

Caillan Davenport, *A History of the Equestrian Order*. Cambridge University Press, 2018 (online)/2019 (print). 783 pages. Hardback \$206.95 CAD. ISBN 9781107032538.

This is an ambitious and impressive book. Davenport's monograph is the first attempt at providing a history of the *ordo equester* for all of Roman history since the 1920s.¹ The work is divided into four parts containing twelve chapters in total, most of which deal with the early imperial period. Chapter 1, *Riding for Rome*, links the origins of the *ordo equester* in early Roman history to an aristocracy of mounted warriors. Although the chapter is very well researched, the section on the decline of cavalry service is somewhat disappointing. Indeed, it largely follows McCall's 2002 monograph and ignores more recent work challenging the traditional argument that Roman cavalymen mostly ceased to exist in the first century.² Moreover, other scholarship that could have supported the author's argument in that section is not cited, such as Blösel's work.³ The next chapter, *Cicero's equestrian order*, focuses on the equites' role in tax farming and in the law courts. Chapter 3, *Questions of Status*, surveys the features that distinguished equites from the senate and people in the late republic, such as the equestrian census and the right to sit in the first 14 rows in the theatre.

The book's second part focuses on the early empire and begins with a chapter examining the new possibilities available to equites following Augustus' establishment of a monarchical *res publica*. It argues that some equites could now reach positions of unprecedented power because of their relationship with Augustus. This allowed them to participate in the administration of the empire in a way that was earlier impossible under the republican system of magistracies which was the preserve of the senatorial order. New positions were also created specifically for equites, such as that of *praefectus Aegypti* as well as several postings to command auxiliary units. Unfortunately, Haynes' 2013 monograph on auxiliaries is not cited in this discussion.⁴

¹ Stein, A. 1927. *Der römische Ritterstand. Ein Beitrag zur Social- und Personengeschichte des römischen Reiches*, Munich. There were other studies but they focused on one period of Roman history: Hill, H. 1952. *The Roman middle class in the Republican period*, Oxford; Nicolet, C. 1966. *L'ordre équestre à l'époque républicaine (312-43 av. J.-C.)*, 2 vols., Paris.

² McCall, J. 2002. *The Cavalry of the Roman Republic. Cavalry Combat and Elite Reputations in the Middle and Late Republic*, London; Cadiou, F. 2016. "Cavalerie auxiliaire et cavalerie légionnaire dans l'armée romaine au Ier s. a.C.," in C. Wolff & P. Faure (eds.) *Les auxiliaires de l'armée romaine. Des alliés aux fédérés*, Paris, 53-78.

³ Blösel, W. 2011. "Die demilitarisierung der römischen Nobilität von Sulla bis Caesar," in W. Blösel & K.-J. Hölkamp, (eds.) *Von der militia equestris zur militia urbana, Prominenzrollen und Karrierefelder im antiken Rom*, Stuttgart, 55-80.

⁴ Haynes, I. P. *Blood of the provinces: The Roman auxilia and the making of provincial society from Augustus to the Severans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

After a chapter devoted to equites' symbols of status (*An Imperial Order*), the next two chapters deal with the role of equites in the army and civilian administration of the empire. Davenport shows that equites working for the imperial administration as officers or governors became part of a service elite performing tasks quite similar to those reserved to senators.

The third part of the book, titled *Equestrians on Display*, is made up of three chapters. Chapter 8, *Ceremonies and Consensus*, studies the ways through which the *ordo equester* projected the idea that it was an integral part of the *res publica*. Augustus took great care to ensure that the *ordo* would be recognized as an essential component in his new regime. He notably personally reviewed the ranks of the equites in the *transvectio equitum* ceremony. Chapter 9, *Spectators and Performers*, demonstrates that there was great imperial concern about maintaining the dignity, status, and morality of equites as befitted members of a class of men second only to senators in terms of *auctoritas*. Hence, a series of imperial measures aimed at preventing equites from fighting as gladiators, working as actors, charioteers, or prostitutes was implemented. Chapter 10, *Religion and the Res Publica*, surveys the role played by equites in several Roman cults. For example, their participation in the Lupercalia festival associated the *ordo* with the origins of the Roman state. Moreover, the creation of equestrian priesthoods in the early principate helped to give the impression that the *ordo* was not perceived as a recent creation but rather as an immemorial part of the *res publica*.

The book's fourth and final part comprises two chapters and is devoted to the late imperial period. Chapter 11, *Governors and Generals*, examines the changes in the command structure of the Roman army as well as in the imperial administration. The reign of Gallienus is correctly identified as a moment of pivotal change in terms of the opportunities available to equites. In a time of crisis and revolt, Gallienus turned to certain equites as officers he could trust. However, Gallienus' creation of new cavalry units because they were 'suited for moving quickly between different fronts' (p. 539) is misleading. Indeed, cavalry only has superior mobility on the tactical level and is actually slower than infantry on the strategic level. Moreover, the entire concept of a reform of cavalry units under Gallienus has been questioned by recent scholarship.⁵

Finally, Chapter 12, *The Last Equites Romani*, analyzes the gradual loss of relevance of the title of *equus Romanus* in the fourth and fifth century CE. Davenport argues that the development of an equestrian service elite in the early empire, whose members performed tasks similar to that of senators, effectively blurred the boundary between the two *ordines*. Finally, in the late fourth century CE, the legislation of

⁵ Petitjean, M. 2016. "Pour une réévaluation de l'essor de la cavalerie au IIIe siècle," in C. Wolff & P. Faure, (eds.) *Les auxiliaires de l'armée romaine. Des alliés aux fédérés*, Paris, 491-525; Whitby, M. 2007. "Army and Society in the Late Roman World: A Context for Decline?," in P. Erdkamp, (ed.) *A Companion to the Roman Army*, Oxford, 522-3.

Valens and Valentinian I meant that all branches of imperial government culminated in the award of senatorial status. Thus, “In the late Roman imperial administration status became a reward for service, rather than a precondition for it” (p. 612). By the fifth century CE, the features pertaining to the *equites* were little more than remains of the past with no relevance to actual status in Roman society as it used to be.

Throughout the book, Davenport shows an impressive command of the sources, notably epigraphic. When discussing such sources, the text is often supported by pictures of the inscriptions being analysed. There are a number of typographical errors, but they do not diminish the overall quality of the book.⁶ Overall, the volume is an impressive piece of scholarship and a much needed update to Stein’s seminal work. It is sure to become the new standard work of reference for research on the *ordo equester* in any period of Roman history.

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⁶ For example: p. 212: to be vote; p. 269: throughout the breadth the empire; p. 285: quite impossible escape; p. 538: were stationed Sirmium; p. 660: senatorial (for sénatorial). This is not an exhaustive list.