

A Late Roman Marching Pack

by Paul Elliott

Every soldier in every period of history requires a marching pack; in this he carries his food, his loot and all of his personal possessions. Unfortunately not a single one survives in the archaeological record from the Late Roman period. Worse, there are no clear depictions of military bags in the 3rd, 4th or 5th centuries upon which an accurate reconstruction could be based. Parts of a leather satchel have survived at Bar Hill, on the Antonine Wall, but this is of much earlier date. It may represent part of a leather satchel, a type of which is actually depicted on Trajan's Column, in Rome. This monument dates from the first years of the 2nd century and shows legionaries marching with slim rectangular satchels slung from forked sticks carried on the shoulder. They are of a very modern envelope shape, with a triangular flap and a central ring closure. Such ration bags may have survived into the 4th century, but equally possibly, they may not.



A soldier's pack *is* depicted on a 4th century mosaic, but there is little detail and those details are indistinct. The 'Mosaic of the Grades' from the excavated Mithraic temple of Felicissimus at Ostia shows the ritual emblems of the grade of 'soldier' (a specific rank within the Mithraic religion). It includes a helmet, spear and a typical military marching bag. This appears to be a teardrop-shaped leather or linen bag, with the top closed off, perhaps with a drawstring. There does not appear to be any form of strap. This bag may have resembled a traditional sailor's duffle bag, with a circular bottom and cylindrical body, tied off at the top.



The bag on this mosaic might be thought of as a mosaic-maker's fancy, but the same pack turns up again in a Mithraeum - this time on a wall painting. Mithraic scholars Vermaseren and Van Essen described the appearance of a temple initiate depicted on poorly preserved wall paintings discovered at the church of Santa

Prisca, in Rome. The only published photograph attests to a painting in a terrible condition, and the Italian authorities will not issue visitors' permits to view the temple. The two scholars, however, described the soldier-initiate in detail, wearing a long-sleeved bright brown tunic with two rows of purple piping at the wrists, plus a red-brown cloak. On his left shoulder is a military bag (*sarcina*) "which he holds at its round buttoned-up end with his left hand." The 'round end' of this military pack fits the slight illustration we have from the Ostia mosaic. The observation about buttons is interesting, is the bag buttoned at the bottom? Without better documented evidence, we shall not know.

There is better evidence, but it comes from the 6th century, from the Imperial Palace in Istanbul. Here in the East, the armies of Rome continued to wage war, to make peace and to intimidate the locals well after Rome fell in AD 476. A mosaic discovered there depicts the head and shoulders of a legionary, wearing a traveller's sun-hat, with a kit-bag thrown over his shoulder. The bag is a red-brown colour and its pleated texture suggests that it was made of thin leather. At the top a drawstring closure can be seen, and it appears as if the soldier uses this drawstring to carry the bag over his shoulder. Although the envelope-shaped satchel of the 1st and 2nd centuries may have been used by the legions in the 4th and 5th, we can be much more certain that the duffel-bag appearing in the Istanbul mosaic was.

It could be that the duffel bag design was peculiar to the Late Roman period, but in fact this type of kit-bag also appears on Trajan's Column, sitting above those rectangular satchels strapped to the forked pole. If anything, this fact adds to the theory that the teardrop duffel bag was a Late Roman soldier's marching bag, because it was *already in use with the legions* three centuries earlier and it possibly even predated Trajanic times. On the Column these duffel bags are shown strapped horizontally across the end of the forked pole, and not slung over the shoulder. Historians have speculated that the tubular bags carried a cloak, or indeed *was* a rolled cloak.

