

THE EMPEROR'S GUARD: A LOOK INTO THE NECESSITY OF THE
PRAETORIAN AND GERMAN BODYGUARDS

by

ANTHONY DAMIANO

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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By Anthony Damiano

Dissertation Director:

Professor Gary D. Farney

The purpose of this text is to compare the praetorian guard to the German bodyguard (consisting of both the *Equites Singulares Augusti* and the *Germani Corpores Custodes*). These forces existed around the same time period, the first three centuries CE, and had a very similar role. This paper looks to answer the questions: why were two guards needed inside of Rome? what were their functions? and how did they affect the empire? The conclusion is made that two guards were not needed inside of Rome; it was simply a helpful luxury to keep a German bodyguard as well. The praetorians on the other hand were a necessary force that was essential to overseeing the life and death of the emperor.

Preface

I have always been fascinated by ancient history and ancient military forces. Going into the planning stages for this piece I knew that I wanted to focus on an aspect of an ancient military force. The idea for this text came into being after discussing the areas in the Roman military that could still use some scholarly attention with Professor Gary D. Farney. After some initial research I realized that this is an area that has not received too much focus in the recent past, and it is still an area that deserves more attention. More arguments can be made in this area, especially with more of a focus on the German bodyguard. Access to a large variety of archaeological records would be needed to make more of an original intervention. This work's intention is to inspire renewed focus on both groups that can be looked at specifically with an ancient focus or more comparatively to the military units of a different time period.

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First and foremost, I would like to thank Professor Gary D. Farney for all the help he has put into this project. Without his guidance the idea for this project would never have come to be. Additionally, I would like to thank all members of the Rutgers library staff who were a tremendous help to me in locating and receiving books. Finally, I would like to dedicate this work to those need encouragement in seeking their dreams.

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Introduction

Bodyguards play a very unsung role throughout the entirety of history, when the truth is they can be very influential figures. They hold the lives of the ruling class, in many time periods, in their hands. This gives guards a huge amount of responsibility, as they are tasked with defending the lives of the most powerful people in a nation, empire, or country. Additionally, these men/women must be extremely trustworthy, as there is nothing standing between them brutally murdering the ruler they have been tasked to defend except consequences and a nice paycheck. Many bodyguards throughout history have proven themselves to be untrustworthy at times and have attempted (and sometimes succeeded) to remove rulers from power. A key example of a group that has acted in this way is the praetorian guard of the Roman Empire.

The praetorian guard were an elite force originally created to defend the Roman emperor. Overtime, however, they evolved to become a key part of the emperor's power. They were employed for many different tasks that can be classified as official and unofficial. Official tasks are those that the praetorian guard were created to perform, and/or are not done in a secretive manner; while unofficial tasks are those that the emperor employed the guard to perform underhandedly. Official tasks included crowd control, use as a policing force, firefighting, military service in the field, and of course general guard duty. Unofficial tasks consisted of the elimination of rivals, promotion of new emperors, looting, use as entertainment, and their use to sway the senate.

Praetorians were to be ready at a moment's notice to defend the emperor or operate as a policing force inside Rome. No legions themselves were allowed inside the city, but four military forces operated inside Rome, the urban cohorts, German

bodyguards, praetorian guards, and the *vigiles*. Overtime, the praetorians (and German bodyguards) evolved to become the emperor's go to force for both official and unofficial tasks. Due to the emperor's reliance on them, they became a show of power around Rome and displayed the power of the emperor to the plebeians and patricians alike. They were also used outside of Rome on numerous occasions, which showed the Emperor's special interest in a task or area where they were stationed.

One could not rule without the favor of the guard; however, contrary to popular belief they were not a king-making force. However, at times they do appear to make "kings," but these are few and far between, and when it did occur it was not the entire guard conspiring to elect one person as emperor, it generally occurred through the actions of a few or the action of the praetorian prefect. Additionally, they did not have the power to select any one man and put him onto the throne; they seldom had the power to choose between a group of eligible men to promote to Emperor, and their choice was closely watched over by the senate and other powerful figures of the Empire (such as governors and generals). Even when they did choose the Emperor, in most cases he was quickly deposed showing that they were not the true king makers of Ancient Rome. Despite the fact that they were not kingmakers they were to be respected and their favor was required for an Emperor to rule and continue his rule. If an Emperor did not have their favor it would not be long before he ended up dead, this becomes apparent quite a few times throughout the first three centuries. Evidently, they were not exactly kingmakers, but their favor is necessary for the continued success and well-being of the Emperor.

Lastly, it will be argued that the praetorians were the elite of the Roman army. Anyone entering into the military in Ancient Rome would have wanted to become a

praetorian because they were paid well, had a better chance at promotion, and lived most of their lives in the capitol city of Rome.

The German bodyguard was a very similar unit to that of the praetorian guard. They were created to defend the emperor, engaged in various tasks for him, and were another one of his personal forces. They also differ from the praetorians for a number of reasons. First and most importantly they seldom become engaged in the politics of the empire as the praetorian guard does. Secondly, they are not used to show the power and dominance of the emperor in Rome or abroad. Generally, their use was always secretive when they engaged in actions besides guarding the emperor. But since they were the emperor's personal bodyguard they had to have a flawless appearance, similar to that of the praetorians. Third, the German bodyguard was never a unified force as the praetorian guard was, they were constantly being disbanded and reunified. Additionally, when they were reunified there is no way to be sure that the same men were brought back into the force, depending on when they were inducted into the German bodyguard their service terms would have varied drastically as the bodyguard was constantly being shut down and rebranded. Unfortunately, there is very little way to figure out what happened to the members of the bodyguard who were disbanded and whether they were brought back into the unit when it was recreated. These certainly would have been very interesting tales. Fourth and last, their favor was never necessary to the government or the empire as the praetorians were, as they were not as important in maintaining or selecting a new ruler because they were never unified and never became a political force. Historian Michael Speidel argues that the German bodyguard and the praetorians heralded in the Roman empire when they were kept in service by Augustus after Rome transitioned into an

empire.¹ Unfortunately, ancient sources are much quieter concerning the German bodyguard as opposed to the praetorian guard. What follows will be a description of the formation of both bodyguards and their general history, readers will see the overall evolution of the both bodyguards. Ultimately, it will be argued that praetorian guard were a much more valuable force to the Empire and were not really threatened by the German bodyguard.

Literature Review

As of late the scholarship surrounding the Roman Empire has seemed to wane as historians, classicists, and archaeologists are searching for something new and original to write about. It is becoming increasingly harder to develop a noteworthy work that brings something new to the table. This seems to be the case concerning many specific topics inside the realm of the Roman Empire. For example, numerous scholars have written about the Roman Army recently, in the last twenty years, and the last hundred years; however, not many new proposals are being put forward. The same is the case when focusing on the history of the praetorian guard. Recently, the guard has been a somewhat popular topic for scholars as three scholars have published a book focusing either entirely or a large portion of the work, on them, in the last twenty years. These publications are *The Praetorian Guard: A History of Rome's Elite Special Forces* by Sandra Bingham, *Roman Military Service* by Sara Phang, *The Policing of the Roman Empire: Soldiers, Administration, and Public Order* by Christopher Fuhrmann, and *Praetorian: The Rise and Fall of Rome's Imperial Bodyguard* by Guy de la Bedoyere. However, the two most defining works on the guard were done in French and Italian by Marcel Durry and

¹ Michael P. Speidel, *Riding for Caesar: The Roman Emperors' Horse Guards* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) 10.

Alfredo Passerini respectively. On the other hand, the German bodyguard does not have much scholarship focusing solely on them; however, this is an area future scholars could look into. Michael Speidel has presented arguments about the German bodyguard, encompassing both the *equites singulares Augusti* and the *Germani corpore custodes* in his book *Riding for Caesar: The Roman Emperor's Horse Guards*. Now, the focus will shift to look specifically at what these works bring to the field and how they relate back to the propositions presented here.

Bingham's work and this piece are in communication, as she tries to look deeper at the guard than other scholars have before; she attempts to go where the sources do not allow her to go. She realizes that because the guard was a part of the army and a normal part of everyday life ancient historians do not always explicitly call them the praetorian guard, instead they may refer to them simply as soldiers. She intends to locate these instances where writers say soldiers but in fact refer to the guard. Her argument is quite cogent, it seeks to challenge what she calls modern misunderstandings that are floating around the guard. Thus, she argues that what started off as Augustus's personal guard eventually branched out and had a role in every aspect of Rome. This claim aligns exactly with the argument put forth here. Bingham also claims that this expansion of roles was ultimately due to the birth of this new unit during the birth of the Empire, while this paper asserts that the expansion of praetorian roles was due to necessity.¹ Evidently, this piece agrees and disagrees with two key points made by Bingham.

Bedoyere's claims in *Praetorian: The Rise and Fall of Rome's Bodyguard* are also very pertinent to this work. His main claim is that the praetorian guard helped to

¹ Sandra Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard: A History of Rome's Elite Special Forces*, (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2013), 4, 8, 78-79, 93, 124.

define an image of the state. The guards revealed how the state acted at the time, be it corrupt, honorable, or secretive. The other part of his argument is that the praetorians were derived from powerful field generals and the oaths they swore to them; it was a tradition that was passed on from the republic to the empire when those who took over the empire were powerful field generals. His last claim asserts that the guard actually needed a strong emperor to lead them.² Bedoyere's claims are very applicable to the work done here as his claim that the guard represented the state is very similar to the claim (made here) that the guard was a representation of the emperor's imperial power (as they are very closely linked). Additionally, Bedoyere's other claim that the guard needed a strong emperor to lead them goes hand in hand with the argument that the guard was necessary to insure the life of the emperor. If the guard was lacking a strong emperor to give them direction they would not defend him and may even end his life. However, in periods where the emperor was a strong leader the guard insured his continued reign. Overall, Bedoyere's work helped to inform the research done here by revealing the image the praetorians displayed and the necessity of a mutual respect between the praetorians and the emperor.

Another scholar who is central to this work is Christopher Fuhrmann in *The Policing of the Roman Empire*. He attempts to compare modern policing forces to ancient ones, and he considers the praetorian guard a policing force. Throughout the work he attempts to answer the question how did state institutions impact public order, law enforcement, and security? Fuhrmann's main goal throughout the piece is to explain

² Guy de la Bedoyere, *Praetorian: The Rise and Fall of Rome's Imperial Bodyguard* (London: Yale University Press, 2017), 5-10.

the origins, development, motives, social impact, and overall significance of Rome's policing forces, while showing that ancient policing forces were very different from modern ones.³ Fuhrmann's work is very applicable to the claims here because his research helps one look at the praetorian guard through the lens of a policing force. In different sections throughout this paper the praetorian guard is considered a policing force.

Additionally, Sara Phang's works *Roman Military Service* will play a key part in this work. Her main focus is *disciplina militaris*, the idea of Roman military discipline. She argues that this style of discipline aimed to separate civilians from soldiers and soldiers from barbarians. The main goal of this form of discipline was to instill a sense of obedience and discipline, but the underlying goal was to instill (modern) masculinity and control the economy (by regulating their income). *Disciplina militaris* was also designed to keep soldiers occupied at all times in an attempt to prevent civil war from occurring. This ultimately led to a competition of who could show the most discipline, and this was linked to promotion throughout the roman military. *Donativa*, bribing with cash, was a method to instill or win over *disciplina militaris*, but it was not always successful.⁴ Phang's work lines up perfectly with the claims made here because she discusses the method of discipline that all members of the praetorian guard were raised on. Additionally, she discusses the method of payment that most members of both guards received at one point throughout their lifetime. This was a very influential part of the

³ Christopher J. Fuhrmann, *Policing the Roman Empire: Soldiers, Administrations, and Public Order.*, 5-8.

⁴ Sara Phang, *Roman Military Service* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1-9.

history of the guard because Roman emperors were killed over it. Phang's work helps to inform about the *donativa*, which becomes essential to the praetorian guard.

Lastly, *Riding for Caesar: The Roman Emperor's Horse Guards* by Michael Speidel is linked to the argument presented here. Speidel states the main goal of his work is to trace the German bodyguard until their death at the Milvian Bridge.⁵ His main argument is the claim that these Germans heralded in the Roman Empire, as they were conceived shortly before the start of the empire. Their creation was a sign of the rise of Emperors because they were a force that came into being just in time to defend the imperial families. Speidel's claims are well supported and very logical. Additionally, he uses a wide variety of sources to support his work ranging from ancient texts and sculptures. His argument is in communication with the one presented here because it is shown that both the German bodyguard and the praetorian guard emergences coincide with the arrival of the Roman empire. Lastly, his work was extremely helpful in filling in the gaps that exist in retelling the history of the German bodyguard.

The Foundation of the Early Praetorian Guard

The first mention of the *cohors praetorian* (what we call the praetorian guard today) is from the end of the third century BCE. It is written in reference to a number of honored troops selected by Scipio Africanus.¹ These troops were honored because they were considered to be the bravest soldiers in the legion, for this they earned themselves 1.5x more pay and exemption from select duties, but they did not receive any special privileges in battle. In exchange for this reward, these select legionaries were to look out

⁵ Speidel, *Riding for Caesar*, 10-11.

¹ Livy, *History of Rome*, 29.1.

for the life of the general they were serving. Bedoyere sees this as a way for Scipio Africanus and other generals to maintain their most elite troops and prevent them from retiring. An increase in pay and privilege is a surefire way to retain those on the fence about retirement. This was the start of the praetorian guards first official duty: acting as bodyguards.²

The word *praetorian* was developed with the word for the general's tent in mind (*praetorium*), and the accompanying word *cohortes* (in *cohors praetoria*) means the number of soldiers who fill a courtyard.³ Clearly, this isn't a specific number of men, which has led to serious discussion as to how many men really were in the praetorian guard. Additionally, the ancient historians who do touch upon their numbers (mainly Cassius Dio and Tacitus) fail to specify which period of guard they are referring to; most likely they show preference to the time period they are living in and may not give accurate figures as to how many men served in the guard prior to these writings. Clearly the guards name indicates two things, their association (or selection) with a general and the fact that they are a relatively large force. Their selection by Scipio Africanus makes perfect sense for the name they are given.⁴

After their initial mention under Scipio there is not much information about the praetorians until their names reappear in association with generals Octavian, Julius Caesar, and Mark Antony.⁵ Their name continues to make sense as they are still riding

² De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 6, 12-14.

³ Ibid, 6-7.

⁴ Ibid, 7.

⁵ See Appian, *The Civil Wars*, 3.40. Caesar, *BG*, 1.40 and 1.42. Cicero, *Ad Familiares*, 10.30.

with generals at this time. However, they had also been employed by governors as a private force as well. In both cases they were still performing their most common duty, riding with the general/governor and guarding his life with their own on and off the battlefield.⁶ However, one can assume that the guards of a governor lived a much more peaceful life than that of a general, and it seems when the praetorians move on to guard emperors they settle in a role somewhere in-between that of a general and governor (in terms of danger, although this is not always the case as some emperors were constantly abroad). Praetorians were to be on constant surveillance, making sure no threats to their general arose, even when the legion is not at war. With this knowledge, it is easy to see how the guard could develop into a force that was designed originally to protect the emperor. Julius Caesar did not officially create the commonly known praetorian guard, as he disbanded all of his bodyguards (praetorian, German, and Spanish) after his campaigns in Gaul. After Caesar's dissolution of the guard, Octavian and Mark Antony would resurrect the guard and both employ them throughout their civil war with one another.⁷

After Octavian's defeat of Antony, ascension to the throne, and name-change to Augustus he went on to make the praetorians a permanent institution that no longer guarded generals but the emperor himself.⁸ Unfortunately, the exact number of

⁶ De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian* 15. Sandra Bigham, *The Praetorian Guard: A History of Rome's Elite Special Forces* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2013), 9-12.

⁷ Sandra Bigham, *The Praetorian Guard: A History of Rome's Elite Special Forces* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2013), 14-15. De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 15-18. Michael Grant, *The Army of the Caesars* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974), 87-88.

⁸ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard* 17. Grant, *The Army of the Caesars*, 88-89. De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 27

guardsmen Augustus established is not clear, and many historians think that he established nine cohorts consisting of five hundred men each (quingenary). Equally as unfortunate, not much is known about the guard during the time of Augustus, as the sources do not speak of them at this time.⁹ It is rather disappointing from a historian's point of view that there is no information of them during time period, but yet it reveals a few things. Firstly, the guard was doing their job, and there were most likely not any significant attempts on the emperor's life or misunderstandings/betrays of significance performed by the guard at this time. Second, Augustus was trying to keep his dictatorial appearance to a minimum because only three of these cohorts were stationed around Rome (the other six were stationed in other areas of Italy, and there is even less information about what they were up to at the time). Third, he most likely used them secretly (or without the knowledge of the general public to say the least), mostly to protect himself and only when needed. Forth and last, the guard had not yet evolved into a "political" group that was extremely influential in the principate. Due to this the guard most likely flew under the radar of most historians and citizens as they were simply a new unit intended to guard the emperor. It is likely that some of the general public did not even know of this group for a period of time (which may have been brief). Their transition into a political force with many duties was to come over the next century. Given the sources provided it is clear that the guard at this time was involved in the official business of guarding the emperor, but little else is known as to what other official or unofficial duties they engaged in.

⁹ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard* 17. De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 28-29.

Instead, more is known about the leadership of the guard, the praetorian prefect, a figure who would prove to be very influential in both the life of the empire and the guardsmen. Augustus introduced a praetorian prefect to lead the guard around 2 BCE.¹⁰ Prior to this, the guard was personally led by Augustus himself and the tribunes that led each individual cohort. However, it seemed that micromanaging the guard and the whole of the Roman world proved to be too much for Augustus, so he then passed down their control to the praetorian prefect. Augustus was still able to command the guard when he felt the need; however, its everyday management was overseen by another. Originally, Augustus appointed one prefect, but shortly after this, he introduced two so that there would not be too much power in the hands of one man leading the guard. If one man was allowed to command the guard he could be favored more than the emperor himself, and this would prove very problematic, as the prefect could then wrestle power from the emperor having control of one of the only forces within Rome. With two prefects, one could manage the troops in Rome, while the other managed the troops outside of Rome.¹¹ Overall, Augustus made a good choice in deciding to appoint two praetorian prefects, but it will be shown that his decision was not always followed, as a few prefects act to take full control of the guard and even the empire.

Interestingly enough the prefect was not a military commander, as that would pose a threat to the emperor, instead he was a manager that came from the equestrian class (even less of a threat than someone from the senatorial class as they were not eligible to become senators).¹² Over time a relationship between the emperor and the

¹⁰ Dio, *Roman History*, 5.10.

¹¹ De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 51.

¹² De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 51-52. Grant, *The Army of the Caesars*, 93-94.

prefect would evolve, and prefects sometimes acted as the emperor's closest advisor. This is particularly evident between Tiberius and Sejanus (before his fall). The position of praetorian prefect became so influential and helpful to the throne that the office remained after the permanent abolition of the guard. The office was typically an end of one's career position, as many worked their way up to it after being the prefect over the urban cohorts, a policing force in Rome. However, some did go on to become the prefect of Egypt, (an even more powerful position), and Sejanus went on to become consul and attempted to secure an even loftier position.¹³ The praetorian prefects of the first three centuries will be looked at closely as they are generally the driving force behind the guard's key decisions, and they help to transform the guard into the necessary political group, with many responsibilities, that it becomes.

Other Forces Inside Rome

Another key military group, located inside Rome, that Augustus established to compete with the praetorians was the urban cohorts. This group was almost akin to a modern policing force as they were used to deal with violence, gangs, disorder, and riots that erupted inside of Rome. They acted along with the praetorian guard in many cases, other times only one of these forces were needed to restore order to the city. However, historian Christopher J. Fuhrmann specifically believes that they were not identical to a modern policing force as they were not constantly on patrol. They were reserved for when order needed to be achieved.¹ The only time either they or the praetorian guard were "on patrol" (as it is called today) is when they were on guard duty at a public event,

¹³ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 20.

¹ Fuhrmann, *Policing the Roman Empire*, 5-6.

either sporting or political. To create them Augustus originally took a few praetorian cohorts and made them into urban cohorts, putting them in direct competition with their former comrades. Similar to how modern countries armies and navies are always trying to one up one another.² This is a healthy practice as it encourages military personnel to be the best they can be. However, the urban cohorts did not evolve to get the recognition of the praetorian guard, but it can be assumed that they were just as prestigious a force when they were first created as they consisted of elite trained Italian-born citizens (just like the praetorians). Augustus organized the group into three cohorts that were quingenary in number. Although these two groups were made with the intention of competition, the urban cohorts did not evolve to the elite status of the praetorian guards. In fact, they are relatively forgotten in most of history, despite their participation in several important events throughout the history of the empire. Overall, their purpose was to help the guard increase security in Rome and drive them both to work harder than the other group.³

Augustus also started another group that functioned similarly to and with the praetorian guards, the *vigiles*. This group was designed to be firefighters in the city of Rome. Essentially the term *vigiles* means “night watchmen.” Their main task was to be on the lookout for any danger that beset Rome, especially fires. They were generally posted on lookout during the night and looked for burglary, riots, and any form of disorder that arose within Rome. In addition, they were constantly on alert for any signs

² De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 54-55.

³ Adrian Goldsworthy, *The Complete Roman Army* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 2003), 58-59. Christopher J. Fuhrmann, *Policing the Roman Empire*, 7, 117, 169.

of fire. They engaged in typical firefighting activities that are seen today, attempting to douse fires, saving people, and preventing the spread of fire. Sometimes when fires raged too wildly their best option was to section off a part of the city and let it burn by destroying nearby buildings the fire could spread to. The praetorians acted in similar ways when fire was started inside the city, and they actually worked closely with the vigiles to police the city. Fuhrmann considers the vigiles a main part of the policing force of Rome, and he identifies that the amount of police workers to citizens in Rome proper was likely higher than it is today in most modern cities.⁴ That in itself is quite remarkable, but it does not necessarily mean that ancient policing was more effective than modern policing because as stated earlier, these men were not constantly on patrol. Generally, these men were used to guard certain areas, put on watch at night, or were a method of response to a crisis. Modern police would still be more effective as they are constantly patrolling for danger and their rate of citizens to police workers is not drastically lower than it was in Ancient Rome.⁵

Expansion of the Praetorian Guards Tasks Under the Julio-Claudian Dynasty

Shortly after the reign of Augustus the praetorians were given their first official field work. This was one of the first steps in expanding the duties of the praetorian guard, which formed them into an all-purpose unit at the Emperor's disposal. They had field work under both Augustus (as Octavian) and Antony before their official formation; however, their work to subdue the Pannonian Legion uprising was their first combat work since their formal foundation under Augustus. Shortly after the end of Augustus' life,

⁴ Fuhrmann, *Policing the Roman Empire*, 117.

⁵ De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 54-57. Fuhrmann, *Policing the Roman Empire*, 7, 117, 169.

during the reign of Tiberius, the legions stationed in Pannonia became mutinous (14CE). Their mutiny hinged around the arduous campaign they were involved in a few years prior named the Bellum Batonianum (6-9CE). The war involved a series of hard campaigns fought through the rugged Balkans in which Romans were pitted against rebelling auxiliary troops. Fighting rebelling auxiliary troops was always more of a challenge for Roman soldiers than dealing with a new enemy as the auxiliary troops knew how the Romans fought. Suetonius even goes so far as to call this the most difficult conflict since the Punic Wars.¹ Additionally, a good quantity of the men involved in this war were conscripted; perhaps the legionaries and auxiliaries who later turned mutinous were sent to fight in this war without their own volition. Due to these circumstances, it is easy understand why these men no longer wanted to fight for Rome. Tiberius, dealt with this matter by sending his son Drusus with two cohorts of praetorian's and praetorian cavalry to put an end to this uprising and protect him simultaneously, as he was the heir to the emperor.² This is how the praetorians were assigned their first fieldwork, a choice that would transform their participation in Rome to include traveling with and defending family members of the emperor abroad.³

The performance of the guard in the Pannonian uprising further proved their worth and ability to function in the field. The guard was not the only source of troops that Drusus was provided, he was also supplied with a unit in a legion. The praetorian prefect at the time, Sejanus, was also sent to look over Drusus as he was young and still

¹ Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, Tiberius, 16.

² Tacitus, *The Annals*, 1.24.2.

³ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 86,87. De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 67-68.

needed to be watched to prevent him from making any crucial errors in the field.⁴

Dealing with the uprising did not prove to be an easy task, essentially Drusus and his troops encircled the mutinous legion and trapped them in their fort. Some attempted to move outside of this camp and were quickly killed, but it was not the encirclement that led to the end of the mutiny. It was the horrendous weather that arrived during the winters of the years 14-15 CE. The mutinous troops did not want to bear the weather any longer and the uprising came quietly to an end due the severity of weather.⁵ This proved to be a crucial event in the formation of the guard as it showed that they were capable of working effectively in the field, and not solely as a field bodyguard. They could operate in all ways like a normal cohort of legionaries. This was good for both their reputation and their image as the emperor's personal troops as it made them appear more feared and elite then even before. The ability to hold their own in open combat earned them that last mark of official troop status that they lacked. This assignment started a domino effect which resulted in future emperors finding more and more tasks they were capable of doing, transforming them into the emperor's personal legion. Lastly, they were used in this task to show the power of the emperor and display that he could settle matters with his guard no matter where he was.

It was under the reign of Tiberius that the guard fully blossomed into a unified and political force that was to have a say in the reign of emperors. Under Tiberius the most infamous prefect took power, Sejanus. He made some alterations to the guard that were crucial to their influence in the Roman world. Most importantly he had the *castra*

⁴ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 86, 87.

⁵ De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 68. Dio, *Roman History*, 57.4. Tacitus, *The Annals*, 1.27-29.

praetoria constructed, and this unified the praetorians into one solid group. This was a fort located inside Rome giving the emperor access to troops inside of the capitol city making him appear even more dictatorial than before. Augustus had not constructed a fort for the praetorians as he feared that it would make him look dictatorial and it gave him security (through distance) in case the guard decided to turn against him. Following the construction of the *castra praetoria* the entire guard was housed there, unless they were following special orders outside of Rome. Their location in the city made them much more of a threat to the principate and allowed them to become a true political force, as they could now make moves to threaten the emperor and politics in Rome. They also became much more useful to the emperor, as he could begin to use them for more and more deeds slowly transforming them into the emperor's personal legion capable of doing whatever he pleased. Additionally, the *castra praetoria* solved a lot of outstanding issues that were revolving around the guard. Specifically, it alleviated the problems of management and equipment storage, as the guard permanently had a new base from which to operate and store their provisions.⁶ It is also imaginable that this helped the guard to become much more organized as the giving of orders was likely easier and less time consuming once they had a concrete base to operate out of. This allowed them to ready themselves in an emergency.⁷ The *castra praetoria* also became the shared home of the urban cohorts as well, allowing the city to have a designated base for two key policing forces of the city. Furthermore, the *castra praetoria* also had a prison for the highest profile prisoners.⁸ The construction of the *castra praetoria* by Sejanus is of great

⁶ De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 72-73. Dio, *Roman History*, (57.19)

⁷ Grant, *The Army of the Caesars*, 131.

importance as it allowed the guard to become a political force and the emperor's personal legion by giving them a central, permanent home inside of Rome.

It is under Sejanus that we see the first instances of mutinous action on the part of the praetorian prefect, and the first signs that the guard is essential to the existence of the emperor. Essentially, Sejanus was Tiberius' right-hand man and advisor; however, it is widely believed that he had Tiberius' son Drusus murdered and was seeking ties into the imperial family through marriage.⁹ However, Tiberius denied him the chance to wed Drusus' widow Livilla, perhaps out of fear that he would have imperial claims and be more dangerous to his throne.¹⁰ It is at this time that Tiberius is likely to have become more aware of Sejanus and his plan. After Tiberius retired to Capri, Sejanus basically had full control of the empire and could run the principate as he saw fit because he could act before or without sending for approval from Tiberius. Additionally, he could eliminate any potential political threats he saw fit as the guard would back him completely. Eventually, Tiberius decided that he needed to eliminate Sejanus as he had become too power hungry; Tiberius saw the necessity in putting a new leader in charge of the praetorian guard because Sejanus could have used his power to easily acquire the throne. It is not clear how long Tiberius viewed Sejanus as a threat, but it was likely a span of months (or even years) because Sejanus even began formulating his own plans to survive Tiberius's assaults on his life.¹¹ Sejanus was clearly working alone (in his attempt to become emperor); however, history seems to drag the whole of the praetorian

⁸ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 92-93.

⁹ Dio, *Roman History*, 58.4.2-4.

¹⁰ De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 73-76.

¹¹ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 111-113. De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 82-85.

guard down with him as culprits plotting to remove the emperor. Not all historians are completely convinced that Sejanus was even attempting to take the principate from Tiberius. Historian JP Pistner actually argues that Sejanus is the victim of defamation by ancient historians, a trend that has continued with modern historians as they have not noticed the defamation located in the primary source material.¹² Either way this is the first time that the guard is viewed as a king making force, and it is not a correct visual as only one man was attempting to become emperor; further, Tiberius's actions to remove Sejanus reveal the importance to the perseverance of imperial power.

Eventually, Tiberius did put Sejanus to death, due to the threat he posed, by promising to give him tribunician powers (essentially sealing him as the next emperor); however, this was a lie from Tiberius as Sejanus was surrounded by the urban cohorts and put to death when he went to the senate to receive the powers. This was actually a disgraceful event for the guard as they were seen as less loyal to the emperor than the urban cohorts; this was another instance of direct competition that emerged between the two groups. After Sejanus' death his family was brutally killed as well. The fear Tiberius had of Sejanus's attempt to take over is a perfect example of how the Emperor needs the praetorian guard to stay loyal otherwise their time as Emperor will be short lived. Once Tiberius knew Sejanus's intention Tiberius had to remove him as quickly as possible without the knowledge of the guard as they may have proven loyal to Sejanus.¹³ This incident shows the necessity of the loyalty of the guard to the principate, and this is

¹² Birley, AR, "Sejanus: His Fall," in N. Sekunda (ed), *Corolla Cosmo Rodewald* (Gdansk, 2007), 129.

¹³ Dio, *Roman Histories*, 58.9-11.

not evidence of king-making as it was one man out of the whole guard who sought to become emperor.¹⁴

After the fall of Sejanus, Macro was promoted to become the praetorian prefect and it is said that he had even more sway over the empire than Sejanus himself, his time in office showcases emperor Caligula's realization of the importance of a loyal guard. For seven years he had his will performed as he influenced the ear of emperor Tiberius.¹⁵ Upon Tiberius's death things went very sour for him; some reports even tell that he sided with the heir Caligula and had Tiberius killed when he was on the edge of death. It is believed that Macro may have arranged Tiberius to be smothered with a pillow to allow Caligula to ascend to the throne.¹⁶ This is an important part of the history of the guard as it would have been the first instance of a praetorian prefect arranging for the death of an emperor. It was not an event of king making though as Caligula (the emperor to be) encouraged Macro to do it; he completed the assignment with the hopes of gaining favor in the eyes of the new emperor. However, Caligula was very aware of the power that Macro was wielding throughout Tiberius' reign, accordingly he removed him from office despite the loyalty he had shown him in helping him remove the older emperor. Macro evidently felt extremely betrayed, as he was expecting to be promoted to the prefect of Egypt or another respectable position before his removal from office. After he was removed, one can surmise that Macro began to feel very paranoid and worried about his

¹⁴ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 111-113. De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 82-85. Birley, AR, "Sejanus: His Fall," in N. Sekunda (ed), *Corolla Cosmo Rodewald* (Gdansk, 2007), 129, 130, 133-4, 142, 144. Grant, *The Army of the Caesars*, 137-138.

¹⁵ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 112-113.

¹⁶ De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 91-93. Tacitus, *The Annals*, 6.50.4-5. Suetonius, *Lives of the 12 Caesars*, Caligula 12.

own safety after the events that befell Sejanus. As a result, he took his own life hoping to spare himself from the torment that both Sejanus and his family went through.¹⁷

Although, other sources claim that Caligula forced him to commit suicide. Caligula had him replaced with two prefects as he did not want the same situation to arise; Tiberius had been foolish to allow one prefect to rule for so long (both Sejanus and Macro).

Caligula's removal of Macro reveals that he knew how important the guard and the position of prefect are to the throne, he knew if he left Macro in charge of the guard there would have been additional trouble.¹⁸

Overall, Caligula did not make any changes to the praetorian guard and his reign went rather smoothly until his death, on his death the guard engaged in an act that many have interpreted as king-making; however, it was not. One benefit Caligula had in his reign was the loyalty of the guard as he was in direct relationship to Germanicus, and the entire Roman army had a special respect for Germanicus, as he was an exceptional military leader. Eventually, things went sour for Caligula as he had bad relations with one of the guard's tribunes named Cassius Chaerea. Apparently, Caligula had insulted his sexual prowess or sexual tastes (historians interpret this differently due to the translation) and this angered him greatly.¹⁹ Chaerea developed a plot with a few other tribunes and one of the prefects and had Caligula killed. What ensued was complete chaos. After his death, the German guard and the majority of the praetorian guard (who was unaware of the responsibility of the event, as only those involved in the scheme

¹⁷ Dio, *Roman History*, 59.10.6.

¹⁸ Grant, *The Army of the Caesars*, 139-142.

¹⁹ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 84. Grant, *The Army of the Caesars*, 148. Dio, *Roman History*, 59.29. Suetonius, *Lives*, Caligula 56.

knew about it) went on a killing spree to avenge Caligula, they killed many senators before settling down. Eventually, a few members of the praetorian guard located Caligula's uncle Claudius cowering under a curtain. Quickly, they hailed him as the next emperor.²⁰ Here is another instance that some historians refer to as a king making instance; however, this is not so as the guard did not intentionally work to eliminate Caligula, only a few who were sore at the emperor did so. Although, there was no heir to the throne chosen by Claudius, Caligula would have been the next logical choice because he was in the Julio-Claudian line. Some historians have argued that the senate would not have chosen Caligula as the emperor; however, this is a flawed logic as the senate agreed with the praetorian's choice and gave Claudius the Tribunican powers. Others, have surmised that Claudius had this story invented after he rose to power, or that he had this whole event arranged to bring him into power innocently and efficiently. If this were the case, he would have made prior arrangements with the praetorian guard or would not have been made emperor by them at all. As the original story stands though, he was made emperor due to his heritage and this is not something the guard could have granted him, so this was not a case of king making, they simply had the power to pass the crown on to the next available heir in the Julio-Claudian dynasty.²¹

Claudius started the trend of providing *donativa*, a substantial donation of *sesterce* given to each member of the guard, upon ascension to the throne; this became an essential part of securing the favor of the guard.²² Following his rule, most emperors

²⁰ Dio, *Roman History*, 60.1. Suetonius, *Lives*, Claudius 10.

²¹ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 84, 90, 95. De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 94-109. Grant, *The Army of the Caesars*, 148-152.

²² Suetonius, *Lives*, Claudius 10.4.

gave the guard a substantial stipend on their ascension to the throne; this stipend was also given to the legionaries. This stipend became a sign of respect to the guard, and if an emperor did not participate in it the guard felt very betrayed and was liable to support others vying for the throne. This happens quite a few times and will be discussed later on. The amount of money given to the guard did not matter; the importance lay in emperors giving a gesture to those who were going to defend their life. Whether Claudius had his ascension to the throne arranged or not he paid all the respects he could to the guard (through *donativa*) to insure their loyalty. Providing the guard with a *donativa* was absolutely necessary to ruling, as having the guards favor was necessary to surviving as an emperor.²³

Another way Claudius showed his respect to the praetorian guard was to have their image printed on coins used at the time; clearly, he wanted to keep the guard in his favor because he knew their defense was necessary to his career. A few coins depicted Claudius bowing down to the guard and receiving the crown from them, others showed them together on the coin. These coins were obviously a way for Claudius to show the public that he respected the praetorian guards, and it surely made historians of the time and the general populace assume that the praetorian guard was a king making force.²⁴ Additionally, it further linked the praetorian guard to the emperor securing them as his display of power. Claudius sang the praises of the praetorians his whole life/reign and he was forever grateful for what they had done for him. It seems likely that he exaggerated this to keep their respect as he had seen the danger that they posed to the last two

²³ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 26-27. De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 108.

²⁴ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 27.

emperors. Both previous praetorian prefects Macro and Sejanus were a threat to the crown of the empire, and Caligula was killed by a group of scheming tribunes and prefects. Claudius was alive for all of these events, so he knew the importance of buying/winning the loyalty of the guard. Therefore, he tried to act as respectful as possible to the guard; what better way to do this than thank them for his ascension? Claudius showed gratitude to the guard because he needed their respect and adoration to secure his longevity not because they had actually made him the emperor.²⁵

Eventually, Claudius was murdered as well, but this time the guard was not involved; instead, it was the work of Agrippina, the mother of the next emperor, Nero, who would use the praetorian guard to show her prowess. She would go on to run the empire until her son grew to an age suitable of ruling. She indulged in the lifestyle of an emperor by constantly having the praetorian guard escort her wherever she went. This was surely a way for her to show her prowess. Later on, when Nero grew up he realized that his mother was too power hungry and needed to go. Before planning her death, he stripped her of her status and took the guard away from her completely. Without the guard, it is sure that Agrippina was no longer feared and respected as she was; she simply became a woman walking around the streets of Rome, no longer escorted by the elite bodyguard reserved for the emperors. The stripping of Agrippina's guard shows how necessary the guard is to the principate, as a mother who fancied herself an emperor could no longer remain in control without their support symbolically or literally. She had

²⁵ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 27.

used the guard to display and secure her power, and after they were taken from her she ceased to have any power in the empire; eventually, she was put to death by Nero.²⁶

Nero is a perfect example of an emperor who used the guard as his own personal legion because he expanded their official and unofficial duties. When giving performances he would rent out half of the audience to his guard to insure his own safety and that he had an audience to perform for as many did not care for his shows. This can be seen as an official and an unofficial duty because he used them as a guard and an audience. Many senators hated Nero's participation in theater; they believed that the emperor should not engage in an activity that was generally reserved for the poor, but this did not stop him. Several historians now think this was his way of connecting with the lower class.²⁷ Nero was also the first to use the guard in many other ways. He employed them to quell riots which had not been done before his time; however, it became an official duty after this. Nero also used the praetorians in the most underhanded way since Sejanus. He used them to eliminate senators and conspiracies that were emerging in Rome.²⁸ This became an unofficial task (due to its secretive nature) that other emperors used their guardsmen for. Shockingly, he even used members of the guard to eliminate other members of the guard.²⁹ This was key in making the guard even more of a political force inside Rome because they now had the authority to eliminate political threats. It also instilled the notion into them that they could eliminate who they please. Nero's use

²⁶ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 30-31. De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 123-124. Dio, *Roman History*, 61.8.6. Grant, *The Army of the Caesars*, 162-163. Tacitus, *The Annals*, 14.3 and 14.11

²⁷ De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 132.

²⁸ Dio, *Roman History*, 62.13.3.

²⁹ Grant, *The Army of the Caesars*, 165.

of the guard expanded their role in the empire securing them as the personal legion of the emperor.³⁰

Nero's fall from grace was not directly caused by the guard, but they did play a role in it. It all started when Servius Sulpicius Galba decided that he would oppose Nero for the principate and declare himself emperor. Galba came from a position of power as he was the governor of Hispania Tarraconensis and had quite a lot of support. During this time, Nero lost control of the praetorian guard because their prefect Gaius Nymphidius Sabinus decided that he would support Galba's claim to the throne. Nero's loss of control is thought to have to do with his lack of management of the army and guard specifically. It is believed that he forgot to pay his praetorians and was being neglectful to them as a whole. Additionally, Galba bribed the guard to turn against Nero by presenting the prefect Nymphidius with a promise to pay 7,500 *sesterces* to each guardsman on his rise to the throne. This spelled the end for Nero as he woke up in Rome one morning lacking any guardsmen whatsoever. Evidently Nymphidius had told the German bodyguard of the bribe as well because they were not in the palace when Nero awoke either. Upon the realization that he had no one to protect him any longer Nero realized that his best chance to escape death was to leave Rome and take refuge in the country. He then disguised himself and rode to the villa of a freeman that offered to give him refuge. Nero arrived at the villa safely, which lie about four miles outside of Rome. During his time there he received word from a courier that he was declared the public enemy of Rome and was to be sentenced to death; however, this was far from the truth as the senate still wanted to make peace with him to insure the continuation of the

³⁰ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 32. De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 126-8.

Julio-Claudian line as they still had great respect for him and his family.³¹ Unfortunately, this never came to fruition as Nero had his secretary kill him thinking that he was an enemy of the state. Nero's fall from grace shows just how important the support of the praetorian guard is to the principate. Without them, Nero realized that he was as helpless as a normal citizen in Rome, unable to issue edicts, defend himself, or enforce his own jurisdictions. The praetorian guard is absolutely necessary to the perseverance of the emperor and without their support any emperor quickly falls into disarray and loses his title; this will also be displayed many times over in the dynasty that followed: the Flavians.³²

The Praetorian Guard: Under The Year of the Four Emperors

After Nero's death Galba came to the throne and the Julio-Claudian Empire came to an end; this led to a time of constant changing of Emperors, most did not make it for more than a few months as the loyalty of the praetorian guard was constantly shifting. Upon his rise to power, Galba, made one of the most foolish mistakes in the history of the principate, he decided to disrespect the praetorian guard. He did this by refusing to give them the donativa he had promised to give them on his ascension to emperor, which amounted to a sum of 7,500 drachmas each.¹ Uniquely, Galba was not appointed to or given the throne by the praetorian guard as the past Julio-Claudian dynasty had been. Instead, he had seized the power of emperor through a display of military force (a trend

³¹ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 32-33. De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 139-141. Dio, *Roman History*, 63.27-29.

³² Grant, *The Army of the Caesars*, 178-180.

¹ Plutarch, *Lives*, Galba, 2.2. Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, Galba, 16. Tacitus, *The Histories*, 1.5.

which would continue). For this reason, he may have felt that he did not owe the guard anything. This infuriated the members of the guard and they felt disrespected because Galba was not treating them as if they were necessary for his rule. The guard would have likely settled for a smaller *donativa* as it was more the thought than the amount that counted. However, Galba failed to do even this, and instead he appointed some of his loyal soldiers to elevated positions in the guard, which further disrespected the original members as they were to be commanded by new guardsmen.² Because of the disrespect he paid the praetorians they never had love for him or his heir Piso. Due to their disdain for Galba it was easy for the next claimant to the throne Otho to convince them to turn against him; without their support Galba would not remain in power, once again displaying the necessity of their loyalty to the throne.³

Otho, quickly stripped Galba of power without the support of the guard showcasing their importance. Wanting to seize power, he began bribing the guard with *donativa*, the exact bone of contention that Galba had withheld from them.⁴ It was not long before all of the praetorians were now on the side of Otho. Soon enough, he had the praetorian guard dispose of Galba and Piso making him the sole leader of the Roman Empire. He was the first emperor to be killed specifically by low ranking guardsmen (that is to say not a tribune or prefect).⁵ Otho would not have gotten anywhere in the principate had it not been for the praetorian guard as he lacked a large army, substantial

² De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 140-150.

³ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 33-36. Grant, *The Army of the Caesars*, 181-185.

⁴ Tacitus, *The Histories*, 1.24.

⁵ Grant, *The Army of the Caesars*, 188-189. Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, Galba, 19.

wealth, or significant influence. Thus, he became more dependent on the guard than any emperor before or after him.⁶ However, he did play a role in keeping up the guards multifaceted role by deploying them into the field for the first time since Tiberius.⁷ Like any other emperor, he needed their support to stay in power. In this case the praetorian's acted like a king-making force, but they did not do it because they supported the new emperor so much as they appreciated the notion that the new emperor would give them money, while the former did not. Additionally, it was the praetorian prefect who put faith in Otho. The guard already had a predetermined hatred for Galba so any claimant to the throne would have been more appealing to them. Thus, the praetorian's deposal of Galba was more out of a disdain for the current emperor than it was a support for the new one. Otho's ascension to the throne, like many others, displays the importance of the guard to the position of emperor. Without the help of the guard Otho would not have become the next emperor, but they did not act as an independent king-making force as they were being led by him.

The next to rise to power was emperor Vitellius. He was the commander of the legions located in Gaul, near the Rhine river. When he decided to make a bid for the throne other generals in the area sided with him. When Otho realized that there was a political uprising starting in Gaul the two engaged in a civil war, the winner of which would become the sole ruler of the Roman world, despite the fact that Otho had not officially declared himself emperor. Otho soon decided that he could not win the war with Vitellius and he quickly committed suicide leaving Vitellius the throne.⁸ However,

⁶ De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 146-150.

⁷ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 35.

historian Michael Grant argues that Otho instead killed himself to put an end to pointless civil war, as the Roman people deserve better than this.⁹ In death, he wanted to heal the Roman Empire and put an end to the succession of quick emperors that had been occurring. Unfortunately, Otho's death was ultimately in vein as more short-lived emperors and civil wars continued to erupt.¹⁰

Vitellius made some major changes to the structure of guard by introducing some of his own legions into the cohorts. He used the men who he found to be the most deserving, trustworthy, and worthwhile. Additionally, he discharged the majority of the guard that was serving under Otho as they betrayed the original emperor Galba by killing him.¹¹ Due to this fact, he believed that the guardsmen that he discharged could not be trusted because they went back on their own oath to serve Galba to the dying breath, by betraying him and killing him due to the bribery of Otho. Vitellius also increased the number of cohorts that the guard maintained year-round from twelve to sixteen. And is said, to have increased the number of men in a cohort from five hundred to one thousand.¹² However, it is not definite that he was the emperor who did this as many emperors around this time are believed to have increased the number of guards in a cohort. Pinpointing the exact time when the number of cohorts and size of cohorts

⁸ Tacitus, *The Histories*, 2.49.

⁹ Grant, *The Army of the Caesars*, 194-196.

¹⁰ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 35-36. De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 156.

¹¹ Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, Vitellius, 10.

¹² Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 36. De la Bedoyere, 160-163. Grant, *The Army of the Caesars*, 197-198. Tacitus, *The Histories*, 2.93.

increased is hard to determine as the written sources determine that it happened, but they do not identify specifically when it happens.¹³

The Praetorian Guard: Under the Flavians

After governing for about eight months Vitellius rule was destined to come to a quick end; this time is known as the year of four emperors. The next emperor to come would usher in the Flavian dynasty, and they were destined to further alter the makeup and actions of the praetorian guard. The man to challenge Vitellius was Vespasian, a man who had been proclaimed emperor in the east by a number of legions stationed there. Upon the news that there was a new emperor, Vitellius shied away from conflict and was willing to totally resign the throne allowing Vespasian to take the throne and him to at least preserve his own life. He did this because he knew of Vespasian's military prestige and the number of forces he commanded. Vitellius was making arrangements to slip out of Rome and quietly hand over the principate to Vespasian, but the praetorian guard prevented this. For whatever reason, they would not let him give up the throne.¹ It can be assumed that they did not want their pride to be damaged. They wanted to prove they could defend him to the last man because they were his loyal men. In addition, they saw how Vitellius treated those who did not keep their oath under Galba. These guardsmen did not want to break their oath like past guardsmen. Furthermore, they may have assumed that Vitellius would be murdered by Vespasian anyway so there was no point in him running away and giving up the throne. Instead they decided they would give their

¹³ Ross H. Cowan, *Aspects of the Severan Field Army: The Praetorian Guard, Legio II Parthica, and Legionary Vexillations AD 193-238* (unpublished dissertation, University of Glasgow, 2002), 11-14.

¹ Dio, *Roman History*, 64.17-20. Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, Vitellius 14-17.

dying breath to fulfill their oath and prolong his reign. However, their plan was to no avail, they did not successfully defend him, as he was ripped from his home on the morning of December 22, 69 CE. He was beheaded, and his body was thrown down the Tiber river, while his head was to be displayed around Rome.² Vitellius's death shows us that even the loyalty of the guard does not insure one's position as emperor because superior military force conquers all; however, without the loyalty of the guard he would have been deposed much quicker.³

After Vespasian arose to the throne he did not do much to change the history of the praetorians, but he did drop the number of cohorts that Vitellius had changed to sixteen. He dropped their number back down to the original nine envisioned by Augustus. With the Flavian Dynasty, fully in control there were to be no revolutions or betrayals involving the praetorians for quite some time. During their dynasty, the guard instead performed its duties and was not too involved in the changeover of emperors until the rule of Domitian. On Vespasian's passing his son Titus came to the throne; however, he did not make changes to the guard or have them do anything groundbreaking. He served a quick two-year term before passing away and leaving the throne to his brother Domitian. He raised the number of cohorts from nine to ten and this was the number of cohorts that would remain until the entire guard was disbanded by Constantine shortly after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge.⁴ He also prepared the praetorians to be ready to be

² Dio, *Roman History*, 64.20. Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, Vitellius 18.

³ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 35-36. De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 164-167. Grant, *The Army of the Caesars*, 206-208.

⁴ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 37-39. Grant, *The Army of the Caesars*, 217-220.

more a usable field army; he strongly believed that they were extremely useful in battle.⁵ This was key to their development as it insured that the guard was still improving to better handle official tasks such as military deployment.

Domitian's death was linked to the praetorians, and thus, provides another possible instance of king making to be examined. Some historians believe that the praetorian prefect Titus Petronius Secundus was linked to the assassination of Domitian, while others claim that he was simply aware of the plot and did not act to stop it. Either way, Secundus clearly had no love for Domitian and was prepared for the removal of the emperor. If he was directly involved in the assassination this could be another moment where one could claim that the guard is a king-making force; however, this is another instance of the actions of one man not the guard in entirety.⁶ The guard was known to have loved Domitian as he had grown up with them under his father Vespasian and brother Titus's respective rules. Evidently, they had been defending him for the entirety of his life and this had bonded the group to Domitian. Additionally, he was fair and just to the guard and treated them with respect as any smart guard-fearing emperor had done before him. None the less, he was still assassinated by an ex-gladiator named Maximus and one of his most trusted servants Stephanus. His death had been foretold to come at midday; however, Stephanus told him it was past midday to alleviate his fears. This is when Stephanus, Maximus, and a few other conspirators struck and eliminated Domitian. Whether they were instructed to do so by the prefect of the guard is unknown, but Secundus undoubtedly had no major gripes against it.⁷ After his death, a line of around

⁵ De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 179-183.

⁶ De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 184-185. Dio, *Roman History*, 67.15.

five emperors took their reign; however, no significant occurrences relating to the guard happened during that time, and it was not until the time of Commodus that anything of significance can be reported. Clearly, this was not an instance of king-making as only the prefect had anything to do with the assassination.⁸

The Praetorian Guard: Under the Nerva-Antonine Dynasty

After the rule of the famous Marcus Aurelius his son Commodus came to power; during his rule he showcases the importance of the guard to the emperor's existence by using them to eliminate a substantial threat. The praetorian prefect Sextus Tigidius Perennis began plotting against Commodus; however, Commodus knew of the loyalty of the guard and that Perennis was the only usurper among them. He was informed of Perennis' treason by his political rival Marcus Aurelius Cleander. Even before this, Commodus was aware of the disaster that Perennis could bring because his close family and allies had warned him of the dangers that Perennis posed. To show this he delivered Perennis to the guard notifying them of his treason and his plot to kill him. The guard proceeded to kill him, redeeming their name and proving that Perennis was the only one involved in the plot to destroy Commodus. After Perennis' fall Marcus Aurelius Cleander would go on to be the next prefect.¹ The guard's removal of Perennis was enough to show their worth and necessity to the throne as they removed a very dangerous threat.²

⁷ Dio, *Roman History*, 67.16-17.

⁸ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 37-39. De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 184-185. Grant, *The Army of the Caesars*, 223-225.

¹ Dio, *Roman History*, 73.9. Herodian, *History of the Roman Empire*, 1.8.8-1.9.

² Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 42-43. De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 210-219. Grant, *The Army of the Caesars*, 248-251.

The Praetorian Guard: Under The Year of the Five Emperors

After Commodus' death, Pertinax rose to the throne, and his ruling situation mirrored that of Galba's, a reign marked by a non-supportive guard, that quickly brought about his destruction. Just like Galba he refused to pay the *donativa* that all emperors besides him and Galba had paid. Without this sum of money, the guard became very untrustworthy and felt dishonored by the lack of support the emperor showed them. Pertinax should have learned from Galba to pay the *donativa* or suffer the wrath of the guard; however, he only paid the guard half of the sum they deserved and for this they killed him. Another reason the guard chose to betray Pertinax was his knew methods of discipline that he was attempting to impose on the guard. The guard at this period was enjoying relative freedom and even treating civilians badly when it was in their own interest; they did not want to be controlled and disapproved of Pertinax's steps to control them. Three hundred members of the praetorian guard decided to rush the palace, on March 28, 193 CE, and none of his guards decided to resist them. Evidently, they were in on the plot as well. Pertinax attempted to send the praetorian prefect Quintus Amelius Laetus to quell them and send them back to their posts without a problem; however, he allowed them to move in and kill the emperor. In one last attempt to save his own life Pertinax tried to reason with the guard; however, they would not listen and Pertinax was quickly killed by one of the guard.¹ Smartly, Pertinax did not attempt to appoint an heir because the guard may have felt the need to kill him as well. Evidently, many members of the guard were in on the plot to remove Pertinax, or they agreed with it despite being filled in on the actual specifics. Pertinax's death led to one of the most tumultuous times

¹ Dio, *Roman History*, 74.8-10. Herodian, *History of the Roman Empire*, 2.4-2.5.

in the history of the Roman Empire. The event to follow became known as the selling of the Roman Empire.² Pertinax however, reinforces the notion that the support of the praetorian guard is needed for the emperor to stay in power; they are absolutely necessary for the safety of both the emperor and Rome itself, and without them the emperor does not have as much control over the city as he is lacking a key way to assert his dominance.³

The events to come would be some of the most critical in calling the praetorian guard a king making force; however, it will be shown that these events just appear to be an instance of king-making. In this event, the praetorian guard offered the principate to the highest bidder. This was the ultimate low point for the guard as they chose not to appoint the next emperor in the line of succession, the successor. Instead, they decided to give the throne to whoever would pay them the most respect, something they had been sorely lacking after the mistakes of Pertinax. The two who came to buy the throne were Didius Julianus and Pertinax's father in law Sulpicianus.⁴ However, the guard did not want to employ a man with any relations to the emperor they had just murdered, so Sulpicianus was not considered, even though he may have offered the guard more money. Julianus had offered the guard more money and it was for this reason the guard chose him. However, other historians even argue that Julianus was the more respectful of the two and chose to show his respect to the guard and it was for this reason he was chosen, as the guard was in need of an emperor who respected them and considered them a useful

² De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 215-217.

³ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 43-44. Grant, *The Army of the Caesars*, 251-253.

force unlike Pertinax.⁵ It is likely that it was a number of these reasons that led to the decision of the praetorian guard, and ultimately, they picked Julianus who became the emperor only to last for a total of two months. Here, one may again consider them a king making force; however, they did not use their power to install whoever they wanted, they only appointed the man who could appease them the most with respect and donativa. Ultimately, they did choose the emperor, but even then, the empire was not happy and their power as a king maker was quickly stripped from them as the next emperor removed Julianus from the throne.⁶ By the end even the praetorians were no longer supporting Julianus because he had failed to pay the money he promised them; further showing that the support of the guard is needed.⁷ This proves that the guard was not even a king making force in this instance, they were once again secondary to the men who actually wanted the throne. While it might be easy to establish the praetorian guard as a king making force it is actually quite the opposite, upon closer examination it is clear that they did not install their sole choice and the Empire responded quickly to overthrow Julianus anyway.

Quickly after Julianus's ascension to the throne three other big names in the Roman Empire were bidding for the throne, one of the three would drastically change the praetorian guard, leaving them an altogether different force until the end of their existence under Constantine. The three men bidding for power were Pescennius Niger, Clodius Albinus, and Septimius Severus. They were the governor of Syria, a wealthy

⁵ Dio, *Roman History*, 74.11. Herodian, *History of the Roman Empire*, 2.6.

⁶ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 44-45. Grant, *The Army of the Caesars*, 252-253.

⁷ De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 218-220.

senator, and the governor of Pannonia respectively. After Julianus' ascension to the throne both Niger and Severus were declared emperor by their men. The two men engaged in a civil war shortly after, which resulted in the death of Niger. Shortly after this Severus had Julianus executed and the entire praetorian guard dispatched from duty as they had been involved in the assassination of Pertinax, the original just emperor (despite his dishonorable conduct). Severus felt they could not be trusted, as they could easily be bought out and were liable to turn on any emperor at any time. Accordingly, he had the guard surrounded with legionnaires and removed from their positions. To increase the severity of the guard's punishment and insure that they would cause no further harm to the throne he banned them from the city of Rome for life.⁸ Severus then had another rival, a man he had been trusting to monitor Britain and Spain, the man above mentioned: Albinus. The two of these men then engaged in a civil war with another result favoring Severus, who became the sole uncontested leader of the Roman Empire. It was under him that the guard was forever changed.⁹

Severus changed the guard forever by attempting to make them more disciplined and obedient to him and further emperors, after a long line of praetorian incidents; however, he resulted in diminishing the elite standing of the guard and making a force that soldiers and politicians no longer revered. Instead of improving the image of the guard, the Roman world found them to be undeserving of the extra benefits that they were receiving (as opposed to normal legionaries). Initially, upon coming to the throne Severus removed the old guard (mentioned above) and replaced them with soldiers from

⁸ Dio, *Roman History*, 75.11. Herodian, *History of the Roman Empire*, 2.9.8, 2.13.

⁹ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 44-47. De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 218-222. Grant, *The Army of the Caesars*, 252-254.

his own legions that he knew he could trust.¹⁰ This diminished the elite status of the guard as all the elite guardsmen were removed and replaced with rank and file soldiers from his Danubian legions. This completely changed the composition of the guard and turned them from elite to mundane overnight. After this he drastically changed recruitment for the guard, along with the modification of a few minor praetorian guard standards. Next, he dropped the recruitment rule that members of the guard could come only from the Italian peninsula, opening up recruitment to Roman citizens from anywhere in the empire.¹¹ This completely changed the status of the praetorian guard, removing their elite status because they no longer could be seen as a selective elite force. He had made the guard mundane by replacing seasoned veterans with traditional legionaries, and he even stopped them from being slowly replaced with an elite force through recruitment. He effectively barbarized the guard by allowing men from any part of the empire to become guardsmen and rise through the ranks.

After this, the guard simply reverted back to its prior form, (at the time of its foundation) when they simply acted as a field bodyguard for the emperor. This notion was further increased as the praetorians were essentially always in the field after the rule of Severus, as future emperors were constantly at war. With the praetorian guard away from Rome their status was further diminished as they were no longer able to keep order in Rome and no longer held within the city, decreasing citizens reverence for them. Additionally, Severus is rumored to have increased the number of guardsmen to fifteen thousand although this could have happened at a much earlier date. He also increased the

¹⁰ Herodian, *History of the Roman Empire*, 2.14.5.

¹¹ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 46-47. De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 225-228. Dio, *Roman History*, 72.2.4-6. Grant, *The Army of the Caesars*, 254-255.

minimum requirements for the service term of the guard from sixteen years to eighteen years. One thing he did not change much was the operation of the praetorian prefects, as he used them similarly to other emperors in the past (as his right-hand man); however, this seems questionable as praetorian prefects treated in this way were known to create problems in the past.¹² Ultimately, that knowledge did not stop future emperor's either, as Constantine kept the position of the praetorian prefect even after he disbanded the praetorian guard. Severus also made some key changes to the vigiles and the urban cohorts to increase security in Rome proper. He doubled and tripled their sizes respectfully, to ensure that Rome was much safer than it had been in the past, under the watch of neglectful praetorians.¹³ It seems his main goal was to tighten up discipline and put an end to the praetorian's unruly existence, he did succeed in that, and accordingly expanded the vigiles and urban cohorts, which would come in handy with the praetorians generally on constant campaign with future emperors. Although he succeeded in more discipline his overall changes to the guard altered the public's view of them because they were no longer used to show the dominance of the emperor, were not recruited from Italy, and were constantly on campaign.

Praetorian Recruitment

What did it take to become a praetorian? The praetorians were considered an elite force for the majority of the first three centuries because they were selected solely from Roman citizens born in Italy itself. They needed to be five feet seven inches, otherwise they were forbidden from joining the guard. Additionally, guardsmen had to be in good

¹² Herodian, *History of the Roman Empire*, 3.13.1.

¹³ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 46-47. De la Bedoyere, *Praetorian*, 225-228. Grant, *The Army of the Caesars*, 254-255.

physical condition before joining. Perhaps the most selective quality was the fact that recruits had to come from a reputable family and candidates had to receive a letter of recommendation from someone of importance to be accepted. Recruitment age was typically in the range of 18-22. Not much is known about their training, but it was probably similar to that of a legionary; however, it probably had some special nuances as they would become guards and a policing force. Much debate has been held over the equipment that the praetorians carried, but the general consensus has come down to agree that they most likely did not carry anything different from the normal legionaries. Some depictions of them show them with an oval shield and others show a square shield. The explanation for this is likely that different soldiers used different shield shapes and that there was not one conformed shape for a shield. Their uniforms were certainly more diverse than popular culture imagines the legionaries today because most had to piece their uniforms together; they were not given a standardized uniform as modern soldiers are.¹

Benefits of being a Praetorian

The guard also enjoyed many luxuries above that of the rank and file legionaries. Perhaps the most beneficial was the fact that they were paid three times the amount of money as a standard legionary. However, their money was doled out to them at set times throughout their career and most of it was stored away for their life after their service. Due to the allotment of cash, they may not have been much wealthier than a typical soldier (during their service), except for the fact that they also received bigger *donativa*. It has already been explained that *donativa* was given out when an emperor ascended to

¹ Boris Rankov, *The Praetorian Guard* (London: Osprey Publishing, 1994), 5, 8-14.

the throne, but it was given out at other times as well; for example: when the emperor eliminated a threat to throne or was married (or other noteworthy occasions such as these). When the donativa was given out, the praetorians were given a much larger sum than the traditional legionaries. This was due to the proximity of the guard to the emperor and the gigantic role they played in his defense. The donativa is a representation of how essential their loyalty was to the principate. It was the way for the praetorians to become wealthy as this money was given directly to them and not saved for their retirement. Due to this being a praetorian would have been a very favorable career.¹

Extra wealth was not the only exception that praetorians were believed to have. Legionaries were also jealous of them because they got to live a peaceful life inside of Rome. Additionally, they served in proximity to the emperor and saw very little threats. They also did not have to serve as long as typical legionaries; their term of service was only for sixteen years, when a typical legionary had to serve twenty. However, this has proven to be just a recommended service time as most men stay on past their sixteenth year. It is likely that by the time they had received a promotion they had no reason to leave the service, as they were getting paid well and had a chance for further promotion. Their life was also pretty comfortable as they did not see much threat and were only sent out to fight in the field on few occasions.² This is another reason why being a praetorian was the most coveted entry position in the roman army

Although, the praetorians got to enjoy the luxuries of Rome their life expectancy was actually lower than that of some legions. This was due to the cleanliness of Rome.

¹ Phang, *Roman Military Service*, 185-188, 191. Rankov, *The Praetorian Guard*, 5, 8-14.

² Geoffery Powell, "The Praetorian Guard." *History Today* 18 (1968), 860. Rankov, *The Praetorian Guard*, 8-10.

Although legionaries faced more threats to die on the fields, they lived in a much healthier environment. One that was not ripe with pollution, disease, and a large number of people. Instead, legionaries got to enjoy the peaceful and beautiful countryside of Gaul, northern Italy, and many other areas.³ Many have viewed the praetorians as a privileged and spoiled unit, but they actually did not fare better than normal legionaries except for in the realm of pay check and also disposition to promotion.

Next, the ladder of promotion will be discussed to show how some praetorians had the chance to rise through the ranks. This led some guards to become rather wealthy, as many were buried with a large ornately decorated tombstone. After being accepted, potential guards had to pass an induction procedure, on its completion men were assigned the rank of *probatus*. As a *probatus* they became a *miles* under a century of the cohorts. If one proved to be a noteworthy guard they would then become a headquarters clerk or technician, what was called an *immunis*. only a very small percentage of soldiers advanced beyond this stage. The next step up the ladder was *principalis*, which was a centurion's deputy. *Principalis* was a very important and sought-after rank as men who reached this distinction earned double the pay of the run of the mill guard. Instead of being a centurion's deputy one could also be a standard-bearer. The next promotion was a huge step into the world of the Roman army; this was the title of *evocati* granted by the emperor himself to select soldiers who were of the utmost worth and note. If one achieved this appointment they were then free to take up an administrative post. The immediate promotion for most was to become a centurion leading a century (of one

³ DL Kennedy, "Some Observations on the Praetorian Guard." *Ancient Society*. Vol. 9. (1978): 278-279.

hundred men). This was another big step up the promotion ladder as centurions were paid as much as six times the amount of the standard legionary. Even fewer soldiers made it past this promotion, but it was achievable. The next step up the ladder would be to become a tribune of a force, which allowed one to run a cohort of men. After this one could keep progressing further and further up the military administrative tree eventually becoming some sort of prefect whether of the urban cohort, *vigiles*, and then eventually maybe even of the praetorian guard or Egypt. This would have been the most sought-after career path for a praetorian guard, but it was highly unlikely that many would achieve this. Undoubtedly, guardsmen were favored too be promoted much higher than traditional legionaries, as it is seen that many guardsmen became centurions of the standard army.⁴

The Praetorian Guard Outside of Rome

Additionally, very little information has been passed down as to what the guard outside of Rome did; however, evidence shows that they generally became a key part of the areas they were stationed in. Typically, the centurions or tribune of the cohort went on to become magistrates in the area they were posted. Furthermore, all of the guardsmen in these areas were influential to the populace there because they were feared, respected, and revered as being the most elite troops in the entire empire. One can imagine that they were a source of inspiration for local boys who wanted to become legionaries or even guardsmen themselves one day. They were highly respected as they rid the areas they were stationed in of crime or mischief as long as they were not in on it

⁴ Rankov, *The Praetorian Guard*, 5, 8-14.

themselves. Lastly, their presence in these areas was seen as a showing of the emperor's power because of their direct relation to him.¹

Unfortunately, many praetorian guards are likely to have acted corruptly outside of Rome. There are records of the guard becoming extremely corrupt by the end of the second century CE. They frequently engaged in looting when returning from a victory parade and were allowed to be corrupt under the rules of Commodus, Caracalla, and Septimus Severus. The sources tell that the guards had even taken to hitting civilians they did not think kindly of because they knew there would be no consequences.²

Although their activities in regions outside of Rome were obscure it seems likely that they engaged in illegal activities because there was no one in these areas to monitor their behavior and many engaged in looting inside Rome itself. It would have been easy for guardsmen to act corruptly as they had superiority and invoked fear in common civilians, so no one may have reported their illegal activities. It is likely that they took as they pleased, for example: when on campaign and when stationed in smaller areas around Italy as there were no form of police in these areas, aside from legionaries stationed in the area. They were most likely the closest thing to the police in the areas they were stationed. It is likely that the rate of guardsmen in smaller areas (and even in Rome when not on guard duty) partaking in illegal activities was high, as they had no one to answer too.³

¹ Snezana Ferjancic, "Veterans of the Praetorian Guard in the Central Balkan Provinces," *Journal of Classical Studies*, (2009): 117-119.

² See Herodian, *History of the Roman Empire*, 2.4-2.5 and 4.4.7. Phang, *Roman Military Service*, 133.

³ Ferjancic, "Veterans of the Praetorian Guard in the Central Balkan Provinces," 117-119.

The Creation of the German Bodyguard

The German bodyguard were originally conceived under Julius Caesar, with the same intention as the praetorian guard, before he took over rule of the empire. Caesar originally recruited his first German bodyguards from Noviodunum in 52 BCE. The guard consisted of Ubians, Batavians, and Gauls who were recruited for their size, bravery, loyalty, and fitness. Caesar originally recruited them by bribing them with cash payments. These guards replaced a Spanish contingent of bodyguards that Caesar had been using for quite some time after he was impressed with their battlefield prowess.¹ He felt that his new recruitment of Germans would better serve him as both bodyguards and emergency shock troopers over that of the Spanish. Caesar specifically chose the Batavians because they were known for their renown as excellent horsemen. This is another reason that Caesar chose to accept them over the Spanish because horsemen work better as bodyguards and shock troopers due to the fact that generals ride on horseback, and cavalry troopers can quickly reach their destination to break up enemy forces. The Batavians were given the land to the south of the Danube for their service as horse guards under Julius Caesar. After rising to the height of his career Caesar did not keep his German bodyguard in the capitol with him as this would be seen as threatening to the Roman people.² Originally, the praetorians and the German guard were created for the same reason; however, the German guard were also used as shock troopers and would eventually deviate more from the praetorians.

¹ Julius Caesar, *Commentaries on the Civil War*, 1.41, 1.75, 2.40. Suetonius, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, Julius Caesar 86.

² Speidel, *Riding for Caesar*, 12-16.

Augustus would then pick up where Caesar left off and continue the career of the German bodyguards; however, he would also disband them revealing the constant disbandment and reunification that the German guard went through, differentiating them from the praetorians. He officially named the bodyguard the *Germani corpori custodes*. They were renowned for their strength and skill as horsemen, and they were valued on the field above the praetorian *equites* (horsemen). However, at one point in his reign he needed to exile the guard to an island in the Mediterranean Sea when a German tribe defeated a Roman unit. This started a scare among the Roman population as they were then aware of every German living around them. Due to this, Roman citizens began questioning the loyalty of the German bodyguard and everyone was questioning the safety of Rome. To quell this fear Augustus exiled a good number of the guard, but he also came up with the idea of mixing in some of the praetorian equites (horsemen) into the German bodyguard.³ This way the public would be less aware of the Germans remaining in the bodyguard. This strategy worked out very well as the Roman public was no longer in fear of the German bodyguard. Ultimately, Augustus disbanded the bodyguard for fear of appearing too despotic and the fear of the Germans.⁴ The constant formation and reunification of the German bodyguard is evident even in their beginning during the time of Caesar and Augustus; this disbandment and reunification differentiated them from the praetorian guard and kept them from becoming a political force.

³ Suetonius, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, Augustus 49.1. Tacitus, *Histories*, 4.15.

⁴ Speidel, *Riding for Caesar*, 18-19.

German Bodyguard: Under the Julio-Claudians

Tiberius re-established the guard after Augustus disbanded it to help with his personal safety; he also demonstrated how much he trusted and respected the guards horse riding skills. Another reason that Speidel gives for keeping a German bodyguard was *fides exercituum*, or troop loyalty, these guards were there to prevent infidelity among the troops when the emperor was abroad. Additionally, these troops were some of the most trustworthy in the empire as they had been bought out of poverty, given a good life, and received a generous amount of pay. The horse guard were also known for an incident in the senate where a senator was approaching emperor Tiberius and he accidentally fell on his knees. The German bodyguard were on such high alert at all times that they thought the falling senator was attempting to assassinate the emperor and they jumped to his rescue. They were about to kill the senator before Tiberius had to stop them and tell them that he had just stumbled without even possessing a weapon. Another famous incident occurred involving the German bodyguard under Tiberius. When Tiberius' brother broke his leg and was close to death in the woods of Germany, Tiberius entrusted one of his German bodyguard named Namantabagius to escort him. He entrusted him over all of his praetorian guard and any of the legionaries or auxiliaries serving in his army. Namantabagius was renowned for his speed on a horse and he brought Tiberius to his dying brother in a record amount of time. The pair covered a record breaking two hundred miles in twenty-four hours to see Drusus during his final dying breaths.¹ This account reveals how trustworthy and effective the horse guard were; they were superior to the praetorians in this aspect.

¹ Speidel, *Riding for Caesar*, 19-20. Tacitus, *Annals*, 1.24.

The German bodyguard also participated in the quelling of the Pannonian uprising that the praetorian guard are known to have helped with, revealing their similar purpose to that of the praetorians. They were sent to escort Tiberius's son Drusus (not to be confused with his brother who had died).² Additionally, they were sent to help Tiberius adopted son Germanicus against the Cherusans in Germany during the Dalmatian War. In both of these occasions they were used as shock cavalry and to personally guard both Germanicus and Drusus. Here it is shown that the German bodyguard was operating very similarly to that of the praetorian guard as they were engaged in the same two activities (up to this point) defending the emperor and use in the field during certain wars/battles that required someone to be escorted due to their proximity to the emperor. At this point in their history these two units were very similar except for their exact purpose on the field (which is to be discussed later).³

After Tiberius's reign, Caligula loved the German bodyguard because they saved his life during revolt; his relationship with the guard reveals that they were beloved more than the praetorians at times. Additionally, they stayed loyal to him and his family throughout his whole life. He even personally charged across the pontoon bridge to Puteloi with his German guard as a show of his and their prowess. This in itself showcases his love for the guard. Furthermore, it is argued that this show of force was meant to scare the tribes of Germany and Britain, with whom the Romans were at war with, as they would have seen this interaction. He also used his guard to deal with an uprising that was to take place in the Northern areas of Germany. Together with his

² Tacitus, *Annals*, 1.24.

³ Speidel, *Riding for Caesar*, 20.

Batavi guard he rode up to this area to monitor those who were to become traitors and oppose Rome. This trip swayed the opinion of those on the verge of rebellion and quieted those who were convinced that rebellion was the only way. On his way back to Rome, Caligula stopped in lower Germany and recruited some horse guards to make this a doubly useful trip to him.⁴ To quell the larger fear of uprising he engaged in recruiting more guards. Additionally, Caligula changed who was to be in charge of the guard by placing ex gladiators and slaves at the head of the German bodyguard.⁵ Caligula recruited more guards and placed trusted slaves at the head of the bodyguard because he loved the unit and wanted to keep control over it.

One of the most significant acts Caligula did was to bribe his German bodyguard by giving them additional *donativa* (exactly how the praetorian guard were being bribed), a method to keep control over a unit he loved. This was a surefire way to gain the trust of the German bodyguard and insure their love; however, it also undermined their discipline as they came to expect a reward when they performed well. Their mood would then flip in an instant if they were withheld a *donativa* because they became accustomed to them and believed that they were constantly deserving of them whenever they performed a worthwhile duty. (A case that mirrors that of the praetorian guard perfectly.) When Caligula was murdered the German bodyguard went into an instant fury. Although they could not prevent his death they went on a killing rampage after learning of his death. They went on to kill senators and civilian's they suspected of involvement in the murder of Caligula.⁶ Their mindset was that they needed to avenge the emperor if they were not

⁴ Suetonius, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, Caligula 43.

⁵ Speidel, *Riding for Caesar*, 21-23. Suetonius, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, Caligula 55.

capable of defending him. Their rage was scary enough to gain an inscription on a clay mask that described them as fearful to children due to their grim countenance.⁷ Speidel questions whether the German bodyguard kept up their German appearances or adopted more Roman appearances. It is clear that at this early stage they still kept up the appearance of their tribe, but later on in their history they do proceed to Romanize.⁸ Caligula loved the guard so much he had to insure their loyalty through the *donativa*.

With Caligula out of the picture Claudius kept up the German bodyguard. Another trend that he continued was the giving of *donativa*. As it has been shown Claudius felt that he owed everything he had come upon in life to the praetorian guard (or at least he pretended this way) because they had named him the next emperor while he was cowering behind a curtain. He did not treat the German bodyguard with the exact same respect as they had not been as influential in him coming to the throne. However, he did respect them and bought their love like any well-mannered emperor.⁹

It was during Claudius' reign that we first see instances of the German bodyguard becoming rich and flaunting their wealth, perhaps even more so than that of the praetorian guard, a difference that was not found within the guard. Because they were not an official unit they were paid directly, and their money was not deposited to be used after their retirement as some of the praetorian guards and legionary's money was withheld for. Due to this they could live more lavish lifestyle even if they did not

⁶ Suetonius, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, 58.

⁷ Speidel, *Riding for Caesar*, 24, "I am a potter's jest, the mask of a red-haired Batavian. Though you make fun of it, a boy fears this face."

⁸ Speidel, *Riding for Caesar*, 20-23

⁹ Suetonius, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, 10.4.

accumulate as much wealth over the span of their entire careers. Evidence of this wealth was apparent through their gravestones. Under the reign of Claudius, German bodyguards began investing in large elaborate gravestones that were generally reserved for those of higher standing than an average soldier. These were anything but average soldiers, but they did not have a rank in the army, like centurion, so it was unusual for someone of their status to obtain this much wealth. Furthermore, they were generally not even Roman citizens making their wealth even more unusual.¹⁰ The fact that some German bodyguards lived to become even wealthier than most praetorian guards separates the forces distinctly from one another.

These gravestones also reveal that there were multiple names for this unit, the less official term was *Batavi*, harkening back to a tribe that many of the members came from. Their gravestones also had the terms *Caesaris Augusti corporis* and *corporis custos*, which were used to show their link to the emperor. Additionally, they labeled themselves *Germanus*, which became a term meaning bodyguard. These stones also show that the leader of this unit of bodyguards was a man called a curator who was the head *decurion* (a leader of ten men) of the force. The most famous of the German bodyguard at this time was Arminius' nephew Italicus, who was actually installed to rule (be king) over the Cherusci, overseen by the Roman Empire. Claudius also gave Italicus some bodyguards, horsemen, and money to ensure that his rule went over well. At first all went well for him but eventually his success led his people to hate him and remove him from rule. However, he reasserted his dominance with the help of the Lombards and remained ruler over the Cherusci until his death.¹¹

¹⁰ Speidel, *Riding for Caesar*, 25-27.

After Claudius' passing Nero went on to continue the German bodyguard and he loved them just as Claudius before him had; Nero used his German bodyguard similarly to how he used his praetorian guard, as a showpiece, but he also expanded their role to include activities they were not originally created to perform. With the praetorian guard he used them as a captive audience, while he used his German bodyguard in the shows he went on to perform. A coin from Nero's time shows that he used the bodyguard to engage in *decursio*, a form of military pageant, that was performed in front of the public and other soldiers. This was a display of a military training maneuver that involved horses, weapons, and full suits of armor. It was intended to show off the skill of the military and particularly the emperor as the true leader of the military. Nero loved showing off his skill in the field and he adequately maneuvered around leading his bodyguard through a series of daunting horseback maneuvers. He, like Claudius before him, assigned ex gladiators to lead the German bodyguard due to the extensive nature of their training that resembled that of gladiators. Another reason that Nero personally assigned gladiators to lead his German bodyguard was due to the fact that he would have them involved in shows that closely resembled those of the gladiators. In addition to their use in *decursio* they would also be used to display mock battles, fighting, and ceremonies in circuses or arenas (similar to the colosseum). For one show under Nero they were used to kill four hundred bears and three hundred lions.¹² This effectively broadened the role of the German bodyguard allowing them to be used in more and more situations putting them in competition with the praetorians.

¹¹ Ibid, 25-27.

¹² Ibid, 27-28.

Additionally, the horsemen were considered to be an honor when bestowed on someone as guards, just as the praetorian were honorable. But, the horse guard probably were even more of a spectacle when someone was guarded by them because they stuck out more than the praetorians. They were different and did not seem to be traditional legionaries as the praetorian guard did. Their armor and weapons would have likely been different, and to top it all of their appearance would have been drastically different, for example skin color, hair color, height, and facial structure. Nero gave his mother Agrippina a unit of German bodyguards to defend her, in addition to her normal praetorian guard (that were also stripped from her when Nero no longer respected her).¹³ Just like the praetorians, they were an elite force that elevated the status of the one being guarded.

Additionally, Nero was the first to use the bodyguard in an underhanded way, similarly to how he was the first to use the praetorian guard in an underhanded way, expanding their role in Rome. He used them during the Pisonian conspiracy of 65 CE. He commanded them to gather up those he felt were suspect, who generally consisted of very wealthy elite members of the Roman community, a number of which were even senators.¹⁴ The praetorian guard or normal legionaries would have had a problem doing this, as they would not have wanted to disrespect Rome's elite. Instead of sending the members of the bodyguard who had become accustomed to Rome and had started to respect the wealthy of the city, he sent the raw recruits who had no idea about the functioning of Rome and simply longed to impress their leader, so they would earn their

¹³ Tacitus, *Annals*, 13.18. Suetonius, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, Nero 34.1.

¹⁴ See Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.69.

pay and be worthy of such a prestigious position. For their service, Nero gave his horse guard citizenship, this is evident due to the fact that three horse guard bore the name Tiberius Claudius. When a foreigner became a Roman citizen, he took on a Roman name and what better name to take on then the emperor whom they originally started serving under. Using his horse guard in an underhanded way opened up the role for future emperors, Nero effectively expanded the role of the guard.¹⁵

When Nero's time was coming to an end the German bodyguard would not even abandon him, for they had such respect for him; signifying the complete loyalty of the bodyguard that surpassed even that of the praetorians. They stuck it out with him until the bitter end. Some sources say that it was the leader of the guard who aided Nero in his suicide, his name was Spiculus a freedman and former gladiator. After handing over the emperor's body they finally stood down, and Spiculus was hung for being one of Nero's loyal men.¹⁶ Sticking with Nero till the end proved the loyalty of the Germans that the praetorians lacked at times.

German Bodyguard: Under Domitian

The guard was passed down to the next emperor Galba, but he cashiered the force because he thought they were expensive, not worth it, and ultimately loyal to another (Nero). Throughout the Flavian dynasty, from 68-98 CE there is no record that the German bodyguard were resurrected after Galba disbanded them. After this long period of no record whatsoever a new group of German bodyguards emerged; however, it is unknown exactly when their unit was created. Some historians believe they were started

¹⁵ Speidel, *Riding for Caesar*, 27-28.

¹⁶ Speidel, *Riding for Caesar*, 27-29.

under Domitian and others argue that it was Trajan who started the next group of German horseman guards. They were called the *equites singulares Augusti* which harkened more to their role as horsemen than the previous title of *Germani corpore custodes*, which harkened more to their kinship and status as Germans and guards. Whether or not Domitian resurrected the German bodyguard is not something that can be deduced for sure. It can be suspected that Domitian had founded the group much earlier, even as early as 83 CE because he was in need of a horse guard in numerous battles; in fact, the ancient sources mention his use of horsemen. Unfortunately, they do not specify which unit they belonged to, this has lead historians to suspect that they could have been a group of German bodyguards or on the other hand they could have been the praetorian equites. Either way it is officially known that Trajan officially recognized this resurrected group, whether or not he was the one to create them.¹

German Bodyguard: Under the Nerva-Antonine Dynasty

Before even rising to the status of emperor, Trajan used Germans that he had bribed during his military service to guard him, while he was still a governor. Undoubtedly, these men who escorted him during his time as a governor passed over to serve him during his time as emperor. One can wonder whether Domitian's (supposed) bodyguard was passed down to Nerva and then to Trajan. It is likely that they were, as this is what previous emperors before him had done, and if these men were worthy defending a past emperor they were worthy of defending him. When he established the German guard as an official force, Roman citizens praised him for it because they recognized his effort as harkening back to the great Augustus. For this he was considered

¹ Ibid, 29-30, 35-37.

a great emperor at the time. However, one group of people was enraged when the German guard was reestablished, that was, of course, the praetorian guard. They were envious that the emperor could now rely on another group of people to complete tasks. Additionally, they may have feared that it would lead them to receive less of a *donativa* or that the Germans may take away chances for them to earn a *donativa*. Trajan also used them in the field during his time as emperor because he was abroad for a good portion of his reign. Like their predecessors they were considered invaluable for their ability to cross a river in full uniform with their horse. This allowed them to be a very affective unit against much larger forces.¹

After the rule of Trajan, Hadrian kept up the new horse guard, and even gave them increased privileges showing that he had great respect for them. He had a large respect for his guard and granted them new rights that previous emperors had. He even promoted some of his horse guards to the post of centurion within the normal army or the horse guard itself. This would have bought the loyalty of those men who had not yet reached this post because they would now have something tangible to work for, a goal. Hadrian's idea to motivate them was brilliant as it took away from their yearning for constant *donativa*, and it introduced competition to drive the men to become the one to be a centurion. As being promoted to a centurion would earn one even more money than several *donativas*. He also did this because he was constantly on the move having them escort him to and from various places throughout the empire. It is said that Hadrian traveled more than any other emperor before or after him, traveling such as this could lead to a hard life for the guardsmen; thus, he had to create some extra incentive for

¹ Speidel, *Riding for Caesar*, 42-45. See Dio, *Roman History*, 68.14 and 68.31.

sticking it out with him. Otherwise, he may have created some mutinous Germans. Additionally, the promotion to centurion held with it the chance for a higher promotion into a better position in the Roman army.² The idea of adding promotional benefits was brilliant, it changed the guard to become less dependent on the *donativa* separating them from the praetorians.

Another thing Hadrian did was the restoration of formation exercises for show, as Nero had done with the *Germani corpore custodes*, retaining the expansion of the role of the guard originally done by Nero. Prior to his reign, the *equites singulares Augusti* had not engaged in these types of activities.³ Hadrian effectively expanded the role of the German guard under their new name, *equites singulares Augusti*.

During his reign, Hadrian also had a very near-death scare. After removing four ex-consuls for the charges of high treason many other senators became very wary of his rule and whether or not he was a threat to them. Due to this, the governor Nigrinus meant to murder Hadrian, perhaps for revenge, personal betterment, or fear. However, one of Nigrinus' own leaders of his personal bodyguard, Viator, betrayed his plot by filling Hadrian in about what was to come.⁴ It is thought that Viator was previously a member of Hadrian's German horse guard as he was a centurion and the commander of Nigrinus' guard. To reach such a high position is thought to have come directly from Hadrian's influence. Additionally, the fact that Viator told Hadrian over keeping his mouth shut for his own commander Nigrinus shows that there must have some former tie, or perhaps,

² Speidel, *Riding for Caesar*, 47-48.

³ Ibid, 48-49.

⁴ Dio, *Roman History*, 69.2.5.

Viator just really liked the way that Hadrian had been running the empire. Either way, Viator saved Hadrian's life due to the information he gave him, and Hadrian went on to hang Nigrinus. For his valuable information, Viator was made a centurion and drill master for Hadrian's personal bodyguard.⁵ This is proof of the respect that Hadrian had for his guard and the fact that the emperors were trying to take them away from the *donativa*.

After the rule of Hadrian came Antonius Pius, who never left Rome. His rule undoubtedly, lead to an uneventful period of time where the guard did not engage in many activities. After his passing Marcus Aurelius took over and their service to him was much different. Under Aurelius the guard was engaged in constant war, as Aurelius was trying to expand the empire for almost the entirety of his reign. Due to this the guard was constantly in the field and moving around with Aurelius. He even chose to honor them by portraying them on a column he constructed that is now designated the Aurelian column. In fact, it shows them numerous time. At one point, they are depicted in parade formation, revealing that this was something they still engaged in during the time of Marcus Aurelius. In the scene, he is riding alongside them inspecting them to make sure they are up to specific standards. In a different part of the column Aurelius is depicted advancing with his entire army into Danube, with his guards all around him. The column was clearly depicting the importance of the safety of the emperor over the fact that the emperor was the leader of the entire army. The fact that he thought to include them in his column clearly shows how important and respected this group was. This is a most valuable portrayal as there are very few surviving depictions like these between the

⁵ Speidel, *Riding for Caesar*, 48-49

German bodyguard and praetorian guard. Due to the rarity of these depictions it is easy to deduce that the emperors who did produce them were very indebted to their guards. To be a guard honored by an emperor such as this must have been a great feeling; this was a show of respect as much as a *donativa*, this was another way for emperors to ween the guard away from *donativa*.⁶

After the passing of Marcus Aurelius, it was up to his son Commodus to keep up the German bodyguard; a man who would eventually limit the role of the guard. Commodus largely was a coward and did not engage in the military affairs that his father did, because of this, during this time both guards (praetorian and German) largely remained inside the city of Rome and did not have many activities to engage in. But there was a plot upon Commodus' life near the beginning of his reign by a young senator named Quintianus. According to the sources he yelled in a narrow entryway, "See, this is what the senate sent you!" Unfortunately for him this gave him away and he was struck down by the German bodyguard. After this, Commodus felt very paranoid and he raised the number of active bodyguards on duty, at all times, in an attempt to prevent close calls, like this from ever occurring again. The leader of Commodus' horse guard was a man named Cleander who was thought by many to be undeserving of the position, but Commodus installed him because he thought he excelled at guard duty. As Commodus was so paranoid after the initial attempt on his life he shifted the duties of the German bodyguard drastically from the previous emperors. Previously, emperors had used the German bodyguard strategically where they were needed in combat and out of combat, they did not serve solely as a bodyguard; however, under Commodus they functioned

⁶ Ibid, 50-51.

mainly as a bodyguard.⁷ He limited the role of the guard after many emperors had continuously expanded it.

It was also during his time that the discipline governing both the German guard and the praetorian guard slackened severely because Commodus limited the number of duties the guard was entitled, due to this they progressively became more villainous. He did not care what activities these two groups of men engaged in, and they proceeded to abuse civilians for their own personal benefit (wealth wise). Essentially, they became looters and were a producer of fear for the Roman citizens themselves. Commodus probably granted these abilities to his guards because he feared them just as he feared the world outside of Rome.⁸ To appear tough and soldierly he instead engaged in activities in the arena, instead of fighting abroad with a troop of men. He attempted to display his merit by shooting a bow at ostriches and throwing spears at lions. Reportedly he was very successful at killing these animals, and this endeared him to the soldiers, but the upper class thought it was distasteful and egregious for an emperor to engage in.⁹ Because he stayed in Rome and did not engage in any military campaigns it is said that his praetorian guard grew soft and was the laughing stock of the army because they withered under his rule, while the German bodyguard fared very similarly. Luckily, due to their recruitment, they needed five years of field experience, which meant that battle hardened men were installed. While the men of the praetorian guard may have never seen a day of battle in their entire lives. Commodus' foolish behavior would soon come

⁷ Ibid, 51-52.

⁸ See Dio, *Roman History*, 72.16.4.

⁹ Dio, *Roman History*, 73.17-19.

to an end with his tragic death at the hands of the Prefect Laetus. Laetus attempted to have him poisoned, and when this failed he had him strangled by his wrestling partner. After all that paranoia Commodus was still assassinated; however, it was a plot that would be hard for any guard to deflect. It would have been nearly impossible to detect that Commodus' long-term wrestling partner had been paid off. Even his raise in the number of active guards would not have prevented this.¹⁰ Upon Commodus' passing luckily his successors would realize the need to go out into the fronts of Rome and engage in military action, allowing both guards to hone their skills and act as the truly elite forces they were.¹¹ Commodus had forgotten that keeping soldiers busy was a key part of *disciplina militaris*, when he limited the role of the guard he allowed them to shrug off their discipline

German Bodyguard: Under the Year of Five Emperors

After the reign of Commodus, the emperor Pertinax arose; his death reveals the loyalty of the German guard that surpasses even that of the praetorians. His reign marked the first of the year of five emperors. Unfortunately, his reign was not long enough for him to engage in any significant activities with the German bodyguard, but his death showcased their attempted defense. When a number of rebellious praetorians attempted to take his life, he approached them in an attempt to reason with them and bribe them into further service; however, this was not to be the case and he was quickly killed.¹ Pertinax needed not do this as he had both the urban cohorts and German bodyguard at hand, and they could have easily dispatched of the intruding praetorians. Pertinax was most likely a

¹⁰ Dio, *Roman History*, 73.22.

¹¹ Speidel, *Riding for Caesar*, 52-54.

¹ Dio, *Roman History*, 74.9-10.

little foolish and overconfident in thinking that he could convince the praetorians to stand down. Most likely, he assumed that they still held on to some loyalty to him, and he simply needed to awaken this feeling within them. Unfortunately, he could not do this, and this event marked another time where the praetorians turned treasonous while the German bodyguard remained faithful to the one they took an oath too.²

German Bodyguard: Under the Severan Dynasty

When the year of the five emperors came to an end, the man left on the throne was Septimus Severus, the man that essentially forever changed the praetorian guard; however, he did not have the same effect on the German bodyguard. Before becoming emperor, he already had his own men who served as praetorian guards to him and foreign German troops who served as his German bodyguard. Logically, he installed these men as his official praetorians and German bodyguard. He could not trust the praetorian guard that murdered Pertinax because they had broken their oath (their cashiering led to a rampage of brigandry around the Italian countryside because they no longer had a job nor a source of income), but he could trust the German bodyguard that wanted to defend Pertinax and he adopted them. Another reason he adopted these men may have been to usher him into his new position as emperor. Upon coming to the throne, he decided to perform an honorary funeral for Pertinax, in which he appeared with Pertinax's old horse guard in a symbolic passing of the guard from Pertinax onto himself. Severus recognized that the German bodyguard was a loyal force and for this he rewarded them, something that cannot be said of the praetorians.¹

² Speidel, *Riding for Caesar*, 54-55.

¹ Ibid, 57-60. Dio, *Roman History*, 75.3-4.

Due to the adoption of Pertinax's men it was Severus who essentially doubled the size of the bodyguard, making them an even more versatile force. In actual numerical terms the German bodyguard was consistently around one thousand men from their initial creation under Augustus and their rebirth under Domitian/Trajan. Now, under Septimus Severus the number became two thousand. This was due to the fact that he had around six hundred guards traveling with him and he adopted all of Pertinax's one thousand guards. Yet another reason for the acceptance of so many men was the danger that had been put upon emperors at this time. After all it was the year of five emperors, and Severus was aware that the four emperors before him had only lasted a few months. He did not want to end up the same way and kept as large a guard as he could to prevent the year from becoming the year of six emperors. Upon entering into Rome with these men he put on one of the grandest and most memorable military parades Rome had ever seen. It had both good elements and bad elements, it was spectacular, but unfortunately, Severus allowed his men to loot just as Commodus had done, this should not have been done as he should have been seeking to discipline the men better than Commodus had in the past. However, they likely appeared even worse (then Commodus' men) looting most houses they passed by and demanding a large *donativa* for a reward from both Severus and senate.² Evidently, he recruited another four hundred men to make it an even two thousand men. This was a good thing for Rome as they now had more of the elite horse guard to go around, on the field and in the capitol city itself, ready to fulfill a number of different roles.³

² Dio, *Roman History*, 75.1-2.

³ Speidel, *Riding for Caesar*, 59-60.

The way Severus handled himself was not the most beneficial for Rome, as he stripped the city of two essential forces. He was almost constantly at war and because of this he robbed Rome of the praetorians and the German bodyguard, that were essential to Rome's safety and order. Without these men it was up to the lesser forces of the *vigiles* and urban cohorts to patrol the streets of Rome, but they were not as capable as the elite forces that Severus kept from Rome for so long. In the long run Severus' decision would hurt Rome as many emperors in the future would follow his trend of keeping both guards abroad.⁴

During Severus' time the German bodyguard and the praetorian guard start to resemble one another. Because the emperor opened up the recruitment of the praetorian guard to any Roman citizens, their makeup started to resemble the German bodyguard, as they began to recruit some of these men from Southern Germany. The German bodyguard stayed an elite force during the rule of Severus because he did not change their recruitment rules, and he still picked the cream of the crop of German horseback riders. While on the other hand the elite status of the praetorian guard plummeted because they now accepted whoever they could. It is interesting that the more known about and common guard was tarnished by the bringing in of 'barbarians' while the lesser known guard was kept elite by restricting their recruitment simply to the best fighting barbarians that could be found. This was one period where being part of the horse guard would have been more respectable than being part of the praetorian guard. The guards

⁴ Ibid, 59-60.

became more alike because they had similar makeups but grew further apart in levels of respectability.⁵

Like Marcus Aurelius, Severus decided to honor his guardsmen, both praetorian and German, by displaying them permanently in a beautiful carving, displaying the high amount of respect he had for them. For Aurelius it was a column and Severus it was a relief panel. The two depictions were quite different as Severus was shown giving a speech in which his guard was not that close to him, nor did they seem to be paying attention. Evidently, they were being vigilant and on the lookout for any number of men who may suddenly spring on the emperor to attack him.⁶ Aurelius display shows just how important the German bodyguard was to him.

The town of Anazarbos was an important place for both the horse guard and Septimus Severus as it became a retreat for them during his constant campaigning; it was here that Severus showed his respect for the guard. Six horse guards were actually buried there and a monument to them was resurrected. This is very important as it is one of the only pieces of evidence that remains of the horse guard outside of Italy and Rome. It can be deduced that this was a place for the guard to celebrate, train, and even put on shows for the people. It is here that they performed in annual games to entertain the people of this town. After a long hard campaign, they came here to relax and entertain the people.⁷ Severus clearly valued his guard and wanted to keep them performing excellently in the field; thus, he rewarded them with a vacation.

⁵ Ibid, 60-62.

⁶ Ibid, 62-63.

⁷ Ibid.

Another crucial event that happened during the reign of Severus was the catching of the brigand Bulla Felix, an event that displays the expansion of the role of the German bodyguard and shows their similarities to the praetorians. He was a robber who led a group of six hundred plunderers around Italy taking from wherever they could to survive. Eventually, when Severus was fed up with their behavior he sent a tribune and a number of the horse guard to deal with him. Finally, they caught up with him and brought him to justice by surrounding him (and those he worked with) and killing them. Here is another piece of evidence that shows the similarities between the praetorian guard and the German bodyguard, as they were used to be an essential force wherever they were needed in the entire empire. Following this event Severus continued campaigning until his was very old in age and eventually he passed away after falling ill during his last campaign.⁸

After Septimus Severus' death his two sons Caracalla and Geta came to the throne as joint rulers, an event that would separate the German bodyguard revealing that they had never become a unified force. Severus wanted to divide the empire between his two sons, but this was destined to fail, as so many Roman men desired to rule the entire Roman world on their own. Additionally, the Roman world was used to having a sole ruler, this was not the time to attempt to change the tradition of ruling. He could have attempted to change it during his own rule to make a more successful transition. But this was not the case, and after Severus' death Caracalla was constantly trying to put an end to Geta and secure the throne for himself. Caracalla's initial attempts to murder his brother failed due to the guards that Geta had around himself. These guards were most likely an assortment of praetorian and German bodyguards, as they had been passed

⁸ Ibid, 63-64.

down from Severus. Eventually, Caracalla was successful, and he brought down Geta with a group of centurions.⁹ In a vengeful manner he also put down many of Geta's followers and guards simply because they did not follow him. One of the many men he had killed was actually a trainer of the German bodyguard named Iutlius Antonius.¹⁰ The fact that this man was killed by Caracalla reveals that there were actually two factions of bodyguards that developed after the fall of the Severus. One supporting Geta and one supporting Caracalla. It cannot be proven anywhere, but it would make sense that Severus had each half of the guard given to his sons respectively, giving them each one thousand German horse guards. This separation of the guard shows that the guard was still, even at this time, not a unified force; although, the praetorian guard must have been confused at this time as well.

This was undoubtedly a time of confusion where both groups were uncertain of whom their true loyalty lied; however, it was not long before Geta was dead and they had no choice but to pledge their loyalty to Caracalla or suffer death. With Caracalla on the throne there is not much evidence as to what either guard engaged in until his untimely demise. On the road in the Mesopotamian planes traveling to various cities he had to use the bathroom, and during this brief moment, praetorian evocatus Iulius Martialis struck him with a dagger killing him. Martialis was quickly struck down by the horse guard when he was noticed holding a bloody dagger. The plan was put together by a number of men, most importantly was Macrinus, the praetorian prefect, who would go on to become emperor; besides him two tribunes of the guard (and brothers) Aurelius and Apollinaris

⁹ Dio, *Roman History*, 78.2.

¹⁰ Speidel, *Riding for Caesar*, 64-65.

Nemesianus were involved in the scheme. Macrinus' motive is clear that he wanted to become emperor in Caracalla's stead; he also feared for his own life because there were rumors of Caracalla plotting against him. As for Martialis it has been revealed that he held a grudge against Caracalla for begrudging him a promotion multiple times.

Marcinus then became the first praetorian prefect and equestrian to become emperor.¹¹ Never before had a non-senatorial class citizen gone on to hold the highest office in all of Rome, the closest any equestrian had become was Sejanus when he arose to the office of consul under the rule of Tiberius.

This was a groundbreaking moment, but once again the German bodyguard had nothing to do with it, except for maybe a few members of their command; again, the Germans proved to be loyal while the praetorians did not. As the two tribunes and co-conspirators might have been in command of the German horse guard. It seems the horse guard was much too loyal to the emperor throughout their life span and never betrayed the emperor. This was likely due to the fact that they were handpicked from a young age and given wealth beyond what they would have accumulated when left at their original tribal homes. The German bodyguard had more of a reason to be grateful to those whom they worked for than the praetorians and this made the difference between loyalty and betrayal that the praetorians were known for.

Macrinus would come to the throne next and rule for a little over a year, and his reign would prove the loyalty of the Germans. He felt no need to get rid of any of the German bodyguard because they did their duty and avenged Caracalla by killing Martialis despite the fact that he was in on the plot. The horse guard then played a

¹¹ Ibid, 66-68. Dio, *Roman History*, 79.3-5.

crucial role in the battles that were to come throughout his reign. Macrinus fought with an upstart named Elagabalus who was attempting to wrestle the throne from his grasp. The two engaged in a civil war, and when the two fought, the horse guard charged Elagabalus's forces, and the two were struck with a terrible fear and began to flee. If it wasn't for the bravery of Elagabalus his forces would have routed but he strengthened his front line, and eventually Macrinus fled the battlefield. Without Macrinus, the German bodyguard lost their inspiration to fight, and it wasn't long before Elagabalus convinced them to join his side and protect him as the next emperor.¹² Upon entering back in Rome, Elagabalus had a grand procession and honored the horse guard.¹³ Eventually both Elagabalus and his successor Severus Alexander were killed by the praetorian guard leaving Maximinus to be the successor to the throne.¹⁴ Despite Macrinus' death his Germans proved their loyalty and the worth on the battlefield by causing the enemy to route.

German Bodyguard: Under the Barracks Emperors (Maximinus and Phillip the Arab)

Maximinus may have been the lowest born emperor ever known to rule in the Roman Empire, he came to command by rising the ranks of the German bodyguard proving the merit that these guardsmen achieved. Previously the lowest born emperor would have been Macrinus who was of the Equestrian class, but if Maximinus was a member of the horse guard he would've been the lowest class emperor of all time (because no equestrians were known to be horse guards). It is rumored that he was born

¹² Herodian, *History of the Roman Empire*, 5.4.5-5.4.12, 5.5.1.

¹³ Herodian, *History of the Roman Empire*, 5.5.7.

¹⁴ Speidel, *Riding for Caesar*, 67-68.

in Thrace making him a barbarian and an outsider, but others say he was born in the town Nova Italica in the province of Moesia.¹ So, it may have been that he was not a barbarian, but either way it is unlikely that he sprung from the senatorial or even equestrian class because he joined the army as a horseman. He was renowned for his size and strength making him an adequate candidate for the cavalry portion of the Roman Army.² Maximinus decided to join the army during the reign of Septimus Severus, which was not unusual as many low born men changed the projection of their life during his reign and rose to high ranking positions. From a horseman, he quickly rose to the rank of governor and he was eventually placed in charge of all the army recruits stemming out of Germany. This occurred due to his outstanding skill at arms, strength, and appropriate appearance for that of a guardsman. He was not promoted until the reign of Alexander Severus. He was responsible for their training and oversight. Maximinus was loved by his men because he got down and dirty with them throughout his training and whenever there was a war. In fact, they loved him so much that they went so far as to support him on his journey to emperor.³ The fact that he rose the ranks quickly and rose to higher ranks reserved to patricians shows how respected a force the guard was.

The claim that Maximinus was an Emperor seems likely after a discovery of a recent horse guard grave. Graves of the *equites singulares Augusti* reveal that they were the troops of a man known as Iulius Maximinus. This name combination is a very unique one and there has not been another Roman named that way that was known around that

¹ Herodian, *History of the Roman Empire*, 7.1.1-2.

² Ibid, 7.1.12.

³ Speidel, *Riding for Caesar*, 68-69.

time. It is safe to assume that Maximinus was once a former horse guard himself, and he rose to the ranking of emperor due to his proximity of his service to the emperors he was guarding. Evidently, they saw how much of an asset he was to their personal defense and they continued to promote him until he reached the penultimate height of the Roman Empire.⁴

After ruling for about three years, Maximinus was eliminated by his own men because he tried to push them far too much. During the siege of Aquileia his troops fell out of love with him and they planned to kill him. It wasn't long before members of the legion II Parthica snuck into his camp and assassinated him for the never-ending siege that he was attempting to put his men through.⁵ However, his rise to power shows much more than his death. The fact that he rose to the height of an emperor shows that the German bodyguard was a very efficient training service for officers of the Roman Empire. This striking example shows that many other men must have risen through the ranks to become successful in the Roman Empire after starting a career in the *equites singulares Augusti*.⁶

The next emperor to have historically worthwhile interactions with the German bodyguard was the successor three men down the line from Maximinus, his name was Phillip the Arab. He is important to the history of the guard because he started a new unit named the *Celeres* who hearkened back to a group of elite soldiers formed by Romulus; their formation showed that they were never a unified force as they were constantly being

⁴ Ibid, 69.

⁵ Herodian, *History of the Roman Empire*, 8.5.3-8.5.9.

⁶ Speidel, *Riding for Caesar*, 69.

altered. The *Celeres* were known as the swift ones and were originally Arab archers who were capable of making extraordinary shots. Maximinus or Phillip is thought to have restarted this group. Speidel claim that it was Maximinus who did so due to a number of attacks on his throne by a number of senators. To claim defense from the senators he blamed them for the death of both Caesar and Romulus (Romulus was thought to have been torn apart by the senators for his group of guards known as the *Celeres*, making him too much of a dictator). To spite the senators Maximinus is thought to have restarted the group known as the *Celeres*. He also was worried that the senators would take advantage of his *equites singulares Augusti* and turn them on him; to combat this he came up with a new group of foreign born bodyguards. This shows that the German bodyguards were never a unified group and were constantly being mixed and matched, unlike the praetorians.⁷

Not much is known about the horse guard following the rules of Phillip and Maximinus except the minor fact that they were constantly abroad with their emperors, a task they shared with the praetorians. They were still needed in the field because they were vital to the survival of the emperor and as shock troopers. Since the emperors were constantly on the field the guard was constantly suffering casualties and being replaced. The hundred years or so after Maximinus's death is the time when the most horse guard were recruited as the most died during this period of constant warfare for the empire. From around 250 to 285 CE the horse guard generally never set foot in Rome and not much is known of their deeds at the time, similar to the praetorian guard at this time. One can speculate that they were constantly engaged in their duty and nothing too scandalous

⁷ Ibid, 69-71.

occurred surrounding them, otherwise it would have been passed down in the written records.⁸

German Bodyguard: Under Diocletian

It was not until Diocletian emerged that more is known of the horse guard. It is known that he declared the horse guard aristocrats to honor them for their deeds over the years and they were honored with being a part of the higher class of Roman society; however, this was an interesting call as the newest recruits of the guard were quite barbaric. Unfortunately, after Constantine's rise to power the *equites singulares Augusti* were also cashiered along with the praetorian guard putting an end to their long history. However, this was not the end of the German bodyguard as Constantine started a new force that he named the *Scholae*, but they will not be considered in this paper because they outlast the time span of the praetorian guard.¹

The Romanization of the *Equites Singulares Augusti* and the *Germani Corpores Custodes*

The *equites singulares Augusti* were a much different group than the *Germani corpores custodes* due to the Romanization that had taken place in between their years of service. Generally, these two groups came from relatively the same area (most of Germany, Northern and Southern Germany) and completed the same tasks (guarding the emperor, escorting him, riding with him, training with him, performing shows/demonstrations, and engaging in underhanded tasks). However, Speidel argues that their appearance and behavior would have been drastically different. During the

⁸ Ibid, 70-71.

¹ Ibid, 72-76.

initial recruitment of the *Germani corpores custodes* most of the bodyguard was taken from Northern Germany, a place that had not yet become Romanized, during the second iteration of the force recruits were generally taken from Southern Germany, which was under Roman rule for quite a period of time. Because of this the *equites singulares Augusti* would have been much more akin to a normal Roman citizen and may have not seemed out of place at all in the world of Rome. Additionally, by the time of their foundation Northern Germany had encountered a significant amount of more contact with the Roman Empire and were in fact attempting to become more like the Romans. So indeed, the recruits from Northern Germany at that time would have been much more Romanized than the recruits from Northern Germany during the time of the *Germani corpores custodes*. However, it is very difficult to tell exactly when the German bodyguard started to become Romanized because very few records remain telling us about their appearance or behavior. It could likely be that the *Germani corpores custodes* were in fact beginning to seem more Romanized themselves before their cashiering under Galba.¹ Overall, the two groups would have been drastically different due to Romanization taking place at the different time periods they existed.

Romanization is likely to have completely changed the outlook of Roman citizens on the German bodyguard. They would have no longer kept long hair and beards and their hair would have been kept to a short length. Due to this they would have no longer been scary or barbaric to the civilians that saw them. Instead, they would have been a group of unusual height in the Roman capitol who were also very handsome. They probably inspired awe and the Roman civilians looked up to them as a very elite force

¹ Ibid, 81-84.

under the emperor. Additionally, they were no longer considered the emperor's stupid grunt force because at this point they would have spoken Latin very well, while it is questionable how well the *Germani corpores custodes* would have spoken Latin. At this point they were likely just as invested in the politics of Rome as the praetorian guard because of their Romanization; however, they proved to be a loyal force and did not engage in betrayals or attempts at using force to usher in new emperors.²

Some emperors following Septimus Severus began recruiting the most tribal members of the German groups for service, men from Goth and Germany who were slaves. These men were called the Lions and considered a very fierce and less civilized portion of the guard. Despite the Romanization of most of the German bodyguard there would have still been some members of the guard who had not Romanized yet, but they would quickly upon the complete immersion of Roman culture and way of life.³

The Selection and Training of the German Bodyguard

Next, let us consider the training of the German bodyguard, a vigorous process which made them an invaluable force. They were put through ceaseless training the same as the praetorian guard. Due to their advanced training they were considered the elite core of the Roman army along with the praetorians. They were so essential to the emperor that he was even known to train with them at times. Since they would be escorting him on the battlefield on horseback he needed to know their formations and exactly how they maneuvered on the battlefield. Essentially, the emperor had to be as efficient as they were on horseback if he was to survive during an emergency situation on

² Ibid, 81.

³ Ibid, 64-67.

the battlefield. To be this efficient, emperors were known to have spent a great deal of time drilling with the German bodyguard. Emperors were also known to scout with their German bodyguard, to prepare for an upcoming battle. On the other hand, emperors did not train with the praetorians as they were more dedicated to guarding the emperor while he was off duty and they did not ride directly with him instead, they were stationed off to the side of the emperor during battle. One of the German guards most useful skills was the fact that they could swim across a river in full battle gear next to the side of their horses. This was a maneuver they practiced frequently as it allowed them to make a quick getaway, engage in a battle where crossing a river was necessary, or even make a flanking maneuver in which a river blocked the path. Additionally, they trained with a variety of weapons and carried a spear, axe, sword, javelin, and sometimes even a bow into battle with them. Their variety of training made them a priceless commodity to the principate.¹

The selection of the bodyguard is also something that needs to be discussed. German bodyguards were handpicked at around the age of twenty and served for a total of twenty-five years as horseback guards, escorts, and warriors. Already being well versed on horseback was a requirement as the Romans only considered the tribes that were renowned for their skill on horseback that way not too much training was needed. Romans were not generally raised on horseback and they did not spend much time training or using the horse, and therefore, they had to rely on auxiliary forces for cavalry, the German horse guard was one of these forces used to substitute the Roman lack of cavalry. Additionally, these men were to be large and ominous as a way to intimidate

¹ Ibid, 87-89, 105-106.

opposing battlefield forces and would be attackers who seek to eliminate the emperor. The selection of the guard was constantly changing over the course of their existence as different areas were considered the pinnacle of horsemanship over the centuries of the guard's existence. Due to this, the selection of the guard shifted from areas of the North and South of modern Germany constantly.²

After retiring the members of the horse guard settled in areas very similar to the praetorian guard, they settled in Rome, around the Italian countryside, or some may have even gone back to their tribes. However, it is unfortunate, that not much is known about the guards who survived to settle down after their military career because their graves were not generally preserved or found like those who died during their service. Nor are there any written records of these men after they settled down.³

The similarity of the German bodyguard to the praetorian equites (horsemen) is another topic to be discussed. They were both used to deliver quick messages, kill targets, abduct, put on shows, and employed in the field when the emperor was abroad or commanded them to escort/defend someone important. Throughout their two existences Caligula actually attempted to goad competition between the two forces in a friendly way. Similar to how Augustus attempted to put the urban cohorts and the praetorian guard into direct competition. These two emperors were well versed with how helpful competition could be between two units as it pushed them to do their best on the field and off. Another group that was similar in role to these two groups was named the *Speculatores*. They were a mounted horsemen group that carried lances. This group was

² Ibid, 87-90.

³ Ibid, 93-94.

used to escort and guard the emperor. But, they were mainly used for crowd control when the emperor wanted to traverse the crowded streets of Rome. Their lances could be held to keep the crowds of Roman civilians at bay.⁴ These three groups held very similar roles, but all benefitted to the policing of Rome.

Conclusion

This essay has attempted to show how valuable the praetorian guard are to the Roman Empire. Originally, they started off as a force that was just responsible for the guarding of the Roman emperor; however, overtime their role expanded as they took on new jobs and routines. These jobs can be classified as official and unofficial duties. The official duties of the praetorian guard were to defend the life of the emperor to the death, preserve the life of the royal family, accompany the emperor while at war, escort the emperor throughout the capitol, fight fires, and serve as a policing force inside Rome when the emperor attended official events (these events could include chariot racing and gladiatorial games). Some unofficial duties the praetorians involved themselves in were the removal of rivalrous politicians (sanctioned by the Emperor), looting, being an audience at sources of entertainment, and being a source of entertainment for the masses (seldomly). These duties made the praetorians an extremely useful force.

Essentially, the guard became a force that was necessary within the walls of Rome due to the official and unofficial roles they adopted. Additionally, the fact that the praetorians (after Tiberius) were the only military unit (besides the *vigiles* and the urban cohorts) housed and allowed inside of Rome made them an invaluable unit. They became so necessary that the power of the emperor became inextricably linked to their

⁴ Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard*, 89-91.

guard duty. Whenever they failed at being an affective guard unit the emperor was removed from the throne and replaced; however, when they were successful emperors held power for long periods of time.

The necessity of the guard to the emperor and the empire did not go unnoticed; the people of the Roman empire recognized them as a direct show of power linked directly to the Roman emperor. They were a revered force wherever they went inside or outside of Rome. Seeing them on guard duty inside the capitol signified to the populace that the emperor was involved, or it was an official event that needed the best protection that Rome had to offer; the same was applicable if the group was seen outside of Rome. They were highly respected by all civilians wherever they traveled (accept for in the periods where they become corrupt, as discussed earlier). Wherever they went they displayed the sheer power of the Roman emperor and empire.

When they recognized themselves as a necessary force within the walls of Rome they became a politically charged force, and actually began to involve themselves in the politics of Rome. This paper has shown a series of events throughout the history of Rome where the guard has involved themselves in the succession of the emperors. The group involved themselves in the politics of the time, but contrary to popular belief they were never a king-making force. At times it does appear as if they selected the next ruler or eliminated the ruler of the time, but this was never actually the case. They cannot be considered a king-making force because they did not all agree on eliminating or selecting a ruler. Generally, this decision was made by one person (such as the prefect) or a few tribunes that lead the guard. These instances were far from a homogenous decision. Additionally, when an emperor was eliminated by the guard, they generally did not have

any say in who would become the next emperor. In these cases, the succession of emperors generally followed its natural progression and passed to the next logical emperor or the heir the previous emperor had chosen (although it seemed as if the guard was a king making force because they welcomed them into their new position). Certain cases look more incriminating (in calling them a king making force), but these have already been explained not to be previously. Overall, they were influential in the politics of Rome because they did remove emperors, but they were not a king making force, as there was much more behind the selection of the next emperor (such as the endorsement of the senate, strength of an individual's army, and level of royalty).

Another goal of this essay has been to show that the German bodyguard was different from the praetorian guard and not as valuable a force as the praetorian guard, as they never became a political force because they were not a unified force and were not Romanized at every point throughout their history. During their existence the German bodyguard was constantly being reformed and disbanded due to various circumstances such as emperors not finding them useful and civilians being scared of them due to fear of Germans. Due to this they were never able to become as involved in politics as the praetorian guard. Additionally, the German bodyguard was always shifting between Romanized and not due to changing areas of recruitment. Thus, at certain time periods the guards would have spoken Latin fluently and at other times they would not have. This certainly affected their ability to be a political force inside Rome. It can also be argued that they were simply not interested in the politics of Rome because they had been recruited from Germany, and they were only interested in what was best for their

homeland. Evidently, they never became as valuable a force as the praetorian guard because they were not unified, consistently Romanized, or a political force.

Even though they never became a necessity, the German bodyguard was a very helpful force throughout the empire because they were used as shock troopers in war and an extra line of defense for the Roman emperor. Due to the fact that they were never viewed as necessary they never became a privileged unit within Rome. Instead, they were positioned behind the praetorians in terms of necessity. Interestingly enough they were the more loyal of the two forces, but they never reached the same level of need.

Overall, the praetorian guard and the German bodyguard were both very useful units to the Roman empire; however, only the praetorians were a necessary force as they insured the survival of the emperor. This was of the utmost importance because if emperors lacked their defense there would have been a constant changing of emperors. The fact that they were not a king-making force reveals that they were that they were not secretly running the succession of the Roman empire. That is not to say that they were not an important force. They were one of the most important forces in all of Roman history as they held the sacred duty of defending the emperor and sometimes (part of the unit) would kill the emperor. Essentially, they held the life and death of the emperor in their hands, but they did not hold the key to succession.

Finally, the question why two forces were necessary can be answered. It seems that the two forces were not both necessary at many times throughout the empire as various emperors chose not to keep up a German bodyguard. It was more a level of comfort that the use of both bodyguards brought that kept them both around. The

praetorians were always a necessity, but the German bodyguard were a helpful luxury that some emperors enjoyed and others did not.

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