

Some Considerations on the *Praefectus ripae legionis primae Ioviae cohortis et secundae Herculiae musculorum Scythicorum et classis in plateypegiis*

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Abstract. This article examines the passage XXXIX, 35 from *Notitia Dignitatum*, the only literary source referring to the fleet commander in the Roman province of Scythia. The document mentions the praefectus of the fleet and two types of naval units under his control. Several questions can be raised about the status of the commander, the place where he or she resided, the nature and attributions of the fleet. Although the text has been studied by many historians, several reading proposals being advanced, the issue of the military fleet on the Scythian border remains open.

Rezumat. Acest articol analizează pasajul XXXIX, 35 din *Notitia Dignitatum*, singura sursă literară ce face referire la comandantul flotei din provincia romană Scythia. În document este menționat comandantul flotei și două tipuri de unități navale aflate în subordinea sa. Se pot ridica mai multe întrebări cu privire la statutul comandantului, locul în care își avea reședința, caracterul și atribuțiile flotei. Deși textul a fost studiat de mai mulți istorici, fiind avansate diverse propuneri de lectură, problema flotei militare de pe frontiera scitică rămâne în continuare deschisă.

Keywords: Roman fleet commander, *Notitia Dignitatum*, Scythia.

Roman fleet in the province of Scythia according to *Notitia Dignitatum*

A passage of *Notitia Dignitatum* mentions the commander of the province's fleet, under the authority of the duke of Scythia: *Praefectus ripae legionis primae Ioviae cohortis..... et secundae Herculiae musculorum Scythicorum et classis Inplateypegiis*². He is listed among legion commanders, having the same status as their prefects.

The passage, hard to interpret, has generated many controversies. Several reading options have been proposed:

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² N. D. Or. XXXIX, 35.

• C. Chiriac: *Praefectus ripae legionis primae Ioviae cohortis [quintae pedaturae superioris] et secundae Herculiae musculorum Scythicorum et classis in plateypegiis*³.

• M. Zahariade: *Praefectus ripae legionis primae Ioviae et secundae Herculiae [et] musculorum Scythicorum et classis in [loco] Plateypegiis*⁴.

• E. F. Scurtu: *Praefectus ripae legionis primae Ioviae cohortis ... et secundae Herculiae musculorum Scythicorum et classis Histricae, Inplateypegiis*⁵.

Musculi Scythici are the first naval unit present in the text. Another unit named *militiae musculariorum* under the command of a *praefectus* is located at Massilia, in southern Gaul⁶. The soldiers may have been recruited locally, as the ethnic appellation seems to show⁷ or the unit received the name of the province in which it stood. A mistake was noted in the above-mentioned fragment. Whether there is a loophole after *cohortis*, either this word was written in addition, following the repeated copying of the manuscript, we do not know for sure.

A. Aricescu proposes the reconstitution of the unit name as *cohors musculorum Scythicorum*⁸. His hypothesis was contradicted by O. Bounegru, who emphasized that the term *cohortis* had nothing to do with *musculi Scythici*⁹. The same author excludes the possibility that the text is referring to cohorts of the Scythian fleet. Naval cohorts are epigraphically certified (a *cohors maritima* at Cordoba and a supposed *cohors naut [arum]* mentioned by three inscriptions at Cemenelum and Riviera), but the term has a general meaning, not referring to the type of ships from which the units were composed¹⁰. M. Zahariade argued that the term *cohortis* should be eliminated, being probably a copy error of the manuscript¹¹.

C. Chiriac believes that the prefect recalled in this passage is the same as the prefect of *pedatura superioris* of the I Iovia legion of Noviodunum. In support of the hypothesis, C. Chiriac recalls the fragments of bricks discovered in Noviodunum, with the stamp PCRΣ¹², dated to the 3rd–4th centuries, after the establishment of the Scythia province, well as the fact that Noviodunum was the headquarters of *Classis Flavia Moesica* during the Principate. He chose *pedatura superioris* because, if the text would refer to *pedatura inferioris* of Aegyssos, his attributions would have been noted in the continuation of the previous sentence.

³ CHIRIAC 1984, 304: “The prefect of the shore, commander of the five cohorts of the first Iovia legion from the *pedatura superioris* (is) also (prefect) of the *musculi Scythici* of the second Herculia legion and the fleet of *plateypegiis*”.

⁴ ZAHARIADE 1988, 90: “... the *musculi Scythici* and the fleet in [the place] (called) *Plateypegiis*”.

⁵ SCURTU 2016, 82.

⁶ N. D. Occ., XLII, 16.

⁷ ARICESCU 1977, 120; BOUNEGRU 1983, 273.

⁸ ARICESCU 1977, 120.

⁹ BOUNEGRU 1983, 275.

¹⁰ BOUNEGRU 1983, 275, note 16.

¹¹ ZAHARIADE 1988, 90.

¹² ISM V, 285: *P(raefectura) C(lassis) R(ipae) Σ(chythicae)*.

The conjunction *et*, immediately present after the gaps in the text, suggests the cumulus of prefect's functions, like the other *et*, used before the *classis in plateypegiis*. According to the author, the prefect of the five cohorts of *pedatura superioris* of the I Iovia legion of Noviodunum could also be the commander of the Scythian *musculi* of the II Herculia and of the *plateypegiis* fleet. The latter would have acted on the *limes* section attributed to the I Iovia legion, while *musculi* on that of the II Herculia legion¹³. The interpretation does not seem convincing. It would have made more sense as the prefect of the ships that served the II Herculia to be one of the prefects of her legion. We tend to believe, however, that in the passage of the *Notitia Dignitum* there is a prefect other than that of *pedatura superioris* of the I Iovia legion of Noviodunum.

The name of the unit could be *legionis primae Ioviae et secundae Herculiae musculorum Scythicorum* (the Scythian *musculi* of the I Iovia și II Herculia legions)¹⁴ or *secundae Herculiae musculorum Scythicorum* (the Scythian *musculi* of the II Herculia legion)¹⁵. The passage refers to the prefect who had authority over the two naval formations in the province. The names of the legions have no place in this passage, unless they are related to the boats. Thus, the Scythian *musculi* were either vessels used only by the II Herculia legion, or more likely by both Scythian legions, for transporting supplies on the Danube.

Musculi were, as the Althiburos mosaic in Tunisia shows, asymmetric crafts without a mast, with a raised snout and a curved bow, the movement of which was made with the help of the frames. The name of the vessels translates into „mice” and probably is related to the characteristics of the craft type: small, lightweight and fast¹⁶. These types of ships were generally maritime, such as those attested in Massilia or in the Histria figurative representations, but they could also navigate in the larger rivers or lagoon areas. *Musculi* seem to have been used for transportation and trade in the low waters around Histria, but also in other areas of the Roman Empire. According to some opinions, the *musculi* could also be battle ships, being part of the *naves longae* category¹⁷. In Scythia, the *musculi* could be boats carrying smaller amounts of supplies to groups of legionaries, dispatched at various fortified points on the *limes*, but also used for transportation of troops or in military actions.

Classis Inplateypegiis/in plateypegiis was another naval formation under the command of the same *praefectus ripae legionis*. The term *Inplateypegiis/in plateypegiis* has generated some controversy. One possibility would be that the text should not refer to a particular place, but to the type of craft that made up the fleet. Several arguments have been put forward in

¹³ CHIRIAC 1984, 305–306.

¹⁴ According to BOUNEGRU and ZAHARIADE's observations regarding the wrong copying of the term *cohortis*.

¹⁵ According to CHIRIAC's observations.

¹⁶ DUV AL 1949, 136; BOUNEGRU 1983, 274.

¹⁷ BOUNEGRU 1983, 274–275; BOUNEGRU, ZAHARIADE, 1996, 63–64.

support of this theory. A. Aricescu¹⁸ underlined that *Notitia Dignitatum* always indicates the types of boats that formed the main naval units: the *musculi Scythici* in Scythia or the *naves amnicae* from Moesia Secunda¹⁹. Also, in the case of Moesia Secunda, there is no localized headquarters of the fleet that was under the command of a *praefectus*. This could mean that the fleet was operating across the entire Danube border of the province. Another argument is grammatical in nature: the preposition *in* is used before the term *plateipegiis*, which do not apply in the case of other toponyms in the Danubian provinces recorded in *Notitia Dignitatum*²⁰.

Other historians have considered that the text refers to a fleet base called *Plateypegia*, located somewhere in the delta area²¹. The toponym *Inplateypegiis* originates, according to M. Zahariade, from the Latin preposition *in* + *πλάτη + πηγή*. He translates the term as „flat bottom/surface (boats) on the river”²². The existence of the toponym may be explained by the name of a type of flat-bottomed boats encountered in Egypt, in the Nile Delta, which are also useful in the Danube Delta. The appearance in the text of a location with such a name may be due to the long presence of such ships in that place²³. *Plateypegia* were light flat-bottomed boats, vertical curbs, with a stern higher than the bow, a mast with a Latin cloth and a rear cabin specially designed to navigate deep water. They were medium-sized vessels used to transport commercial goods, especially cereals. As evidenced by Egyptian papers, the Roman army used local *plateypegia* fleets to carry *annonae*²⁴. Zosimos describes how the army of the Lower Danube was being supplied during Valens's war with the Goths: „He (Valens) conveyed the soldiers' provisions on a large fleet of transports through the Black Sea to the mouths of the Danube, and thence by means of river boats stored them in the towns along the river to facilitate the supply of the army”²⁵.

It seems unlikely that they were brought from Egypt, as part of the Theodosius I troop's exchange between this province and Scythia, certified by Zosimos, due to the long distance that had to be covered and the fact that these ships were not designed for sailing at sea.

In support of the toponymy theory, a comparison was made with Belgica Secunda province: *praefectus classis Sambricae, in loco Quartensi sive Hornensi*²⁶. Just as in this case, our

¹⁸ ARICESCU 1977, 120.

¹⁹ N. D. Or. XL, 36.

²⁰ ARICESCU 1977, 121.

²¹ PÂRVAN 1906, 41; 1913, 507, note 1; VULPE 1938, 400; BARNEA 1968, 372 and 374; ZAHARIADE 1988, 90; 2006, 175–176; 2008, 352–353; 2009, 352; 2015, 164; BOUNEGRU, ZAHARIADE 1996, 27.

²² ZAHARIADE 2015, 164.

²³ ZAHARIADE 1988, 90; BOUNEGRU, ZAHARIADE 1996, 27.

²⁴ BOUNEGRU, ZAHARIADE 1996, 69; BOUNEGRU 2011, 21–22; KHALIL 2012, 75.

²⁵ ZOSIMOS, IV, 10.

²⁶ N. D. Oc. XXXVIII, 8; ZAHARIADE 1988, 90. Under the command of the duke of Belgica Secunda are mentioned *Equites Dalmatae* at Marcis, *praefectus classis Sambricae, in loco Quartensi sive Hornensi* and *tribunus militum Nerviorum* in Portus Aepatiacus. *Classis Sambricae* seems to be a war fleet.

text could show where the fleet commander was headquartered: *in [loco] Plateypegiis*, a fortification that fulfilled its main core role. The toponym could indicate the long presence of flat bottom boats in this place, on St. George's arm of the Danube, somewhere close to the sea. R. Vulpe expressed the opinion that *Plateypegia* could not have been born until the third century, when the barbarians in the north, using boats to cross the Danube's arms and channels, intensified their attacks on the empire²⁷.

E. F. Scurtu considers the term either to be a toponym of a settlement in the delta area, either to refer to the entire delta of the Danube. In his view, Histria could have been a naval base for *classis Histrica* who operated in the provinces of Pannonia Prima, Valeria, Pannonia Secunda, Moesia Prima and Dacia Ripensis and which was the main fleet headquarters of Scythia. Another possible site of the prefect of the fleet proposed by the author is Halmyris, where there would have been a shipbuilding site that would have functioned until the sixth century²⁸. We emphasize that *classis Histrica* is not mentioned in Moesia Secunda either, which shows that this is not an omission in the text. Units of this fleet were attached only to those ducats, which contradicts the author's hypothesis.

Another problem can be raised with regard to the toponym *Inplateypegiis*. If we really have to deal with the name of a military base of the fleet in the province where its commander was headquartered, then *Inplateypegiis* should be one of the main ports of Scythia, equipped with the port facilities needed to host a large fleet. However, the supposed toponym is not certified by any other historical source. It seems more logical that the headquarters of the prefect would have been in one of the main ports, probably at Noviodunum, where *Classis Flavia Moesica* also had its headquarters.

By the term *ripa legionis* we understand specific sectors of the border allocated to each legion for surveillance and defence. Like the commanders of the two Scythian legions, the fleet commander bears the title of *praefectus* and is recorded among the commanders of *riparienses* legions. Under his authority were the *musculi Scythici* and *classis in plateypegiis*, which were more likely to be the naval units responsible for transporting food and supplies to the troops on the border. The military fleet of Scythia was probably made up of the other two units mentioned in *Notitia Dignitatum*: *milites nauclarii*²⁹ and *milites superventores*³⁰, to which other unidentified units could be added. They probably used types of craft such as those *naves longae* used by Promotus in the year 386 in the battle on the Danube with the Goths³¹ or *naves lusoriae*³².

²⁷ VULPE 1938, 300.

²⁸ SCURTU 2016, 81–84.

²⁹ *N. D. Or.*, XXXIX, 20.

³⁰ *N. D. Or.*, XXXIX, 21.

³¹ ZOSIMOS IV, 39.

³² *Codex Theodosianus* 7, 17, 1.

Without excluding the other possibilities presented, we suggest another possible reading of the passage from *Notitia Dignitatum: praefectura*³³ *riphae legionis primae Ioviae et secundae Herculiae musculorum Scythicorum and classis in plateypegiis* („prefecture of the Scythian *musculi* of the I Iovia and II Herculia shore legions and of the fleet of *plateypegia*”).

It is difficult to tell whether the *musculi Scythici* would have acted on the *limes* portions attributed to the II Herculia legion and *pedatura superioris* of the I Iovia legion (that is to say the river section from the Moesia Secunda border to Aegyssus, to the point where the delta begins) and on St. George's arm acted that *classis in plateypegiis*. There is also the possibility that these two types of craft have fulfilled different tasks, depending on the characteristics of each, throughout the Dobrogea's section of the Danube. One of their main task could have been the distribution of the *annona*. Maybe *classis in plateypegiis* took in the supplies for military units from the seagoing ships in the region of the Danube mouths, as Zosimos reports, which were to be transported to the river ports and the *musculi* picked up smaller cargoes to distribute to the various garrisons. Perhaps these vessels, especially the *musculi*, also acted as battle ships when the situation required.

The fleet commander in Scythia

It was considered that the *praefectus* of the fleet was subordinate to the commanders of the two legions on the Scythian *limes*³⁴. Two arguments were brought: his presence at the end of the list of the Scythian military units in *Notitia Dignitatum* and the fact that he was the commander of the Scythian *musculi* assigned to the two legions. We consider this *praefectus* to have the same status as the prefects of Legio I Iovia and Legio II Herculia. Returning to the text of *Notitia Dignitatum*, we note that it lists, in a specific order (*sub dispositione viri spectabilis ducis Scythiae*), the military units of cavalry (*cunei equitum*), infantry (*auxiliares*), the frontier legions (*item legiones riparienses*) and members of the duke's offices (*officium autem habet ita*)³⁵. We believe that the order in which the troop categories are listed is not accidental, but reflects the importance and the role each of them had in the military organization of the province. Just as there was a well-defined differentiation between the status of the *scholae – palatini/comitatenses/pseudocomitatenses – limitanei/ripensis/riparienses* at imperial scale, probably the same was in the case of troops in the border provinces. Taking as an example the case of Scythia, the seven *cunei* could have represented the elite cavalry units under the command of the duke, stationed at key points, but who could quickly intervene in every

³³ In the oldest preserved manuscripts of *Notitia Dignitatum* from 1436 and 1542, passage XXXIX, 35, the term *praefectura* is used, abbreviated as *praef.* in the first document (see Figures 1 and 2). In O. Seeke's edition of the text from 1876, the term *praefectus* is used (p. 88).

³⁴ ZAHARIADE 1988, 89; BOUNEGRU, ZAHARIADE 1996, 24.

³⁵ *N. D. Or.*, XXXIX, 11–43.

corner of the province, locally having a role similar to that of *comitatenses* at the level of the global imperial strategy. *Auxiliares* included eight units of *milites* (both infantry and naval combat units³⁶) and were the second group of troops, which probably had the role of supporting the actions of the *cunei*.

In the third category are included the frontier legions. We note that there was a main *praefectus legionis secundae Heculiae/primae Ioviae* at Troesmis and Noviodunum, which held authority over the other two *praefecti ripae legionis secundae Heculiae/primae Ioviae cohortis quintae pedaturae superioris/inferioris*. The fleet commander held the title *praefectus ripae legionis primae Ioviae et secundae Heculiae musculorum Scythicorum et classis in plateypegiis*, which could suggest its subordination to the prefects of the two legions or only to that of legion I Iovia from Noviodunum, the last mentioned in the list. However, we consider that the expression *ripar legionis primae Ioviae et secundae Heculiae* must be connected with *musculi Scythici*. Thus, the aforementioned prefect would not necessarily be subordinate to the commanders of the legions of Troesmis and/or Noviodunum, but he would be the commander of the *musculi Scythici* and the *classis in plateypegiis* which ensured the supply of the military units on the Danube line, especially with grains. Most likely, he was under the direct authority of the duke of Scythia. An imperial decree of January 28, year 412, issued by Theodosius II and addressed to Constans, who held the post of *magister militum per Thracias*, assigns the tasks of rebuilding the river fleet of Scythia to the duke of the province³⁷. This information could support the theory that the fleet commander subordinated directly to the duke, not to the prefects of the legions.

The PCRE stamp from Noviodunum seem to indicate the presence of the prefect of the Scythian fleet on this particularly important naval basis. The prefect's headquarters could be established here for strategic reasons. It is likely that at least until the rebellion of the Goths in the Balkans and the Hadrianopolis disaster from 378, the prefect's seat remained at Noviodunum.

The image of *Notitia Dignitatum* on the province's military fleet is incomplete. The text mentions only the Danubian fleet, without providing any information on the province's maritime fleet. The literary sources of the fourth century speak only of naval military activities on the Danube. Also, the fifth century imperial decrees kept in the *Codex Theodosianus* refer only to the river fleet. Perhaps the efforts of the imperial administration of this period were concentrated on the river fleet, as the Gothic confederation in the northern Black Sea, which had organized strong sea attacks on the Balkan Peninsula and Asia Minor in the third century was no longer a threat. No epigraphic findings have been made at this time to testify the existence of other naval units and to fill the image of the military fleet distribution in this part of the empire.

³⁶ We can distinguish the names of two naval combat units in the text: *milites nauclarii* and *milites superventores*.

³⁷ *Codex Theodosianus* 7, 17,1.

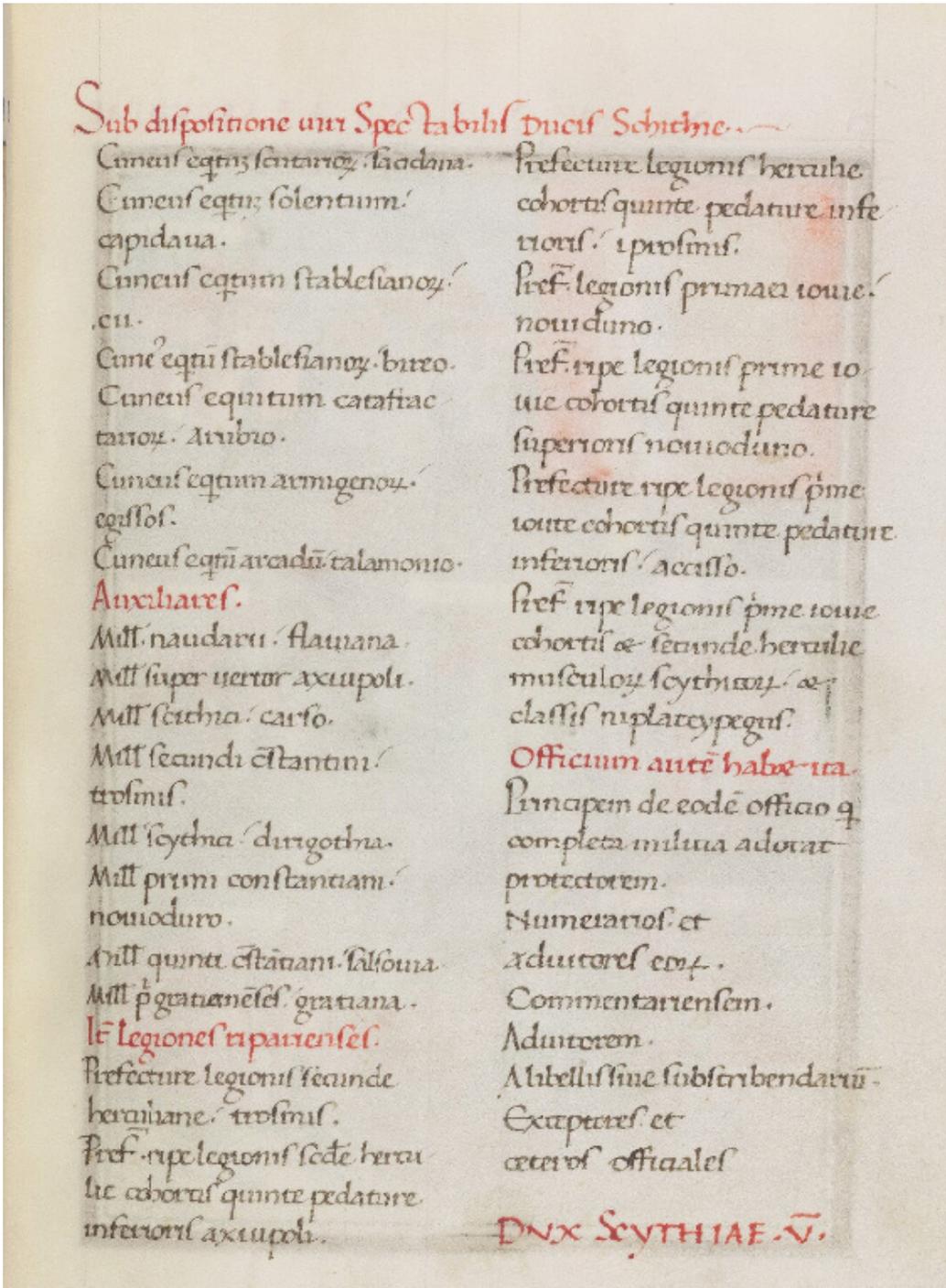


Figure 1. The *Notitia Dignitatum* page on the military organization of the Scythia province. A copy of the manuscript made in 1436 for Pietro Donato, the Bishop of Padua (ap. <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk>)

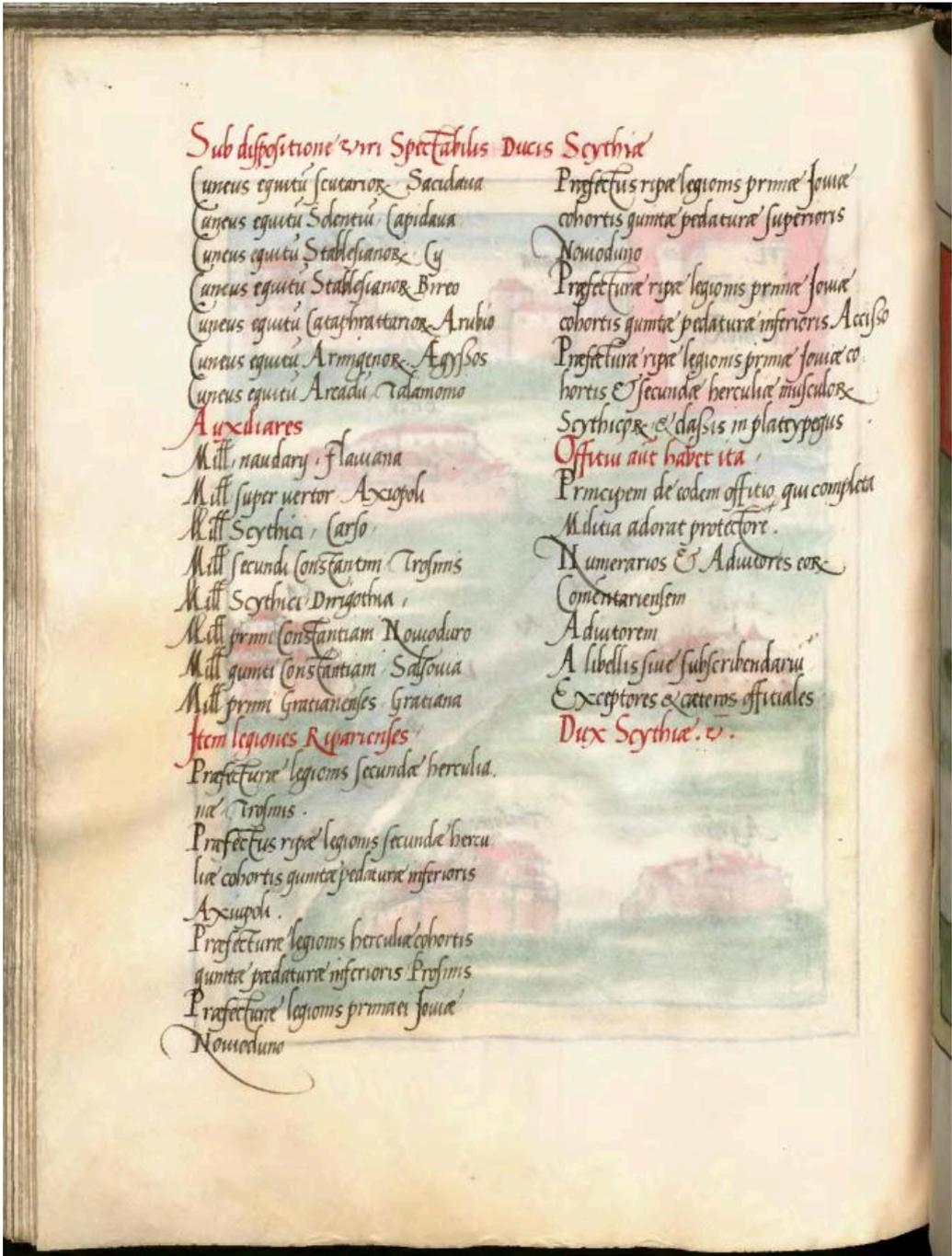


Figure 2. The *Notitia Dignitatum* page on the military organization of the Scythia province. A copy of the manuscript made in 1542 for the Palatinate Count Ottheinrich de Neuburg (ap. <https://dl.wdl.org>)

Conclusion

Corroborating the information from *Notitia Dignitatum* with those from other historical sources, we have tried to better understand the role of the military fleet commander and that of the naval units of Scythia in the Roman military strategy at the Lower Danube. We believe that the *praefectus* mentioned in this document was directly subordinated to the duke of the province and had under his authority two types of ships: *musculi Scythici* and *classis in plateyepgiis*, who were operating on the *limes*. Their main task was, apparently, the distribution of grain supplies to the various garrisons. The headquarters of the fleet prefect were located, probably at least until the year 378, in the town of Noviodunum.

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