



AUXILIARY SOLDIERS: ROMANS- TO-BE

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Ersin: At its peak the Roman Empire covered 5 million square kilometres and spread across Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. But in such a huge empire, what did it mean to be Roman?

Right at the northern border of the empire, troops were stationed at forts along Hadrian's wall. One such fort was Vindolanda. But just how Roman would the people living here have felt?

It's a marvelous site isn't it?

Patricia Birley: Yes, it's a really wonderful place.

Ersin: And where were the wooden tablets discovered?

Patricia: The tablets were discovered just in front of us over there about three metres below the modern ground surface.

Ersin: What was so extraordinary about this find?

Patricia: Well this is a unique find; Roman writing tablets which tell us so much about the people who lived here at Vindolanda and about the people in Roman Britain.

Ersin: As you can see, these tablets are behind protective glass and the light level is very low in here. This is because these tablets are so fragile and delicate. I would love to hold one in my hand, but even if I could I wouldn't be able to read the text because it is so faint.

This tablet from Vindolanda, displayed in the British museum, preserves an account of purchases made by soldiers within the camp. Documented here is a man called Gambax a name which indicates that he came from Eastern Europe. And in the next column is written pepper, and two denarii. The Romans imported their pepper all the way from Asia. So here is a remarkable piece of evidence, that shows a soldier from Eastern Europe buying pepper from Asia while stationed in Northern Britain.

From the names recorded on other tablets, we have evidence of soldiers from Spain, Gaul, Germany, the lands along the Danube, Asia Minor, Syria and northern Africa.

These men were not Roman citizens, but auxiliaries, drafted in from all parts of the empire.

What made these men travel thousands of miles to the cold of northern Britain? They wanted what it was to be a Roman and, surprisingly, it could be found right here. All auxiliaries were promised citizenship after 25 years of service. Roman citizenship came with the right to legally marry and have children that would be freeborn citizens, as well as enjoying the protection of Roman law. Even before their 25 years were up, the soldiers could experience the Roman way of life within this stone fort, almost one and a half thousand miles from Rome.

The roads which were built to facilitate the conquest of Britain ensured rapid communication and trade with the rest of the empire. Like the pepper that Gambax bought, we can see from the amphorae that had been found and from written records, that soldiers had access to olive oil from Spain and a steady supply of wine and other luxuries from across the empire. The remains at Vindolanda give an outward impression of a Roman town, a Roman island at sea in a foreign land.

And the local Britons could join the army too. After a full 25 years of service, stationed far from home, you would be presented with a diploma like this one. This is the diploma of Riburus, son of Severus from Spain. He was a junior officer in the first Panonian cavalry regiment. This diploma grants citizenship for himself, his children, and descendants and the right to a legal marriage.

So this Spanish man, in all likelihood a peasant, spent 25 years fighting in foreign lands to become an official Roman citizen.

While Gambax travelled from Dacia to Britain, Riburus came from Spain. And on either side of the empire, many others would have lead very similar lives within the Roman camps; wearing the recognizable uniform of a roman soldier, eating roman food, and speaking Latin.'

In joining the army, these men started on a path to Roman citizenship. Yet how Roman would camps like these have felt, filled with men from across the empire each bringing with them their own language and customs? We can only guess how the soldiers living here would have felt and to what extent they considered themselves to be Roman.