

Praetorian guard of the roman empire: history, functions and political influence

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Abstract: This article explores the historical significance of the Praetorian Guard, the elite military unit formed to protect Roman emperors and their families. Tracing its origins, the article examines the Guard's various functions, including its roles in security, military operations, and ceremonial duties. It also delves into the political influence wielded by the Praetorian Guard, highlighting pivotal moments of power shifts, including coups, assassinations, and the unit's impact on the stability of the Roman Empire. Through an analysis of key events, the article illustrates how the Praetorian Guard evolved from a protective force to a politically significant entity that shaped the course of Roman history.

Keywords: Praetorian Guard, Roman Empire, History, Functions, Political Influence, Imperial Protection, Military Unit, Elite Soldiers, Political Power, Assassination, Usurpation, Emperor's Bodyguards, Guardianship, Civil War, Military Coups, Allegiances, Transition of Power, Corruption, Roman Politics, Legacy.

Introduction: The Praetorian Guard was established at the beginning of the principate of Octavian Augustus in 27 BC. At first, it served exclusively to protect the emperor and his family, but over time it acquired significant political influence, interfering in the election of emperors and state affairs. The guard became not only a symbol of the elite of the Roman army but also one of the factors of instability in the late empire.

1. Origin. The Praetorian Guard dates back to the times of the Roman Republic when praetors and consuls formed small guard detachments. However, during the Principate, it was transformed by Augustus into a professional military unit.

2. Organization and numbers. Initially, the guard consisted of nine cohorts, each of which included about 500-1000 men. Subsequently, the number increased, especially during the Severan era. The guard was based in Rome and its environs, and its main camp (Latin: *Castra Praetoria*) was a fortified garrison built in 23 CE under Tiberius.

3. Decline and liquidation. In 312 CE, Emperor Constantine the Great, realizing the danger of the guard's political influence, disbanded the Praetorians after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. This event marked the end of its existence as a military force.

Functions of the guard. The Praetorian Guard had several key roles:

1. Guarding the Emperor: The main function was to ensure the safety of the emperor, his family, and his residences.
2. Military Service: The Praetorians participated in military campaigns, usually serving as a personal guard or elite unit.
3. Police Functions: The Guard maintained order in Rome, especially during times of civil unrest.
4. Political Influence: The Praetorians played a significant role in the intrigue, deposition, and proclamation of emperors.

Political Influence and Corruption: The powerful position of the Praetorian Guard allowed its commanders (*praefecti praetorio*) to manipulate emperors and influence their policies.

- Deposing and Appointing Emperors: The Praetorians were responsible for several changes in power. For example, they assassinated Caligula in 41 CE and then installed Claudius on the throne. In 193 CE, they openly sold the imperial throne to Didius Julianus.

- Corruption and Influence: The privileged position encouraged corruption and weakened discipline. Many

of the guard's commanders sought to use its power for their gain.

Role in the fall of the Roman Empire. Political instability caused by the actions of the Praetorian Guard became one of the reasons for the weakening of the central authority in the empire. Their intervention undermined confidence in the institution of imperial power and contributed to the intensification of the crisis of the 3rd century AD.

The Praetorian Guard left a significant mark on history. It became the prototype of elite security formations in many states, and its history serves as a vivid example of how the military elite can influence political stability.

In the 3rd century, the pressure of the Germanic tribes on the northern borders of the Roman Empire from the Rhine and Danube increased. Military needs dictated the need for a combat-ready army. The military and political reforms of Diocletian and Constantine gave the Roman army a hierarchical chain of command, a system of commanders, and a professional officer corps. In 312, Emperor Constantine disbanded the Praetorian Guard as a source of unrest (Zos.II.17.2; Vict.Caes.40.25). In particular, V.V. Semenov in his work "Praetorian Cohorts: Model and Practice" says that when Constantine disbanded the guard, he was guided by the final removal of bureaucratic functions from the Praetorians. In addition, being initially a very closed corporation, the Praetorians opposed themselves to the civilian population and the rest of the army, and, having, like all the legions, their patrons, they could act as principled opponents of Christianity, to which Constantine was inclined. It should also be noted that the last time the Praetorians entered the battle was under Emperor Macrinus and, in fact, "grew" to their camp in Rome (they participated in Aurelian's military actions against Zenobia (Zosim. I, 52). But, one way or another, the emperor no longer needed the military and bureaucratic apparatus of the Principate and the period of "soldier" emperors.

S.A. Lazarev in his work "The Roman Army in the Late Empire" believes that "Protectors were assigned by the emperor to military masters and other commanders, about whom they played the role of deputies, simultaneously performing various special duties. They were sent to round up vagrants and the sons of veterans evading military service escorted recruits, patrolled the roads, carried out customs service, were used to arrest important persons, and escorted them to their destination. (Although, perhaps, this was done by frumentarii, and from the era dominated - agentes in rebus that replaced them) In 359, a group of tribunes and protectors were tasked with overseeing the construction of fortifications along the right bank of the

Euphrates.

The term of service in the Corps of Protectors was not established, but, as a rule, it took at least five years to obtain the position of senior commander. Often a soldier's service ended in the post of protector and he received a resignation personally from the emperor. However, the protectors themselves did not always seek to be appointed to the active army.

CONCLUSION

The Praetorian Guard, created to protect emperors, became a powerful political instrument capable of deciding the fate of the Roman Empire. Its history is evidence of how an imbalance between military force and political power can lead to internal upheavals and the weakening of the state.

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