

arma tribunicium cingere digna latus: The Parazonium in Roman Art and Culture

Arms and armor operated as both status symbols and signifiers of identity in the Roman world. In the archaic army, the members of each socio-economic order wore and wielded a different set of *arma*, from the cavalry gear of the *ordo equester* to the slings of the *funditores*. As various allies began to serve in the army, each group brought their own equipment, such as the camels of the Trajanic Ala I Ulpia dromedariorum Palmyrenorum. Even off the field of battle weapons could serve as a mark of rank, such as the *fasces* that denoted a magistrate's *imperium*. Individual pieces and sets of *arma* thus matched their men, much like the shield of Aeneas in *Aeneid* 8.

One of the foremost examples of *arma* as signifiers is the parazonium. Its name suggests that it is a piece of equipment worn about the flank. And indeed, in *Epigram* 14.32 Martial glosses this item as a military decoration, a sign of honor, and “*arma* worthy to gird a tribune's side” (*militiae decus hoc gratique erit omen honoris, | arma tribunicium cingere digna latus*). Yet the term parazonium has been used in catalogue descriptions since at least the 18th century to identify the long dagger or short sword that is often carried by emperors, gods, personifications (e.g. *Virtus*), and other important figures in Roman art, including statuary, reliefs, and coins. The weapon is traditionally shown in its scabbard, never drawn, and is frequently shown held upside-down with the girdle hanging loose or not present at all. Whether the term itself refers to the sword-belt, the weapon, or both as a unit, the literary and artistic evidence taken together suggest that the parazonium served primarily as a status symbol for those deserving of the honor, although like the *fasces* it must also have served a practical purpose in times of need.

In this paper I explore the significance of the parazonium in Roman culture in order to illustrate the symbolic potential of this key piece of *arma* both in Republican and Imperial times,

where in addition to its generic significance it develops a more specific connection to the authority of the emperor himself.