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ON A ROMAN FIRE-BRIGADE IN BRITAIN.

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The Notitia, or Official Register of the Military Establishment of the Eastern and Western Empire, informs us that at the time when it was drawn up, namely, at the beginning of the fifth century, there was a numerus or cohort of night-watchers or fire-men at Greta Bridge in Yorkshire: Praefectus numeri Vigilum Concangios (Not. oc. xl, 24). The Latin term here used is *VIGILES*, and what these *vigiles* were it is the purpose of the present essay to inquire.

The fact of there being a *NUMERUS VIGILUM* stationed in Britain is in itself well-nigh unique in the military annals of ancient times; for the only other instance on record is that mentioned by the Notitia of a detachment or auxiliary force of *vigiles* at Ofen in Hungary: *auxilia vigilum contra Acinco in barbarico* (Valer.), where the word *solo* should be understood (*ib.* xxxiii, 48).

The organized bands of fire-men or night-watchers were in the city of Rome an ancient institution. Suetonius tells us that the emperor Augustus organized them afresh by forming them into seven cohorts, and by assigning one cohort to each two quarters of the imperial city. An altogether fresh interest has been given to the institution by the discovery in 1866, in the Transtiberine region of Rome, of the guard-house or head-quarters (*excubitoria*) of one of these fire-brigades.

¹ Read at the Meeting of the Institute at Lewes, August 3rd, 1883.

At the period of which we are now treating, the ancient constitution of the Roman army had undergone considerable change, so that none of the ancient writers who have treated of Roman military affairs, Polybius, Tacitus, Dion Cassius, or even Vegetius can be taken as our guide. The decay of the empire, and the throes of dissolution brought on by internecine struggle for command, conducted in the face of barbaric hordes who were breaking across the borders on every side, may furnish some explanation of the relaxation of discipline and the lapse into desuetude of many time-honoured institutions. The extraordinary nature of military circumstances at this period of the Roman empire may be exemplified by the strange and novel designations given in the *Notitia* to some of the bodies which formed the permanent garrison of Britain. Thus in the fortieth chapter of the *Western Notitia* we have, "Under the disposal of the respectable personage the Duke of Britain," besides the band of night-watchers at *Concangium*, a band of *exploratores* or scouts at *Bowes* on *Stanemore* in *Yorkshire*, a band of *directores* or guides at *Burgh* under *Stanemore* in *Westmoreland*, where, says *Horsley*,¹ they were much needed, and of *defensores*, which he interprets as defenders of passes, at *Brougham*, but whom *Scholl* thinks were a reserve force to support an army pursuing an enemy in rout. Then we have the sea-forces which in an emergency seem to have been used for the defence of the northern stations of the island against the incursions of the *Picts* and *Scots*. Besides the fixed stations of the *marines* or of the *galley-men* who manned the fleet that kept up communication between *Gaul* and *Britain*, such as may have existed at *Dover* and *Lymne* in *Kent* (*Classiarii Britannici*), we have evidence of Roman *marines* being established at *Tynelaw*, at the mouth of the *Tyne*, and of a number of *bargemen* called perhaps from their services in *Asia* on the *Tigris* (*numerus barcariorum Tigrisiensium*) at *Piersebridge*, or, to judge from remains, at some point nearer the mouth of the *Tees*. To add a name that strikes strangely on our ears, we may mention the *Equites Cataphractariorum* stationed by the

¹ *Brit. Rom.* p. 477 note

Notitia at Morbium in Britain (wherever that may be), who may have been Asiatic cavalry armed cap-a-pie.¹

Whether the VIGILES above-mentioned were night-watchers along the river-side, or a body corresponding to our modern fire-men, it may now perhaps be almost impossible for us to determine. As every legion and separate body in the Roman service had an organized system of patrols, sentinels and night-watchers, it would seem superfluous to have a cohort exclusively formed of sentinels or watchmen engaged in garrison at a ford or a bridge of a small Yorkshire river, supposing Concangium to be identical with Greta Bridge. The term VIGILES is not new in the Roman annals; it had long been appropriated to the body of men existing perhaps in every large city, and established primarily to perform the office of a modern fire brigade, to which were added the duties of night-police. These must not be confounded with the sentinels or night-watchers of a Roman camp. The latter as they took the watch by turn could not receive any distinctive appellation making them into a separate arm of the service, just as we have not a regiment of sentinels or a troop of horse called patrols. Sentinel and patrol duty would fall to the lot of all by turn. Festus informs us (*sub voce*) that the light-armed infantry Velites were called *procubitores* because they were employed in out-post duty when the Romans were encamped before an enemy; but we do not read anything similar of the VIGILES.

In the days of Republican Rome the safety of the city was committed to certain Triumviri, on whom devolved the duty of extinguishing any sudden conflagration. From the night-watches they had to keep they received the surname of Nocturnal. The danger and labour of this civic duty was sometimes shared by the Aediles and

¹ To these strange-sounding names, most of which were unknown in the campaigning days of Caesar, Cicero and Horace, we may add the *Excultores* of whom there were young and old, *Juniore*s and *Seniore*s, and some styled in addition British, most probably from their connection with the Roman military establishment in Britain, though they were placed by the Notitia amongst the *auxilia Palatina* or household troops. These *Excultores*

we can only surmise were the same as *Excursatores* or pioneers, of whom Ammian says, "*Excursatores quingentos et mille sensim praeire disposuit.*" Other strange terms introduced in those later days of the Roman empire, were the *Speculatores*, *Protectores*, *Curatores*, *Scutarii*, *Scurrae*, *Bucellarii*, *Parasiti*, etc. Cf. Böcking in his notes on the *Eastern Notitia*, vol. ii, p. 208.

Tribunes of the people. A body of men was stationed near the city-gates, whence they could be quickly summoned in case of need. Alarmed by the growing frequency of conflagrations in the city the Emperor Augustus took the matter into his own hands, increased the number of night-watchers and gave them a regular military organization. Suetonius in the life he wrote of that Emperor (Octav. xxx) says, "*adversus incendia excubias nocturnas vigilesque commentus est*;" and Dion Cassius (LV, 26) sets down the event in the year from the foundation of Rome 759. Zell, in his learned disquisition on the various branches of the Roman army says expressly that Augustus took the fire-men already in existence, equipped them as soldiers, and made them guardians of public safety both as regards persons and property. As we learn from Tacitus (Ann. xi, 35) these VIGILES were commanded by a prefect who was of equestrian rank; but as Dion Cassius observes (LV, 26, LIX, 2) the corps itself in consequence of its being raised from amongst the class of libertini, was regarded as holding a position inferior to that of the regular soldiers. Tacitus in his History (iii, 64) calls the Roman fire-men the servants or henchmen of the better classes, and Suetonius (*ib.*, 25) alludes to them with the expression *libertino milite*.¹

Beside the seven cohorts which, as historians tell us, were established by Augustus, and distributed by him in fourteen excubitoria or guard-houses, one for each of the fourteen districts into which ancient Rome was divided, Claudius established similar corps of VIGILES at Ostia, and at Pozzuoli, near Naples.² From many passages of the Digest it appears that fire-men were established in other municipia as well, although no monument attesting their existence has been discovered outside the city of Rome, with the exception of Nismes in France, and Cirta, the ancient capital of Numidia, now called Constantine in Algiers.³ As Cassiodorus tells us,

¹ Vide Smith's and De Vit's Dictionaries *sub voce*.

² Suetonius in his life of Claudius says *Puteolis et Ostiae singulas cohortes ad arcendos incendiorum casus collocavit*.

³ Maffei however in his Museum of

Verona (462,2) has an inscription belonging to the town of Turuza in Tunis dedicated to a certain *Catius Alcinus Felicianus*.....VICE PRAEFECTUS VIGILUMOB EXIMIUM AMOREM IN PATRIAM by the ORDO TURZETANUS.

the fire-brigades fallen into disuse were re-established by Theodoric in Rome and in Ravenna. The inscriptions that have been found proving their existence on Monte Celio in Rome have been illustrated in the monograph by Kellerman on the two blocks of marble found in 1820 in the villa Mattei.¹

It seems then but natural to infer that no large Roman town, unprovided with a garrison sufficiently numerous to undertake the office, (and, says Gibbon, instead of being confined within the walls of fortified cities, which the Romans considered as the refuge of weakness or pusillanimity, the legions were encamped on the banks of the great rivers, and along the frontiers of the barbarians,) would be left without its complement of night-watchers or fire-men, an institution which may then have been well known in such important towns of Britain as York, Verulam, London, Colchester and Richborough. So sparse and desultory is the information accidentally left to us of the inhabitants and functionaries of the hundred cities of Roman Britain, that we cannot be surprised if a small brigade of vigiles existed in each one of them without any record being left to us.

It may not be out of place here to say something on the various duties the Roman fire-men or night-watchers were expected to perform. In 1848 an inscription of five lines was found in Aïn-Beïda cut upon a stone which had been used in the foundations of the house of the Caliph situated between Tebessa and Constantine, which sufficiently sets forth the duties of the Roman as well as the provincial VIGILES. This inscription first published in the *Inscriptions Romaines de l'Algérie*, Paris, 1855, fol., and republished in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, vol. viii, (Berolini 1881) under the number 2297, runs as follows :

ERIS SECURITAS SOPORANTION,
MUNIMEN DOMORUM, TUTELA CLAUSTRO-
RUM, DISCOSSOR (sic) OBSCURUS, ARBITER
SILENTIOSUS, CUI FALLERE INSIDIANTE
FAS EST ET DECIPERE GLORIA.

The inscription may be translated as follows: "Thou shalt be the safety of those who sleep, the guardian of houses, the protector of sacred enclosures, watching in

¹ Kellermann, *Vigilum Romanorum latercula duo*, Romae, 1835, in 4to.

the dark night, and judging without appeal those whom thou mayest apprehend ; thou whose duty it is to overreach the cunning of evil-doers and whose glory is to frustrate the cunning of those who plot mischief."

The words *soporantion* for *soporantium* and *discossor* for *discussor* prove this inscription to belong to a time of decadence. Wilmanns, who re-published the inscription in the *Corpus*, says of it, "Who this person may be who is thus spoken of, I do not know ; it may refer to some animal (*fera*) kept instead of a watch-dog." It was reserved for De Vit in 1868 to shew the identity of this inscription with a passage of the seventh letter, seventh book of Cassiodorus, containing the warrant or formula of the *Praefectus Vigili* in Rome.

But the chief duty of the Roman fire-men was to make their nightly rounds in the city confided to their care in order to prevent and extinguish fires. Hence the frequent mention in ancient authors of the axe and the bucket which they carried with them. The Roman jurisconsult Paullus says in the *Pandects* (i, 15, 3), *Sciendum est, praefectum Vigili per totam noctem vigilare debere et coerrare calciatum cum amis et dolabris, etc.* Hence Petronius in the seventy-eighth chapter of his *Satyricon*, where he narrates that as the Roman fire-men were passing near the house of Trimalchio and heard an unusual noise, says they immediately rushed on the scene with buckets of water and axes, and busily began to break down the gate: *Vigiles qui custodiebant vicinam regionem rati ardere Trimalchionis domum effregerunt januam subito et cum AQUA SECURIBUSQUE tumultuari suo jure coeperunt.*

Amongst the means used by the Roman fire-men for extinguishing sudden conflagrations, we read of rags or cloths steeped in vinegar or water, and an instrument called *Sipho*, which may have been an instrument of brass having the nature of a siphon or pump to cast up water, as among the lower officials of the Roman fire-brigade we read of *siponarii*, who had charge of this machine, and *aquarii* who attended to the water supply. Mention is also made of ladders and poles, and some think also of cushions, which were used for saving the lives of those

who were in danger unless such means of escape were provided.

Moreover the Roman VIGILES were called by the common people SPARTEOLI, either on account of the shoes or tunics worn by them, which were made of Esparto grass which grew on the coast of Africa and of Spain,¹ or from the Esparto ropes of which they made use, or still more probably from the vessels made of the same material and smeared with pitch in which they were accustomed to carry water. Hence the Scholiast on Juvenal, at the 305th line of the fourteenth Satire says:—*Per translationem disciplinae militaris Spar-teolorum Romae, quorum cohortes in tutelam urbis cum amis et cum aqua vigilias curare consueverunt vicinis.* It is of these Sparteoli that Tertullian says (*Apolog.* 39, *a med.*) that the smoke from a certain supper given in honour of Serapis was so great that on seeing it they thought the kitchen was on fire, and their services would be required. *Ad fumum coenae Serapiacae Sparteoli excitabuntur.* To judge from the text of Juvenal just mentioned, not only soldiers but even the servants of noble families were ready on occasion to perform privately the duties of Roman fire-men.

Dispositis praedives hamis vigilare cohortem
Servorum noctu Licinus jubet, attonitus pro
Electro signisque suis Phrygiaque columna
Atque ebore et lata testudine. (v. 305-308.)

The Roman fire-men, then, were a body trained to arms and accustomed to exact and rigid discipline. To explain therefore the existence of a cohort or numerus (for at that time the two terms were used promiscuously) of VIGILES at Greta Bridge in Yorkshire, we may suppose with some foundation that the fire-men scattered through the different cities of Britain may have been gathered together into a separate corps, and thrown forward for the support of the numerous forces engaged in defending the northern frontier against the continual invasions of the Picts and Scots.

It was only after this paper had been written that I

¹ In Spain near Carthagera, called by Pliny (xxxii, 43, 2) *Espartaria* from the Esparto grass which grew in its neighbourhood. Appian (*De Rebus Hisp.* 12)

calls it *σπαρταγηνς*. Vide De Vit's *ONOMASTICON*, tom. ii, page 146, *sub voce* Carthago in Hispania.

observed in a note on page 44 of Brady's History of England, vol. i, that this author inclines to the view that the *VIGILES* at Concanguim were not other than Roman fire-men. I will conclude in the words he there makes use of: "These watchmen were first introduced by Augustus, as a remedy against fire, thieves, and other inconveniences and mischiefs, in the great and populous city of Rome, and had their several circuits appointed for this night-service; they were afterwards soldiers, and distributed into seven cohorts, from whence the name was derived unto the soldiers abroad in the Provinces, whose duty might be somewhat alike."