Notitia dignitatum

Version 01

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Bernhard Palme
(University of Vienna, Department of Ancient History, Papyrology and Epigraphy)

Abstract: Lexicon article on the state manual or reference book for the internal use of Roman authorities compiled around 394/396–425/430 AD.

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bernhard.palme@univie.ac.at
Notitia dignitatum

The Notitia dignitatum tam civilium quam militarum in partibus orientis / occidentis (ND) presents itself as a schematic manual which itemises the civil and military hierarchy of the Later Roman Empire. Divided into an Eastern section (Or.) and a Western section (Occ.) its approximately 3600 lines of text provide an overview over the high civil and military officials in order of seniority. The ND comprises 90 chapters, each describing an official or military commander by his rank and title, the area of competence, the subaltern personal of the bureaus resp. the units and the garrison under his command. The ND offers an unique insight into the organization of the Later Roman Empire from the top positions at the courts – beginning with the praefecti praetorio in the civil branch and the magistri militum in the armed forces – down to the dioceses and provinces as well as the military commands and the distribution of the troops. Colorful illustrations, depicting up to 20 objects, show the insignia of each position, vignetts of the major towns in the area of responsibility, the shield emblems of the military units and allegorical representations of the provinces (simulacra privinciarum) (Berger 1981, Grigg 1983, Di Dario 2005). In its extant form, the ND is the greatest surviving source for the bureaucracy of the late empire. Though highly problematic, it is of outstanding importance for the administrative and military history of the 4th and 5th centuries CE.

Transmission
The late antique original of the ND was transmitted only by a single Carolingian deluxe copy, the Codex Spirensis (Ward 1974, Reeve 1983). This codex from the Speyer Cathedral Library, dating to the end of the 9th or beginning of the 10th century, was lost before 1672. In this manuscript the ND appeared alongside with other texts of administrative and antiquarian interest, like the Notitia urbis Constantinopolitanae. All extant copies of the ND were taken directly or indirectly from the Codex Spirensis. The earliest date to the mid 15th century, some of them – noteworthy the Oxoniensis Canonicianus Misc. 378, our most complete and earliest witness, and the Monacensis Latinus 10291 – preserve the illustrations.

Editions
The critical edition by Seeck 1876 with line-drawings of the pictures is still authoritative. The edition of Neira Faleiro 2005 provides reproductions of the Oxoniensis illustrations, but is riddled with typographical errors.
Date and composition
The date, composition and purpose of the *ND* are still a matter of dispute. Scientific analysis concentrated on administrative and military aspects, mainly in respect to specific regions of the empire and the earliest or latest addition to the text (Ward 1974, Goodburn and Bartholomew 1976).

As it represents the divided empire, the core of the *ND* dates from the years around 395 (Jones 1964, Hoffmann 1969, I: 25–53). Communis opinio regards at least the Eastern section in itself a coherent document. Despite the Eastern origins, the archetype for the *Spirensis* was Western. Its Eastern sections ceased to be updated ca. 400 at the latest, while its Western portion underwent continual revision until at least 419 and possibly until around 425. At about this time the archetype of the *Codex Spirensis* was drawn up. It is debated, if the Eastern section after having been transmitted to the West at an uncertain date, served as a model for the Western section, made up from different *Notitiae* (Clemente 1968, Demougeot 1975, Brennan 1996). According to this theory, the Western text contains too many anomalies to allow a single date. The *ND* would not be a single base text, but rather a composition of two or more separate lists joined together some time after their initial setup. A key argument for this composite-theory is the way how the dioceses Pannonia, Dacia and Macedonia are presented as divided between East and West. However, Kulikowski 2000 demonstrates that the *ND* represents the state of the Balkan dioceses at the start of Theodosius’ campaign against Eugenius. Thus the initial composition of the *ND* probably was a single base text of Eastern origin. It reflected the political realities of the Eastern Roman world of late 394, while the Western list showed the dispositions as they were imagined by the Eastern court, updated by later corrections.

While the arguments for a single base text of Eastern origin are convincing, Zuckerman 1998 points out that according to the rank *spectabilis* ascribed consequently to the *comes Orientis, praefectus Augustalis*, the *vicarii, comites* and *duces* of the *pars Orientis*, the terminus post quem for the Eastern section is 399 or even 401. Consequently, the base text was either compiled and brought to the West after 399, or there are post-Theodosian corrections also in the Eastern section.

While the Eastern section remained unchanged after that date, the Western section underwent a long series of corrections. It represents various chronological strata of progressively overlaid changes and thus does not depict the West at any specific date. Addenda from later periods include e.g. mention of the *comes Gildoniaci patrimonii*, possible
only after 398 (Occ. 12,5), or the division of the schola domesticorum, which cannot be dated before 408 (Or. 1,14–16; Occ. 1,13–14). The latest citations are the military units Placidii Valentinianici felices (Occ. 7,36) and Equites constantes Valentinianenses (Occ. 7,165), dependent on Valentinian III’s birth in 419 or even his elevation to Augustus in 425.

Inconsequences
Moreover, problems result from internal contradictions in the ND. The lists were kept up to date only with lassitude, changes have not been carried out systematically. When additions or deletions were made in one chapter, no effort was made for consequential changes in the entire document. Hence the large number of discrepancies especially in the Western list which underwent several revisions.

Military lists
Confusion paramounts in the army lists: Changes with the troops in the provinces were not recorded, disbanded units still recorded, translocated units occur in the Western section as well as in the Eastern. Basically the military lists are Theodosian (Jones 1964, Hoffmann 1969), peculiarities like the large number of pseudocomitatenses in the Eastern comitatus suggest a campaign force, as it is expected with preparations of Theodosius against Eugenius. Hoffmann’s 1969–1970 complex reconstruction of the distribution and transfer of units was based on the assumption, that troops with the epitheton seniores should be Western, while those styled iuniores should be Eastern according to the division of the comitatus by Valentinian and Valens at Naissus in 364. An inscription showing Cornuti seniores at the East already at 356 (Drew-Bear 1977) destroyed this general reconstruction, though many of Hoffmann’s detailed results many still be correct.

Purpose of the document
Discussion is going on also on the occasion, when the Eastern base text was brought to the West. While Zuckerman 1998 thinks it was sent to the West in 401 (after the reconciliation of Honorius and Arcadius), other interpretations see it brought to the West by Theodosius in 394 (Kulikowski 2000), reactivated by Stilicho for his engagement in the East in 408 (Clemente 1968) and finally edited at the court of Galla Placidia in 426 (Brennan 1996), or as a birthday gift from Theodosius II to the young Valentinian III (Purpur a 1992).

This touches the central question, if the archetype of the ND was an unique example, drawn up for a specific purpose, or one of many such official manuals. Most assume that the
ND was a practical administrative tool. Such a list could have been compiled by the primicerius notariorum, head of the central chancellery at court, who had all relevant information at his disposal (Brennan 1996). As he prepared the imperial codicilli for the annual nomination of the high-ranking officials, he kept the Laterculum maius (Or. 18,4, Occ. 16,5), a list of all civil and military positions. The archetype to the extant ND may have been a more elaborate copy of such lists; progressive revisions were necessary only if the document functioned as a practical manual.

However, Purpura 1995 and Brennan 1996 argued that the ND served only symbolic purpose. Basically a ideological text, it emphasized the unity and cohesion of a carefully structured Roman empire. The actual version that has become the archetype for the Carolingian copy might have been a luxury edition for an emperor or a senior official. Nevertheless, also a document with originally ideological intention must have relied on similar administrative tools.

This new approach has serious consequences for the use of the ND as historical source. As a work with ideological purpose it would present an imaginary reality and not the actual situation. But even if its administrative purpose is accepted, much caution is needed in using the ND for interpreting conditions in the 4th and 5th centuries. While the Eastern section provides a fairly accurate picture of the Eastern empire at about the end of Theodosius’ reign, the Western section contains such a large number of later corrections that its information is of limited value if not confirmed by outside evidence.

Bernhard Palme

References and suggested readings


