

Roman Empire: Caesars Army

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The Roman army which had taken part in the earlier campaigns was one of the most successful fighting forces that the world has ever seen. For nearly eight centuries it was pre-eminent in the field. The core of that fighting force until the late 3rd century was the legion. There were about 30 legions in the empire, each a little over 5,000 strong. Four were stationed in Britain until AD 87 or 88, when one was withdrawn.

These heavily armed infantry regiments were supported by smaller units, nominally either 500 or 1,000 strong, either infantry or cavalry, or a mixture of both. In the 2nd century there were over 60 such units in Britain, giving a total strength for the army of the province of about 53,000. Not all these soldiers were based on the northern frontier. There may have been 30,000 men in the north, bearing in mind that not all units would have been at full strength.

These regiments were based in forts. Generally these forts, linked by roads, were about a day's march (some 14-20 miles) apart, though they were closer on the frontiers such as Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine Wall. The barrack-blocks for the soldiers were normally built of timber. In the 1st century the commanding officer's house, the headquarters building and the granaries were also of timber, but in the 2nd century they were usually of stone.

The buildings were packed together relatively tightly and were surrounded by ramparts of turf (stone was rarely used) and at least two ditches. Up to four gates provided for easy movement. The forts - and frontiers - were built by the soldiers themselves. Each legion contained its own architect-engineers, surveyors, masons and carpenters; even a glazier is attested.

There is no evidence that the army received any outside help in its construction projects, though there is a possibility that civilians were used in the fetching and carrying of materials.

The use of turf to build the fort ramparts - and the Antonine Wall itself - demonstrates that much of the surrounding countryside had been cleared of trees and was used for the pasturing of animals. There is little evidence for arable farming in Scotland at this time. Analysis of botanical remains suggests that the tree cover in the Roman period was not very different from today's, with a light covering of mixed deciduous woodland and a ground flora of herbaceous plants, mosses, shrubs and bracken growing at the edge of the woodland.

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