



# THE CENTURION

**I**N THE ANCIENT ROMAN EMPIRE, a legion was the largest unit in the Roman army, consisting up to 6,000 infantry and cavalry. Each legion was divided into “cohorts” of 600 men, and each cohort was further divided into “centuries” of 100 men. The commander of a century was a centurion.

Consistent displays of bravery and military acumen allowed common soldiers to rise through the ranks to become centurions. Demonstrating military prowess, the centurion would eventually be called upon to lead a legion on a campaign and in battle.

The New Testament mentions centurions on numerous occasions. Some expressed faith in Jesus. For instance, Matthew 8 and Luke 7 mention a centurion who came to Jesus to request healing for his servant. He humbly confessed his unworthiness, but stated if he, a man under authority, could give orders, certainly Christ who possesses all authority could order his servant to be healed without ever entering the centurion’s home. Later, a centurion at the foot of the cross also came to the conclusion that Jesus was indeed God’s Son (Matt. 27:54).

The first Gentile convert to Christianity was Cornelius, a centurion in the Italian cohort (Acts 10). Coming to Caesarea from Joppa, Simon Peter followed the Lord’s instructions and shared the gospel with Cornelius and his Gentile guests. They became followers of Christ and were baptized.

The New Testament portrays other centurions, who, although themselves may not have become followers of Christ, they showed favorable treatment toward believers. For example, Julius, a centurion of the Augustan cohort, escorted Paul to Rome, treated him kindly, and even saved Paul’s life when their ship wrecked at Malta (Acts 27).

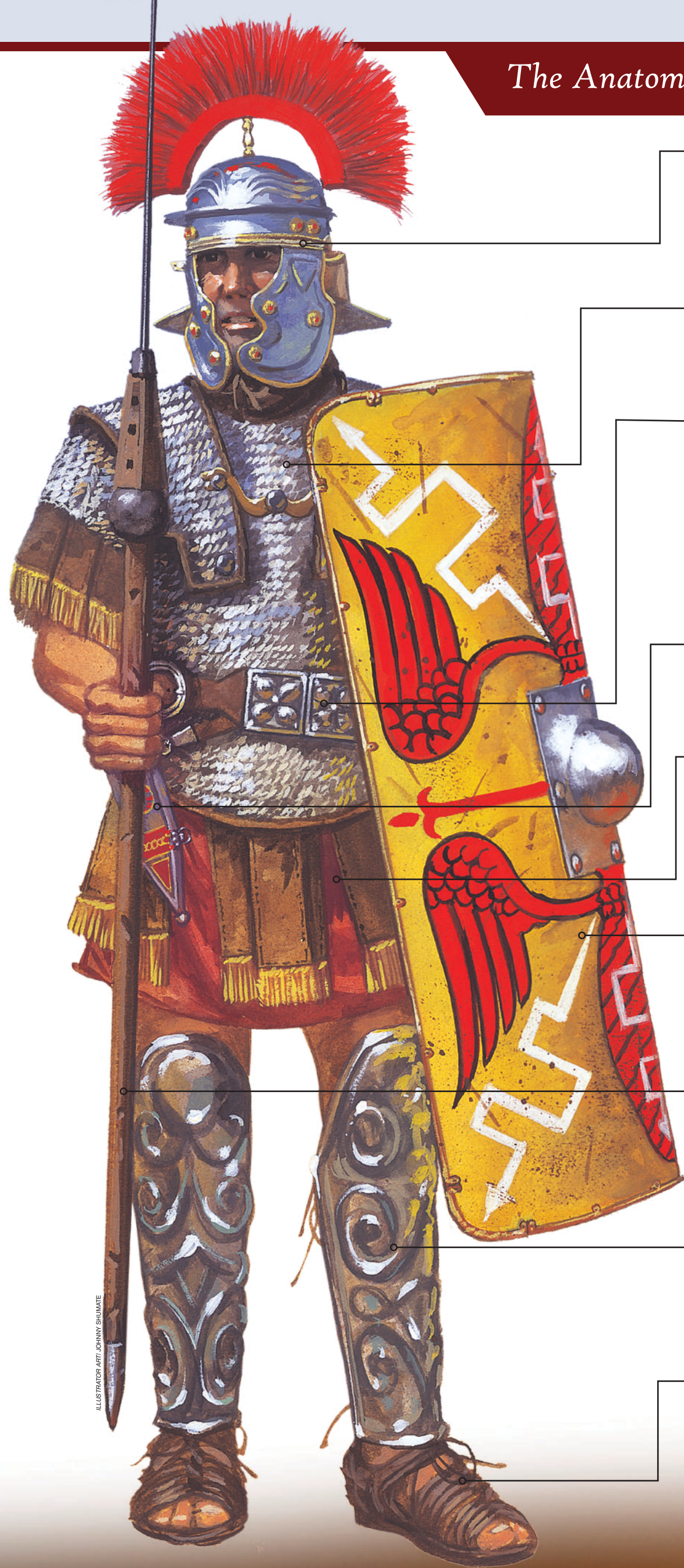
Late in 2005, archaeologists working at a prison near Megiddo unearthed a mosaic that measured about 20 by 30 feet. The mosaic, which evidently had been part of a church floor, dated to the second or third centuries A.D. The mosaic listed names of some early believers, mentioned Jesus Christ, and had images of two fish—giving reference to His feeding the 5,000. Additionally, the chapel had the inscription: “Gaianus, also called Porphyrius, centurion, our brother, has made the pavement at his own expense as an act of liberality.”

History indicates that Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire, among both the military and non-military alike. The mosaic offers evidence that, if there were others like Gaianus, then centurions continued to become followers of Christ in the centuries after His ascension. **B**

Sources for the CenterSpread include: Peter Connolly, *Greece and Rome at War* (London: Greenhill Books, 1998); Pat Southern, *The Roman Army: A Social and Institutional History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); “The Beginners’ Guide to Roman Military Equipment,” The Museum of Antiquities [Online; accessed 26 February 2009]. Available on Internet: [www.museums.ncl.ac.uk/archive/index.html](http://www.museums.ncl.ac.uk/archive/index.html).

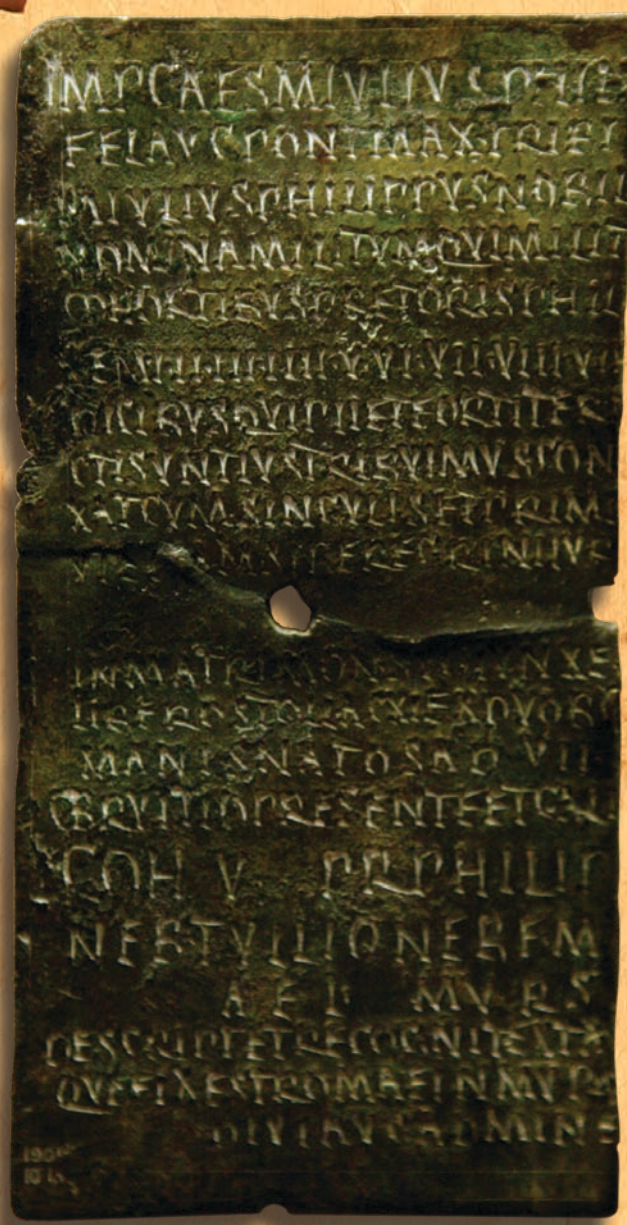
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## The Anatomy of a Centurion's Uniform



- HELMET**  
 Typically made of iron or a copper alloy, Roman helmets tied under the chin and had guards for the neck and brow. Protective cheek pieces could be attached. Fittings allowed elements to be added to the top.
- BODY ARMOR**  
 Soldiers wore three types of body armor: mail (as shown), scale, and segmental. The mail shirt weighed about 30 pounds.
- BELT**  
 The belt supported part of the armor's weight. Early soldiers wore two belts, one for the sword and the other for the dagger. Later, both hung from a single belt. Belts were decorated with embossed medallions plated with silver. Baldrics, straps that held the sword and draped over one shoulder, became common in the first century.
- SWORD AND DAGGER**  
 The Romans used pointed, double-edged swords and daggers. Centurions wore the sword on the left; infantry and cavalry—on the right.
- TUNIC**  
 The military tunic was a large, baggy, wool or linen short-sleeved shirt seamed along the sides. Although longer than civilian tunics, soldiers tucked their tunics in their belts, making them come above the knee. Roman citizens typically did not expose their knees.
- SHIELD**  
 Made of a plywood, the curved shield had an edging made of a copper alloy binding. An iron or copper alloy plate (or "boss") covered the hand grip. Shields were carried in the left hand.
- PILUM**  
 Able to penetrate both shield and armor, his heavy javelin had a barbed iron head on a long iron shank fastened to a wooden shaft. Upon impact, the pilum would bend, rendering it useless for a second use.
- GREAVES**  
 Centurions were easily recognized because of their silver armor, including their greaves. Not just protective, the greaves were also typically decorative.
- BOOTS**  
 Made from a single piece of leather, the boot laced up the front and had iron hobnails on the sole for traction. The leather and nails made quite a racket as soldiers marched on pavement.

Below: Caliga found in London showing the thick sole studded with hobnails.  
ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO BRITISH MUSEUM LONDON (01/25/19 & 20)



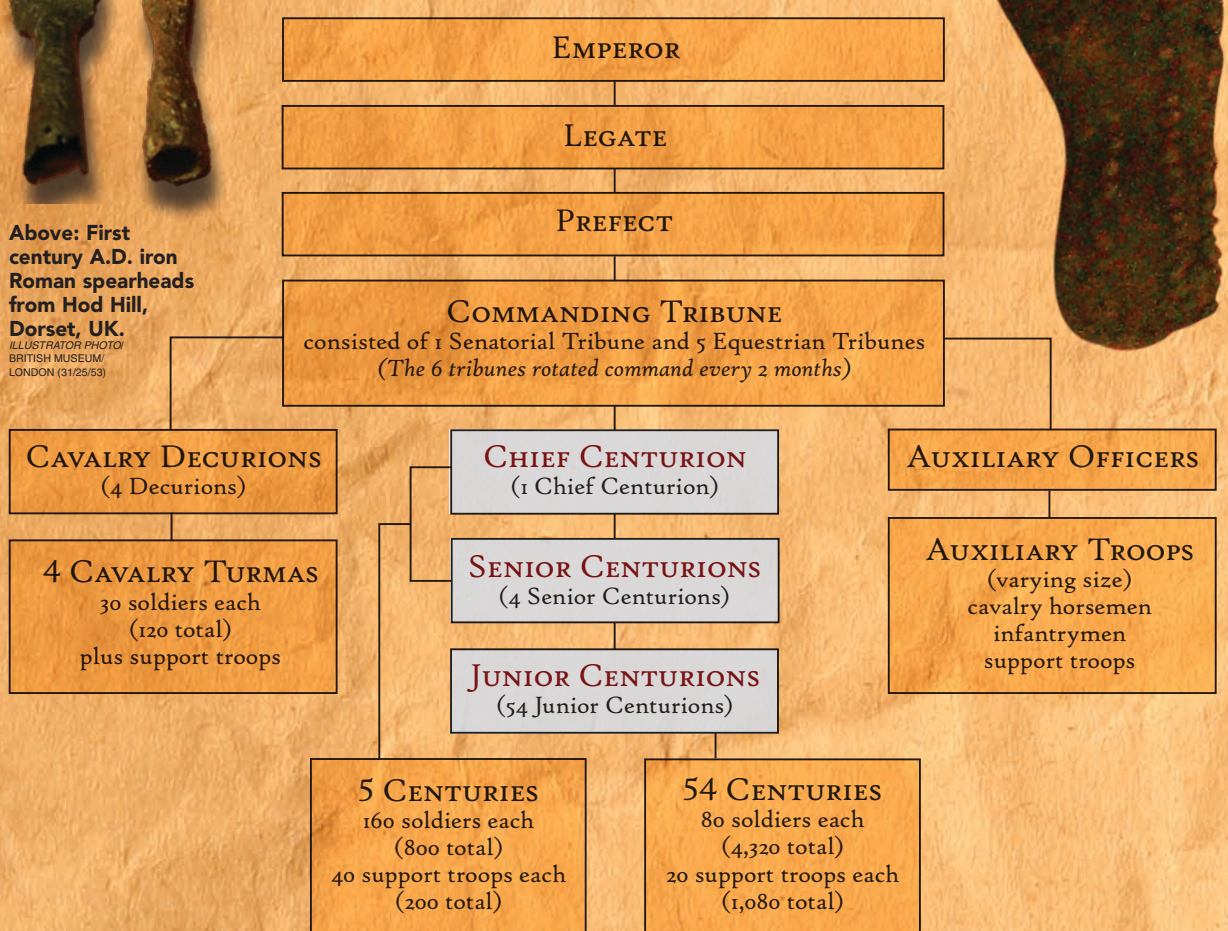
Above: Dated January 7, A.D. 246, this bronze diploma was awarded to a soldier discharged from the 5th cohort of the Praetorian Guard.



Right: Between 91-88 B.C., the Italian confederation (also called the Socii) revolted against Roman rule. This first century B.C. lead sling bullet is inscribed with the letters ITAL declaring the rebels new capital Italia. Other times soldiers would inscribe their bullets with the name of their emperor or commanding officer.

Below: First century iron Roman sword with bronze scabbard. Embossed decoration on the scabbard includes the she-wolf suckling Romulus and Remus, the legendary founders of Rome.

### ROMAN IMPERIAL ARMY CHAIN OF COMMAND



Above: First century A.D. iron Roman spearheads from Hod Hill, Dorset, UK.  
ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO BRITISH MUSEUM LONDON (01/25/18)

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO BRITISH MUSEUM LONDON (01/25/16)

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### CENTURIONS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Reference	Events
Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 7:3	At Capernaum, Jesus healed a centurion's slave and affirmed the centurion's faith.
Matthew 27:54; Mark 15:39,44-44; Luke 23:47	A centurion guarded the cross. Seeing the events, he affirmed that Jesus was God's Son. The centurion was called before Pilate to confirm Jesus' death.
Acts 10:1,22	Cornelius of Caesarea was a centurion. He welcomed Simon Peter and became a follower of Christ.
Acts 21:26-32	When a riot broke out at the Jerusalem temple because of Paul's teachings, centurions and soldiers help quell an uprising.
Acts 22:25-26	Centurion almost scourged Paul after he had been arrested in Jerusalem.
Acts 23:11-23	Centurion soldiers were instrumental in saving Paul from those who plotted to take his life in Jerusalem.
Acts 24:22-23	Felix commanded a centurion to guard Paul.
Acts 27	A centurion guarded Paul, accompanying him as he sailed to Rome, and saved Paul's life after the ship wrecked in a storm.



**A Roman centurion made of basalt from the early Roman period.**

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ/ NATIONAL MUSEUM OF DAMASCUS (9/1/13)

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