

Roman Army School 2024

The Roman Army School 2024 gathered at Collingwood College on Friday 22 March. Having settled in to our accommodation and had dinner the proceedings kicked off with a talk by David Breeze on the administration of the Roman Army. The strength returns, duty rosters and other documents required a level of bureaucratic effort fully equal to that of a modern army. However, remarkably little of what must have been a mountain of documentation survives and David talked us through some of it. The subject encompassed pay (in specie), providing proof of freeborn status and the degree of literacy amongst soldiers.

The second day started with David again, this time taking on the subject of Agricola's final campaign as a lens through which to examine the subject of supply. The talk started with a discussion of what was meant by 'travelling light' in the context of Roman campaigning. We were directed at Caesar's *De Bello Gallico*, Josephus who tells us what a legionary was supposed to carry and the visual evidence provided by Trajan's column. The size of Agricola's army, how many day's rations it would be expected to carry, the daily average march distance and the requirements of combined naval and land operations were all considered. The subject of foraging came up and, perhaps unsurprisingly, the mapped locations of Agricolan marching camps aligned very closely to the location of the best agricultural land (i.e. where the local farming population was likely to be concentrated and foraging would be most successful).

The morning ended with a talk by Jorit Wintjes on Roman maritime logistics. The talk started by looking at the question of 'ships, animals and the army away from home' using the 1867/8 Magdala campaign which deployed 40,000 animals (including 44 elephants) as an example of the scale of what could be achieved. The division of the navy into praetorian classes (big) and provincial classes (small) was then discussed along with evidence for a maritime component in the legions, for example the altar dedicated by Marcus Minucius Audens miles and gubernator of legio VI Victrix at York. The differences between day-to-day logistics and campaign logistics were then examined. The former involved a wide variety of commodities, supplied in relatively limited quantities at regular intervals by a small number of vessels. By contrast campaign logistics a limited range of commodities to be supplied in large quantities at infrequent intervals by many vessels. The talk concluded that there were many questions but not much evidence however naval logistic supply was clearly a complex process requiring considerable pre-planning.

After lunch Bill Hanson talked about timber for forts and frontiers drawing on material from Elginhaugh, Westerton, Barburgh Mill as well as more widely from the Antonine and upper German frontiers. It was noted that turf and timber construction remained the default option in Britain into the 2nd century. The possibility of timber stockpiling and the use of pre-fabricated elements was discussed and the example of the reconstruction of The Lunt critically examined. Excavated evidence from Elginhaugh and Carlisle seemed to show that timber selection was not always what might have been expected with alder being used in considerable quantity despite its relatively low durability. Pollen evidence suggests that alder and hazel were present in quantity at both locations and that the choice of timber was dictated by what was to hand. Equally in some cases the lack of large timber seems to have led to particular construction choices.

The day was rounded off by David in place of Graham Sumner who was unwell and unable to attend. The subject was demand and supply on the northern frontier. The theoretical strength of the garrisons was calculated however it was noted that evidence suggests that some units at

least may have been as much as 25% understrength. The need to feed the garrisons a wide range of provisions from meat to wine and vegetables was examined along with the potential to source these not only within the British province further afield in Gaul and Spain. In addition to foodstuffs there was a need for medical supplies, arms, armour, musical instruments, tools, animals, tents and clothing. The role of taxation in both cash and kind was discussed deductions as well as deductions from the soldiers' pay for the food, weapons and clothing with which they were supplied. The roles of private enterprise and 'home production' in military workshops changed over time with military production gradually ceasing and private enterprise taking up the strain until government *fabricae* were set up in the 4th century.

There were two talks on Sunday morning followed by an excursion to Corbridge in the afternoon. Sue Stallibrass started her talk on feeding the Roman army in Britain with the confession that we know almost nothing! We can however be fairly sure that three perennial concerns would have played a part – perishable foods would have to be consumed promptly, availability would vary seasonally and lead-in times would be critical. In the case of the latter consideration we were pointed to the article by Graafstal in *Britannia* 2023. Sue then discussed three principal food groups – grain, meat and drink – with examples from various sites. The secondary products of food production – dung, hides, sinews and bone were also noted. A comparison between the forts at Castleford and Segontium was made with the former showing evidence for local sourcing and a preponderance of pigs – as well as intense carcass processing and the consumption of prime age animals. By contrast Segontium provided evidence for secure supply lines and the consumption of older animals. Evidence from the Flavian fort at Carlisle suggested that there older cattle were consumed after being used for traction although sheep were eaten young perhaps suggesting that they represented excess stock. Figs, grapes, dill and olives are represented in archaeological record. Likewise wheat, barley, oats and rye are all attested although questions remain about the use of, for example, barley – how much was used for brewing? The potential value of isotope analysis and evidence from the Vindolanda tablets were also discussed. The concluding overview suggested that local production was important with relatively few exotic imports and only a little evidence for hunting.

The Sunday morning session was concluded by Nick Hodgson who talked on supplying Hadrian's Wall. The talk started with a discussion of the extent (considerable) to which units were responsible for their own supply – for example Vindolanda tablet II 343 details the cost of grain, possibly supplied from the Catterick area to the value of 800 denarii (the estimated modern equivalent value being £56,000). The possible role of the County Durham villas in supplying the Wall garrisons was discussed - the early 2nd century date at which the villas appeared may not be coincidental. More distant sources of supply seem to have become important after the 2nd century with pottery providing a durable proxy for commodities such as grain. Pottery from East Anglia and the south coast seems to have piggybacked on the grain trade (and may have been uneconomic to transport on its own). A significant change occurred in the 4th century with the implementation of the *annona militaris*. The question of unit budgets for supply was discussed and the relevance of Pliny's letter to Cornutus (VII.31) in which the 'rapacity and carelessness' exhibited by some units was noted. The structural evidence for granaries at Corbridge, South Shields and Housesteads was discussed (the first of these providing a nice link to the subject of the subsequent excursion).

The coach trip to Corbridge was made in delightful early spring sunshine. Nick and David provided the expert guidance with Nick concentrating on site XI and the granaries while David discussed the legionary compounds. We were treated to an impromptu lesson in

epigraphy in the new(ish) museum where we could also see the well-known lorica segmentata and a reproduction of the Corbridge lanx. The drive back to Durham provided an opportunity for a running commentary on the Wall landscape east of Corbridge.

Monday morning was given over to a wash up session largely concentrating on comparanda from more recent military contexts. Jorit reminded us that logistics is where the army and civilian society met and Sue pointed out that there is little or no evidence for the presence of mules in Britain.

The facilities at Collingwood were judged to be splendid and arrangements are in hand to return in 2025. Hopefully next year the fire alarms will not go off in the middle of the night.