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Roman Spies on the Banks of the Tigris?

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Oculi legionum – Roman Spies on the Banks of the Tigris?

In 1988, David Kennedy published a short article in which he presented an extraordinary, now lost Latin inscription. As yet, this inscription has not been included in the *Année Épigraphique*, the Epigraphische Datenbank Clauss / Slaby (EDCS) or any other major collection of Roman inscriptions. It was, however, discussed in two recent articles.¹ The text allegedly read as follows:²

Oc{c}uli legionum

No photo, drawing or detailed description of the monument and its inscription exists. All that is known is what professor David Oates recollected in ca. 1987 from a letter, which the archaeologist received in 1973 from someone who claims to have seen the inscription in the Iraq in 1943. Both the reported findspot and the text of the inscription are unique among Latin inscriptions. It is therefore worthwhile to quote from David Kennedy's account from 1988:³

“In 1943 while working in northern Iraq, a British engineer discovered a Latin inscription on the west bank of the Tigris some 3 km south of Mosul. Thirty years later, in a letter to Professor David Oates, he reported this discovery together with a brief description of the stone and text as far as he could still recollect them. Subsequent enquiries in Iraq by Professor Oates failed to discover any knowledge or trace of it and the only record now of this text is Professor Oates' own recollection.

The stone was said to have borne an image of an eagle in relief and, below, the words *occuli (sic) legionum*. The find spot is a bend on the river Tigris just below Mosul, at a point where the modern road rises to pass along a bluff overlooking the river. No structures have been reported there and, although he frequently flew from the airfield at Mosul, Stein's aerial survey seems not to have searched downstream of that city.”

The engineer reported no ancient structures at the findspot and indeed, no Roman remains from the vicinity have become known since then. The geographical position of Mosul at one of the most important crossing points of the Tigris encouraged Kennedy to speculate that “the location would certainly have marked a suitable place for an outpost describing itself as 'The Eyes of the Legion’”.⁴ Similarly, N.J.E. Austin and N.B. Rankov took this report as evidence for a “watching post at the very limit of Rome's reach”.⁵ Most recently, O. Stoll chose the German translation of this text (“Die Augen der Legionen”) as the title for a lengthy and thoroughly documented article, in which he discusses the evidence for an alleged Roman military policy to monitor and secure long distance trade routes beyond the confines of the Roman empire by stationing soldiers from the legions and the auxilia in outposts located in

¹ Palermo 2020. Stoll 2022.

² Kennedy 1988.

³ Kennedy 1988, 101.

⁴ Kennedy 1988, 101.

⁵ Austin/Rankov 1995, 188.

foreign territories.⁶ Stoll also assumed that our inscription revealed the name of a Roman military post. This post, in his view, was part of a network of similar military posts that were established by soldiers of *legio I* and *III Parthica* of *provincia Mesopotamia* in the first half of the third century to watch the important crossing of the Tigris river near modern Mosul.⁷

However, there is little to support such interpretations, even though one could have made reference to those soldiers at Bu Njem who, in the local military records, were referred to as *de spec(u)lis* (“from the lookouts”).⁸ However, a Roman practice or tradition to give outposts and watchtowers fabricated Latin names is unknown. Also, unlike the modern practice of setting up town signs etc., there is no evidence that the names of outposts and watchtowers were inscribed without any further information onto stones and fixed to the relevant buildings in order to announce their names. Finally, the name *oculi legionum* for a watchtower (or a building with a similar purpose) is completely non-distinctive, as it describes the purpose of most of Rome’s watchtowers and fortlets manned by legionary soldiers. The name could therefore have been applied to any legionary watchtower or fortlet throughout the empire. Hence there is nothing that specifically connects the expression *oculi legionum* (if that is indeed what stood on the stone) with a Roman policy of monitoring and protecting the lucrative long-distance trade with the East or with the remoteness of its alleged find spot. One might, perhaps, also have expected a designation of such colloquial nature to have been formulated in Greek in the Eastern part of the empire.

The genitive plural *legionum* presupposes that soldiers from both of *provincia Mesopotamia*’s legions, *legio I* and *III Parthica*, undertook common activities near Mosul (if that is indeed where the inscription originates from).⁹ Common actions of soldiers of more than one legion far away from their bases and from provincial capitals are mainly known from soldiers serving in detachments (*vexillationes*) on military expeditions. The inscriptions commemorating such actions on the frontiers regularly include the names of the legions in question and are typically building inscriptions, as can easily be verified with the help of the EDCS. Yet, the names of the legions appear to be missing on the inscription from near Mosul (unless we are to assume that the text broke off after *legionum*) and neither the eagle relief nor the text as reported by Kennedy are at all indicative of a building inscription. In fact, the mention of a relief of an eagle above the text recalls funerary inscriptions as known from places in northern Syria.¹⁰ Yet, there is again nothing to suggest that we are dealing with an epitaph. The texts collected in the EDCS also bear out that the known cases in which *legionum* is not abbreviated but fully spelled out are very rare (most of them survive on

⁶ Stoll 2022. Most of the evidence Stoll discusses, however, is either from within provincial territory (Colchis, Farasan, Hegra) or from allied countries (Albania, Iberia, Armenia, Bosporan kingdom, kingdom of Saba and Himyar), and some inscriptions can hardly be taken as evidence for a Roman military strategy to protect long-distance trade (e.g. the inscriptions from Gobustan and Harmozika). All that, however, is not to say that the Roman army was not, in places, intensely involved in controlling and securing long-distance trade.

⁷ Stoll 2022, 27-28: «(...) Vexillationen aus Nisibis (...), die an diesem Ort eben die ‚Augen offenzuhalten hatten‘.» Ibid. 93: «Kontrolle über unerobertes Gebiet».

⁸ Marichal 1992, 79-80.

⁹ On the creation of Roman Mesopotamia in 195 and its garrison see Speidel 2009, 184-191.

¹⁰ Blömer 2019, 47-60.

stamped tiles from Mirebeau near Dijon). Taken together, these observations all cast grave doubts on the veracity of the report transmitted by David Kennedy in 1988.

In another very recent contribution, R. Palermo suggested the British engineer to have misread and misunderstood this text in 1943 because the expression *oculi legionum* is without parallel in Latin epigraphy.¹¹ Yet, although Palermo rightly emphasizes the highly unreliable nature of everything that has been reported about this “find”, he nevertheless proposes “a tentative explanation” assuming a “misread of *oculi* in place of *specul[.].*”, which could refer to the *speculatores*, the military scouts that surveyed the land before the bulk of the army arrives”. In Palermo’s view, “the location nearby the modern city of Mosul might also be related to the existence of a small fort/military post, which could have been part of the complex defensive system along the western bank (Roman?) of the Tigris, opposed to the Parthian (and then Sasanian) eastern bank. This could also explain the presence of *speculators* (assuming the chance of *oculi* > [*sp*]ecul[atores]) as the advanced group of Roman troops in the area, with the precise purpose of providing information on the movements of Parthian (or Sasanian) soldiers in the area.”

Palermo admits his proposed restoration [*sp*]ecul[atores] *legionum* to be speculative. His use of square brackets suggests that he assumes that the inscription was, at least in part, fragmentary when it was discovered in 1943. However, he offers no suggestion regarding the original nature of the inscription and what it originally may have commemorated. *Speculatores* of two legions from the same province could indeed act together, as a building inscription from Aquincum from 228 demonstrates: *Scola (!) speculatorum legionum I et II Adiutorum Piarum Fidelium Severian(a)r(um) refecta per eosdem quorum nomina infra scripta sunt (...)*.¹² However, as noted above, there is nothing to suggest that we are dealing with a building inscription. Nor does the surviving evidence on legionary *speculatores* of the first three centuries at all support the notion that such soldiers were stationed in groups in remote outposts to collect information on movements of the enemy or to protect long-distance merchants. For according to epigraphic, papyrological, and some literary texts, the *speculatores legionis* were not scouts that acted as a vanguard for combat units but senior staff members of a provincial governor. They are on record for operating as messengers and as public executioners.¹³

Evidently, the British engineer’s report as transmitted by David Oates and David Kennedy does not inspire confidence. As much as its text might appear intriguing, it does not supply an accurate description of the monument, of its size or shape, and claims the existence at a very unusual location of a unique and strange inscription. One might even doubt that the place where the engineer claimed to have discovered the inscription is identical with its original location. Whatever the engineer believed to have seen is therefore likely to have been distorted by his untrained eye and the memories of two people over a period of around four and a half decades. At any rate, the transmitted text does not appear to make any sense and

¹¹ Palermo 2020, esp. n. 10: “Chance that the transcription is erroneous is nevertheless extremely probable.”

¹² CIL III 3524 = ILS 2375 = TitAq I 9 = [EDCS-28600413](#).

¹³ Austin / Rankov 1995, 150 with the evidence.

certainly cannot be remedied without further reliable information. It is prudent, therefore, to refrain from drawing conclusions based on the presumed existence of this inscription until reliable information emerges.

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