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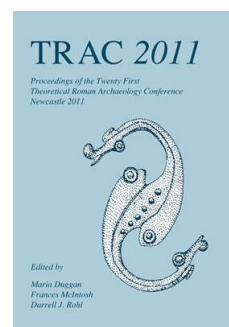
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Paper Information:

Title: Sulpicia Lepidina and Elizabeth Custer: A
Cross-cultural Analogy for the Social Role of
Women on a Military Frontier
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Pages: 105–114

DOI: http://doi.org/10.16995/TRAC2011_105_114

Publication Date: 29 March 2012



Volume Information:

Duggan, M., McIntosh, F. and Rohl, D.J (eds.) (2012) *TRAC 2011: Proceedings of the Twenty First Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, Newcastle 2011*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.

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complete record of women's lives in a military context. The American western frontier in the second half of the nineteenth century provides an interesting and useful analogy for a pioneering military group forging into unknown and sometimes hostile territory with the purpose of conquest and pacification. Specifically, the letters of Elizabeth Custer, wife of the commander of the U.S. Seventh Cavalry Regiment provide an interesting parallel to the life of military wives only glimpsed in the Vindolanda tablets.

Using historical analogy

A few necessary caveats about using historical analogies to illuminate the more distant past are necessary. This approach has had a rough ride, particularly through the formulation of the 'New Archaeology' of the 1960s. Early analogic approaches were criticized primarily for their simple overlay of current narrative onto the past, presuming an uncomplicated continuum of human similarity. Certainly one cannot project a modern scenario backwards and declare it unquestionable truth, but almost no-one today proposes such a method. Outright rejection of analogy disregards the potential to identify material markers produced by similar historical and social conditions. It becomes possible to at least hypothesize about a social group that is less well documented and to shed more light onto current questions (cf. Kopytoff 1993: 146). With its limitations clear, this investigation uses analogy in a constructive way to offer a broadened perspective about past lives that are otherwise frustratingly incomplete, such as those of Roman military wives.

The American West provides an interesting historical comparison with which to explore the lived reality of pioneering military women. This is not the first proposition to draw a parallel between the Roman frontiers and those of the United States in the nineteenth century. Whittaker suggested that this was a far more useful analogy for understanding the mentality of Roman expansion and frontier regions, than the overused contrast with the British colonial model (Whittaker 1994: 4–5). He argued that a similar political viewpoint was shared by both, in terms of the meaning and physicality of a frontier. There was a similarity between the American and Roman view of a frontier as being in a constant process of change, and an area to be entered, rather than a boundary (Whittaker 1994: 4–5). The Roman frontiers were malleable zones that demarcated the 'current official line' (Osborn 2006: 22–3). In this way the opening of the American West provides a comparable situation, with its frontier a constantly moving target and by no means solidified.

Using comparison and analogy to understand frontier situations has been argued positively by other scholars, usually referring to the similar 'actors' and situations to be found in a frontier environment (with caveats, Kopytoff 1993: 143–7; cf. Hingley 2008: 27). The focus in this paper is the frontier expansion and push into Dakota Territory in the 1860s and 70s, at which point there were already thousands of settlers living in states further to the west, leaving this northern pocket of native territory still to be brought under control. As we now tend to see Roman frontiers and provincial areas, the American West was also a region of movement, exchange and fluidity that held elements of the conqueror and the native at one and the same time. In these environments the outcome of daily life may also have been similar, especially for those associated with a formulaic player in the process of change, such as the conquering military force (cf. the 'actors' and 'actor's culture' of Kopytoff 1993: 144).

Women in the Roman military community at Vindolanda

The most comprehensive image of the social lives of women associated with the Roman army comes from the Vindolanda writing tablets (Bowman and Thomas 1994, 2003). The well-known birthday party invitation (*Tab.Vindol.* II 291; III App. 291) and other letters between Sulpicia Lepidina and Claudia Severa tell us that wives of commanders had some freedom of movement around the frontier, at least those attached to these auxiliary units. We also see that they maintained social bonds while posted to remote locations through social events and frequent correspondence between family members (*Tab.Vindol.* II 291–94). They continued traditions such as birthday celebrations, perhaps a difficult task in this environment, and ultimately may have enjoyed freedoms that exceeded privileges held by women in Rome itself (e.g. *Tab.Vindol.* II 292; III App. 292). The cohesion and maintenance of family bonds is clear in all the letters, even those between males that otherwise discuss military matters, such as those between prefects. But a deeper look at some letters that are less commonly referenced also reveals a somewhat striking female world within this environment of the highly masculine Roman army.

An inventory list from the *praetorium* archives of Flavius Cerialis, husband of Sulpicia Lepidina, refers to supplies being used for the celebration of the *matronalia* on the *kalends* of March (*Tab.Vindol.* III 581). The festival celebrated Juno Lucina and the fecundity of women in their domestic social role as mothers and wives (Gagé 1963; Prescendi 2000). The celebration of Juno and the *matronalia* has been argued to stand in direct contrast to the predominant male social identification of ‘soldier’ in the Roman world, and asserts the female role as predominantly domestic (Lopez 2007). Though the army honoured other female deities, celebration of the *matronalia* differs quite dramatically from the rituals related to, for instance, Minerva, who was important to soldiers not because of her feminine qualities but rather for her associations with military prowess. The very existence of the *matronalia* celebration mentioned in an official list of military supplies from the *praetorium* is striking because it suggests that the army was aligned with this aspect of a female world in the military context. Moreover, a prerequisite of the *matronalia* celebration is the presence of married couples and the presumed fecundity of the wives, both matters typically associated with a female social sphere and contrary to our image of the masculine world of the army.

The celebration reinforces the role of women here as predominantly domestic; however, in a military camp the domesticity of women, particularly the wife of the prefect, takes on a public role as well, thereby dispersing the binary opposition of the private domestic life of women and the public masculine world of the army. Such a public role of the commander’s wife should be expected by nature of the physical space in a Roman fort. The centrality of the *praetorium* and the official military role it played makes it nearly impossible to separate public and private in this environment; therefore, integration of a prefect’s wife and even children into the social structure of the community should be expected. Officer’s wives may have been an important aspect of the social structure of the military community and we should imagine the prefect’s wife taking the lead in a specifically female festival such as the *matronalia*. The prominent social position of Lepidina specifically in the life of the fort is reinforced in a tablet in which a colleague of Cerialis confirms his attendance at her birthday celebration (*Tab.Vindol.* III 629). An event in honour of this high status woman appears to have been an important social function for male military colleagues, as well as other females. In this fragmentary glance we might see Lepidina acting in a leading female role within the social structure of the camp. There is certainly a precedence of prominent women in the Roman

world acting within a female network of power and on behalf of other women, albeit we usually see this enacted on a much higher social level, for instance in the imperial household (Laurence 1997: 133).

The tablets make clear that at least women of the higher ranks were a strong part of the social fabric of a Roman military community. They maintained social bonds amongst military families on the frontier, and the wife of the prefect may have held a prominent social position in the community. At the same time, though most officers were allowed to marry by law (Allason-Jones 1999a), there is no indication that there were any state sponsored provisions for such individuals. Therefore, female social networks would have been important, if not crucial, in this otherwise overtly masculine environment. Such a network is hinted at in one letter in which a woman, Paterna, promises to bring supplies of a fever cure to Lepidina (*Tab. Vindol.* II 294; cf. Birley 2002: 145). Another records Valatta's appeal to Cerialis possibly through the patronage of Lepidina (*Tab. Vindol.* II 257; III App. 257). But the tablets and other sources offer only a tantalizing and altogether too fragmentary picture to move far beyond merely proving their presence, to discovering the social role of women on this military frontier. Therefore, I turn to a useful historical analogy to provide a possible framework for investigating social roles that women fulfilled in similar historical environments.

Military communities and wives on the American Western frontier

In the late nineteenth century the American frontier west of the Mississippi River in Dakota Territory was fortified by a chain of forts and outposts as a protection for settlers and active rail construction against the Plains Indians (Stewart 1961: x–xiii). The environment here was harsh at all times of year; hot and dry in summer and brutally cold and snowy in winter. Despite this, the wives of officers in the American army travelled to the frontier and lived with their husbands in the camps, many of which were remote and isolated (Stallard 1992: 11–13). They spent several years posted to these distant locations during which time the group became intimately tied together. Because of the extended lengths of time these units were stationed together, a better Roman period parallel to the nineteenth century American military wives may be found in the wives of centurions, rather than the families of prefects or tribunes. The centurions' wives would have spent a much longer time with the garrison and would have been part of career military families, much like those associated with the American armies (Lindsay Allason-Jones, pers. comm.). However, there was an unusual social structure in the context of the Batavian occupied fort at Vindolanda (VIII *Batavorum*). The prefect, Flavius Cerialis, and his wife Sulpicia Lepidina were Batavians themselves, rather than the more common situation in which an equestrian Roman citizen led the cohort for usually a three year period (Birley 2002: 42). Since the Batavians also continued to recruit from their homeland, Cerialis and Lepidina may have had much more in common socially with the unit of Batavians than was typical for the prefect and his spouse.

A complete record of the lives of women associated with the American military frontier comes from Elizabeth Custer, the wife of George Armstrong Custer, Lieutenant Colonel of the Seventh US Cavalry Regiment. The Custers are a household name because of his infamous death at the Battle of the Little Big Horn River in June 1876. Elizabeth travelled with her husband and this military unit for all the years of her marriage, and was very often part of a female network of other military wives associated with officers and regular soldiers. A similar leading social role that was only hinted in the Vindolanda letters for the wife of the prefect in the Roman military community emerges quite strongly from Elizabeth's letters. In the words of

her husband, Custer believed, ‘as the wife of the commanding officer [she] belonged to everyone’ (Custer 1961: 114). There is a particular reminiscence here of the affection that Germanicus’ soldiers had for Agrippina and their children. Moreover, Custer also felt that their house should be open for the garrison at all times (Custer 1961: 118), suggesting a very public character to the commanding officer’s household and therefore the wife of the unit leader.

The letters of Elizabeth Custer clearly have a different motivation than those of Sulpicia Lepidina and Claudia Severa, but both sets of correspondences offer clues as to how women coped in a similar historical circumstance on a military frontier. Elizabeth’s letters form a very deliberate archive of her time with the Seventh Regiment. She writes about her life on the frontier from the comfort of New York City after the death of her husband and her exit from military life. The great importance of Elizabeth’s letters is in their thorough record of both legal reality and social custom. From Elizabeth’s description of her life in this environment two things are clear: there was absolutely no state provisioning for the wives that accompanied soldiers, even the wife of the commander, but nonetheless they were cherished and they formed an integral part of the social structure of the military fort. Elizabeth writes, ‘it seemed very strange to me that with all the value that is set on the presence of the women of an officer’s family at the frontier posts, the book of army regulation makes no provision for them, but in fact ignores them entirely!’ (Custer 1961: 105; cf. War Department 1881). Roman military wives also faced a distinct lack of official recognition, even for those legally married to officers, and they must have created social networks to cope with their unique situation.

The most salient point to emerge is that there was a significant difference between legal and social reality (cf. Stallard 1992: 30, regarding servants in the military context), a fact that is certainly also clear in our understanding of the Roman world and particularly the Roman army. Elizabeth complains, ‘the servants and the company laundresses are mentioned as being entitled to quarters and rations and the services of the surgeon. If an officer’s wife falls ill she cannot claim the attention of the doctor, though it is almost unnecessary to say that she has it through his most urgent courtesy’ (Custer 1961: 105). Though there was no legal provisioning, social practice and general good manners assured that wives were entitled to services in the same *de facto* sense that must have existed for the wives of enlisted men in the Roman *auxilia*. Moreover, Elizabeth reiterates that wives were ‘cherished and appreciated’ and she describes the devotion of soldiers and husbands toward them (Custer 1961: 101; cf. Stallard 1992: 17, regarding travel by wives). This disparity is reminiscent of the senatorial discussion in A.D. 21 recorded by Tacitus, in which Severus Caecina recommends that women be prohibited from the frontiers and the military environment because of the disruption they cause (Tac. *Ann.* 3.33). No senator is on record agreeing and Valerius Messalinus replies, ‘but for those returning from toil, what was more honorable than wifely solace?’ (Tac. *Ann.* 3.34.2). Drusus adds that his solitary diplomatic missions were ‘always with a heavy heart if he were wrenched from his dearest wife...’ (Tac. *Ann.* 3.34.6). As with Roman centurions and lower ranks, the American army of this period was a professional group of soldiers. George Custer was a career Lieutenant Colonel and his soldiers were on the path of lifetime service to the military. Families in such an environment in any period coped with their unique situation, and at all times there surely were unwritten laws of social custom specific to that environment.

So there are similar legal and social circumstances in these military populations nearly two-thousand years apart. There is also a comparable situation between the individuals that comprise these social groups. Extended families were an important part of the American military community (Custer 1961: 104). Custer’s sister was married to an officer in the regiment, while his brother was a Colonel, and stories often include the extended family,

particularly sisters, as a part of the regiment community. The presence of extended family units within Roman military communities is certain in the epigraphic record (Allason-Jones 1999a; Allason-Jones, forthcoming; Roxan 1991), and military diplomas make clear that soldiers married sisters and daughters of comrades (Greene, forthcoming). Military communities generally are a tight knit group, made stronger by the bonding experience of their social circumstances. One result of living in this context was that marriage partners were found from within the institutional group, suggesting the community was set apart in some way. Also of interest are the varied social and cultural backgrounds of the wives associated with the American army. Wives came from the major towns and cities in the vicinity of the regiment, though only from American settlements; none originated from native communities. Several wives were brought from the home town of the soldiers, while some wives began as laundresses for the unit. This population was a mixed socio-cultural group, but all had a primary attachment to the military garrison. This diverse population is reminiscent of Roman patterns, particularly in an auxiliary setting.

Elizabeth's opening letter stating her motivations to write down her experiences as a military wife is worth quoting in full for the provocative points it raises. It is particularly interesting when considering the social cohesion of a military group, both soldiers and non-combatants, and their separation from non-military society: 'One of the motives that has actuated me recalling these simple annals of our daily life has been to give a glimpse to civilians of garrison and camp life—about which they seem to have such a very imperfect knowledge. This ignorance exists especially with reference to anything pertaining to the cavalry which is almost invariably stationed on the extreme frontier...our life, therefore, was often as separate from the rest of the world as if we had been living on an island in the ocean...' (Custer 1961: preface, xxix). The notion of the military as an independent 'total institution' may be too strong a model (Pollard 1996; MacMullen 1984), but the isolation and separation apparent in Elizabeth's letters was probably similar to the situation of many auxiliary units and attached families stationed out on the extreme frontiers of the Roman empire.

The isolation experienced by military families on the American West was poignant, though there are several instances in the rest of Elizabeth's letters in which they and the soldiers are billeted within towns and took up residence in guest houses for long periods. Leave was taken for weeks or months in which soldiers returned to populated areas, sometimes a nearby city, sometimes home. The isolation therefore, though certainly instigated by geography for some of the time, seems also to stem from the social differences between the military community and civilian society. The community of soldiers, which in this case clearly included the non-combatant element of the population associated with the military as well, formed a separate and socially different part of the population. This same social separation has been argued quite successfully for the Roman army by Haynes (1999) and James (1999). Elizabeth's motivation to write down these experiences with the American army was in part an attempt to rectify the disparity between the military community and the rest of society, but speaks strongly for an overarching difference in social groups.

Also brought into sharp focus in this letter is how little non-military individuals might actually know about life in the army. This recalls the many references in Roman literature that seem to uphold an ideal about the masculinity of the army and the lack of a female presence, which we know to be untrue. Considering the vast geographical separation between, for instance, Rome and the military frontiers, one can imagine a similar discrepancy between the highly idealized notions of the Roman army that turn up in literature and the actual reality of

life there. Elizabeth Custer's description of this disparity makes the isolation palpable. During a particularly brutal campaign against the natives, Elizabeth describes her shock when during a trip out of the military zone a civilian asks off-handedly, 'ah, is there a campaign, and for what purpose has it gone out?' (Custer 1961: 70). Though her life is thoroughly encompassed by military matters, this is not remotely true for other civilian groups. There may be a historical parallel here both in the physical separation, but also the social misunderstanding between groups with a military identity and those without.

What is so striking is the extent to which the lives of the women present with the Seventh Cavalry Regiment are totally and completely tied up with the military, even though it is clear that they were strictly prohibited to take part in official matters (Custer 1961: 114–16). Until recently the discussion of non-combatants associated with the Roman army has tended towards an image of a group of citizens that just happened to be living their civilian life in physical proximity to the Roman army. Recently our definition of the military community has become more encompassing and has inclined toward the inclusion of the garrison and the non-combatant population as a much more inclusive and inseparable group (e.g. Birley 2010). Elizabeth Custer reveals a world where the most immediate concern of military wives is the unit itself, and not merely their own husband. Elizabeth views the regiment together for the march and reacts, 'my heart swelled with pride to see our grand regiment all together once more and in such fine condition' (Custer 1961: 22). When the proposition came up for the women to spend some time away from the camp she writes, 'it was far more comforting to stay at a military post, where everyone was interested in the expedition, and talked about it as the chief topic of concern' (Custer 1961: 70). After all the safety and well-being of the unit allows the protection and livelihood of the non-combatant population, and this would have been the same reality for those associated with Roman military garrisons. As Allason-Jones has reminded us: '...if a woman had a relationship with a military man, her best chance of continued support for herself and her children lay in following him wherever he went' (Allason-Jones 1999a: 47). This sentiment is clear in several memoirs of women in the American West (e.g. Summerhayes 1970: 204: 'I had cast my lot with a soldier and where he was, was home to me. '; cf. Stallard 1992: 15).

And what of the women on the American military frontier other than generals' wives? First of all, there were plenty of them. In fact, in one description of a camp it was the bachelor's quarters that were the anomaly. In other camps families made do with the conditions they had. Elizabeth reports, 'in one set of quarters there chanced to be so many children and so little room that the parents had invented a three-story bed...' (Custer 1961: 79). The use of buildings and the internal arrangements were organized according to individual need, availability of materials, and terrain (Stallard 1992: 26–7). This arrangement, not haphazard but idiosyncratic and flexible, is reminiscent of the varied layouts one can find in a Roman fort. We have been accustomed for a long time to seek complex explanations for singular definitions and use of space in Roman forts (e.g. after Petrikovits 1975), but it is clear now that this is unrealistic and unnecessary. The variation of size, layout and internal arrangement is almost endless in forts across the empire, to say nothing of the variation of extramural organization, suggesting space in military settlements was organized according to need, possibly to accommodate different facets of the military population, including families in some instances.

The women on the American frontier formed a female network and were highly concerned with the interests of the others. Elizabeth writes about a trip out for the group of army wives; '...we were a band of friends sharing the same isolation, and each took comfort in contributing to the enjoyment of the rest' (Custer 1961: 90). There was plenty of work to be done, and this

typically occurred in collective efforts. Elizabeth describes the community taking shifts, sometimes even the officers themselves, to stand vigil on a sick child or make clothing when they were far from the commercial world (Custer 1961: 100–1). Out of necessity the non-combatant population came together in a close-knit group. Their legal circumstances were simple—there were no state provisions for their habitation in the military sphere (War Department 1881), and because of this a female network was critical to provide for everyday needs and to raise the spirits of the regiment.

In this way, Roman military wives—though the officer’s families at least enjoyed an advantageous legal status—found little in the way of state provisioning. Nevertheless, the letters of Lepidina and Severa suggest that an attempt was made to maintain a sophisticated social existence while posted to the frontier and to call on other females when there was need. Nineteenth century America cannot be simply overlaid onto the Roman world. However, the usefulness of identifying patterns of overarching social organization within military communities and the structure that resulted should not be underestimated. It seems likely that in both historical situations discussed here strong female associations emerged from this similar social context in a military and frontier zone. As for the social standing of the military wife generally, one last quote by Elizabeth Custer is striking: ‘Nevertheless, though army women have no thrones or scepters, nor any acknowledged rights according to military law, I never knew such queens as they, or saw more willing subjects than they govern’ (Custer 1961: 106).

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Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Michael W. Taylor of Chapel Hill NC for first turning me towards the letters of Elizabeth Custer as a comparative source for the lives of military wives and families. I would like to thank Lindsay Allason-Jones for a very lively discussion about these and related topics, which much improved the final outcome of this paper. I also extend great thanks to Amy Richlin for her help and support with this research.

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