

# Posting to hadrian's wall proved a hard one for a roman soldier

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Hadrian's Wall was built in 122BC by the Emperor Hadrian in an attempt to build a barrier to keep the Scottish barbarians out of the empire and to protect the existing state lines of the current empire. The wall built by the legions of Britain was, after its construction, policed by the auxilia of the Roman army. When questioning the life style of the soldiers who were posted on Hadrian's Wall one must take into account their standard of living, their clothing, their duties as a 'miles'; their housing, their diet and what they did in their free time.

Using evidence from the excavations at such sites as Chesterholm, Housesteads and other forts along the wall I should hopefully be able to judge how hard a life the soldiers who were posted on the wall had. For a Roman soldier it was the daily duties that would primarily determine whether or not a posting to Hadrian's Wall would be a hard one. A Roman soldier's day would start early with inspection, parade duties, physical training, as well as any other extra duties such as cleaning the latrines, sweeping the camp, guarding the principia, the granary and the gateway.

Much like today's modern military a Roman soldier had to clean their own kit, weapons and armour, collect both fuel for the fire and food for the animals. The only way to get out of the monotony of normal fort life was to be out on patrol duty, escorting someone somewhere or being assigned to a party going out for supplies. One tablet from Vindolanda (Chesterholm) that is particularly useful in understanding the duties and life of the typical soldier is tablet 154, a strength report of cohorts I Tungrorum from Vercovicium. " 18 May, net number of the First Cohort of Tungrians ... 52, including

centurions ... 6 of whom there are absent: guards of the governor ... 46... at <https://assignbuster.com/posting-to-hadrians-wall-proved-a-hard-one-for-a-roman-soldier/>

Coria 337 ... centurions 2 ( ? ) ..... total ... absentees ... 456, including centurions ... 5, remainder present ... 296 including centurion ... 1 from these: sick ... 15, wounded ... 6, suffering from inflammation of the eyes (lippientes) ... 10, total of these ... 31, remainder, fit for active service ... 265, including centurion ... 1. " -- (Tab. Vindol. II. 154)

According to this report there are 456 miles; including 5 centurions who were on active service. 96 soldiers, including only one centurion were still in Vindolanda. 31 of these soldiers were sick or wounded. What is interesting about this tablet is the use of the word lippientes to describe the ten soldiers suffering " inflammation of the eyes". In the time of the Romans this affliction was also associated with an undisciplined and shameless life as well as being a minor suffering of the eye, hence its common usage in the sarcastic sense. The fact that they were not reported sick, or aegri could well indicate irony.

The tablet actually offers a clear view of how a cohort milliaria operated, despite the fact that the report doesn't give explicit mention of the soldiers' tasks. It may also be interesting to note that this tablet was written on May the 18th, and it shows that at the time, in the middle of the season for military operations, more than half of the cohort I Tungrorum was absent. This could either show that the life for a soldier posted at Hadrian's Wall was either a very busy one or that the soldiers were spread thin along the wall.

The tablets from Vindolanda are essential evidence in determining the general life of a soldier posted on Hadrian's Wall. Despite the majority of the tablets being found in a waterlogged rubbish heap at the corner of the

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commander's house more have been recovered from other parts of the site. The Vindolanda tablets provide a good source of information about the dietary requirements of the Roman Army stationed at Hadrian's Wall. Tablet 299, found at Vindolanda, contained a 'shopping list'; of the food that was probably intended to feed the garrison. ... bruised beans, two modii, twenty chickens, a hundred apples, if you can find nice ones, a hundred or two hundred eggs, if they are for sale there at a fair price. ... 8 sextarii of fish-sauce ... a modius of olives ... To ... slave of Verecundus". -- (Tab. Vindol. II. 302) The Roman Army consumed a healthy combination of simple high-energy food. Bread was their staple food and grain production was increased throughout Britain to meet the demand from the army.

Analysis of the "deposits" shown in the sewers under Bearsden Fort, on the Antonine wall, show something of the Roman soldiers diet during the Romano-British era. The deposits had traces of: ground wheat grain fragments, ground barley grain fragments (apparently used as "punishment rations" for soldiers), figs, coriander, opium poppy seeds, celery, hazel nuts, blackberry, raspberry and bilberry.

The tablets also refer to vegetables and fruits, such as Malum, apples (Tab. Vindol. II. 302). These "deposits" in the sewer and the Vindolanda tablets would suggest a very healthy, high in fibre, diet for the soldiers of the wall. Another obvious addition to any military diet is meat; tablet 191 particularly shows this with references to "capream", "ceruinam" and "porcellum", or roe-deer, venison and young pig. Coupled with the remains of animal bones found at numerous sites along the wall such as Cilurnum and Vercovicium

one can presume that the meat supplies for a soldier posted at Hadrian's Wall was a very good one.

As well as conventional food there is evidence for some rather exotic provisions consumed by the miles such as eggs, pepper, and even oysters, as affirmed by tablet 299. "... A friend sent me fifty oysters from Cordonovi..." -- (Tab. Vindol. II. 299) Oysters have been discovered stored in the wine cellars at Richborough, Rutupiae, and have been reported as a form of snack for soldiers either in between duties or at the bathhouse's.

As well as tablets found at Vindolanda providing evidence for the seemingly superb diet of the soldiers there has also been discoveries of Amphora's containing residues of Vinegar, Villum and Muria, a Roman spice. With such a range of food available to the regular miles it would be hard to suggest that their diet was hard. As well as the actual diet it may also be relevant to question the quality of the food in question, and to query whether or not the food was in an adequate state for consumption.

Pictured left are some of the excavations done at Corbridge, one of the main towns south of the wall. Excavations at Corbridge indicate that it was one of the main supply depots for the soldiers posted at Hadrian's Wall.

Archaeologists have found that the granary sits on top of a series of vents or chambers, much like the ones of a hypocaust system found in the baths at Chesters Fort. These vents allowed air to flow freely throughout the building's substructure, therefore preventing damp and delaying the rate of decomposition of the food stored inside.

As well as air vents found underneath the floor other excavations of granaries at different places along the wall have further shown that the granaries had a portico to keep the rain from the stores, the excavations at Benwell Fort particularly show this. This archaeological find would lead one to suppose that the soldiers garrisoned along the fort not only had a healthy and even enjoyable diet but also that it was a hygienic diet, not decomposed or infested with maggots like the diets of soldiers who fought more than a thousand years later like those in the nineteenth century.

As well as food soldiers have always needed alcohol to keep them happy on the march or on duty, the Romans were no different. Several literary sources from all over the empire say that soldiers on duty carried "iron rations" when on active service, including acetum, a sour wine, sometimes mixed with water to form a drink called posca. From the graffiti on wine amphora found on military sites we are also have an indication that the miles drank more than just acetum. An amphora found in the wine cellar of the supply depot at Rutupiae, Richborough, was graffitied on the neck claiming it was originated from Mount Vesuvius.

An amphora from Newstead fort along the wall had the word vinum, vintage wine, engraved on its handle to identify its contents and graffiti from wallsend records amphora with Passum or sweet-honeyed wine written on it. It wasn't just wine that the miles drank. Because of the high proportion of Celtic and Germanic men in the auxilia beer was just as popular as wine. An inscription at Vercovicium mentions a discharged soldier of the classis

Germanic who had set himself up in the late first century to supply local beer to the military market in Germania Interior.

The regard for barley for soldiers posted at Hadrian's Wall can be evident at a number of sites located around the wall where there is evidence for widespread use of barley, used either for the brewing of beer or animal feed. Evidence from the Vindolanda tablets suggests that there was a large demand for beer, for instance tablet 190 records the procurement of vast amounts of barley (hordeum) as well as a substantial amount of both Celtic beer and expensive wine.

Another tablet, 343, refers to some 1715 litres of threshed braxis, another cereal known to have been used in the brewing of beer. A brewery at Vindolanda has also been identified, inside archaeologists found ceramic drinking vessels and two large flues. The flues, which would have been part of an oven or a kiln setup, make scientists and archaeologists suspect that the facility housed a brewing operation larger than that of a home-based one. The level of comfort for a soldier posted to Hadrian's Wall would have been greatly dependant on the rank of the soldier.

For the regular miles of the auxiliary the level of ease would have a far larger variance depending on where they were posted say than that of a commanding officer. The weather, for example, would have affected the life of the soldier. From excavations at Cilurnum (Chester's Fort) we can see that the cohort commander had hypocaust systems installed under some rooms of the house, allowing the house to stay hot when cold. However for the regular miles no such systems were found under their accommodation.

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This fair commodity that the officer had would have made their posting to Hadrian's Wall a lot more comfortable, particularly if coming from the warm climates of the Mediterranean. For a typical soldier however, without the comfort of a hypocaust system, climate and the local community would have had a massive effect as to whether or not the posting to Hadrian's Wall was synonymous with a hard life for a soldier. We know from epigraphic evidence that soldiers were employed into the 'auxillia' and posted to Hadrian's Wall from all over the Roman Empire.

A gravestone found at Vercovicium suggests the presence of at least part of Cohors I Hamiorum Sagittariorum, a regiment of bowmen from Syria. The tombstone is unfortunately not inscribed but carries a carved image undoubtedly of a Hamian archer, identified by the unusual helmet, armed with a peculiarly curved bow. If such men were stationed at Hadrian's Wall who originated from such a different climatic environment then one can presume that life for these foreign archers would have been far from easy considering the northern British climate.

Yet evidence from the tablets found at the Vercovicium site indicates that the Roman soldiers were accounting for the poor weather by wearing additional clothing. It was originally believed that soldiers on the march wore no socks and it was unclear as to whether or not underwear was worn. However, among the horde of wooden tablets one read; "... I have sent ( ? ) you ... pairs of socks from Sattua, two pairs of sanfals and two pairs of underpants, two pairs of sandals... Greet... ndes, lu... ... enus, Tetricus and all. " -- (Tab. Vindol. II. 346) This tablet not only confirms that soldiers had



the luxury of under-wear, as well as socks, it also suggests that soldiers were in correspondence with people from their home countries, suggesting that if one on the wall was lacking in some small comfort it could be sent from home. With these simple clothes of comfort helping to prevent the cold one could argue that the weather wouldn't have affected the life of the miles too much.

We know from excavations at various points along, and around the wall that the Romans had ways of keeping themselves warm, other than underpants, socks and hypocausts. In particular the soldiers along Hadrian's Wall used coal to heat themselves up. We know this from excavations at Vercovicium which have revealed coal pits where the coal was obviously stored. Further evidence for the use of coal in heating up the soldier is found at numerous places along the wall, where residues of coal can be found.

One can presume that these residues are all that remain of braziers or little fires that were lit in order to keep the auxiliaries warm while they were on watch. With these numerous comforts or precautions that the soldiers used in preventing the cold one can eliminate the notion that the climate change for the soldiers would prove to lead to hard life for a soldier posted to Hadrian's Wall. It seems from the Vindolanda tablets that life on the wall was not all that exciting for the officer classes.

It's easy to imagine why life on the wall for a high class Roman citizen would not be exciting or enjoyable, with the lack of amphitheatre, theatres and circus's there seems to be no great entertainment, other than that created in the local Vicci. The lack of things to do for one of the officer class's can be

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suggested by the seemingly endless rounds of visits that the officer's wives seem to be doing to make their days more enjoyable. One such lady is Claudia Severa, the wife of Aelius Brocchus, the prefect of a nearby fort called Briga, Celtic for hill.

Claudia Severa is in constant contact with Sulpicia Lepidina, the wife of the prefect Flavius Cerialis, prefect of the Ninth Cohort of Batavians at Vindolanda. The most famous of these letters is a birthday invitation to Lepidina from Severa; " Claudia Severa to her Lepidina greetings. On the third day before the Ides of September, sister, for the day of the celebration of my birthday, I give you a warm invitation to make sure that you come to us, to make the day more enjoyable for me by your arrival, if you are present(? ). Give my greetings to your Cerialis.

My Aelius and my little son send him (? ) their greetings. I shall expect you sister. Farewell, sister, my dearest soul, as I hope to prosper, and hail. " -- (Tab. Vindol. II. 291) At times, official channels could be abused, or at least stretched, in order to accommodate those in the position to take advantage of them. A legionary centurion called Clodius Super asks Cerialis to send him some clothing Cerialis had picked up from a friend in Gaul, saying: 'I am the supply officer, so I have acquired transport' -- (Tab. Vindol. II. 255).

Another factor which may have eased the tedium of life at the wall was family visits. We know this happened on occasion because of the Vindolanda tablets, for instance one told of Veldedius visiting his " brother and old messmate" Chrauttius en route to Housesteads. This leverage with the official channels and postal services as well as family visits would allow for <https://assignbuster.com/posting-to-hadrians-wall-proved-a-hard-one-for-a-roman-soldier/>

the deliverances of some creature comforts and friendly faces that both the soldiers, officers and their wives could have done with in making their lives on the wall more comfortable.