

# ROMAN MILITARY BELTS

## AND

# THE BELT OF TRUTH

Like modern belts, Roman military belts were both functional and highly decorative. The higher the rank of the individual the more discretionary money he had to “show off” his rank and wealth. One way of demonstrating that wealth and status was the sometimes very elaborate *clingulum* (also known as a *balteus*) which was worn around the waist to secure the sword to the body, to keep the armor tight to the torso, and to support the side-dagger, the *pugio* at the ready for close up fighting.



The *clingulum* would often be highly decorated with stamped metal plates or intricately cast or carved plates which were sometimes silvered to add to their artistic presentation and value. The *clingulum* would serve as a status symbol and or as a way for the soldier to “wear his wealth” and take it with him at all times. While the Roman military did have a good banking system, many soldiers wished to display their status by the armor and accoutrements they owned and wore. So, this belt was both highly practical and potentially decorative. In off duty time, when the soldier would not be wearing his armor, he would still proudly wear his decorated *clingulum* as both an identity and a status symbol.

Many of the line soldiers would wear anywhere from five to seven leather straps suspended from their belt in front of the groin area. These straps, collectively known as a *sporrán* or “apron” were adopted when the Roman armor design shifted from chain-mail style to the banded metal style. The chain-mail armor extended to an area between the waist and the knee while the banded armor came only to the waist. The *sporrán* gave the soldier a less naked feeling and did provide some minimal protection. The apron straps were often highly decorated. They also had end-pieces, or finals, made of bronze that would make noise when a group was marching. The noise was a type of psychological warfare to raise the anxiety of the enemy being attacked.

If a soldier was dishonorably discharged, his *clingulum* was taken away from him as a symbol of being stripped of his military identity and standing. If a soldier got into trouble with his commander, he might be required to pull extra guard duty as part of his punishment, but he would be required to pull that extra duty *without his clingulum*, and thus be in the public eye belt-less. That would make him look like a woman in his unbelted tunic. The added embarrassment was added punishment. A belt-less soldier was no soldier at all.

Centurions normally wore a leather vest-like garment under their armor. This *subarmalis* had gold or other braid-trimmed-tabs at the shoulders and below the waist which provided protection similar to the *sporrán* of the lesser ranking soldiers.

Another absolutely essential item was the *baldric* which supported the sword. This belt was slung over the right shoulder for a centurion, placing the sword on his left side, and reversed for the regular line soldier whose sword was worn on the right side of his body. The sword was not attached to the *clingulum* around the waist, but suspended from the shoulder of the soldier by the *baldric*. This arrangement shifted the weight of the sword and scabbard to the shoulder making it possible to move more freely. After the first century the side dagger was sometimes suspended from another *balteus* opposite the placement of the strap supporting the sword. The two belts would make an X across the chest and back and be held snug to the body by the *clingulum*.

Roman military belt buckles ranged from the very plain, simple bronze rods bent or hammered into shape to the highly elaborate cast buckles with intricate designs and artistic patterns. Most buckles were made of bronze but some were of carved bone or ivory, thus adding to the beauty and value of the belt and serving as a way of telling everyone how wealthy and important the wearer was.

Belts were highly prized and important parts of the Roman soldier's personal armor. They were maintained in good condition by oiling them to keep them from becoming stiff or cracking. They were, in reality, foundational to a soldier's personal armor and to his ultimate success. Belts essentially kept everything together for the soldier so he would be able to fight and survive.

Key Roman terms:

<i>Clingulum</i>	A belt worn around the waist
<i>Baldric</i>	A shoulder slung belt to support the sword
<i>Sporran</i>	Leather straps in front of the groin on the clingulum
<i>Subermalis</i>	A garment worn under the armor for padding/protection



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