

One of the more exciting Roman excavations now underway is ironically not in Italy, but in Britain, not far from Hadrian's famous Wall. Here, at a site called Vindolanda, a team of archaeologists under the direction of Professor Robin Birley is painstakingly clearing the remains of a Roman fort and its attendant civilian settlement. Not only are the physical remains of these structures noteworthy, but in addition thousands of artifacts are being uncovered in a remarkable state of preservation.



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Vindolanda seems to have been one of a series of Roman forts that were spaced some seven miles apart along the course of Hadrian's massive defensive wall. Defense was vital at this northernmost frontier of the Roman Empire, and there is evidence to suggest that a Roman garrison was stationed here from the 1st to the 5th centuries A.D. Like all Roman forts, Vindolanda had a large central headquarters building, fortified gates, and soldiers' barracks; unlike other excavated forts, however, Vindolanda also had a large civilian settlement outside its wall, thus furnishing clear evidence for the first time of the complex relationship between a Roman garrison and the native population.

The excavators have, in fact, been concentrating on the civilian settlement, as Professor Birley has indicated in an extensive article in Scientific American, February 1977. He reports that there were two distinct phases in the development of the civilian area, that, indeed, there were two successive towns, the later built upon the ruins of the earlier. The earlier phase is today called Vicus I, the second phase Vicus II. Vicus I was settled in the middle of the 2nd century A.D. and included, in addition to private dwellings, a large bathhouse (for soldiers and civilians); a mansio or inn, with six guest rooms for travellers; and numerous stores and temples.

In 280 A.D., or thereabouts, Vicus I was completely rebuilt into Vicus II. Vicus II seems to have been much more industrially oriented than its predecessor: it featured several workshops specializing in bronze and iron goods, and its population was composed of skilled craftsmen as well as farmers and general labourers. The function of this Vicus was crucial to the well-being of the fort itself: as Birley points out, the town would serve to support the garrison by providing food, manufactured goods, and social diversions of numerous kinds. The morale of the Roman soldiers would undoubtedly be improved by the presence of the Vicus nearby.

In the course of recent excavations, the archaeologists came across an unexpected bonanza: a deposit of organic materials which had been well preserved by an acid-free and oxygen-less burial. These materials included textiles, wood, and leather goods -- all of which are perishable and rarely come to light in modern excavations. Thus the Vindolanda finds are filling a large gap that had heretofore existed in our knowledge of Roman life on the frontiers.

A detailed listing of all the interesting finds is impossible to give here, but some of the more important include hundreds of pieces of leatherwork, especially in the form of shoes. In addition to heavy soldiers' boots, the excavators have uncovered many sandals, women's shoes, and children's booties. Harnesses and other leather goods have also been found. The textile industry likewise flourished at Vindolanda: many fragments of wool in different weaves have turned up in good state of preservation. Other finds have included gaming boards with dice, wooden combs and barrel staves, hammers, keys, coins, and lots of chicken bones! Now we can not only reconstruct how the soldiers amused themselves, but even what they ate.

The most startling discovery, however, was what looked at first to be a pile of wood-shavings. On closer inspection, it was noticed that some writing was visible on the faces of these very thin pieces of wood, and so was found a very important (and indeed unique) group of Roman documents. More than 200 in number, these documents contained private and official letters, formal orders to the troops, and various records of the garrison. Each "wafer" was only about 6 x 10 centimeters in size, and was written by a quill pen using carbon ink. The excavators hope that extensive study of these documents will reveal much about life at Vindolanda.

The site at Vindolanda covers about 20 acres, and the excavators admit to having years of work ahead of them. This is one excavation that will bear watching in the years to come!