

# Vigiles

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The *vigiles* (*cohortes vigilum*) were part of the important garrison of Rome during the imperial period. While the *vigiles* were organized along military lines, they were paramilitary and not used like the Praetorian Guard or the urban cohorts during military conflicts (see PRAETORIAN COHORTS; COHORTES URBANAE). Their primary duties in the capital were focused on fire prevention, as well as preventing crimes at night. Fire in the city of Rome had always been a dangerous problem, and bands of firefighters had existed during the republic (see FIREFIGHTING). The Republican predecessors to the *vigiles* included those organized by the *triumviri nocturni*, assisted by aediles, free citizens, as well as a band of public slaves (*Dig.* 1.15.1). AUGUSTUS originally created a force of six hundred slaves seconded to the aediles in 22 BCE as a permanent firefighting force (*Cass. Dio* 54.2). This expedient later proved insufficient, leading to the creation of the *cohortes vigilum* as a permanent force in 6 CE with seven cohorts consisting of five hundred men each (*Cass. Dio* 55.26).

Each of the seven cohorts of *vigiles* was commanded by a tribune, promoted from the ranks of the legions as an *ex-PRIMUS PILUS*, who would later usually go on to a tribunate of the urban cohorts and then the tribunate of a Praetorian cohort. The cohorts were placed under the overall command of the equestrian *praefectus vigilum*, who had responsibility also for hearing cases over minor crimes. Each cohort was based at a camp, and they were

responsible for protecting two of the fourteen regions of the city, while simultaneously maintaining two *excubitoria* (watch stations; see EXCUBIAE) in these two regions as well. Furthermore, detachments of the *vigiles* could be found at OSTIA and PUTEOLI by the reign of CLAUDIUS (*Suet. Claud.* 25.2).

While the *vigiles* were originally recruited from freedmen and served for six years, they were later recruited from freeborn citizens, and the strength of the cohorts rose to a thousand men each. While they were not soldiers, the *vigiles* were nonetheless able to influence political affairs like the Praetorian and urban cohorts. In 31 CE, the former *praefectus vigilum* Macro relieved the Praetorians outside the Senate while the Praetorian Prefect SEJANUS was meeting with the senators, and replaced the Praetorians with his own *vigiles* when Sejanus was disposed of during the plot (*Cass. Dio* 58.9). In 69 CE, the *vigiles* were involved, along with some of the urban cohorts, when the urban prefect Flavius Sabinus declared for his brother VESPASIAN against VITELLIUS (*Tac. Hist.* 3.64). However, by the fourth century CE, the *cohortes vigilum* were no more, joining the defunct Praetorian Guard and urban cohorts, and they had been replaced by guilds which were then put in charge of fighting fires.

## REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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