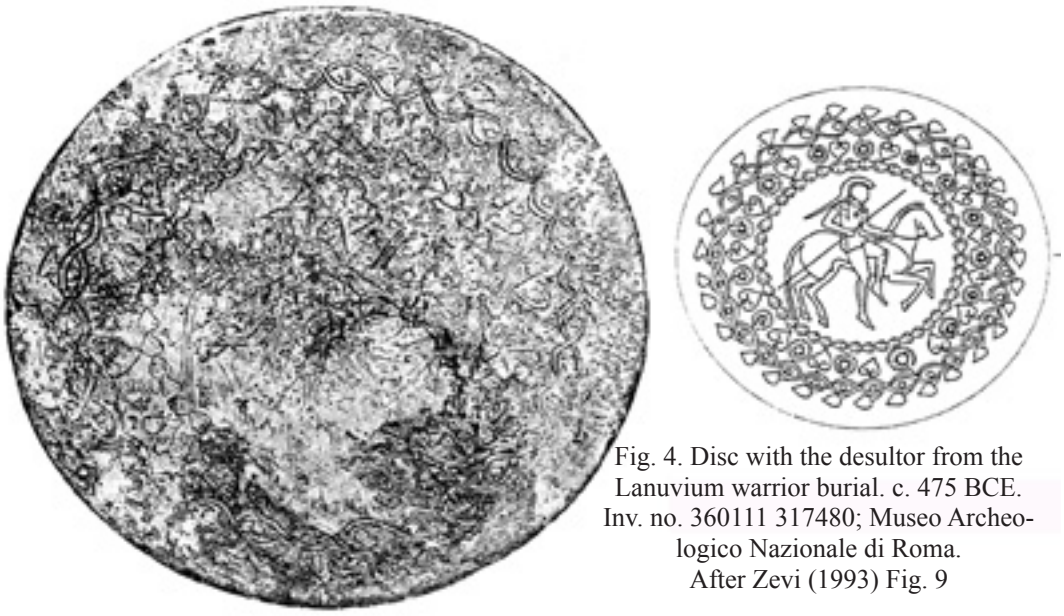

Fig. 4. Disc with the desultor from the Lanuvium warrior burial. c. 475 BCE. Inv. no. 360111 317480; Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Roma. After Zevi (1993) Fig. 9

length, is one of the longest examples we have from around the Mediterranean, making it somewhat impractical to be used on foot but particularly effective when wielded on horseback.[37] Thus, it is likely that the grave belonged to a warrior who may have fought on horseback, suggesting that a re-evaluation of other bronze armour finds from the region may also be needed.

This is particularly evident at sites like Paestum, where the rich tomb paintings (see Fig. 7, below) generally support the interpretation that the bronze armour found in the graves should be associated with men who operated, at least part of the time, on horseback. The absence of local corroborating evidence of a similar type from other contexts makes the extension of this across the region uncertain, but it is worth noting that the styles of bronze body amour that we find in Italy – and especially southern Italy – are conducive to cavalry. From the triple-disc cuirass to the squared breastplates, flared bivalve,[38] and short Greek muscled varieties (Fig. 5), most extant examples could be used on horseback.[39]

37 Quesada Sanz (1990). See also Colonna (1977) 150-5; Cristofani (1990) 269 for identification as infantry or cavalryman.

38 A two-piece, muscled cuirass which flares out around the waist, presumably to allow the wearer to sit – perhaps on a horse.

39 The possible exceptions might be some of the so-called 'long' cuirasses, which may have extended low enough below the waist to make sitting on a horse awkward or uncomfortable. However, our interpretation of the exact fit of these pieces of armour is uncertain, as

Fig. 5: Bronze Cuirass, fourth century BCE, Apulian. Metropolitan Museum of Art (Accession Number: 1992.180.3) Reproduced under OASC license.

However, this is not to say that so-called 'light cavalry' did not exist too.[40] As noted above, Varro (*LL* 7.57) speaks of *ferentarii*, and it is possible that lighter styles of armour were more suitable in some situations. Most notably while being heavily armoured might represent the ideal, especially for close combat, the practicalities of being on horseback and needing to mount and dismount quickly or using javelins may have precluded this. Some warriors may have chosen to prioritise mobility and speed over defence. However, this should not be pushed too far. Given that medieval knights, wearing more armour, were able to mount and dismount much larger horses without as-

it would have varied based on the torso length of the wearer and the musculature of the armour may not have matched the actual body underneath. While it is possible that some warriors only put their armour on when they reached the battlefield, and only wore it while on foot, the ability to mount and dismount a horse while wearing armour would have surely been an advantage (for example, the Prenestine Cistae show combat between horsemen equipped with armor – although it is hard to know how to understand these depictions).

40 The designations 'light cavalry' and 'heavy cavalry' are largely modern conventions that have been applied, not always consistently or accurately, to antiquity. The terms typically refer, first and foremost, to the amount of armour and equipment carried but also give an indication of a unit's tactical function. 'Light infantry' is typically lightly armoured, moves quickly, and fights from a distance with javelins *vel sim.* 'Heavy cavalry' is typically more heavily armoured and primarily engages in close, hand-to-hand combat.

sistance, it is likely that even heavily armoured ancient cavalrymen would have been relatively mobile.[41]

A second observation is that, although not mentioned in the literature in a military context, chariots also feature prominently in a number of iconographic representations, particularly in friezes from sites like Velletri and Palestrina.[42] It is, again, entirely uncertain what these images are meant to portray, and it is possible (some might say likely) that what is being depicted in these images is either a ritual or victory celebration, like the Roman triumph, and not combat – as, of course, there is a long tradition in Rome of utilizing a chariot in this context. Religious associations are also possible, as the temple to Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Capitoline, supposedly dedicated in 509 BCE, famously featured a statue of the god in a four-horse chariot on the roof. However, the sheer number of chariot depictions in contexts that also include warriors is notable.

The military equipment finds for cavalry in archaic Central Italy suffer from many of the same problems as the iconographic evidence, in large part because of their overtly ritual context, as they all come from either burials or votive deposits. As a result, it is uncertain what function they were actually intended to perform and what their relationship was to the practical landscape of archaic Roman warfare. That being said, the amount and range of evidence that has been unearthed from Central Italy is impressive, although unfortunately very little of it can be directly connected to Rome or even Latium. The vast majority of our evidence for cavalry and chariots comes from Etruscan contexts – a feature of the archaeological record that likely relates as much to local mortuary practices as it does to wealth and military practice. However, given that many of Central Italy's elite seem to have exhibited a high degree of mobility and were arguably not bound by the cultural paradigms of 'Etruscan' and 'Latin' (or, for that matter, 'Sabine' or 'Umbrian', etc.) as the more settled populations, evidence from Etruscan contexts can plausibly be applied to the wider region.

Evidence for military equipment relating directly to horses and cavalry can be categorized into two distinct areas: horse bridles/bits/spurs and chariots. The surviving horse bits from archaic Central Italy usually consist of a swivel-jointed mouthpiece, typically of bronze but sometimes iron (see below, Fig. 6), which

41 Clements (2012).

42 Stary (1981) Taf. 46.

Fig. 6: Iron Etruscan horse bit. Etruria. c. 550 BCE
Metropolitan Museum of Art (Accession Number: 03.23.51)
Reproduced under OASC license.

contains two rods linked together at the middle and ending in eyelets for the reigns. These are present in Central Italian contexts going back to at least the eighth century BCE and were often quite elaborately decorated. They are often found either connected to or alongside cheek-pieces, also elaborately decorated, although of varying forms – including both hammered and cast bronze shapes. As with other evidence related to horses, these items are often argued to explicitly symbolize the high social status of the individual and so their interpretation is somewhat vexed.[43] While it seems clear (and perhaps obvious) that bridles/bits were important in the Central Italian use of horses, as Harrison has argued, their interpretation is far from clear-cut.[44] For instance, although many Etruscan sculptures "depict the head of a horse reigned in and deep, what we refer to today as 'deep and round,' a typical position of control that calms any horse into submission…these sculptures and metal bits [may not only be] indicative of the style of riding used by the Etruscans, but they may also serve as a visual attestation to the power the Etruscans wielded over their neighbours." There is no evidence for the use of saddles in archaic Central Italy, with iconography suggesting that

43 Haynes (2000) 16-17. See also Turfa (2005) 115-116.
44 Harrison (2013) 1108.

at most blankets or light padding was in use. Even as late as the fourth century BCE, the tomb paintings from Paestum, so rich in their detail for other aspects of military equipment, do not indicate any change in the type of equipment for Central Italian cavalry (see Fig. 4).

Fig. 7. Tomb painting depicting a warrior's return
(Paestum, Tomba Adriuolo 12 – eastern slab, 375-370 BCE)
Picture from the National Archaeological Museum of Paestum.
Photo by Francesco Valletta and John Grippo.

The other finds that could plausibly relate to cavalry and the use of horses in warfare are the elaborate chariots found in the richest of Central Italian graves, typically from Etruria (see. Fig. 6). Usually designed for two horses to be yoked (although iconographic evidence suggests four horse versions were also in use), chariots may have provided an interesting point of union between the lightly armed cavalry and heavy infantry, as several temple friezes (for instance from Toscania[45] and Cerveteri[46]) show armoured infantry riding on the back of chariots. Consequently, it has been argued as far back as the turn of the twentieth century that these chariots may have served as transport for infantry on the battlefield.[47] As noted above, however, it is entirely uncertain whether these vehicles would have ever been used in warfare itself and indeed, given the heavily forested and rugged nature of the terrain in much of archaic Central Italy and the elaborate decoration on those which have survived, it is likely that our extant examples were not. However, the strong association between chariots and victory parades, not to mention graves featuring weapons and armour, does suggest a somewhat martial character.

Fig. 8: Monteleone bronze chariot, inlaid with ivory and featuring scenes of the Greek hero Achilles. Etruria. Late sixth century BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art (Accession Number: 03.23.1) Reproduced under OASC license.

45 Stary (1981) Taf 34.
46 *Ibid*. Taf. 36.
47 Helbig (1904).

Leading the Equites

Looking across this collected evidence, the vital importance of horses to ancient elites, and elite warfare, seems evident – although we are arguably still no closer to understanding how the Roman cavalry operated. There are some clues, however, buried in rituals and remembered practices, which may help to shine a little more light on the situation. We can plausibly assume that members of the cavalry were connected, by social, political, and kinship (or pseudo-kinship) based bonds. One did not become a member of the *equites* or cavalry simply by virtue of owning a horse. Indeed, many of Rome's archaic religious and civil festivals revolve around the horse (*Equirria*, *Equus October*, *Consualia*[48], etc.). In addition to emphasizing the symbolic value of the horse, they were also a manifestation of the social, political, and military capacity of the *equites* and, in some cases – for instance, the *transvectio equitum* ('review of the *equites*') – may mark part of the initiation into the group. On the 15th of July, the *iuvenes* of the *equites* marched from the Temple of Mars in Clivo outside the *pomerium*, through the Porta Capena, past the Temple of Castor in the *Forum Romanum*, and up to the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Capitoline (Livy 9.46; *Vir. ill.* 32.2). Although the ritual described seems to have been the result of a late fourth century BCE reworking by the censor Q. Fabius Maximus Rullianus, as part of a reform associated with the census of the *equites* (Val. Max. 2.2.9; Plut. *Pomp*. 13.5), the wider tradition traces its origins back to the appearance of the Dioscuri after the battle of Lake Regillus in 496 BCE (Livy 2.9ff.; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom*. 6.3; Cic. *Nat*. 2.6), giving it added prestige and hinting at an archaic importance. Indeed, within the wider citizen body of the emerging Roman state, the *equites* are consistently marked out as a distinct group.

The leader of the *iuvenes* in the *transvectio equitum* was the *princeps iuventutis*, who was ceremonially equipped with a shield and a spear, showing the clear martial associations. Indeed, leadership of the *equites* is a central issue, and something which we also know a bit about. As noted above, when under the overall command of a dictator, the *equites* were evidently commanded by a *magister equitum* ('master of the horse'). Sadly, we know very little about this

48 The Italic agricultural god Conso, in whose honour horse races were held from ancient times, was later identified with Neptune (the Greek Poseidon), said to be equestrian as the creator of the horse.

office, except that he is usually always paired with the dictator.[49] It was appointed by the dictator, although, it is largely modern scholarship that interprets this as evidence of a subordinate role. While he was subject to the *coercitio*, or control of the dictator, who could also limit his duties (Livy 8.36,1), there is no evidence that he was under his *imperium*. Although his term of office ended with that of the dictator, this required a separate *abdicatio* (Livy 4.34) and the original designation of the dictator as the *magister populi,* or 'master of the *populus*/infantry' (Cic. *Rep*. 1.40; Varro *LL*. 5.82) perhaps hints at equal footing. By the late Republic, the office seems to have been considered comparable to the praetorship (Cic. *Leg*. 3.3), with the holder entitled to six *lictores*.[50] However, in earlier periods, this notional equivalency is far from certain.

Although the narrative of the Regal period is deeply problematic, Dionysius of Halicarnassus records a tradition where whereby Taqruinius Priscus was supposedly the "ἡγεμὼν ἱππέων" (*hegemon hippeon*, 'cavalry commander' - Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom*. 3.41.4; 4.6.4) while serving during the reign of Ancus Marcius, and then went on to lead the cavalry himself as *rex* in the early years of his reign (Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom*. 3.48-53). As he aged, the young Servius Tullius is recorded as showing his value as a member of the cavalry before moving up to the position of ἡγεμὼν ἱππέων himself (Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom*. 4.3.2). Thus, the position of leader of the cavalry seems to have been comparable to that of an heir, and indeed we can see a similar situation with the *princeps iuventutis* touched on above. In 5 and 2 BCE, Gaius and Lucius Caesar, the adoptive sons of Augustus, were both acclaimed *principes iuventutis* by the *equites Romani*, and Ovid (*Ars*. 1,194) noted "*nunc iuvenum princeps, deinde future senum*" ('today first among youths, tomorrow first among old men', i.e. the senators).[51] By the Flavian period, the *princeps iuventutis* ('leader of the youths', and often abbreviated 'PI')

49 "Paired" is the traditional understanding, although this may not be entirely correct – as the year 217 BCE hints. In this year, although somewhat exceptional in Roman history due to the situation and Hannibal's invasion, the sources record the appointment of Q. Fabius Maximus Verrucosus as dictator, with M. Minucius Rufus as *magister equitum*. However, Rufus was then elected co-Dictator with Fabius through a law proposed by the tribune of the plebs, without being replaced (Polyb. 3.103.1-5; Liv. 22.25—26; Val. Max. 5.2.4; Plut. *Fab*. 7—9; App. *Hann*. 12; etc.). It is difficult to know how much to read into this set of events, but it suggests that by this point having a dedicated master of the horse was not required.

50 Brill's New Pauly (BNP) '*Magister equitum'*.

51 BNP '*Princeps iuventutis'*.

was used to designate the young successors of the emperors. Thus, although one might consider the role junior, it was not minor. Rather, the leader of the cavalry was a vital part of the military system, entrusted to the notional heir apparent.[52]

The *magister equitum* and *principes iuventutis* were not the only leaders of cavalry though. As noted above, our sources record that, when Romulus created the cavalry, he dubbed them the *Celeres* and put them under the command of the *tribunus celerum* (Livy 1.13; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom*. 2.13; Varro, *LL* 5.91; Plin. *NH* 33.9; Festus, *s.v. Celeres*). This position seems to hold the same rough status and connotations as the other two cavalry commanders, as L. Junius Brutus was supposedly named *tribunus celerum* by Tarquinius Superbus and held this position when he led the revolt against the *rex*. Intriguingly then, despite the supposed parallels between the early Roman and Classical Athenian systems, this early Roman command system is markedly different from that present in Athens, where two cavalry commanders (*hipparchs*) were elected each year, each with control over the cavalry from five tribes (*Ath. Pol*. 61.5-6).[53]

Below this overall commander, the system of command for the early Roman cavalry seems far more egalitarian – although it is also likely Hellenistic in date. As noted above, during the Republic, the Roman citizen cavalry was divided into *turmae* of thirty men each, which were in turn divided into three groups of ten.[54] Each group of ten cavalrymen was then led by a *decurio* selected by the military tribunes, with the first decurion selected also taking command of the full *turma* (Varr. *LL* 5.91.1). Thus, for a cavalry force of 300 (the supposed size of the cavalry under Romulus) one would have 30 *decuriones* of notionally equal status, and for a force of 1200 (the supposed size of the cavalry under Tarquinius Priscus) one would have 120. Each *decurio* also selected an *optio*, who served as a sec-

52 If this holds true for the *magistri equitum* of the Republican dictators, it perhaps changes how we should view the appointment and relationship between the men and families involved.

53 This is not to say there are not strong resonances between the overall Roman and Athenian cavalry systems, for instance in number. Both began with 300 cavalry, later expanded to 1200, etc.

54 Allied cavalry maintained their own organization and command structures, which are largely lost to us. Although the allies evidently provided the majority of Rome's cavalry by the second century BCE, their number, importance, and relationship to the Roman *equites* before 338 BCE is uncertain, and so they do not play a major role in the present argument.

ond-in-command and, by the late Republic, was a 'rear-officer' who operated from the back of the file.[55] Thus, a full 20% of the *equites* was made up of 'officers' most of whom seem to have held roughly equal rank. Again, this contrasts with the Athenian system which, in addition to the two elected *hipparchs*, had 10 tribal cavalry commanders – one from each tribe – who acted in a similar way to the *taxiarchs* of the phalanx (*Ath. Pol*. 61.4-6).

The closest parallel for the early Roman system, as described by our sources, is the Hellenistic model, with a single, elite, overall commander – often either the king himself or the heir to the throne – with the cavalry itself, also composed of elites, divided into *ilia,* or squadrons comparable to *turmae*, on a regional/kinship basis (e.g. Arr. *Anab*. 3.11; Curt. 5.2.6; Diod. Sic. 16.85; 17.17).[56] This suggests two options, and arguably either is equally possible. First, much of the preserved tradition for the Roman cavalry organization dates to the Hellenistic period and mirrors comparable systems. Second, the Roman cavalry system had much more in common with the family-based, or tribal systems used by Hellenistic kings for their cavalry than it did with the state-based, elected systems used by the Greek poleis like Athens and Sparta. To the above we must add that the tradition condenses into a few lines, an institutional and tactical development of cavalry that we do not know.

The Early Equites

The nature of the *equites* within this command structure needs some attention as well. All our extant sources focus on the social, political, and economic aspects of the early *equites*, as this was largely how the group existed and operated by the late Republic. While the *Celeres* were an identifiable military unit in all the traditions, the *equites* were primarily a socio-political entity, defined by the census and placed into eighteen centuries within the *comitia centuriata*. Livy (1.43) records that Servius Tullius retained six archaic centuries, three of which had been established by Romulus (Tities, Ramnes, and Luceres) and subsequently doubled

55 McCall (2002) 79.

56 Alexander subsequently divided the *ilai* into two *lochoi* (Arr. *Anab*. 3.16). He also, after the execution of Philotas, split command of the Companion cavalry into two positions (Arr. *Anab*. 3.27). However, this seems to be due to his not having an heir to whom he could entrust this singular command.

by Tarquinius Priscus (Cic. *Rep*. 2.36), alongside twelve others. But while the rest of Servius Tullius' centuriate system was explicitly based on wealth, the selection criteria for the equites was more vague and, in any case, not exclusively based on the measurement of wealth. As noted above, the tradition records that the six archaic centuries used the old tribal affiliations, while the twelve new centuries of *equites* were drawn *ex primoribus civitatis* ("from the leading citizens" Livy 1.43.8). This marked change in tone, from the rigid property ratings noted in the lines before for the various infantry classes, suggests a fundamentally different organizational principle. While one would expect that members of the *equites* held wealth at least equivalent to the 100,000 *asses* of the first class, this was not their defining feature. Rather, men were selected for the *equites* according to different criteria, most likely related to their family affiliation and connections.

This picture aligns well with the model outlined so far, where the *equites* formed an important part of the elite landscape of Central Italy. As noted above, simply owning a horse or having sufficient wealth to do so was not necessarily enough to be part of the *equites* or the cavalry. Many families likely owned horses for agricultural, pastoral, or other practical purposes. From the social, cultural, and religious aspects of the group to the seemingly more tribal and yet also egalitarian nature of the military command structure reminiscent of Alexander's *Hetairoi* or 'Companion Cavalry', the Roman *equites* and cavalry relied upon a strong, pre-existing, set of relationships. Indeed, it is likely that the basic skills of horsemanship, particularly in a combat environment, were an elite preserve – hints of which can be seen in the wider references to the display of these skills in games and rituals.

Strabo (5.3) mentions equestrian competitions in Ardea and Lavinium, which seem to offer comparative support to the tradition relating to the institution of the *ludi equestri* (*Consualia*) in Rome, traditionally established by Romulus (Livy 1.9.6; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom*. 2.31). Equestrian events were supposedly part of Central Italian traditions and customs since time immemorial – Dionysius (1.33) suggests they were connected with the heroic period – but the elder Tarquin was associated with an increase in their military significance. Indeed, the Tarquins' strong connection with cavalry and the *Campus Martius* may offer a plausible explanation for the somewhat problematic connection between the gods *Consus* and *Neptunus Equestris* (*Poseidon Hippios*) within the *Consualia* festival. Plutarch (*QR* 48) Dionysius (Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom*. 2.31) suggest that *Neptunus Equestris* and *Consu*s were understood to be the same deity, despite their very

different associations: *Consus* with grain and *Neptunus Equestris* with horses. Tertullian, supposedly quoting an inscription on the altar used in the festival (*De Spect*. 5.7 – "CONSUS CONSILIO MARS DUELLO LARES COILLO POTENTES") also indicates a direct association between Consus and both Mars and the Lares.[57] This festival was also associated with the *flamen Quirinalis*, thus perhaps linking in Quirinus as well, and was the context for the Rape of the Sabine Women (Livy 1.9.6), which has led some to connect it to marriage and even the census.[58] However, the festival's location in the *Campus Martius* may also link it to the *ager Tarquinius,* which was famously taken from the Tarquins, after their removal, and consecrated to Mars through the sacrifice of crops (*Ager Tarquiniorum, qui inter urbem ac Tiberim fuit, consecratus Marti Martius deinde campus fuit. Forte ibi tum seges farris dicitur fuisse matura messi Quem campi fructum quia religiosum erat consumere, desectam cum stramento segetem magna vis hominum simul immissa corbibus fudere in Tiberim tenui fluentem aqua, ut mediis caloribus solet.*, Livy 2.5.2-3).[59] Given the Tarquins' association with the *equites* (in both a social and military guise), control of Rome during a period of expansion, and their direct connection with the festival's location, it is possible that *equites* may sit at the centre of this complicated tradition.

But, of course, the religious elements of the early *equites* extend far beyond the Tarquins and the *Consualia*. Most notably, there is also the cult of the Dioscuri, who had temples in Latin sites like Cori, Tusculum, Ardea and Lavinium, as well as Rome, and were particularly important for the young male elite. The brothers are depicted on the Francois vase, an early sixth-century BCE Attic black-figure volute krater, although not on horseback. The first locally produced evidence of them is the sixth-century BCE altar at Lavinium and there is roughly contemporary evidence from Etruria where they were known as the children of Tinia.[60] The cult in Rome was famously dated to 484 BCE, as the result of an oath by the

57 See Dušanić and Petković (2002) for discussion.

58 Noonan (1990).

59 "The land of the Tarquinii, lying between the City and the Tiber, was consecrated to Mars and became the Campus Martius. It happened, they say, that there was then standing upon it a crop of spelt, ripe for the harvest. Since this produce of the land might not, for religious reasons, be consumed, the grain was cut, straw and all, by a large body of men, who were set to work upon it simultaneously, and was carried in baskets and thrown into the Tiber, then flowing with a feeble current, as is usually the case in midsummer." (trans. Foster, 1919, Loeb Classical Library).

60 Gartrell (2021) 11-12.

dictator Postumius during the Battle of Lake Regillus in 496 BCE (Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom*. 6.13.1-4; Livy 2.20.12; 2.42.5). Interestingly, while there were *aeditui* or 'caretakers' of the temple of Castor (which seem to have been numerous), there is no solid evidence for a priesthood associated with the cult.[61]

Of particular interest to the present discussion, however, are the activities associated with the cultic activities. Dionysius of Halicarnassus (6.13.4-5) describes the *transvectio equitum* thusly:

> ...ὑπὲρ ἅπαντα δὲ ταῦτα ἡ μετὰ τὴν θυσίαν ἐπιτελουμένη πομπὴ τῶν ἐχόντων τὸν δημόσιον ἵππον, οἳ κατὰ φυλάς τε καὶ λόχους κεκοσμημένοι στοιχηδὸν ἐπὶ τῶν ἵππων ὀχούμενοι πορεύονται πάντες, ὡς ἐκ μάχης ἥκοντες ἐστεφανωμένοι θαλλοῖς ἐλαίας, καὶ πορφυρᾶς φοινικοπαρύφους ἀμπεχόμενοι τηβέννας τὰς καλουμένας τραβέας, ἀρξάμενοι μὲν ἀφ᾽ ἱεροῦ τινος Ἄρεος ἔξω τῆς πόλεως ἱδρυμένου, διεξιόντες δὲ τήν τε ἄλλην πόλιν καὶ διὰ τῆς ἀγορᾶς παρὰ τὸ τῶν Διοσκούρων ἱερὸν παρερχόμενοι, ἄνδρες ἔστιν ὅτε καὶ πεντακισχίλιοι φέροντες ὅσα παρὰ τῶν ἡγεμόνων ἀριστεῖα ἔλαβον ἐν ταῖς μάχαις, καλὴ καὶ ἀξία τοῦ μεγέθους τῆς ἡγεμονίας ὄψις. ταῦτα μὲν ὑπὲρ τῆς γενομένης ἐπιφανείας τῶν Διοσκούρων λεγόμενά τε καὶ πραττόμενα ὑπὸ Ῥωμαίων ἔμαθον· ἐξ ὧν τεκμήραιτ᾽ ἄν τις ὡς θεοφιλεῖς ἦσαν οἱ τότε ἄνθρωποι, σὺν ἄλλοις πολλοῖς καὶ μεγάλοις.[62]

He thus emphasizes the direct military aspects, including their division by tribe and centuries ("as if they came from battle") and displaying their "rewards for valour in battle". We can see similar, overt martial aspects in the *Ludus Troiae*. As described by Virgil (*Aen*. 5.545-603), this seems to have been a simulated battle, with three *turmae* of young *equites* performing various, intricate manoeuvres. Thus, while clearly a ritualized display, there are strong hints that elements of the *equites* retained strong martial connections, and indeed practised and drilled to-

61 Gartrell (2021) 25-26.

62 "But above all these things there is the procession performed after the sacrifice by those who have a public horse and who, being arrayed by tribes and centuries, ride in regular ranks on horseback, as if they came from battle, crowned with olive branches and attired in the purple robes with stripes of scarlet which they call t*rabeae*. They begin their procession from a certain temple of Mars built outside the walls and going through several parts of the city and the Forum, they pass by the temple of Castor and Pollux, sometimes to the number even of five thousand, wearing whatever rewards for valour in battle they have received from their commanders, a fine sight and worthy of the greatness of the Roman dominion. These are the things I have found both related and performed by the Romans in commemoration of the appearance of Castor and Pollux; and from these, as well as from many other important instances, one may judge how dear to the gods were the men of those times." (trans. Cary, 1937, Loeb Classical Library).

gether. It is clear, as well, that the skills deployed by the *equites* were not those of amateurs or 'part time' cavalry, but rather experienced horsemen. For instance, as noted above, Granius (26.2) tells us that Tarquin's *equites priores* went into combat with two horses, and also connects this custom with the cult of Castor. The horse-rider relationship was built only through years of apprenticeship: knowing the potential and limits of the horse, taking care of it, and knowing how to direct and control it. Licinianus' suggestion of having two horses, however, may not solely be connected with this cult, as it may also connect to *desultores* – and indeed Hyginus (*Fab*. 80) explicitly connects all three.

As noted above, a *desultor* is one who jumps off or between horses.[63] Although it is often assumed that they were common in antiquity, and indeed the practice is referred to as far back as Homer (*Il*. 15.679-684), explicit literary evidence in a Roman context is limited. One of the only clear examples of their existence is in Caesar's triumphal games (Suet. *Iul*. 39), where they seem to be young members of the *equites*. However, they appear far more regularly in iconography. The theme of the *desultores*, represented in the moment of the leap from the horse, is frequent in iconography between the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, in the Tyrrhenian area. In southern Etruria the leap of the *desultores* is well documented in the tombs of Tarquinia and appears among the equestrian figures that act as acroteria, or roof decoration, on the temple of Apollo (510-490 BCE) in Veii and on the tympanum of the temple B of Pyrgi (510 BCE).[64] For Latium, there is the disc found in the famous warrior burial from Lanuvium and some of the cysts found in Palestrina. They are also found in iconography found on silver Roman coinage by the second and first centuries BCE, with their iconography often blurring with that of the Dioscuri which dominated previous issues. The association between *desultores*, and the tremendous skill and ability which it involves, with the *equites* is noteworthy. It reinforces, yet again, that this group was far more than a social, political, economic, or religious entity. It had practical aspects, which evidently included advanced horsemanship in a decidedly martial context.

63 Thuiller (1989).

64 Tomb of the Master of the Olympics in Tarquinia (c. 500 BCE), in Tomb no. 4255 in Tarquinia (480 BCE), from the Tomb of the Monkey in Chiusi (480-470 BCE) and from the Tarquinian Tomb of the Triclinium (470 BCE). See Steingraber (2006) for images and discussion.

Fig. 9: Reverse of silver denarius, 112 - 111 BCE. Minted in Rome by Ti. Quinctius. RRC 297/1. American Numismatic Society. Image is in the Public Domain.

The early Equites *in Context*

While the literary sources describe early Roman battles in epic terms, it is increasingly accepted that warfare likely operated on a much smaller scale. Warfare in archaic Central Italy was dominated by bands of, typically elite and gentilicially organized, warriors and was largely characterized by raiding for portable booty.[65] While a wide range of goods would have been subject to seizure in this context, our sources regularly emphasize the importance of livestock – most notably cattle, as well as sheep and goats, and likely horses.[66] Famously, when Porsenna arrived at the gates of Rome in 508 BCE, Livy (2.11.3) reports that "...*ut non cetera solum ex agris sed pecus quoque omne in urbem compelleretur, neque quisquam extra portas propellere auderet*".[67]

While livestock, and especially cattle, were a prime target of warfare, it was likely on an irregular basis. First of all, the traditional campaigning season was often thought to be based on the agricultural calendar – beginning in March and running until the summer harvest – as this is when the men, based on the farms, would have been available. However, this period not only aligned with a gap in the

65 See Armstrong (2016) for discussion.

66 Plutarch (Cor. 10.2) reports that Coriolanus was given a horse from the spoils of war after a battle with the Volscians. Amongst the many items offered to him, this was supposedly the only one he accepted.

67 "...not only were they forced to bring all their other property inside the walls, but even their flocks too, nor did anybody dare to drive them outside the gates" (trans. Foster, 1919, Loeb Classical Library).

agricultural calendar, but was also an important period for pastoralists, as it was the period when they were most often on the move. While some animals may have stayed on the same farmstead for their entire lives, most were evidently subject to seasonal transhumance.[68] Thousands of animals moved on a regular cycle from summer pastures in the mountains to winter pastures on the coast, often moving hundreds of kilometres. This movement is attested by Roman laws like the *Lex Agraria* of 111 BCE (CIL I²: 585) or the second century CE inscription from Saepinum (CIL IX, 2438), as well as literary sources, like Cato's *De Agricultura* (149) – and indeed these basic rhythms and movements of people and animals are still evident in modern times.[69] It is also likely visible in the activities of (and conflict around) various mobile, tribal entities connected with the central Apennines.

While it is likely that groups of pastoralists contained both men on foot and horseback, horsemen would have represented an important component. Groups of horsemen and livestock can move, feed, and rest at the same pace. Indeed, the rearing of cattle and horses is often done in conjunction, as they require similar resources and activities. As comparative ethnographic examples indicate, horseback pastoralists are far more efficient and effective – they do not fatigue and maintain a high level of responsiveness, can quickly move about, observe territory, anticipate threats, and intervene promptly.[70] Conversely, those who wished to raid groups of pastoralists, be they members of other pastoral groups or of the agricultural communities they passed through, would have also benefited from being on horseback.[71]

The early *equites* in Rome, and across archaic Central Italy, likely played a key role in the competition over livestock – both raiding for animals and protecting their own animals from raids. This was, certainly, an economic concern – and very possibly a known and accepted risk. During these periods of movement, land, which was typically dominated and controlled by agriculturalists, would have been shared with pastoralists and their herds. Some limited predation by the agriculturalists on these herds may have been an accepted form of 'tax' for this limited use, and the damage it likely wrought. However, it is likely that preda-

68 Barker (1989).
69 Barker et al (1991).
70 Taylor et al. (2020).
71 Anthony and Brown (2014).

tion often exceeded acceptable limits, or pastoralists may have also preyed upon weaker settlements and groups during their journey, leading to violence. There were also likely social forces at play. Livestock is often the primary currency for exchange in social transactions amongst pastoralists. While other forms of wealth are known and used, livestock is often the most acceptable form of wealth used to pay dowries or a 'bride price' in pastoral societies.[72] For those living in settled communities throughout the ancient Mediterranean, livestock was vitally important for ritual display and sacrifice. Thus, it is likely that young men on both sides of this pastoral/agricultural relationship would have been incentivized to raid for livestock during these periods of movement in order to increase their standing. Being part of the *equites*, or equivalent group, was likely an important step for young Central Italian elites in improving their social and economic status.

Conclusions

The early Romans *equites*, far from being strictly a social, economic, or political group, were likely an important military force in the Regal period and early Republic. However, the nature of this role was dictated by the nature of both war and society in the region. Archaic Central Italy featured a heterogeneous population, with both pastoralists and agriculturists (and likely a mixture of the two), as well as settled communities and more mobile *gentes* ('clan groups') and tribes. Warfare was dominated by raiding for portable wealth, and especially livestock, in which quick action by young men on horseback would have been central. They would have been able to quickly respond to both threats and opportunities, as well as keep up with and herd animals. Equally importantly, cavalry actions would have provided ample opportunity to display bravery and daring in combat situations. As Polybius (6.25) noted, the early Roman *equites* were remembered as being more lightly armed and armoured than the 'heavy' cavalry of the Hellenistic period. Instead, and as befitted their raiding function, many may have "fought in light undergarments, the result of which was that they were able to dismount and mount again at once with great dexterity and facility, but were exposed to great danger in close combat, as they were nearly naked" (Polyb. 6. 25.3, trans. Paton). But this did not necessarily apply to all of the *equites*. Some, like the warrior from

72 Anthony (2007) 239.

the Lanuvium burial, may have been equipped with full bronze panoply and long *kopis* as early as 500 BCE. Despite later writers' attempts to standardize things, the vast majority of military equipment was acquired and maintained personally (the *equus publicus* being a notable exception), meaning that individual warriors and families would have had significant control, likely resulting in a degree of diversity.

However, two broad conclusions are possible. First, if we accept that early Roman warfare was at least partly based around clan-based raiding, the early Roman *equites* seem to have embodied the elite warrior ethos which defined this period. Drawn from the top socio-political echelon of society, and focused on elite display – duelling, raiding, and feats of strength and daring – they were not a 'sideshow' within early Roman warfare, but the 'main act'. The exact nature of this 'act' is the subject of a future paper, but its centrality and importance for early Roman warfare are worth emphasizing as the core point being made here. While it is likely that they were supported by infantry, the core goals and ambitions of the elites – who also dictated the time and nature of warfare – were actually accomplished by the cavalry. Indeed, in this context, they were seemingly quite effective. Highly trained, with the best available equipment, their role was important enough to be supported through the granting of mounts at public expense. Second, the changing role and position of the Roman cavalry is likely connected to the changing nature of warfare in Italy, most notably during the fourth and third centuries BCE. During this period, raiding was increasingly replaced by territorial expansion, and the composition of armies was altered by their increasing size, the rise of mercenaries, the increased role of allied troops, and a 'democratization' of violence. In this context, it made less sense for socio-political elites to risk life and limb in battle, when the bulk of the rewards were acquired *after* the battle, through treaties and diplomacy, in the form of land. While monomachy and duelling arguably remained an important aspect of warfare, and at least a vestigial part of elite display (especially for commanders), the wider appeal of cavalry actions for Roman elites seems to have declined. If they were not able to win individual glory on the battlefield, due to the changing nature of warfare, they would rather save their display for the much safer confines of ritual display in the city. However, this later ritualized version should not completely obscure the far more functional and effective nature of the early Roman cavalry as it existed in the Regal and early Republican periods.

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So called Missorium of Kerch, 4th century Found: Bosporan Necropolis, vault on the Gordikov estate. Near Kerch, the Crypt in the North-Eastern Slope of Mount Mithridates, 1891 This silver dish was a diplomatic gift from the Byzantine Emperor to a representative of the Bosporan government. In this fine example of the early Byzantine art traditional Classical themes are combined with a new artistic style. The vessel shows a composition typical of Roman coins: the Emperor on horseback is piercing the enemy with a spear. The rider was usually accompanied by one or several warriors and Nike crowning the winner. In contrast to the Classical composition showing the final scene of a battle, here we see the scene of triumph: Emperor Constantius II sits on a horse, triumphantly raising his spear. To emphasize the Emperor's highest rank and divine power, the artist used special pictorial devices including, for example, the distortion of proportions. The images were produced by a chisel. Part of the ornamentation is nielloed. The outer surface is gilded and a loop is soldered onto it. Hermitage Museum. Saint Petersburg.

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