

# Sources for the Roman Republic

Sakari Saaristo, 2017

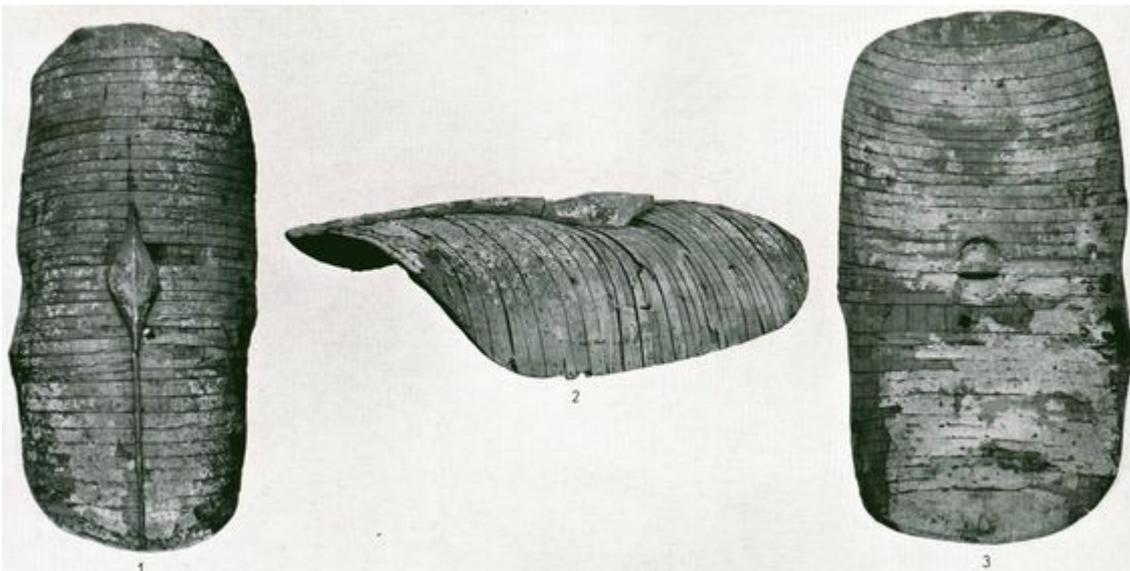
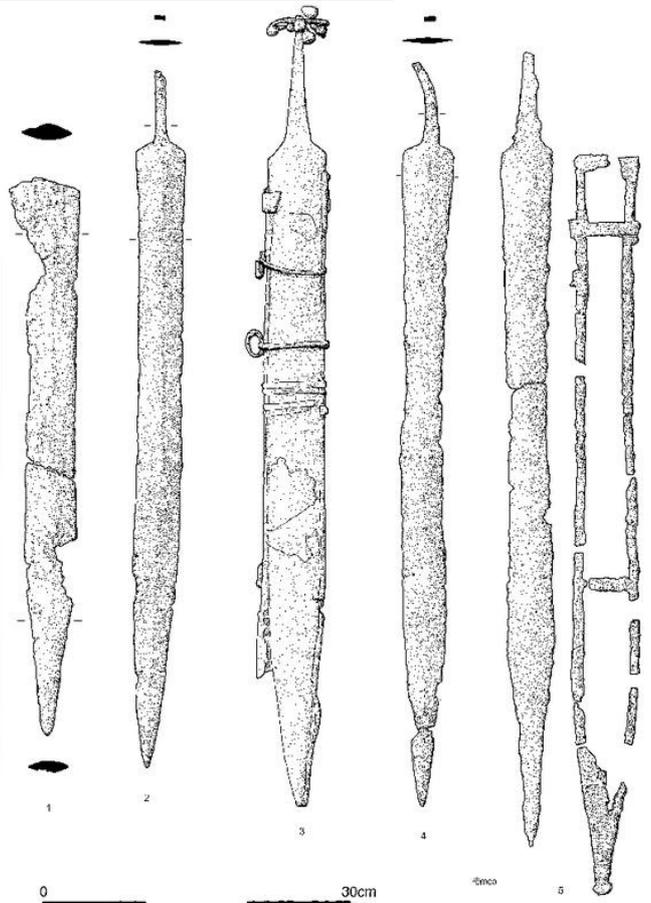
*When reconstructing the Roman Republican army, there are three kinds of sources we can use: archaeological, historical, and iconographical.*

## Archaeological sources

Archaeological sources are the most reliable, they mean objects like weapons and armour that have been found in an archaeological dig, and they can be reconstructed with the most certainty. One of the problems is that the objects are often incomplete (e.g. a sword might miss its handle), but then they can be reconstructed by comparing them to other objects, either from the same period, or slightly earlier or later, depending on the available sources. However, archaeological material is never fully complete, because most of the objects that ever were in use didn't end up under the ground in the condition that they could have survived to our days. All the weapons and equipment which could be recycled, were passed from one owner to another. For example helmets could have been in use for generations passing down from father to son, and many of the found helmets do bear names of more than one owner. When the object couldn't be used for its original purpose anymore, it could be reworked into something else, e. g. we know some bronze cauldrons from Greece, that have been made from old helmets. If the object was worn beyond repair, an object of metal could be melted back into raw material for use in a new project. Materials, especially metals, were much more valuable than today, and were not discarded easily.

Organic materials tend to preserve less inside the ground, which is the reason why clothing finds are much rarer than weapon and equipment finds. Rarely the handles of the swords have been preserved, or the shafts of the spears, and not a single tunic from Roman Republican period have been found. However some tunics from the Roman Imperial times have been preserved, especially in the hot and dry climate of Egypt. With these tunics as well as iconographical sources the reconstruction of Republican tunics is possible, despite the fact that no originals survive.

Another problem while reconstructing the whole panoply of a soldier is the shattered nature of the finds. Whole panoplies are rarely found, more equipment comes from singular finds, which can be gathered together to form a whole set or armament. There lies a problem that we can't really know if all those pieces of equipment were ever used together. Even though they would all be from the same time period (which is a rare case indeed), they can be found from different sides of the Mediterranean world. Local variations most certainly existed in the Republican period, since we know they existed in the Imperial times, so a Roman soldier from *Hispania* didn't necessarily look the same as a soldier from *Gallia*, let alone a soldier from *Syria*. Shattered picture is the result of the rarity of the finds, especially the kinds of objects like shields, while helmets are more numerous. Legionary shields from the Republican period exist just one, and it has been found from Egypt. Were the shields exactly the same in *Gallia*? Based on other sources they most likely were, but we can never be fully certain about it until we find a similar shield from *Gallia* itself.



## Historical sources

Another section of sources are historical ones, which includes all the textual evidence from the Roman Republican as well as Imperial times that describe the Republican period. The problem with Imperial texts is that they are not period sources. **Titus Livius**, a historian from the time of **Augustus**, wrote a history of Rome from its foundation to his own time (*Ab Urbe condita*, From the founding of the city), but because he himself wasn't alive through most of that period, he based his story on the work of earlier writers (of whom many works have been lost). Although Roman historians are generally quite trustworthy, record from personal experience is always more reliable than one that has been go through several people.

We know almost nothing fully certain about Roman history from before the year about 390 BCE., because in that year (or in some other year around that time) the Gauls with their leader **Brennus** sacked Rome, for the first time. Gauls burned down the state archives, and in this act all the previous historical records got destroyed. Only after this time we can reconstruct things based on historical sources with a good level of certainty.

### **Polybios' Histories (264–146 BCE)**

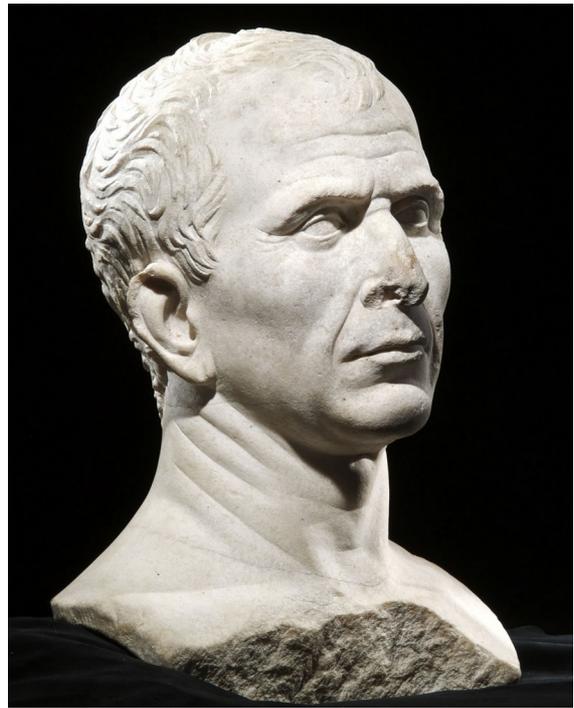
The most important historical source for reconstructing the Reublican army is the Greek historian **Polybios** (200–118 BCE). Originally Polybios came to Rome as a war prisoner, then he served in the Roman army, and wrote a book about Roman history (Ἱστορίαι *Historíai*, Histories), in which he describes the events of the Republican times, as well as the military between the years 220–146 BCE. Polybios wrote in Greek, which all the learned and noble Romans knew, so the military terms have to be translated from Greek to Latin. The historian also doesn't bother to explain things which would have been self-evident to his readers, such as many details about weapons and armament. For example he just mentions that soldiers had helmets, not what they looked like. From this we can deduce that all the soldiers had very similar looking helmets, because everybody knew them, so they didn't need further explaining. On the contrary Polybios explains the form and function of the *pilum*-javelin to his readers, because apparently it wasn't known to everyone.

As what is the case with archaeological sources, also historical corpus is never completely survived to us, if at all. Polybios' Histories originally included 40 books, from which only first five survives to the present, and then some chapters and fragments of the others. One of the best things about Polybios is that he wrote from his own experience (and also from other eyewitnesses'), and he was experienced in soldierly life. Polybios took part in several military campaigns, such as the siege and destruction of *Carthago* in 146 BCE. He was also a close friend to the most famous generals of his age, **Lucius Aemilius Paullus** (conqueror of *Makedonia* [area of modern Greece]) and **Publius Scipio Aemilianus** (conqueror of *Carthago*, son of the former), and the teacher of the latter.



## Caesar's Gallic Wars (58–52 BCE)

Another totally invaluable historical source about the Republican period is of course the one written by **Gaius Julius Caesar** (100–44 BCE). The book *Gallic Wars* (*Commentarii de Bello Gallico*, Commentary about the Gallic War) has previously belonged to the curriculum of Latin in all universities, also in Finland. Caesar tells an eyewitness story about his war in *Gallia*, the opus contains seven books, of which Caesar has himself written six, and the last one is written by his legate **Aulus Hirtius** after Caesar's death. The work has been completely preserved to the present day, because it has been used for millennia in Latin teaching thanks to its simple, direct prose (and interesting subject). Every book describes the events of one year of the war, between 58–52 BCE. Along with Romans the work portrays many enemies, such as Helvetians, Gauls, Germans, Belgians, and Britons, and of course the famous king of the Gallic Arverni tribe **Vercingetorix**, who led the famous resistance army against Caesar.



Caesar wrote also another book, *Commentarii de Bello Civili*, Commentary of the Civil War, in which he tells about the civil war against his former friend **Gnaeus Pompeius**, and against the Roman senate. As is known, the war ends with Caesar emerging victorious dictator of Rome. Other history books also exist which use Caesar's name, following the happenings of the civil war, the Alexandrine War (*De Bello Alexandrino*), African War (*De Bello Africo*), and Hispanian War (*De Bello Hispaniensi*), but in reality they are written by other people than Caesar, maybe the legate Aulus Hirtius, and Caesar's close friend **Gaius Oppius**.

When reading Caesar one has to consider that he talks about himself in the third person, and of course tries to make himself look as good as possible, while simultaneously denigrating his enemies. However Caesar is not considered in any way an unreliable historian, and as a descriptor of the late Republican military he is simply irreplaceable.

## Iconographical sources

The third category of sources is iconographical ones, meaning pictures. The title includes all frescoes, vase paintings, sculptures, figurines, reliefs, mosaics, drawings and graffiti, all that can be imagined. Iconographical sources are in many ways harder to use than historical or archaeological sources, but they also have their own good sides.

At best an iconographical source shows us the whole panoply of a soldier, from which we can fairly reliably reconstruct it. These kind of sources from the Republican era are extremely rare, mostly just two bigger reliefs, to which I will return later. On top of that the picture has to be put in the right time, one should also take into consideration artistic conventions. This means that the artist may not have depicted the reality as it were, but as it was supposed to be represented. Pictures always have to be interpreted correctly, and it happens by knowing the symbology and artistic conventions.

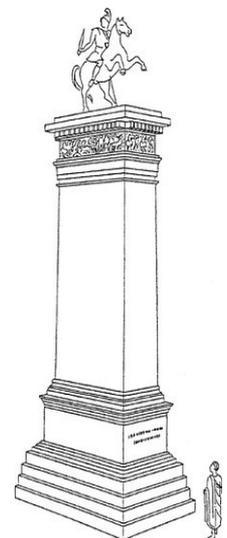
Roman art is divided into two categories: "patrician art" and "plebeian art", of which the firstly mentioned represents all the public monuments and pictures. Most of the iconographical sources that depict soldiers are patrician art, public propagandistic monuments, which idealise the reality. The problem however is not so great in Republican times than for example on the Column of emperor Trajanus. But that doesn't belong to our time period here.

Special care need to be applied to the research of helmets from Roman art. Although many other pieces of equipment are usually depicted faithfully, throughout Roman history a strong Greek tradition prevails in the depiction of helmets. Because of that most Roman officers and other important military figures have Greek Attic helmets on their heads. Roman Attic helmets have never been found in archaeological digs, so by the most part these helmets in pictures came from the artists imagination. Attic helmet is precicely that which everybody knows from the heads of Roman officers in Hollywood movies, the one which has a high separate browband or diadem. The helmet of that form didn't exactly exist, instead it's an artistic representation of existing helmets, which are somewhat different. They were also not helmets for ordinary soldiers, unlike some pictographical pieces would like a viewer to believe.

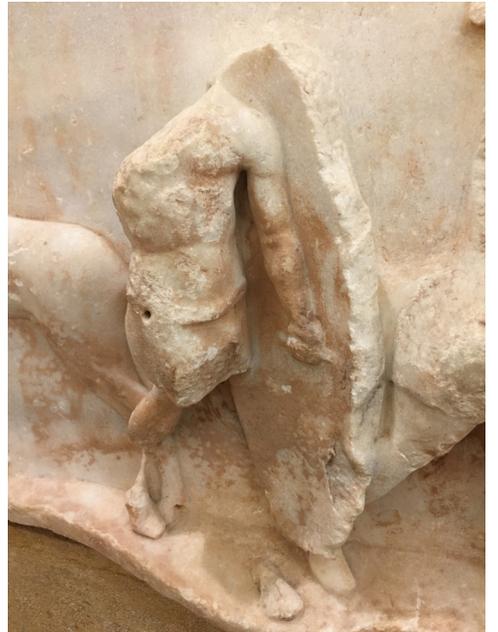
## The monument of Aemilius Paullus (167 BCE)

Lucius Aemilius Paullus, the same one that Polybios knew, was a Roman general who lived between 229–160 BCE. He earned the honorific name Macedonicus after conquering Macedonia (the area of modern Greece) and making it a Roman province. Paullus beat the last king of Macedonia, **Perseus**, in the famous battle of Pydna in 168 BCE. This battle was a triumph of Rome, and it showed without question how much more versatile and flexible the Roman manipular system was compared to the rigid Macedonian pike phalanx. One military technological period ended, and another one started.

To celebrate his victory, Paullus erected, or rather captured a pillar (a square column) already erected by king Perseus in Delphi, and on top of it he put his own image. Delphi was the holy city of all Greeks, and also Romans, because there lived **Apollon's** (**Apollo's** for the Romans) oracle **Pythia**, from which both the ordinary people, as well as the great and mighty of the Mediterranean world went to ask for advice in many different things. For the price of the prediction people gave a present to Apollon. The pillar of Perseus had been such a gift, and now the gift to the god changed under the name of Paullus.



The most interesting thing of the pillar are the reliefs in its upper register. They depict the battle of Pydna, and this might be the earliest case of Roman pictography that can be linked to a real historical event. The relief depicts Roman and Macedonian soldiers in the midst of a fight, both infantry and cavalry. Modern view is that the depiction in the relief is highly accurate and represents the armament of the period well. Romans have big oval *scutum*-shields, the same which Polybios described, and on top of their tunics they have *lorica hamata*-mail armours with shoulder doubling. Unfortunately none of the heads of the Romans have survived in this relief, so we can't see what kind of helmets they were wearing. The weapons in their hands have neither preserved, but the legionaries must have had swords in their hands. Sandals also can't be distinguished from the relief, but they could have been painted on. Originally the relief, as all Roman art, was painted with bright colours, but nothing survives of the colours after two thousand years.



## The monument of Domitius Ahenobarbus (115 BCE)

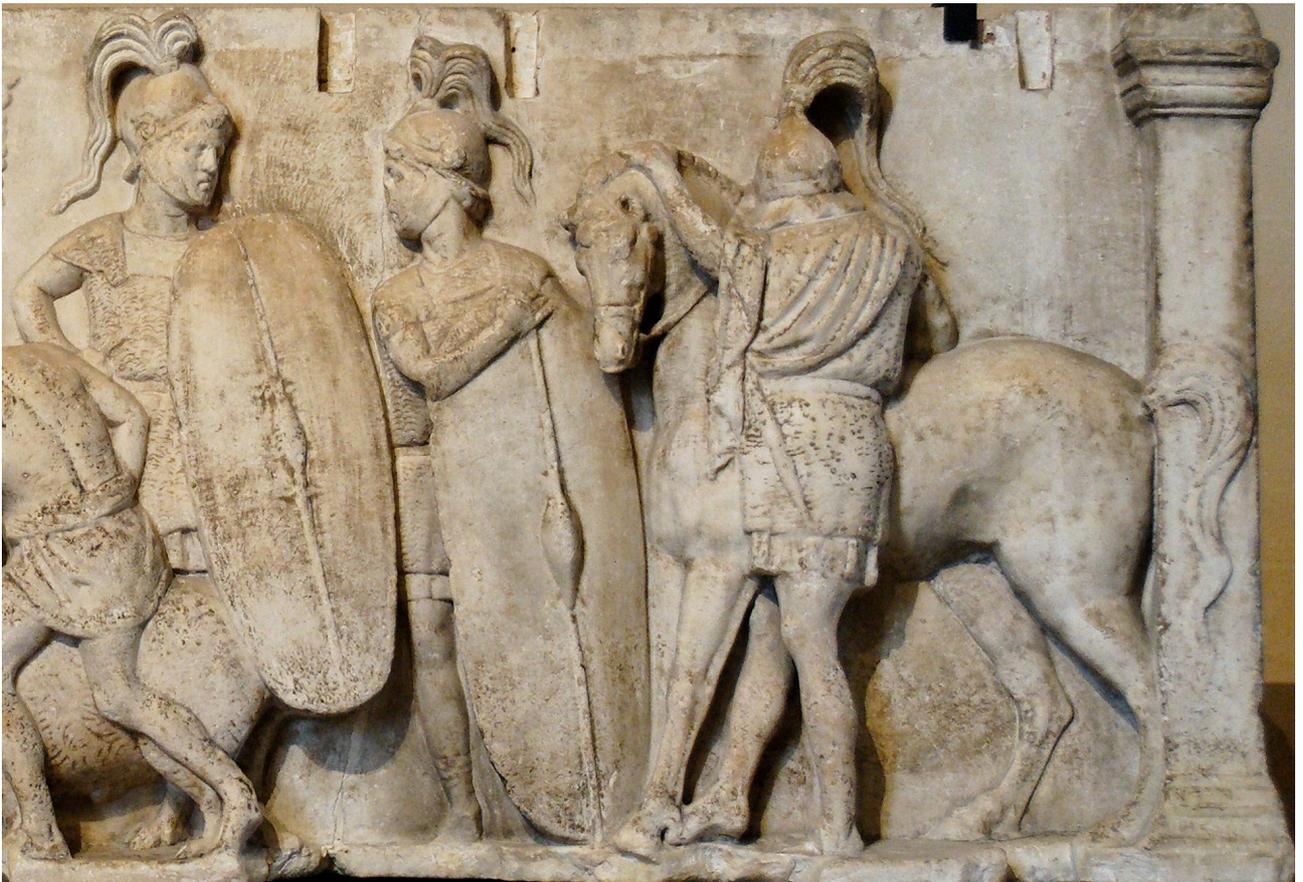


**Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus** (died 104 BCE) was the *consul* of Rome in year 122 BCE. He conquered with the general **Quintus Fabius Maximus Allobrogicus** the province of *Gallia Transalpina*, that is the southern part of modern France (*Provence* and *Languedoc* areas). He wanted to create a safe land route from *Italia* to *Hispania* (modern Spain), where Rome had recently conquered land. Romans won the Gauls (*Allobroges*, *Salluvii*, *Arverni*) at the battle of Vindalium using their war elephants. Ahenobarbus was awarded with a triumph in Rome in 120 BCE, for the win against the Gauls. Ahenobarbus constructed the *Via Domitia*-road from Italia to Hispania in 118 BCE. and worked as a governor (*proconsul*) of Gallia, as well as the *ensor* of Rome in 115 BCE. He was also appointed as *Pontifex*, the leading high priest of Roman religious life.

Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus constructed a monument which nowadays is usually know as an altar. It might have also been something else than an altar, but it is not preserved in its entirety. In any case the most important part, the relief, is preserved, and it has been preserved remarkably well. On one side of the piece the reliefs depict oceanic gods and creatures, on the other side is more earthly things. That is a *census*, which Ahenobarbus has probably held in Rome, when he was a *ensor*. Census-side, which is held in the Louvre in Paris, is extremely interesting when recreating Roman Republican legionaries. The census is guarded by Roman soldiers, four legionaries, one cavalryman, and a figure in commanding officer's panoply, possibly Ahenobarbus himself, or the god of war Mars, who was often depicted in the panoply of a Roman general.

The reliefs have been preserved in better quality than the ones on the monument of Aemilius Paullus in the outdoors of Delphi, and in the relief of Ahenobarbus the heads of the soldiers are also intact. All the legionaries are wearing sleeveless mail shirts with shoulder doublings, looking exactly the same as in Paullus' relief. The same kind of are also the big curved oval shields. Swords have been preserved, unlike in Paullus, even though they are sheathed. Most interesting are the helmets, which for the most part represent the Montefortino-type, but the relief includes also other types of helmets, like the Greek Boeotian helmet the cavalryman is wearing, and the pseudo-Attic helmet forms of some of the soldiers. It is quite hard to say which archaeological helmet type they are representing. All the helmets are decorated with flowing plumes, which might be made of either horse hair, or then from long and thin bird feathers.

The commander (Mars?) depicted in the relief is dressed like a Roman officer, maybe a tribune. He has a metallic plate armour cuirass, either bronze or iron. On the chest of the cuirass is most probably a *gorgoneion*, which is a head of a Gorgon Medusa, snake haired woman, who according to a Greek myth petrified everyone who looked her in the eye. In Roman armours *gorgoneion* often appears as an apotropaic emblem, to ward off the evil eye. Commanders sash (*zoni*) is tied around the cuirass with a Hercules knot (reef knot), and the other signs of an officer includes a commanding spear, and commanders cloak (*paludamentum*), which should be worn wrapped around the left arm. Under the armour the man also has a padding jacket (*subarmalis*), from which hangs two different length rows of fabric or leather flaps (*pteryges*). The commander also has a plumed helmet, but its type is hard to say since the relief is so worn out at that point, and he also has a round shield. Officers often used older shield forms than regular soldiers, as part of their Hellenistic attire. In his left hand he is holding a sword.



## Gravestones

Romans often carved the image of the deceased onto their gravestone, which told about the profession and life of the dead person. If the orderer of the stone didn't have money for a full picture carving, the gravestone might have a bust, a relief about objects or symbols relating to them, or at a minimum a plain text, which told about the name, family, profession, and age of death, sometimes something else too, like the names of the slaves they had freed upon death. Thus gravestones tell a lot about people, and the pictures on them are often very realistic with the details of clothing and equipment. A lot of soldiers' gravestones have been found from the Principate time, but unfortunately very few from the Republic.

In fact there is only one which can be of any help, the gravestone of **Minucius Lorarius**, the centurion of *legio Martia*, from year 43 or 42 BCE. The centurion is depicted in his everyday clothes, without armour, helmet, or a shield, which is typical in gravestones. A sword he does have on his belt, and besides the inscription he can be recognised as a centurion by the fact that the sword is held on the left flank, while ordinary legionaries have it on their right. He also has a centurions vine staff (*vitis*) in his right hand. Apart from the brooched cloak and tunic he has closed shoes, and an a dagger (*pugio*) which has been attached to his belt with an extremely interesting method. Usually a dagger is attached to the opposing flank of the sword, left side for the legionaries, right for centurions, but the dagger of Minucius has been tied horizontally in front of the belt, over his lower abdomen, with a complicated looking system of straps.



The gravestone is also interesting in another way, because the legion mentioned in it (*legio Martia*, legion of Mars) is known from several ancient sources. The legion in question was composed of Caesar's Gallic War veterans. It operated in the province of *Africa*, but after Caesar's assassination it moved to *Macedonia*. In the new civil war *Martia* supported first **Marcus Antonius**, but leaped with *legio IV Macedonica* to support **Octavianus**. The number of *Legio Martia* is not known.