

The Roman Empire: Army Life

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The Romans appreciated the problems of disease in an army and thus every fort had its own bathhouse and latrine for the use of all the soldiers in residence, while larger forts also contained a hospital. Medical staff included doctors, medical orderlies, bandagers and ointment-makers. Diet was carefully considered too. While wheat formed the staple part of the diet, the food included several different types of meat, fish and shell-fish, vegetables, fruit and nuts. New wine was the common drink.

Analysis of the sewage found beside the latrine at Bearsden demonstrates that the soldiers there ate wheat (both emmer and spelt), which was presumably made into bread or gruel. Fragments of barley resemble the pearl barley used nowadays in broth. Coriander, dill, celery, linseed and opium poppy were used not only in cooking but also medicinally. Fruit eaten included figs, raspberries, blackberries, bilberries and strawberries; hazelnuts also appeared on the menu.

Many of these items could have been obtained locally; but others such as opium poppies and figs are not native to Britain and must have been imported from the continent. Analysis of the food debris indicates that the soldiers had a mainly vegetarian diet. They also suffered from worms! Other items used by the Roman soldiers were brought from far afield, including armour and weapons (produced in the army's own factories), tools and clothing, pottery and cooking equipment. Surviving military documents indicate that soldiers might travel several hundred miles to procure supplies. Other products could have been obtained locally. These include wood for building, bracken and heather for bedding, marsh hay for fodder, and wood and peat for fuel. The Roman army also required large quantities of leather for making into tents, shoes, bags, shields, shieldcovers and saddles: hides would certainly have been obtainable locally.

It is possible that the presence of the Roman army, with its major demands for food and goods, encouraged local agriculture, but there is little evidence for this in Scotland. There is evidence, however, for a growth in the size and number of native farms during the Roman period, and this may be related not only to the peace, or Pax Romana, imposed by the Roman army but also to the army's supply needs.

Regulations governed the payment for goods supplied to the army, but there is also plenty of evidence from other frontier areas of the empire for extortion and corruption by soldiers. There can be little doubt that the situation would have been similar in Britain.

The fort was the unit's base and home. Through many months of the year, however, soldiers would be out on patrol, escorting supplies, serving on guard duty in the provincial headquarters in London and later in York, and perhaps even fighting. Some were outposted for several years to fortlets, while others manned watch-towers and signal-stations. Within the province the army served as the empire's police force, maintaining law and order in the frontier area. The regimental commanding officers served as local judges, acting rather as the British Empire's district officers were

later to do.

Training was another important part of military life, and in the 3rd century the abandoned hill-fort on Burnswark was apparently used for training soldiers in the use of catapults and similar engines of war. When on campaign soldiers protected themselves by constructing a camp. Within this, their tents (of leather) were arranged in rows according to strict regulations. Marching camps would usually be occupied for no more than about three days, for in that time the soldiers are likely to have contaminated the water supply and eaten all the food in the area.

Soldiers involved in building projects, such as the construction of the Antonine Wall or permanent forts, also lived in camps. The Roman army preferred to fight a set-piece battle, as it was specially trained for this type of warfare, and was usually successful. Mons Graupius was such a battle, though tactically speaking it was a relatively simple affair. On most other occasions the Caledonians seem to have adopted guerrilla tactics, a sensible, though ultimately unsuccessful, method of fighting the highly disciplined Roman army. The tribes south of the Tay do not appear to have caused the Romans any trouble. In fact, Tacitus took more space writing about the appalling weather of the year 79 than he did about the conquest of Agricola's opponents. The Caledonians and their successors, the Picts, were always the main enemy of Rome.

Information and images in these pages are extracts from the HMSO publication 'Invaders of Scotland' by Anna Ritchie and David J Breeze. This fascinating volume contains many more images and drawings and continues the invaders theme with sections on the Vikings and Angles. Well worth the price. To buy this book try at Amazon.com for ISBN 011494136X