

I: Roman Fortress Studies

Present Trends and Future Questions

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Pre-Flavian legionary dispositions

By the early years of the second century AD the three legions stationed in Britain were in the fortresses where they were to remain until at least the end of the third century: Legion II *Augusta* at Isca (Caerleon), Legion VI *Victrix* at Eburacum (York), where it had replaced IX *Hispana*, probably at the beginning of Hadrian's reign, and Legion XX *Valeria Victrix* at Deva (Chester). All three were founded in the seventies of the first century AD. These fortresses have been known for centuries, but our knowledge of the legionary arrangements in the years before their foundation was less securely based and it is in that area that we have seen the greatest advances since the Second World War.

The position in the nineteen-thirties was stated by R G Collingwood in *Roman Britain and the English settlements* (Collingwood & Myres 1936). Collingwood was quite clear on the legionary arrangements which followed the invasion. After Camulodunum had fallen, the Roman army was divided into three columns which advanced from London. Legion IX struck north-east to Lincoln, where it established its fortress about 47; Legion II conquered the south and south-west of England, building a fortress at or near Exeter; while the third column, consisting of legions XIV and XX, advanced along Watling Street, first constructing a base in the High Cross area, south of Leicester, where Watling Street crosses the Fosse Way, and then moving on to found a double legionary fortress at Wroxeter. Probably before 50 Legion II was moved from Exeter to a new fortress at Gloucester. Unfortunately, as Collingwood admitted, there was no structural evidence for any of these fortresses, although in several cases tombstones confirmed that the respective legions had probably been based there at some time.

What is the situation today? The foundation dates of the Flavian fortresses remain unchanged, but later discoveries on the sites of Collingwood's postulated first fortresses only confirmed parts of his predictions. The fortresses at Lincoln and Gloucester were located soon after the Second World War, when development and excavation was resumed, but it was soon realised that neither had been built as early as the late forties; indeed the evidence suggests that Lincoln dates from the early sixties and Gloucester from the later sixties. At much the same time Aileen Fox found the fortress at Exeter, while Graham Webster's work at Wroxeter located the fortress there, although it was for a single legion,

not the double fortress postulated by Collingwood. The corresponding fortress in south Wales was discovered in 1967 at Usk and shown, like Exeter and Wroxeter, to have been founded in the mid-fifties. Finally excavations in Colchester revealed that the *colonia* had been built on the site of a legionary fortress constructed immediately after the invasion.

What was surprising about these discoveries was that, except for Camulodunum, none of these fortresses had been built until the mid-fifties or later, some ten or more years after the invasion. Perhaps this should not have surprised us, for this was a time when the first phase of the conquest had been completed and the establishment of forward bases for the legions was a logical decision. If a name has to be given to the creator of this system, it must surely be that of Didius Gallus, governor from 52 to 57, and the construction of the fortresses at Exeter for Legion II, at Usk for Legion XX and at Wroxeter for Legion XIV can be seen both as the consolidation of his predecessors' conquests in western Britain and the necessary preparation for further advances in Wales and Cornwall. The fortress of Legion IX at Lincoln was built slightly later, in the early sixties, a fact which may be explained by the fact that unlike the western fortresses, which lay on frontiers where further military advances were imminent, the northern frontier was formed by the client kingdom of the Brigantes, and no campaign was envisaged against them at that time. Given its foundation date it is tempting to associate it with the suppression of the Boudiccan revolt of 60/61, which must have led to a major reconsideration of the military arrangements in eastern England.

However, the fact that most these fortresses had not been built until the mid-fifties raised the question of where the legions had been based before then. A possible solution was suggested by the discovery of a series of large forts, now usually called vexillation fortresses, ranging in size from around 4 to 10 hectares. About fifteen are now known, and some ill-defined but extensive early Roman military sites such as that underlying Chichester probably fall into the same category. With the exception of Longthorpe we know little about the internal plans of these forts and we should not assume that all were of the same date, but they do provide an explanation for the missing early legionary fortresses. They suggest that for the first ten or more years of the conquest period most of the legions were split into smaller groups, possibly sharing their winter quarters and administrative centres with auxiliary troops — an arrangement which reflected the need to garrison the wide front on which the Roman army was operating in the later forties and early fifties. Only Legion XX at Colchester had a single base in the Claudian period, and that was probably as much for political as military reasons since Camulodunum was the *de facto* capital of the new province.

Fortress plans

It is unfortunate that we do not know more of the internal layouts and building plans of either the vexillation fortresses or the Neronian legionary fortresses, for the design of the legionary fortress was not static through the first century. The often unspoken assumption that the Flavian fortresses, as exemplified by Inchtuthil, were standardised, and that their predecessors were essentially of the same design, is disproved as soon as we look, for example, at the Augustan fortresses of Germany, which differed in important ways from their successors. To mention one example, their gates are of a type which we never find

even in the Claudio–Neronian fortresses of Britain. Nor is there the uniformity of overall planning which is often claimed. Admittedly there is a high degree of standardisation in the types of buildings present but far less in where they should be placed within the fortress. Even rectangularity of plan was not sacrosanct.

Perhaps more surprisingly there are enormous gaps in our knowledge of the interiors of the Flavian fortresses. Very little is known of York, which was perhaps the most important of them all, and while the basic plans of Chester and Caerleon are fairly clear, much of the detail remains obscure. By contrast, we have the complete plan of Inchtuthil, even if it is one with rather a lot of dotted lines. But Inchtuthil was never completed and it is interesting to note the buildings which came at the end of the order of priorities: several tribunes' houses, the *praetorium* and, surprisingly, the main bath house. One of the most striking features of the plan is the small size of the *principia* and the fact that it lies in the middle of a large open space, both suggesting that the timber building was going to be replaced with a stone *principia* as soon as the first phase of construction was completed. This, together with the fact that a stone wall was inserted into the front of the fortress rampart, suggests that Inchtuthil was intended to have a degree of permanence which its pre-Flavian predecessors had lacked.

Questions for the future

Turning to the future, we may ask what questions remain. The answer is a lot: so many that only a few can be discussed here. One obvious need is to obtain more detailed knowledge of the overall plans and of the buildings within fortresses of all periods. A glance at the plan of any of them shows how woefully inadequate our knowledge actually is, and how lavish is the use of the broken line when overall plans are produced. One wonders to what extent the stone phases reflected their timber predecessors. We assume that they did, and indeed for the major buildings this seems likely, but we should remember the small *principia* at Inchtuthil, which would surely have been rebuilt in stone on a larger scale. The more or less complete excavation of a site to its lowest levels was rare before the nineteen-fifties, and how many key sites were excavated before then?

Another interesting question concerns the relationship between the legionaries and the inhabitants of the *canabae* around fortresses. Did these people have free access to the fortress? The finds from the baths at Caerleon suggest that they were used by women and children. We know that there were legal restrictions on the rights of legionaries to marry, but we also know that they often formed stable relationships with women during their service. This in turn raises the question of whether they always slept in their barracks or whether they lived, at least for part of the time, with their families in the *canabae*, where they must have owned or at least paid for their family's accommodation. A very large proportion of the people living in legionary *canabae* will have been related to the serving legionaries or have been discharged legionaries themselves, but the nature of their interaction with serving soldiers is ill-understood.

We know from literary sources that the legionary legates often had their families with them, and, given their high social status, they will have had large households, a fact which is confirmed by the enormous size of their houses. The Vindolanda tablets have revealed

aspects of the social life of the wives of auxiliary commanders, and this must have applied on an even grander scale in legionary fortresses. Nor is there any reason to suppose that the junior officers did not bring their families with them: certainly they will have had slaves and servants. Within the fortress such households will have provided models of civilian life in a military context, and one wonders how they related to the rest of the fortress. At a lower social level, inscriptions make it clear that centurions and even ordinary legionaries often owned a slave, which raises the question of where they lived. It would have been highly inconvenient for a soldier if his personal slave had to spend most of his time outside the fortress.

Then there is the question of how the Roman army was supplied with its equipment and other necessities, as well as the luxuries which the men undoubtedly demanded and could afford. Here again we may have over-emphasised the difference between the military aspects of the fortress and the life of the civilians outside it. In his account of the temporary camps of the second century BC Polybius mentions the *forum* or market. There are no obvious market places inside the fortresses of the first century AD, but one may wonder if the market function died with the Republic. Are we correct in assuming that all commerce was confined to the *canabae*? Could some of the so-called *tabernae* which lined the roads at Inchtuthil really have been shops or even bars? One of the compounds which fronted the *via principalis* at Usk, in the position occupied by the *tabernae* at Inchtuthil, produced exceptionally large numbers of amphora stoppers, suggesting that the vessels were opened and their contents distributed there, but were those contents being sold or issued as rations? The enigmatic ‘Elliptical Building’ at Chester is not dissimilar in plan to certain *macella* found in Italy and the eastern provinces, which prompts the question of whether the resemblance could have extended to function as well as form. And who sold the mutton chops, pigs’ trotters and chickens (head removed but feet still on) which the bathers gnawed in the *frigidarium* of the legionary baths at Caerleon?

In short, perhaps we should ask if legionary fortresses were not more open, more ‘civilian’, than we usually believe, with the inhabitants of the *canabae*, many of whom were related to past or present legionaries, normally free to wander in and out as the occasion required? The excavation of part of the *vicus* of the auxiliary fort at Vindolanda has shown how close this ran to the fort, in places almost touching its defences. Our knowledge of the *canabae* around legionary fortresses is very limited, but they must have been major settlements in their own right (those at York were raised to the status of a *colonia*, a status achieved by very few towns in Britain) and their relationship with the fortress at their core must have been both intimate and complex.

Turning to other matters. Many of the gaps in our understanding of how a legionary fortress functioned are due quite simply to our lack of detailed knowledge of the buildings involved, a lack which only major new excavations will resolve. For example, no complete legionary barrack block has been excavated in Britain since the nineteen-twenties, when many of the questions which we would ask today would not have been postulated and certainly could not have been answered. And hardly any major building — baths, *principia*, *praetorium*, workshop or hospital — have ever been completely excavated in a British fortress. Do we always have to wait until a developer threatens such a building

before we can excavate it? And are we to postpone research excavations forever on the grounds that future techniques will always be better than those in current use — an argument which is becoming increasingly common.

A great deal of attention has been devoted to the origins of these fortresses, rather less to their later history. Among the reforms which remodelled the Roman world at the end of the third century was a major change in the status of the legion. With the creation of field armies, the legions were divided into units of around 1000 men and those units dispersed to various posts. This development is well known but its possible effect on the legionary fortresses has often been ignored. One result would have been that eighty percent of the barrack accommodation would have become redundant. The *praetorium*, built for a member of the senatorial order with a large staff and great wealth, will have passed to a man who was little more than a minor officer and who must have found such a vast palace impractical and inconvenient. And a whole series of enormous buildings, the *principia*, the workshops, the granaries and the baths, built to serve 5,000 men, were now used by one fifth of that number, and that fifth had to maintain them if they were to be retained. It seems unlikely that such a drastic reduction in manpower had no effect on the physical structure of the fortresses, but the archeological evidence for it remains obscure.

One problem which this reduction creates is in deciding when a fortress was actually abandoned. The evidence is clearest at Caerleon. The *Notitia Dignitatum* states that Rutupis, the Saxon Shore fort at Richborough in Kent, was under the command of the Prefect of the Second Augustan Legion. Clearly by the date of the *Notitia*, which is unlikely to have been compiled much before the end of the fourth century, the remnants of Legion II had been removed from Caerleon. In fact excavations there suggest that some of the major buildings, including the *basilica* of the *principia*, the baths and the hospital had been demolished before the end of the third century and that the amphitheatre was abandoned at much the same time. Given this, and the information in the *Notitia*, what is more obvious than to conclude that the fortress had been closed at that time and the reduced legion moved to Richborough? But can we assume that the abandonment of these great buildings really does mean the final closure of the fortress? Would it not have been logical for the reduced unit to have demolished some of the buildings which they had inherited and for which they can have had little use? The final answer may well be that the legion was completely removed, but the question remains — how do we differentiate between evidence of reduction and evidence of closure? To do so will require careful and extensive excavation of the later levels, which, inevitably, are those most likely to have been disturbed in the past and to which earlier excavators rarely devoted much time or effort.

One final point. In the nineteen-sixties the excavation of groups of barracks in some auxiliary forts on Hadrian's Wall revealed that they had been remodelled in the fourth century to convert them into rows of small individual dwellings, so-called 'chalet barracks'. Presumably these reflect the reduced size of the auxiliary garrisons of this period, perhaps even the introduction of soldiers' families into the forts. We now know that such barracks were normal in late Roman auxiliary forts in the north of England, but what of legionary barracks? Could some of those have been modified in the same way? Given

the number of barrack blocks in a fortress it is clear that a fourth-century legion need have modified only a small proportion of the barracks, a fact which will not make their location any easier. None have been found as yet, but one has to remember that many of the auxiliary barracks which are now known to have been remodelled had already been excavated earlier in the twentieth century without this modification being recognised. Given the high proportion of legionary barrack blocks which were also excavated in the first few decades of the twentieth century, we may ask if there is any reason to suppose that excavators who failed to recognise them in auxiliary forts will have been more observant on legionary sites.

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