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THE VINDOLANDA WRITING TABLETS

R. P. Wright

THE LOWER-CASE "Roman" type, in which most of this volume is printed and which since the Renaissance has been and remains a principal vehicle for the transmission and diffusion of western European civilisation, is derived from the Carolingian minuscule hand. This in turn is the direct descendant of the cursive handwriting used by ordinary Romans, as distinct from the capitals of lapidary inscriptions. Surviving evidence of this early stage in the evolution of the Roman cursive hand is relatively rare. It is thus gratifying that so generous a sampling should have been brought to light by Mr. Robin Birley on our own sector of the Roman frontier. The discovery is one that should concern every reader of this page. For this reason and because of the many other interesting aspects of the discovery, conservation, transcription, and contents of these tablets, the review Mr. R. P. Wright had been invited to write of this important monograph is here presented as an article.—*Editor*

A. K. Bowman and J. D. Thomas, with contributions by J. N. Adams and R. Tapper, *VINDOLANDA: the Latin writing-tablets*. Britannia Monograph series no. 4, 1983, Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, 157 pp., 11 figs. in text, XV pls. [Price £16.50].

This is the definitive edition of the Vindolanda wooden writing-tablets found in 1973–4, and bought in 1981 by the British Museum. The Administrators of the Haverfield Bequest and the Craven Committee of the University of Oxford and the Vindolanda Trust have aided the publication with generous grants. Much has depended on the photographic skill of Miss Alison Rutherford, of Newcastle University, and of Mr. Eric Hitchcock, of University College, London, and on the technique for conservation pioneered by the staff of the Research Laboratory of the British Museum.

The factors are detailed which preserved the wooden tablets and much leather work in anaerobic conditions, aided by wastage from tanning in an adjacent workshop. As Dr. Richard Tapper and Dr. Judith Turner have shown, the wood used for the wafer-thin "leaf tablets", many only 1–2 mm thick, was mostly sapwood from alder or birch, and could be folded. Two "stylus tablets", recessed for wax, are over 7 mm thick and came from larch or spruce not native to Britain. Little can be gleaned from the eleven stylus tablets. The two editors have used their skill in palaeography to decipher the texts and have given ample commentaries. As

papyrus had to come from Egypt at the other end of the Empire the unit in this fort entrusted a mass of ephemeral records and letters to slender tablets pared from the wood of trees available locally. Out of 117 items there are eleven main documents, and in addition to miscellaneous letters there are three archives of which two concern the commandants at Vindolanda. Two documents record the personnel used for building a bath-house and providing lead. Some of the letters are recommendations, and a full bibliography is given of similar letters found elsewhere.

For palaeographers and students of Latin handwriting in ink this monograph constitutes a monumental work which it would be foolish for them to overlook. The editors have tabulated the cursive letter-forms and concluded that Latin cursive was written in much the same way at this time throughout the Roman world. In ch. 5 Dr. Adams deals with linguistic points.

For two highlights we have in no. 37 the mention of Marcellus, governor of Britain in A.D. 103, thus corroborating the archaeological dating, and the full name of the fort, Vindolanda, already inferred in 1914 by Haverfield (see *RIB* 1700). Mommsen's note to the Dacian account (p. 86) referred to the Laralia, not the Larales, who seem to be unattested. In no. 37 (p. 130) it would be helpful to explain that *clarissimum uirum* indicates senatorial rank (see *OLD*). The writer of letter 31 must be restored as Firminus; Kajanto records 119 instances in *CIL*, and more elsewhere, and only two for Terminus. For an illustration of the rare adjective *sagacia* (no. 44) see the relief of the triad of *genii cucullati* from the neighbouring fort at Housesteads (*AA*⁴ xi (1934) 190, pl. XXVII, xii (1935) 187-94, 234).

For the general reader one may mention no. 38, sent to a soldier at Vindolanda to record the despatch or delivery of various items of clothing, such as pairs of felt or woollen socks (i.e. for northern winters), pairs of sandals and of underpants. Nos. 4 and 5 illuminate the diet of the army. It is not clear whether these stores were supplementary for the soldiers, extras for the officers or special commodities for a feast. No. 5 records purchases for the unit, many being for varieties of meat. This substantiates the theme of R. W. Davies (*Britannia* ii (1971) 126-8, table 1), based on animal bones found on military sites in Britain and partly in Upper and Lower Germany, that meat formed part of the regular diet. No. 4 lists daily disbursements of food supplies. *Axungia*, basically "axle-grease", meant pork fat, perhaps for sacrificial use and commended by the Elder Pliny as an emollient or warming agent. *Ceruesa*, cited four times, was Celtic beer and *bracis*, a Celtic loan-word, was a cereal usable in malting.

The fifteen plates illustrate the main texts, but for easy reading one should visit the Vindolanda Museum with its impressive display of ten of the photographs at 10-times magnification, provided by the liberality of an American Foundation.