

Who Am I & What Am I Doing?

by Stephen Kenwright

PART ONE

“...ingressi milites, quis fausta nomina...
Soldiers, who bore auspicious names, entered...
Tacitus: **Histories**, Book IV, 53

Shortly after joining Comitatus it became clear that I would need to adopt a suitable period name. On a practical level I would need to identify my shield to avoid confusion and to communicate in character during displays, but it seemed it could also be a starting point for developing a whole identity with a trade to keep me busy and a 'back-story' to add depth to my contribution to living history displays. Funnily enough, however, the most pressing demand was for a username for the various re-enactment Internet Forums that I wished to join.

Will any old name do? For the amount that they might crop up with the public, probably, but I have always been annoyingly particular that things - boats, characters in stories - should be appropriately named. People's names have been shown to carry cultural preconceptions with them strong enough to affect the grades given by teachers to otherwise identical tests. I might even claim that choosing a name helps us to visualise & therefore bring about a particular outcome. Much more appropriately, however, the Romans apparently shared my superstition and sought to fix it so that the first soldier who enlisted in a new unit or the first citizen numbered in a census should have a 'fortunate' or 'auspicious' name like 'Victor', 'Felix' and 'Fortunatus' and, as in the above quotation, chose such individuals for particular religious duties as well.

I was briefly tempted by a joke name, or at least an in-joke like the perfectly historical but often misused 'Spurius' but felt that the general tenor of Comitatus appeared to be a tad more serious. My top priority would be to compliment without duplicating the existing names in the group and secondly to help to get the message across that soldiers in the Late Roman army would have names reflecting a wider national & cultural mix than in earlier times. Finally and purely for convenience, rather than have two separate names, I wondered if I could find one that would sound Roman for the 4th century, but which might be adapted to serve for later periods and Germanic shows as well.

Fitting the Bill

My first surprise was that I might only need one Roman name rather than the classic three. I knew that during the Republic and early Empire the 'Tria Nomina' of praenomen, nomen and cognomen was used to distinguish true citizens from foreigners and slaves and gave an indication of status within the ranks of the patrician and plebeian families. Even at its height there were many exceptions and variations. More news to me was that a cognomen wasn't necessarily a personal nickname, but could be passed on as a family name & even become quite inappropriate - the famous Caius Iulius was very sensitive about advancing baldness according to Suetonius & some suggest this was exacerbated by his family cognomen 'Caesar' starting out as a nickname meaning 'hairy'.

As the empire expanded, foreign names became more common. Auxiliaries and others gaining citizenship often kept or romanised their former names, many of them Greek or Germanic in origin, or used the name of their tribe or place of birth. At the same time the Tria Nomina system was steadily undermined by the custom of new citizens adopting the nomen of the reigning Emperor,

the local governor or their sponsor. By the 3rd century, one-fifth of all nomina were those of emperors.

When Caracalla extended full Roman citizenship to free inhabitants of the empire in 212 A.D., the system lost much of its original purpose and apparently began to decline in popularity. As Eastern influence increased fewer family names and more individual by-names were used; relational (son/daughter of), descriptive (such as Chrysostom, 'golden-mouthed'), locative, ('of Tarsus') or occupational ('the shepherd').

The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire is a good source of names in use in the 6th – 7th century and some of these have been very helpfully catalogued & made available on the net, including their comparative frequency. The Byzantine influence is clear; I discovered that my Christian name, 'Stephanus' transliterated from the Greek, was quite common, at least in the Eastern Empire. However, half the fun of stage shows is in adopting a different persona and I carried on looking.

A Good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, *Proverbs 22:1*

As Christianity moved from toleration to becoming a fashionable and then state religion, it became popular to use saints names instead of the nomen. In 416 A.D. Theodosius II required that all serving soldiers should be Christians, so many of our portrayals are of troops who are at least officially and perhaps ostentatiously Christian. I therefore started to look for a suitable saintly name of the time.

Faustus, Marcellus, Menas & Mercurius were all 4th century Roman soldier-saints whose names were common in the late period. With the Praesidiensis listed in the Notitia Dignitatum under the Gallic command, I thought I might find a suitable late Roman across the Channel. Surfing the Fount of all Knowledge, I came across references to Salvian, often rendered Salvianus, a fifth century priest in Gaul who criticised Roman rule as being oppressive. He praised the virtues of the Germans and argued that the Romans had become decadent in their Christianity and, therefore, morally inferior to the pagan but honest barbarian, which I felt was fitting – here was someone who may have seen the 'barbarisation' of the army as an improvement.

I was struck by the way that Paul iii was able to locate his impression of Fortunatus with a real inhabitant of the fort of Arbeia thanks to an inscribed piece of pottery. People similarly looking to source authentic names of real Roman personnel might be interested in The Vindolanda Tablets Online, which includes a name list from the 1st & 2nd Century. Hugh Elton also usefully examines the names of soldiers in "Warfare in Roman Europe AD 350-425".

Conveniently for me, 'Salvianus' was used as a cognomen in the three name system and appears in inscriptions at the frontier fort at Risingham as well as Arbeia and, importantly, seems to have persisted as a single given name well into our period in Britain, surviving in late 6th century inscriptions in Wales. Sorted. Now all I had to do was decide who this character really was & how he ended up in the army.

Further reading:

Warfare in Roman Europe AD 350-425 by Hugh Elton, Oxford: OUP, 1996

Influence of Names, in **Curiosities of Literature** by Isaac D'Israeli, Routledge, undated

The Private Life of the Romans by Harold Whetstone Johnston, Scott, Foresman and Company, 1903, 1932

The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire volumes IIIa and IIIb by Martindale, J. R., Cambridge University Press, 1992

Links:

Nova Roma has a good summary of the Tria Nomina with some suggested meanings for cognomen:

http://www.novaroma.org/via_romana/names.html

Vindolanda Tablets Online:

<http://vindolanda.csad.ox.ac.uk/>

Index of names from Volume three of the Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire:

http://www.sca.org/heraldry/laurel/names/byzantine/early_byz_names.html

The Military Martyrs includes a lot of later stories about soldiers who were converted & suffered the consequences, to be treated with some caution, I suspect:

<http://www.ucc.ie/milmart/>

The Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England On-line Database:

<http://www.pase.ac.uk/>

A collection of articles on medieval names, with some good advice about the reliability of sources:

<http://www.s-gabriel.org/names/>

A gateway site to all kinds of historical naming info, some to be used with care:

<http://www.lowchensaustralia.com/names/medievalnames.htm>

Finally, for masochists only - Salvian, On the Government of God, This Fifth Century Polemic Done into English by Eva M. Sanford (1930):

http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/salvian_gov_00_intro.htm

Part Two: The Character of the Nation

... ab uno Disce omnes.

...from one example the character of the nation may be known.

Virgil **The Aeneid** (II, 65)

Continuing my article for newbies, by a newbie. Adopting a name suitable to the period has the clear utility of giving re-enactors the ability to address each other in front of punters (not sure that Mops - Members Of the Public - is particularly more respectful and 'clients' just sounds sordid). However, do we also benefit from developing an identity or 'persona' with a back story as well? Interestingly, I understand that even members of The Middle Earth Historical Re-enactment Society research a character history in the interests of authenticity in their re-enactment. Or 'enactment', if you prefer.

For well-organised military re-enactments, most of the basic questions are answered collectively - a unit's name and history, the circumstances of the engagement etc. Civilian Living History displays are also enhanced at group level with a clear dateline, specific cultural groups portrayed and so on. Given that Comitatus, like many other groups, routinely provide this level of information, do we feel a genuine benefit from going further as individuals?

Who's your daddy?

Most of us develop a 'patter' or standardised speech repeated to the public many times each event. On the face of it, punters seem unlikely to suddenly start questioning us as to our imagined birthplace or family status, but more experienced re-enactors will know better than I if they are ever asked, for example, how they became a soldier or if recruits always came from the local area. In these cases having a prepared story may be useful. On top of the 'when' provided by the dateline, I think that knowing the rest of the reporter's '5 Ws': who & what I am, where I came from and why I am here, promotes my own confidence and hence the punters' confidence in me, even if not challenged on them. They may help to convey some of the 'character of the nation' referred to in the rather free translation at the start of this article.

Who are you and why should I care?

Most re-enactors working with school groups begin by introducing themselves by name and explaining their status - their rank in a military organisation or their occupation in the wider world. This is not simply being 'child friendly', but relates to the way in which we all learn new information - we feel more comfortable if we can place what we hear and see in a social context, which helps us to connect new information to what we already know.

Method Acting

It has been well-established (by Paul McKenna, I imagine) that visualisation helps one to attain a goal. As Dustin Hoffman would say, an actor who considers the back story and motivation of the character is better able to fill in the blanks left by the script - tone of voice, posture and expression - and thus is often able to give a better performance. The better amateur theatre directors I have played for have coached every member of the company in developing just such personas to add realism & weight to every line or mimed action & re-action.

In re-enactment I doubt that it is often necessary to produce a theatrical performance 'in character', especially when attempting to teach someone something new, as one of our most valuable tools for doing so is by comparison to modern equivalents; "Looms were often wider than is common today." "Naalbinding is similar to knitting, but only uses one needle." "That is herringbone stitch," etc.

Furthermore, tempting as it is, I suppose speaking in Latin, pretending to have a lung disease and to be afraid of cameras is unlikely to aid communication. Regia Anglorum have some sensible advice about avoiding introducing jarring anachronisms into the conversation - enquiring about The Match or high pollen warnings - but not allowing play-acting to get in the way.

I'd be interested in people's opinions about 'in character' re-enacting.

Time waits for no man

One of the big problems we face is that we don't just cover different peoples, but also a considerable slice of history. However, I believe two basic identities will cover most events; 'Roman military' including an associated civilian camp and 'Germanic community'. If you are keen, they can be adapted slightly for post occupation continental forces or Sub-Roman Britain (I prefer Christopher Snyder's term 'Brittonic Period'), Anglian settlers and so on.

A happy life is one which is in accordance with its own nature.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca, **Essays**

Military Diplomas certifying auxiliaries' citizenship provide a source of soldiers' careers up to the end of the third century, although the majority are from the second century and most of the free transcriptions available on the web are untranslated. As a beginner, I found memorial evidence the most accessible source of simple life histories, or hints upon which to model a persona.

Most evidence is from the Roman occupation period or the continent.

For example, Aurelia Aia (or Faia) was married to a soldier called Aurelius Marcus stationed at Carvoran Fort (Magnis) at Hadrian's Wall & came from Colonia Martia Julia Salona in Dalmatia, now Solin in Croatia. The nature of the dedication may imply she was Christian and Salona did become an important centre of Christianity later.

The memorial of Lucius Vitellius Tancinus (*RIB* 159) in Bath records his fathers name, his home country and town: *Caurium* on the *Tagus* river in Lusitania, now Coria in western Spain. This was in the territory of the *Vettones* tribe and he served for twenty-six years in the *Ala Vettonum*, an auxiliary cavalry unit.

The tombstone of family man Julius Alexander in Lugdunum, modern Lyon, (*CIL* 13.2000) records his African nationality, being a citizen of Carthage, 'in every way the best' an artist in glass. He lived 75 years, 48 of them with his wife 'without any injuring of spirit' and blessed with four children & grandchildren from all of them.

Not exactly full biographies but perhaps a starting point for a character of one's own.

My thanks to Victor, Fasta & Fortunatus for their help.

Further reading:

The Roman Inscriptions of Britain, by RG Collingwood and RP Wright, 1965, OUP reprinted and revised in 1995 by Alan Sutton Publishing, ISBN: 0 7509 0917 X

Links:

You can find a wealth of epigraphic evidence at roman-britain.org:

<http://www.roman-britain.org/main.htm>

follow>roman>military menu and pick a unit type of interest, e.g. [Cohortes Britanniarum](#) to find all the related material including diplomas and memorials.

Guy de la Bédoyère has transcribed volume 1 of Collingwood and Wright's, *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain*, OUP, 1965:

<http://www.romanbritain.freemove.co.uk/INSCRIPTIONS.HTM>

A handy small selection of memorial inscriptions:

<http://www.personal.kent.edu/~bkharvey/roman/texts/texttombs.htm>

General info on military diplomas:

<http://www.romancoins.info/MilitaryDiploma.html>

Searchable & extensive epigraphic database of the University of Heidelberg:

<http://www.uni-heidelberg.de/institute/sonst/adw/edh/index.html.en>