

## The Praetorian Guard

### Etymology of *Praetorion*

The term *praetorium* is a Latin loanword in Greek. It is found 8 times in the *NT* (Matt. 27:27; Mark 15:16; John 18:28 twice, 33; 19:9; Acts 23:35; Phil. 1:13). The word *praetorium* signifies properly “the general’s tent, the headquarters in a camp.” The term “Praetorian” came from the tent of the legate of a legion in the field—the *praetorium*. This Latin loanword has other derived meanings such as: (1) “the residence of a governor or prince” (2) “any spacious villa or palace” (3) “body of men.” It refers to the camp of praetorian soldiers established by the emperor Tiberius (Suetonius 37), and does not refer to the palace of the emperor Nero himself.

### Secular Historical Evidence

The fact that this word *praetorian* is used for this group of elite soldiers is well attested in other ancient literature (Tacitus *Histories*, Book IV, 46; Suetonius *Tiberius* 37; Nero 9).

Bo Reicke, Professor Emeritus of New Testament at the University of Basel in Switzerland commenting on this word in the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia writes, “The expression ‘*praetorium*’ cannot refer to a building (as in the Gospels), but must indicate some people, comparable with “the others.” Several Greek inscriptions use the word *praetorium* in a personal sense to designate the praetorian guard of the emperor in Rome (L. Heuzey and H. Daumet, *Mission archeologique* [1876], nos. 130f. *Inscriptiones Graecae*, XIV [1890], no. 911; W. Dittenberger, *Orientalis graeci inscriptiones*, II [1905], no. 707). This corresponds to a normal Latin literary usage (Pliny Nat. hist. XXV.6 [17]; Suetonius *Nero* 9; Tacitus *Histories*. 1.20; etc.). During the first Christian centuries the Praetorian Guard was always garrisoned in Rome, although part of it would have provisionally accompanied the emperor abroad. Inscriptions found at other places (as also those quoted above) have to do only with individuals who had earlier been members of the Roman bodyguard.”

This word *praetorium* is used for councils for war, the officers who met in the general’s tent (Livy 26.15, 30.5). But more frequently it denotes the praetorian regiments, the *imperial guards*. This in fact is the common use of the term. It is found in such phrases as *veteranus ex praetorio* meaning “the veteran troops of the Praetorian camp” (Tacitus, *Histories* Book 2.11).

Suetonius uses the same phrase in *Nero* 9. Tacitus writes, “*exaucatorati per eos dies tribuni e praetorio Antonius Taurus et Antonius Naso, ex urbanis cohortibus Emilius Pacensis, e vigiliis Julius Fronto*” which translated says, “About this time were cashiered two tribunes of the Praetorian Guard, Antonius Taurus and Antonius Naso, an officer of the City cohorts, Emilius Pacensis, and one of the watch, Julius Fronto” (*Histories* 1.20).

The Jewish historian Josephus uses the Greek word praetorian for the *band of soldiers* who were the “purest part” of the Roman army.

## **The History of the Praetorian Guard**

They owe their name and origin to the small group of men who accompanied the Republican magistrates, the *Praetors*, when they embarked upon a campaign. Adopting this practice Augustus created the Imperial Guard. The Praetorians forming the imperial guard were hand picked men and were originally 10,000 in number and all of Italian birth. They were instituted by Augustus to act as a special, elite force for his protection, and were called by him *praetoriae cohortes*, praetorian *cohorts*. This imitated the select troop, which accompanied the *praetor* or Roman general. It was the habit of many Roman generals to choose from the ranks a private force of soldiers to act as bodyguards of the tent or the person. In time, this cohort came to be known as the *cohors praetoria*, and various notable figures possessed one, including Gaius Julius Caesar, Marc Antony and Octavian Augustus.

As Caesar discovered with the X Legion, a powerful unit more dangerous than its fellow legions was desirable in the field. When Augustus became the first ruler of the Empire in 27 B.C., he decided such a formation was useful not only in war but also in politics. Thus, from the ranks of legions throughout the provinces, Augustus recruited the Praetorian Guard. The group that was formed initially differed greatly from the later Guard, which would murder emperors. While Augustus understood the need to have a protector in the maelstrom of Rome, he was careful to uphold the Republican veneer of his regime. Thus he allowed only 9 cohorts to be formed, each of 500 to 1,000 men, and only 3 were kept on duty at any given time in the capital and the remainder was dispersed in the adjacent Italian towns.

While they patrolled inconspicuously, in the palace and major buildings, the others were stationed in the towns surrounding Rome; no threats were possible from these individual cohorts. Augustus’s death in 14 A.D. marked the end of Praetorian calm.

Through the machinations of their ambitious prefect, Lucius Aelius Sejanus, the Guard was brought from the Italian barracks into Rome itself.

In 23 A.D. Sejanus convinced Tiberius to have the *Castra Praetoria* (the Camp of the Praetorians) built just outside of Rome. Henceforth the entire Guard was at the disposal of the emperors, but the rulers were now equally at the mercy of the Praetorians.

The reality of this was seen in 31 when Tiberius was forced to rely upon his own *cohors praetoria* against partisans of Sejanus. Though the Praetorian Guard proved faithful to the aging Tiberius, their potential political power had been made clear.

On campaign, the Praetorians were the equal of any formation in the Roman army. Seldom used in the early reigns, they were quite active by 69 A.D. They played no role in the administration of the empire even though they could assassinate emperors; turn against prefects and the people of Rome.

Septimus Severus marched into Rome in 193 A.D. and disbanded the Praetorians after Didius Julianus purchased the Empire from the Guard for a vast sum. Severus founded a new formation from his Pannonian legions. Even Vespasian in 69, reduced their ranks in number upon ascending the throne.

Diocletian in 284 reduced the status of the Praetorians and they no longer were a part of palace life since he lived in Nicomedia. A new corps of guards, the Jovians and Herculians, replaced the Praetorians as the personal protectors of the emperors. By 305, the *Castra Praetoria* seemed to have only housed only a small garrison in Rome.

In general, the Praetorian Guard participated in appointing emperors and were responsible for the ascension of Claudius in 41 A.D., the disorders in 68-69, the lynching of Domitian's murderers in 97 A.D. They were also involved in the murders of Pertinax in 193, Elagabalus in 222, and Balbinus and Maximus in 238. Constantine finally disbanded them in 312.

## **Organizational Structure**

The Praetorians were under the orders of one of two prefects from the *praetorium*, men of equestrian rank directly answerable to the Emperor. One tribune and 6 centurions individually led each cohort. The latter were generally of equal status, with the exception of the *trecenarius*, the chief centurion, whose name is derived from the fact that he also commanded the 300 *speculatores* (another of the ruler's guards), and his second, the *princeps castrorum*.

The Praetorian cohorts were said to be *equitatae*, that is they contained a certain portion of cavalry (one-fifth) alongside a majority of foot soldiers (four-fifths).

Augustus created these 9 cohorts in 27 or 26 B.C. They were numbered I to IX and given the scorpion as an emblem.

In 2 B.C. the two Praetorian prefects were appointed primarily to supervise them. Tiberius appointed only 1 commander, the notorious Sejanus. It was these two, emperor and officer, who set up the 9 Praetorian and 3 Urban cohorts in Rome itself towards 20-23 A.D.

The 12 units were billeted in a camp 440 x 380m (1445 x 1245 ft), a total of 16.72ha (40 acres), to the west of which was installed a training ground or *campus*. Experts disagree on how many men each cohort contained-1000 from their beginning according to Mommsen, Passerini and D.L. Kennedy.

Durry and Pflaum believe the number to be 500 until the time of Severus when they were made up to 1000. Archaeological evidence proves conclusive though that the legionary camps which housed about 5000 soldiers, measured between 45 and 50 acres.

Each of the 12 Roman cohorts must have contained only 500 men as together they occupied just 40 acres. Thus they were 500 and not 1000 strong.

### **The Ranks of the Praetorians in Descending Order:**

*Prefects:* Available to the Vigiles and urban cohorts; the highest rank of the Praetorian Guard. *Procurators:* A rank of the Equestrians *Tribunes:* These officers, also from the legions and usually of the Equestrian class, commanded a cohort. Centurions could (rarely) be promoted to the tribuneship. *Centurions:* Soldiers transferred to the Guard after service in the legions, the *Vigiles* or the *Urban Cohort*. *Evocati:* After 16 years of service, retirement was possible but most soldiers chose to stay in this honorary unit. *Principales:* Legionary administrators *Immunes:* After 5 years, these soldiers were allowed to serve in the *Equite singulares* (cavalry branch) or as *Speculatores* (special agents). *Miles:* Regular soldier

### **Recruitment**

The fact that the Praetorian cohorts constituted the cream of the Roman Empire can be seen in their recruitment, at least at the beginning of the Principate. In the 1st century, it was necessary to be Italian to be chosen, and until the time of Tiberius it was restricted to Italians from Latium, Etruria, Umbria and the oldest colonies.

Under Claudius, Cisalpine Gaul, that is the plains of the river Po, was added. At the beginning of the 2nd century the peninsula still provided 89 percent of these

soldiers, a figure that was to fall slightly by the end of the Antonines, to the advantage of a few Dalmatians and Pannonians.

## **Training**

The training of the Guardsman was more intense than in the legions because of the amount of free time available when a cohort was not posted or traveling with the emperors. Equipment and armor were the same as those of the regular legions. There was only 1 notable exception where the Guardsman had specially decorated breastplates, excellent for parades and state functions. Each Guardsman possessed 2 suits of armor, one for duty and one for the field.

## **Pay**

The Praetorians received substantially higher pay than the soldiers in the regular legions. They were paid by a system known as *sesquiplez stipendium* or by pay-and-a-half. Thus, while the legionaries might receive 225 denarii, the Guardsman received 375. Domitian and Severus increased the *stipendium* (payment) to 1,500 denarii, distributed 3 times a year, in January, May and September. Upon retirement, a soldier of the Praetorians was granted 20,000 *sesterces* (5,000 denarii), a gift of land and a *diplomata* reading “to the warrior who bravely and faithfully completed his service.” Many chose to enter the honorary *Evocati* upon retirement while others re-enlisted in the hopes of gaining promotion and possible high positions in the Roman state.

## **Prefect of the Praetorian Guard (*Praefectus Praetorio*)**

The Prefect of the Praetorian Guard was the commander over the Praetorian Guard. This position evolved into one of the most powerful positions in the Roman Empire. The Praetorian Guard functioned effectively for 25 years after its institution by Augustus in 27 B.C.

The tribunes of the Praetorian Guard answered directly to the Emperor himself. In 2 B.C., however, Augustus appointed 2 prefects, Q. Ostorius Scapula and Salvius Aper, so that neither one would become overly ambitious. The pair directed the affairs of the Guard with moderation. This all changed with the rise of Strabo’s son, Sejanus, to the prefectship in 14 A.D. He proved so useful to Tiberius that vast amounts of power were handed over to him. He totally changed the function of the office forever.

The prefectship became the highest attainable posting for members of the Equestrian Order because of its prestige and influence. The emperors found the position convenient for delegating many unpleasant tasks. Because of this the prefects amassed tremendous amounts of power in the administration of the government. In the 1st century A.D., Burrus helped guide Nero's imperial policy early on. The death of Burrus brought an end to Nero's wise policy making. The infamous Tigellinus arrived on the scene and disgraced the office, which Burrus had so magnificently performed in.

## **Burrus**

Burrus was one of the most famous men in Rome. Sextus Afranius Burrus was the Prefect of the Praetorian Guard during the reigns of Claudius and Nero. Burrus was an important advisor and key figure in Nero's reign. An inscription claims that he came from Vasio in Gaul. He had a tremendous military career as he served as tribune, and then as procurator for the empress Livia and later for Tiberius and Claudius. He met Agrippina the Younger through Claudius.

Livia found him to be a trusted advisor and in 51 A.D. she recommended him as sole prefect of the Guard. The prefect would perform Agrippina's interests, which were to put her adopted son Nero on the throne as Claudius's heir over her own son Britannicus.

In 54 A.D., Claudius died and Burrus presented Nero to the cohorts of the Praetorians. Burrus became Nero's advisor offering him wise counsel along with the philosopher Seneca. The two men preserved and protected the Empire from Nero's failures as a leader. They also managed to break Agrippina's hold on her son.

In 59 A.D., Nero murdered Agrippina. From that point on, Burrus and Seneca's influence on Nero faded. Burrus was accused of plotting to overthrow Nero in 55 A.D. In 62 A.D., he tried to dissuade Nero from divorcing Octavia. He became ill probably poisoned by Nero in 62 A.D. He was a man with character and integrity, something that Nero lacked.

Tacitus writes that Burrus was an officer of high reputation, and he was generally considered to be an excellent soldier and a brilliant administrator and an honorable man. Dio writes that once when Nero asked him a second time for his opinions, Burrus responded: "When once I have spoken, do not ask me again." This same Burrus put Paul up in the fine accommodations of the Praetorian Camp.