

VII: Where have all the Soldiers gone?

Some Thoughts on the Presence and Absence of Soldiers in Fourth-Century Chester

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The problem of recognition

A reading of the 1994 publication on Saxon Chester soon brings home the problems of this period. The Saxon layers dating to the ninth–tenth century are characterised by Simon Ward as follows: ‘The basic relationship shared by all contexts identified as Saxon on the sites under consideration in this volume is that they lay in the stratigraphical sequence between the frequently more easily dated Roman and medieval levels.’ (Ward *et al* 1994, 3–4). Given the fact that large-scale building in Roman Chester stopped in the third century it is tempting likewise to characterise the fourth-century occupation as being represented by the features lying between the recognisably earlier Roman layers and identifiable later, Saxon, structures. Unfortunately, the paucity of dating evidence is sometimes such that it is hard to tell what is late Roman and what Dark Age or Mercian.

In the past most efforts have rightly been focused on disentangling the often complicated earlier history of Chester, especially the date of its foundation and the plan of the fortress in the second and third centuries AD, and in reviewing the material for this paper it was surprising how little evidence we are actually dealing with. By the fourth century the Romans had a lot of good quality buildings from earlier periods they could continue to use. Evidence from elsewhere, for example Carnuntum, shows that late Roman occupation in fortresses often involved the adaptation of these existing buildings rather than the building of new ones. In a way this is unsurprising, as the practice continues today. For example, there is no twentieth-century cathedral in Chester because the old one is still perfectly serviceable, given some necessary changes to make it suitable for modern usage, like installing central heating, a cafe and a bookshop. It seems therefore not impossible to predict similar behaviour by the Romans with respect to their upstanding buildings.

A further complicating factor in the reconstruction of late Roman Chester is the diminishing size of the legions and with them often the size of the attached settlements. It can therefore not be ruled out that we have to expect much smaller numbers of people living in and around Chester.

Structural evidence

The defences

Thompson (1965, 29) assumed in the 1960s that the western defences of the fortress were destroyed shortly after the repairs to the north wall, which he dated to *c* AD 300 (for a late Saxon/early medieval date for these repairs, see now LeQuesne *et al* 1999, 120–1; 146–8). This would suggest an early end to the fortress as a defensible structure. This conflicts, however, with the historical evidence, which shows that in 893/4 the Danes were able to hold out against the Saxons inside the fortress for two days. Strickland has also convincingly argued that the slighting mentioned by Thompson was more likely to have occurred when the City Walls were extended to the Dee in the medieval period (Strickland in Ward *et al* 1994, 8–10). At St John Street Mason (1994–5, 13) argued that the defences collapsed and had then been rebuilt in the period AD 250–300.

If Thompson and Mason are correct, then in the fourth century the fortress area would have been protected by a recently refurbished wall, although this gives us little indication as to the character of the settlement inside.

The *principia*

Very little of the *principia* has been excavated, but from what we know it seems that it was refloored in the fourth century (Carrington *ed* 1994, 34). This paving appears to have extended over most of the building, as Ward seems to have found patches in the south range (1988, 15). He also argued that this extensive paving might be an indicator that the headquarters building continued in intensive use.

As to the end of the building he remarks (1988, 28): ‘In conclusion, therefore, these [latest] pits are possibly evidence for a period of occupation at some date around the end of the fourth century or later. This occupation could have been in the still-standing south range of the *principia* or in lighter timber structures on the site of it. If it was in the *principia*, then it was probably a very different sort of occupation from that which the building had enjoyed earlier in its life. It is clear, however, that when this period of occupation ended, an organised demolition and site clearance was carried out. One important effect of the demolition and levelling of the Roman building was to raise the ground level by up to 1.5 m above the adjacent road surfaces. This seems to have occurred on the sites of all the major Roman buildings in the centre of the fortress’.

It cannot, therefore, be assumed that the *principia* was still fully functional throughout the fourth century and the question of whether it contained a church as Strickland and Thacker argue (Strickland in Ward *et al* 1994, 11) must for the moment remain open.

The Elliptical Building, the granaries and the other store buildings

The elaborate Elliptical Building also has rebuilding evidence dating to the fourth century (Mason 2000, 143–9), while Ward (1988, 15; Ward *et al* 1994, 43) mentions fourth-century sandstone paving in the large store buildings in the *retentura*. Strickland and Ward believe that especially the store building to the north of the Elliptical Building continued to remain standing and even to acquire a number of timber structures in its north yard in the latest Roman period. Also still standing and functioning was the granary in Hunter Street (in Ward *et al* 1994, 12).

In fact, the only store buildings that were demolished in the course of the fourth century were apparently the granaries in Commonhall Street. With regard to these, Thompson recorded that they did not contain much dating evidence. However, he then went on to say:

Large-scale demolition was reflected by a consistent layer of broken roof tiles between the granaries and in the spaces between the sleeper walls. From this layer and above it were recovered coins of the late third and the early fourth centuries [Carausius and Constantius], suggesting that by then the granaries were no longer being used for their original purpose. Two ventilators were also filled with a rough masonry blocking, unfortunately undated but perhaps connected with the conversion of the granaries to some other purpose during the Roman period. (Thompson 1965, 39).

The presence of roofing debris between the sleeper walls implies that somebody had taken up the raised stone floor and that, as Thompson concluded, the granaries had ceased to operate as such at some point after the end of the third century AD. However, it also implies that there were still people living inside the fortress who were willing and able to conduct large rebuilding programmes necessitating the removal of the flagging (perhaps to re-pave the *principia* or the *retentura*?). The presence of the broken tiles may attest a later accidental collapse of the granary roof, although a controlled demolition can also not be ruled out.

These features remind one of a very similar sequence at the granaries in Birdoswald (Wilmott 1997, 110–28), where the roof collapse and the filling in of the sleeper walls represented the first stage of a late and post-Roman sequence of events that saw the conversion of the granaries into a dwelling house and eventually a timber hall, although no similar structures were reported at Commonhall Street.

The fortress baths

The main fortress baths appear to have remained functional until the end of the fourth century (Mason in Ward *et al* 1994, 18; *forthcoming*). The small bath house to the south of the Elliptical Building also remained standing well into the Saxon period, suggesting that the fortress continued to enjoy a comparatively high standard of living, as it was certainly able to provide bathing facilities for a large number of people (Mason 2000, 150–1).

The barracks

At Crook Street and Goss Street, as well as probably in Abbey Green (Strickland in Ward *et al* 1994, 12), it seems that the barracks and the centurions' quarters survived well into the fourth century, with a layer of paving representing the very latest Roman activity, which is overlain by the collapse of the structures (Ward *et al* 1994, 22, 29 and 70).

On the other hand Thompson stressed that the barrack buildings in the Deanery Field (directly adjoining Abbey Green) were systematically demolished at the end of the third century (Thompson 1965, 36). It seems therefore reasonable to expect that at least one, perhaps two, cohort blocks were no longer operative in late Roman period.

At Northgate Brewery the situation was slightly more complicated. The latest recognisable barrack buildings of the old style were demolished at the end of the third century, but this appears to have been followed by a late timber phase about which very little is known and the dating of which cannot be refined beyond the 'after the end of the third century' of the preceding phase (Ward & Strickland 1978, 26–7). The surviving features consisted of a few post holes, a rubble spread, a paving over an earlier cess pit and perhaps an adjoining hearth. Dug into the rubble was a pit containing residual pottery and a broken sword. This last item cannot easily be fitted into a civilian context and might be one of our best indicators that there were armed personnel at that time in Chester. Given the publication of the Saxon remains in Chester, which saw the re-attribution of the other late timber buildings at similar sites to the Saxon period (Ward *et al* 1994), it may be worthwhile to re-examine the sequence of this site as well. But until then the sword remains a candidate for interpretation as a late Roman artefact.

The *vicus*

Thompson (1965, 45) assumed that most of the *vicus* had been destroyed by the end of the second century AD. However, he noted that the then very recent excavations at 46–50 Foregate Street in 1961 had produced walls from a late third- or fourth-century building, while to the north of the site a surface sealing pottery of the late third and fourth century was noted.

More recent work has shown that the so-called *mansio* in Castle Street continued into the fourth century (Mason 1980, 4 and 23–5). The Phase III building had been destroyed by fire at the end of the third century and then rebuilt. The later activity on the site can be summarised as follows: at some time in the first half of the fourth century, perhaps *c* 330, the passage way separating two blocks was enclosed by crudely built walling and new surfaces were laid. About the middle of the century the second well, which had been kept in commission, was backfilled to ground level and a large quantity of masonry derived from demolished walling was used to top up the filling of the first well, which had sunk owing to compaction. It is possible that these operations mark the end of the occupation on the site, but levels which may have provided evidence to the contrary could well have been removed by nineteenth-century levelling. Mason also stresses the absence of any material dating to after the middle of the fourth century.

The amphitheatre had last been rebuilt in the 270s with stone paving slabs being laid in the arena. The abandonment of the structure is dated to the mid-fourth century (Thompson 1976, 172, 179). It is to be hoped that future work may be able to refine the history of this structure.

Discussion

The status of Chester in the fourth century

In summary, by the beginning of the fourth century Chester was still full of substantial buildings with signs of recent repairs outside but especially within the fortress walls. There is enough fourth-century pottery to prove continued occupation. A lot of sites, however, appear to show a complete absence of archaeological material dating to the second half of the fourth century or later, suggesting a dramatic reduction in settlement size. The coin list

also shows the typical peaks and troughs until the 360s, when it suddenly declines, suggesting relatively 'normal' conditions in Chester until the middle of the fourth century (Shotter 1998–9, 45; Carrington ed 1994, 29).

In addition to this we also find a number of Mediterranean and continental imports on the site (Carrington ed 1994, 53). The continental pottery, particularly Mayen ware, is to be expected in a settlement this size; the Mediterranean imports are, however, much less common.

Also unusual is the type of building surviving. One would have expected the bath buildings and the granaries to survive for a while, as they offered amenities that could be used by civilians as well as the military. In Chester however, we have a substantial survival of large store buildings combined with the destruction of several of the granaries.

This raises some questions as to the nature of the population inhabiting the fortress, especially the problem of the continued presence of the legion. Strickland (1984, 30–5) argued that the widespread evidence for demolition, then dated to the end of the third century, indicated that the legion left Chester about that time and that the site probably became a civilian town operating as the capital of one of the late Roman British provinces, perhaps with some small military component, while Carrington (ed 1994, 29) argued that the decline of the coinage after the 360s might indicate that the army left Chester only in the later fourth century.

The latest evidence for Legion XX *Valeria Victrix* at Chester consists of tiles giving the legion the title *Deciana*, an honour bestowed by the emperor Trajan Decius (249–251) in the early third century AD (Carrington ed 1994, 29). We know of a third-century detachment under or at least incorporating one Aurelius Cervianus, which is commemorated on a roundel probably found in Gaul (now in the Cabinet de France). By 255 this or another vexillation is attested at Mainz in Germany (CIL 13, 6780), while by c 260 a joint vexillation of XX *Valeria Victrix* and II *Augusta* was operating on the Danube and in Pannonia (CIL 3, 3228). It has been argued that these vexillations were cut off from their parent units when Postumus rebelled against Gallienus in 260, although we are lacking positive proof (Coello 1996, 18). There is also an altar to Cocidius from Bankhead set up by men of Legion XX *Valeria Victrix*. The latest evidence for the legion are coins struck by Carausius for the unit between 287 and 293 (RIC, Carausius 82, 83, 275; Le Quesne *et al* 1999, 6; Carrington ed 1994, 29).

The later history of the legion remains therefore debatable: it may have continued for a while without commemorating its name, or it may have been disbanded or destroyed. If the vexillations on the continent did not return, we have to assume that the unit was at least temporarily under-strength from the mid-third century AD. The legion does not appear to be mentioned in the *Notitia Dignitatum* (written in the late fourth century), although John Casey has raised the possibility that the Comitatusian unit of the *Victores Iuniores Britannici* derived from the Legion XX *Valeria Victrix*, although Legion VI *Victrix* cannot be ruled out as a possible alternative (Casey 1990, 18). The identification of units mentioned in the *Notitia Dignitatum* with earlier units can be far from easy, given the fact

that some of the name changes are substantial and hard to explain from the limited evidence available: for example Legion II *Italica* seems to have turned into the *Divitenses* and one or some of the Pannonian legions are listed as *Pannoniciani Seniores*.

The size of the late Roman legion

The possibility of the Legion XX operating under-strength has already been noted. This, however, raises another vexed question: the size of the later Roman legion. Most people agree that in the later Roman period we have to expect legionary units that were substantially smaller than the original 5000–6000 soldiers mentioned for the first and second centuries AD. Often vexillations (as well as specialists with the legion like the horsemen and the *lanciararii*) were split from the main body and never returned, or the original unit was allowed to run down in size. Following a set of numbers surviving in papyri from Egypt, the size for one of these later legions is usually given as about 1000 men (Carrington ed 1994, 29; Casey 1990, 14), equivalent to about a fifth or sixth of the original nominal strength of the fortress garrison. The scanty evidence, however, does not allow us to make any statements as to whether this size applied throughout the empire and if so, when it became the norm. It is theoretically possible that some of the older legions survived for a while with higher numbers.

Given the problems of the size, the next problem that needs addressing is the question of the accommodation of any military personnel. Until recently the accommodation of legionary soldiers in the early empire was usually assumed to be straightforward: soldiers inside the fortifications, women and children and other dependents outside. However, finds in auxiliary forts (for example in Vindolanda) in the last few years have shown that this situation might actually never have been quite so clear cut, but as a rule of thumb it still holds.

From the early third century onwards this situation changed: soldiers were now allowed to formally marry, and it is often assumed that this also meant that they were allowed to live with their wives, although this is nowhere stated in the surviving sources. The result would be a mixing of the two populations and therefore, finds with female associations (eg, mirrors: Lloyd-Morgan 1977), as well as children's toys and clothes, inside the fortress, and finds of military equipment outside the fortifications. Rather than discussing concentrations of finds, we should therefore turn to the question of space allocation.

The Chester fortress has long been recognised as unusually large. Whereas 'normal' legionary fortresses are about 20 ha in size, Chester was *c* 10% bigger, or 22.5 ha (Carrington ed 1994, 29). This size difference could be expressed by equating it with other sites: Chester had in the second century the same amount of space as a 'standard' legionary fortress plus the auxiliary forts of Vindolanda (1.46 ha) and Gelligaer II (1.18 ha) combined.

So when assessing the needs of a late Roman legion in Chester, perhaps reviewing the evidence from other late fortresses might shed some light on the problem. The fortress in Deutz, opposite Cologne, has long been assumed to be the base of the 1000-strong Legion XXII *Constantiniana Victrix* and later the base of the Legion II *Italica Divitensis*. In a

recent article Maureen Carroll (1998) has drawn attention to the problems of this equation. The first unit is only known from its brick stamps and this is not a proof of residence, while the second one is known from the *Notitia Dignitatum*. However, Carroll has also drawn attention to the fact that the calculation of a thousand-strong unit is based on a reconstruction that assigns twelve barracks to centuries containing eighty soldiers each, giving space for 960 men, while the four central barracks were reserved for the administration and the officers' accommodation. As Carroll pointed out, this leaves no room for workshops, stores and stabling, even though cavalry equipment is known from the fortress. By comparison with other late Roman forts of similar size, therefore, it seemed to her much more likely that Deutz housed only a 500-strong unit, perhaps part of the legion.

Similarly the small fortress at Castrum Rauracense/Kaiseraugst near Basel has traditionally been identified as the main base for Legion I *Martia*. A recent reassessment (Fellmann 1998) has shown that this was only one of three known locations for the legion in the first half of the fourth century, the others being Oedenburg/Biesheim and Breisach further along the Rhine, which might again suggest a split unit.

So the comparison with newly built legionary fortresses (and other examples just tend to prove the point) show that we have very little understanding of the space needed by late Roman legions. However, given the size of Chester, there should have been no problem finding sufficient room for a late legion within the fortress, even with the reduction in residential accommodation caused by the demolition of some of the barracks.

The role of late Roman Chester

In fact what is in many ways surprising is not the partly destroyed barrack buildings — after all in Caerleon we also see the demolition of barrack blocks from the third century onwards — but the substantial effort to keep a large number of buildings well maintained and usable, which must have put a huge strain on the personnel in residence. The fact that the effort was made suggests that these buildings must have been important. Quite a number of them are interpreted as having started life as stores: their ground plan is often mirrored in buildings known from harbour areas in Ostia and elsewhere (eg Rickman 1971, figs 18 and 22), and this may suggest a role for Chester in the fourth century AD as a store base and transshipment point for goods to and from Britain. However, the fact that it was the granaries closest to the Dee that were destroyed suggests that these goods did not include grain, although there is little proof to link the surviving buildings with mining in the North Wales mountains. Transshipment and harbour facilities would also explain the Mediterranean imports in Chester. But harbour facilities even in the late Roman period do not always demand a military presence, so what positive proof for the presence of late Roman soldiers survives from Chester in the fourth century?

Very little military equipment from the early Roman period survived into the fourth century unchanged. Probably the least important change is the fact that soldiers were now wearing 'trousers' with their tunics. The swords were longer and worn on the left side, the shield is round and the helmet enclosed the face even more fully than the early Roman examples. These changes should allow us to identify late Roman soldiers easily in the material, especially the infantry equipment, which included long swords, javelins, round

shields, helmets, perhaps arrows and bows and, most importantly, late Roman military belts and crossbow brooches (Bishop & Coulston 1993, 160–182).

However, while late Roman crossbow brooches are known from Chester, military belt fittings have not so far been encountered in the published material. As mentioned above, late Roman swords tended to be generally longer than the earlier *gladii*, and although easily identified among the military finds, they are only rarely encountered on settlement sites. In fact, most of the swords known so far come from the graves of Germanic mercenaries rather than from Roman fortifications. However, the sword from Northgate Brewery mentioned earlier remains a possible candidate (Ward & Strickland 1978, 26).

The identification of missile weapons is further complicated by the fact that javelin- and arrow heads from the fourth century AD, apart from the *barbuli* and the *plumbatae*, show little difference to earlier spears and javelins and therefore only rarely allow safe dating. Taking these caveats into account very little survives in Chester that can safely be identified as late Roman military equipment, but before discarding the possibility of a Roman military presence in Chester it has to be kept in mind that other late Roman sites such as Richborough and York have produced similarly low concentrations of late Roman military equipment.

Magnentius and the end of military occupation at Chester

After reviewing the evidence as it stands, we therefore have to say that while we have little positive proof to support a continued presence of the Legion XX *Valeria Victrix* in Chester there is even less to rule out such a presence until the 360s. All that remains for me now is to present a model that would explain the sudden decline of Chester in the later fourth century.

In the 350s Magnentius deposed Constans, the reigning emperor in the west. This usurpation culminated in the battle of Mursa, on the 28 September 351, between Magnentius and Constantius II. This battle had the reputation amongst the fourth-century historians of being the bloodiest battle in a century that has several other contenders for this title, including the battle of Adrianople twenty-seven years later. The ‘official’ figures speak of 50,000 casualties, all members of the Roman army. The Germanic invasions along the Rhine were probably a direct result, and the reduced overall manpower appears to have triggered a major restructuring of military forces, especially in the western empire. We know of substantial changes in the German units like Legion I *Martia* (Fellmann 1998) and possibly the Deutz garrison (Carroll 1998). Is it not more than likely that, if the Chester legion was not destroyed in the battle itself, it may very well have been sent elsewhere or amalgamated with other units? This would explain both the sudden drop in the coin list and the lack of the archaeological material after the middle of the fourth century as well, as the omission of the legion from the *Notitia Dignitatum*.

One last point needs mentioning. Carrington (ed 1994, 51) states that Gildas’ reference to the martyrs Aaron and Julius in *legionum urbs*, could just as well refer to Chester as to Caerleon, as Gildas has been connected with the monastery of Bangor is Coed. If this is the case, two things stand out. First, Deva changed its name in the late Roman phase. In

itself, this is nothing surprising as quite a few places appear to have undergone this change, amongst them Caerleon, which dropped the name Isca. The problem is one of inference, as it is tempting to link the new name with the continuing presence of the legion. However, this need not be the case, as we know that the legion in Caerleon was moved but the name nevertheless continued. So unfortunately, whichever way the location of Aaron and Julius eventually goes, it does not help with determining the status of Chester.

If we see the legion continuing in Chester or prefer to interpret it as a civilian place, we know from the archaeology that Chester continued into the Dark Ages (eg Ward *et al* 1994 and Mason 1985) and that it was important enough to attract high-status goods such as Mediterranean amphorae (Carrington ed 1994, 53), suggesting a more than usual importance for the place.

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