Tertullian and the Roman Army

by Ikuo Murone

Author can find out the paragraph relating to the Roman army in Tertullian’s treatises; for example, Ad nationes, De pallio, De corona, and De idolatoria. Among the abovementioned works De apologeticum, De corona, and De idolatoria are of special importance. He mainly discussed the imperialistic war of the Roman army in the chapter 25 of De apologeticum. The latter two treatises mainly related to the meaning of the military service: for example chapter 11 of De corona, and the chapter 19 of De idolatoria. 1)2)

That is to say, Tertullian began his argument by relating an event in his two treatises: as a Christian soldier refused to wear a laurel-crown at the public ceremony, which would have dispensed “Donativum” to him in honour of the victories over the Parthians, he was remitted to a higher tribunal. He reported this event, 3) and justified the act of the Christian soldier. And then, he recommended all the Christian soldiers to abandon their military services. 4) Moreover, in De idolatoria, he developed his argument observing that the occupations by the Roman soldiers were not suitable for true Christians.

From these facts, I can conclude that Tertullian was the first Christian writer who took up the problem of military service as the main theme in the daily life of Christians. And it is also said that Tertullian pointed out the presence of the Christian soldiers in the legions of Marcus Aurelius (apol. 5, 6; 42, 3).

On the other hand, besides other Christian writers at Tertullian’s age, Celsus in his treatise entitled “alethia logos”,

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reported with anxiety that the Christian soldiers were not in conformity the policy of the Roman Empire, and that they refused to join in the state-worship.

Thus, in order to know the historical background of such a tendency, we must clarify the meaning of the reign of Emperor Septimis Severus in the course of the Roman Empire. It is said that the reign of Sept. Severus marked a turning point in the course of the Roman Empire, and signified the decline of “res publica” which had been maintained by the idea of “civitas”, and the initial stages of the idea of “dominatus”.

At any rate, the duty of the Emperor Sept. Severus since 193 AD, was to defend the frontiers against the invasions of barbaroi or peregrini, and at the same time, to maintain the “imperium” policy from Augustus to Trajanus. In order to accomplish the policy, Emperors Severus had to make efforts to reinforce the Roman army.

And then, two main plans were carried out; one was the expansion of the coverage of citizenship, the other the strengthening of the thought control for the sake of maintaining the military discipline.

The former aimed at the reinforcement of the common soldiers as well as the expansion of the source of revenue. So many young people at the lower classes, who belonged to the “humiliores”, the proletarri of cities and provincials, were recruited. From the stand-point of “humiliores” joining the Roman legions meant a chance to gain the Roman citizenship, and to escape from the lower classes in future. The Christians were in the same conditions, because they also belonged to the “humiliores”. In fact, according to Tertullian’s testimonies, excepting some rare cases many Christian soldiers belonged to the inferior ranks (“caligata” or “inferior”) during the reigns of Marcus Aurelius to Emperors Severus (idol, 19.1).

The latter was the problem of spiritual elements to establish
the unitary governing system of the Roman Emperors. Above all, such spiritual elements were essential to the military discipline, and were nothing but the idea of the "Kaiser von Gottesgnaden" (W. EnBlin), which was based upon the synchretism of the Roman religions. It is true that "Constitutio Antoniniana", the enactment of Carcalla (212 AD), aimed at the accomplishment of the synchretism of the Roman religions in order to unify the public opinion.

After all, the main purpose of the enactment seems to have been the establishment of the Roman army. And it is no exaggeration to say that taking part in the ceremonies of the legions under Severus meant showing loyalty of the common soldiers to Emperors. In the nature of things, some Christian soldiers refused to take part in the abovementioned state-worship on the ground of their belief.

So, sooner or later, the conflict between the ruler-ideology and the Christian thought, had gradually increased in the Roman army. In order to dispose these conflicts, the courts of the Roman Empire prosecuted some of the Christian soldiers on a charge of "sacilegium", and "crimen majestatis". Indeed, the above-mentioned enactment of Carcalla seemed to make ready for justifying the Roman court decision on the Christians in following years.

In conclusion, I must summarize Tertullian's views about the Roman army. Firstly, he refuted the public opinions that the powers of the Roman religions had brought the prosperities (magni) of the Roman Empire, and stated that "imperium", or "omne regnum" did not depend upon the powers of the Roman Gods, but on the military power. And, still more, he related that the results of the Roman imperialistic wars were nothing but the miserable catastrophies; downfall (strages), slaughter (cades), and plundering (rapine). So Tertullian regarded "militia", the occupation by the Roman soldiers, as a conduct
unbecoming to Christians.

Secondly, he recommended the Christians to oppose the enlistment of the Roman army, because it might be impossible for Christian soldiers to free themselves from the act of devoting the sacrifice at the ceremony (necessitas immolatorum), or the execution of the capital punishment (capitalium judiciorum). 9)

Thirdly, there was the problem of murder. He stated in the chapter 37 of De apologeticum that the Christians who ought to be the son of peace (filis pacis), must not murder, and moreover, recommended them to be slain rather than to slay.

Lastly, I must relate the positive meaning of the refusal of the military service in Tertullians treatises.

It is well known that Tertullian often used the terms of the military system. These terms were not only used as Clemens of Rome did, to show the analogous relationship between the system of the Roman army and that of the Christian community, but also to present the antithesis to the Roman militarism and the ruler-ideology of the Emperors. For example, the term “militia christi” was used to oppose the “militia caesarri”, and in the same way, “sacramento divi” was the antithesis to “sacramento humano” which was the enlistment ceremony of the Roman army 10).

In Tertullian’s view the enlistment under Severus was for the Christians nothing but the miserable act against the teaching of Jesus.

So he related conclusively, “non potest una anima duobus debri, deo et Caesari” (idol, 19.2).

The text and quotations from the works of Tertullian are given according to the edition in the Corpus Christianorum. Series latina. 1. 11. TERTULLIANI OPERA. TYPOGRAPHI BREPOLS TURNHOLTI.

1) R. Klein: Tertullian und das Romische Reich, 1928, Anhang 11
Tertullians Stellung zum Kriegsdinst. Carl Winter Universitätsverlag.


3) De corona, 1.

4) De corona, xl, 2.


7) Cassius Dio Cocceianus: ἡ Ῥωμαϊκὴ ἱστορία, LXXVIII, 9, 4-5.


9) De idol. 19. 1.

10) De idol. 19. 2.