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The Archaeological Importance and Discoveries of the Roman Fort of Vindolanda

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Introduction

Perhaps the best known of all Roman forts along Hadrian's Wall, Vindolanda (the Roman name for modern Chesterholm) in Northumbria has achieved prominence for three reasons. First, for the excellent preservational condition, both of its archaeological artefacts (not least its famous writing tablets), and for the general survival of the layout of the buildings and walls, much of which is clearly visible despite destruction of the forts and subsequent robbing of the stone by local people to build houses. The good survival of the fort is, alas, a relative condition: compared to some archaeological sites on the continent, the Roman remains of Britain exist, for the most part (although with some notable exceptions) as foundations or ruined walls. Second, Vindolanda is well known for its world-class excavations, conducted for the most part by successive generations of the Birley family; and third, the name of Vindolanda is famous among Roman scholars for the remarkable archaeological discoveries that these excavations have uncovered. These include, of course, the aforementioned 'Vindolanda Tablets', which will be discussed elsewhere in this volume by Professor Takashi Minamikawa. Although I will mention these tablets in passing, my paper concerns chiefly the history of the excavations at Vindolanda, the chronology of the fort, and the importance of the archaeological discoveries.

The Historical Context

Hadrian's Wall is Britain's most complete Roman monument. Whilst the Wall was the result of a planning decision by Hadrian, the overall structure was the result of responses to local needs at various times. It is thought that Hadrian's presence in

Britain in AD 121 was itself a response to difficulties which had been experienced in the north over the previous decade. Hadrian appreciated that the Roman empire as a whole could not afford and did not need further expansion, and felt that it was more important to safeguard the integrity of the existing empire by strengthening frontiers and developing the empire's inner strength.

The Wall was built along the same route as, and was an enhancement of, the 'Stanegate frontier', originally a line of forts along a road linking Corbridge with Carlisle and Kirkbride. Although there is no unequivocal dating for the construction of this road, it is assumed to have been built during the time of Agricola (Shotter 1996, 32). Such a road would have been crucial to communication and policing, especially in keeping an eye on the rebellious tribe of the Brigantes of Yorkshire.

The Stanegate frontier was originally thought to have been active some time between the Roman withdrawal from southern Scotland in around AD 100 and the inception of Hadrian's Wall in c. AD 125. Shotter (1996, 43), however, has put forward an alternative model of earlier development. He notes that an auxiliary fort was established at Carlisle during the early Flavian period, and a vexillation fortress and supply base was built at Corbridge during the governorship of Agricola. These sites lay on either side of the Pennine hills, and the communications link between them was via Vindolanda, the first phase of which was established in the mid-80s. Problems and disturbances between the Romans and Britons at this time are hinted at in many sources. A tablet from the first fort at Vindolanda, dating to the late 80s, makes clear that the garrison unit was severely under strength at the time. Also dating to the same period is the famous Vindolanda tablet, which describes the Britons as '*Brittunculi*' or 'horrid little Brits', showing clearly the attitude of the Romans towards the local Britons.

It would seem that the evidence from the Stanegate frontier is of a first phase of substantial modification occurring in the late 80s and early 90s, the same time as the Roman withdrawal from much of Scotland, offering the opportunity for the redeployment of troops in Britain. During this period, the original fort at Vindolanda of 3.5 acres doubled in size. The Vindolanda tablets suggest that this enlarged fort was intended for a double garrison, consisting of the *Cohort VIII Batavorum* (the numeral was regularly written as VIII and not IX) in addition to the original garrison of Tungrians. Other forts were also built along the Stanegate frontier at this time, and existing forts were enlarged. It seems likely that the frontier was also extended eastwards and westwards during this period.

Shotter (1996, 49) suggests that early in the second century, the Stanegate frontier underwent a second phase of modification. Some of the forts were reduced in size at this time, reflecting a policy of spreading the available troops between more newly built installations.

However, troops were needed elsewhere in the empire in the early second century, in Dacia and in Parthia and Armenia in the east, although we do not know whether troops were taken from Britain for these expeditions. It would seem that either there were real reductions in the number of soldiers in Britain at this time, or that the perception of a preoccupied Trajan caused difficulties and unrest in Britain, so that when Hadrian became emperor, Spartianus observed that the 'Britons could no longer be held under Roman control' (*Life of Hadrian*, 5.2). The fact that Hadrian travelled to Britain during his first imperial journey in AD 120 suggests that the situation was serious. However, as Hadrian's Wall closely follows the line of the earlier Stanegate frontier, this suggests that no territory had been lost.

Part of the function of the Stanegate frontier was to control movement; this was later, in the building of Hadrian's Wall, to be achieved more effectively by giving it a strong visual command of the territory in which it lay; as the Stanegate road went through several valleys, the route selected for the Wall was moved further to the north to occupy the northern crests of the valleys and better command the territory. At this time, most of the forts on the Stanegate were abandoned as redundant (Shotter 1996, 43). As some of Brigantian territory also lay to the north of the Wall, the 'outpost forts' of Bewcastle, Birrens and Netherby policed this area. As well as for observation, another principal function of the Wall was to supervise crossings in either direction; the milecastles were, in reality, fortified gateways.

Hadrian's Wall was intended to be a linear barrier from Newcastle to Bowness-on-Solway, which was equipped with a small milecastle every Roman mile (housing between eight and thirty-two men), and a pair of watchtowers (each requiring perhaps six men) between each pair of milecastles. It would seem that it would have been important to have garrisons on the wall itself because the actual building of the wall may have annoyed local people because it disturbed social and agricultural communications and, in the west, cut off a section of the tribe of the Brigantes, as mentioned previously.

As Shotter (1996, 69) discusses, the strategy behind the building of Hadrian's Wall sheds light on the political situation in the early second century. Clearly, the Wall was a line for surveillance and control of movement; the role of milecastles as for-

tified gateways shows us that they were for supervising movement and not preventing it; Hadrian's policy was to separate the Romans from the barbarians by means of visible boundaries, not to stop traffic altogether.

Vindolanda has now been set within its historical context; we have seen the role it played from the early 80s onwards, first as part of the Stanegate frontier, and then as part of Hadrian's Wall. The next part of this paper outlines the chronological development of the fort itself, which will be followed by a history of the excavations at Vindolanda and a discussion of the archaeological finds.

The Chronology of Vindolanda

Not just one, but possibly as many as nine consecutive forts have been found at Vindolanda: five successive timber structures, and certainly three, perhaps four stone buildings above them (Birley 1993, ix). The current dating of eight of the nine forts and the composition of the garrisons are shown in the table below as an aid to this paper (Birley *et al.* 1993; *pers. comm.* & www.vindolanda.com)

	Occupation	Size of fort	Garrison
Period I	c. AD 85 – c. 92	Max 4 acres	Coh. I Tungrorum?
Period II	c. AD 92 – c. 97	Max 7 acres	Coh. VIII Batavorum Coh. I Tungrorum?
Period III	c. AD 97 – 105	Max 7 acres	Coh. VIII Batavorum Coh. III Batavorum
Period IV	c. AD 105 – c. 120+	Max 7 acres	Coh. I Tungrorum + detachments from Coh. I Vardullorum & legionary detachments
Period V	c. AD 120+ – c. 140+	Max 7 acres	Coh. I Tungrorum.
Period VI	c. AD 160 – c. 180	Max 4 acres	Coh. III Nerviorum
Period VIA	c. AD 180 – c. 200	Max 7 acres	Unknown
Period VIB	c. AD 205 – c. 213	Max 4 acres	Unknown
Period VII	c. AD 213 onwards	3 1/2 acres	Coh. III Gallorum

The dating of the forts of Vindolanda has not been easy, and new dates for phases (and changes in the total number of phases) seem to emerge in the literature every decade as more of the fort is excavated. As Birley himself says, each six-month excavation season produces many variations, contradictions and utter surprises (*pers. comm.*).

The current belief is that there were five successive timber forts of varying sizes within the years c. AD 85 to c. AD 140. There were then two stone forts (Stone Fort I and the Severan Fort – forts 6 and 7) between c. AD 160 and 213, followed by the con-

struction of Stone Fort II for the Fourth Cohort of Gauls (fort 8). That fort was comprehensively reconstructed circa AD 300. There have been indicators, shown by geophysical surveys and aerial photography, of another possible fort in the fields to the north of the others, but no excavation has yet taken place there, as the Vindolanda Trust does not own the land (Birley *pers. comm.*)

The first five forts were made of earth, with turf and timber ramparts and timber internal buildings; these all date to before the period of construction of Hadrian's Wall, i. e., to the period when Vindolanda was part of the Stanegate frontier, as mentioned above. Indeed, the Stanegate ran past the fort's northern rampart. It is within these forts that the remains of the writing tablets were found. The first of these forts dated to the mid-80s AD, the time of the Agricolan arrival in the north (Birley 1977, 108; 1994, 1). It lay to the west of the stone forts, beneath the later vicus. This fort was represented by a turf rampart and ditch. In c. 92, a larger fort replaced it, implying a change in the composition of the garrison (as mentioned previously, this was when the Batavians joined the Tungrians in the fort); the north and south ramparts are thought to have been extended eastwards to take in a large area underlying the stone forts. It is thought that there were four main structural periods within this larger fort (making five pre-stone forts in total), all in timber and the last dating to c. AD 120, demolished by the Romans in about AD 140 and left to rot in a quickly-forming swamp (Birley 1977, 108; Birley et al. 1993).

The second fort was indicated by the substantial remains of a *fabrica* or workshop. This was followed by the demolition of all structures and the levelling of the site before a new wooden building, of a different type and plan, was reconstructed (the third fort) and soon after rebuilt (the fourth fort), this phase probably dating to around AD 105-20 (*ibid.* 109). Finally, the remains were also levelled and another timber structure, the fifth, laid out, dating to AD 120+ -40+ (Birley *et al.* 1993). The late first century and early years of the second century were notorious for the frequency of new regimental postings, which may account for the alterations that took place around AD 105. The final timber structure was thought to have been the work of a more humble unit, drafted into the area for menial duties during the construction of the wall (*ibid.* 110); however, it is now thought to have been the work of the first cohort of Tungrians.

Once Hadrian's Wall was built, the garrisons moved forward to the new frontier, supposedly abandoning Vindolanda to nature. In 1977, Birley wrote that the site was only reoccupied some forty years later, and a new stone fort erected, taking its

place between Housesteads and Great Chesters forts along Hadrian's Wall. It is now thought that this period of abandonment was no more than twenty years.

In 1977, Birley believed that the first stone fort dated to c. AD 163, and the second, to c. AD 270 (Birley 1977, 87). However, later, Bidwell proposed an earlier date for the end of the timber fort and the start of the stone forts on the basis of the pottery and a Hadrianic inscription from Vindolanda. Bidwell suggested that the final timber fort ended in AD 122–4, and that the first stone fort was built at the same time (Bidwell 1985, 10). The dates for these forts have been overturned, and now it is thought that the last timber fort shows definite Hadrianic occupation, and the first stone fort is more likely to have been of late Hadrianic or early Antonine date (Birley 1994, 1).

There has been much discussion and contradiction in the literature about the end of Vindolanda. Bidwell (1985, 76) suggested that the barracks were demolished after c. AD 400. There is evidence for people living in the vicinity of the fort at or after this time, and it would seem that at least some of these people were Christians: a small chapel has been identified, built about AD 400, in the courtyard of the commander's residence, the *praetorium*. A tombstone has also been found, dating to the late fifth or early sixth century, and a penannular brooch with sixth or seventh century parallels is also among later finds on the site.

It would seem that the dates of the forts of Vindolanda seem to change with every season of excavation – it is as confusing for the library-based researcher as it is for the excavators at Vindolanda themselves; however, it is hoped that the table provided above, which reflects the current state of play, will be of help the former.

The History of the Excavations

The first excavation at Vindolanda was in the early 18th century, where an altar was found in the remains of a hypocaust by John Warburton (Bidwell 1995, 1). One hundred years passed before the next investigation, when Anthony Hedley explored the east gate of the first and second stone forts. Between then and the 1830s, Hedley also explored the north gate of the second stone fort, cleared the west gate, part of the west wall and a stretch of the north part of the east wall. Part of the *praetorium* (commanding officer's residence) was also excavated.

However, after this period, the team working at Vindolanda was led by the Birley family, and has been for several generations. Eric Birley, Professor of Archaeol-

ogy at Durham University in the north of England, bought the site of Vindolanda in 1929, and excavated there from 1930 to 1937. Eric intended the excavations to be comprehensive, but the Second World War intervened when only the headquarters building and the defensive walls of the fort had been examined; the most important buildings examined were the two successive *principia*. Eric Birley placed the fort in the guardianship of the Ministry of Works (the powers and duties of which have now passed to English Heritage) in 1951, after a short excavation in 1949. Although the amount of excavation carried out at the fort was intermittent over the next thirty years, a major campaign was undertaken by Eric's son Robin and Robin's wife Pat between 1969 and 1974. This excavation concentrated on the Roman settlement (*vicus*), which lay to the west of the fort. Since this and subsequent periods of excavation, the remains of the settlement were exposed for the public to view.

Robin and Pat have both worked on the site since that date, often joined by Robin's brother Anthony, Professor of Ancient History at Düsseldorf University. Robin and Pat's son, Andrew, is now continuing the family tradition of excavating at Vindolanda: he joined the team in 1996.

The Vicus

New evidence from Vindolanda is constantly proving old theories wrong. A good example of this comes from the civilian settlement or *vicus*. Excavations to the west of the stone forts, overlying the remains of the timber forts, originally revealed what was thought to be two successive extra-mural establishments. Birley referred to these settlements as *vici*, despite remarking that the first looked more like a military-built annexe within a defence system (1977, 71). Bidwell (1985) also believed there to have been two successive *vici*. Both believed that the first *vicus* was built at the same time as the first stone fort, and the second built at the same time as the second stone fort. However, both Birley (1977) and Bidwell (1985) are now considered to be hopelessly out of date; '*vicus* I' later proved to be a Severan fort.

The latest date for the construction of the *real* – and only – stone-built *vicus* is now thought to have been AD 213, built to house the dependents of the newly arrived 4th Cohort of Gauls; contrary to the opinion of coin experts, it continued to be occupied into the fourth century. However, it is thought that the army were involved in the planning and the infrastructure of the village, with the provision of a drainage system and roadways. This means that the civilian settlement did not grow

'organically' around the fort, but was created in an orderly manner by the army. This controlled planning of a *vicus* is very rare, and seen at only one other Roman fort in the country. This settlement was much modified in later years and was less extensive in the fourth century. Knowledge of this *vicus* has recently been greatly enhanced by the 2002 excavations, which demonstrated that it extended further to the west of the fort than was previously believed. However, there must, of course, be civilian settlements associated with the earlier forts, and they probably lay further to the west, where excavation has yet to take place (Birley *pers. comm.*).

Circular Houses

Discovered in 1932, in around AD 200–212 perhaps as many as thirty circular stone buildings were erected on the northern part of the fort. Seven more circular buildings were found while excavating the *southern* wall of the stone fort in 1999 and 2000. These joined the two that were found in 1997 during excavations of the *praetorium*. The Birleys have proposed that the entire fort platform was covered with them, laid out in rows of five, back to back, and with narrow roads fronting them. They suggest that, if the circular buildings were laid out at regular intervals throughout the fort, there could have been as many as 240 of them (Selkirk 2002). These round houses were a very unusual find. The preceding Iron Age Britons built and lived in round houses, but the Romans built their structures in a rectangular shape. Therefore, the presence of a potentially 'native' house shape inside a Roman fort over 150 years after the Roman conquest can be seen as very unusual. No parallel exists in other forts, leading Bidwell to state that they did not represent a military building type (1985, 29). A number of villa sites have produced round houses of broadly similar construction, variously interpreted as mill-houses, shrines, and threshing floors supported by low walls. However, the Vindolanda round houses are thought to have been lived in because of the presence of hearths and ovens inside them.

As the native round house persisted as a building type on both sides of the frontier in northern Britain, Stead (1976, 83) regarded them as a continuing Iron Age tradition, but built using Roman techniques. Bidwell (1985, 31) suggested that they accommodated civilians, possibly conscripted labour, which had to be kept under close supervision. Further, he thought that these civilians were not housed in normal military buildings because this part of the fort had been cleared of buildings after a

change of garrison, and the imported labour was allowed to build housing in their own style. Bidwell thought that the structures represented the vernacular architecture of the countryside. Current interpretation by Robin Birley suggests that they were used to house family groups; if they were used to house male prisoners or convicts, then surely the Romans would have used standard barrack buildings, where control would have been easier. Birley asks whether the buildings were prisoner of war camps, housing some of the Severan hostages from the Maeatae and Caledonian tribes; he also suggests that the round houses were temporary refuges offered by the Romans to the friendly northern farmers (the Votadini) who were threatened by other northern tribes (Selkirk 2002). Whatever their use, the dwellings were cleared away by AD 213 to provide a clean platform for the new fort of the Fourth Cohort of Gauls.

Preservational conditions

The first five successive forts at Vindolanda were made of timber. As Hanson (1978) has argued, the maximum life of a timber structure in the north of Britain, built with softwoods, is unlikely to exceed ten years, because of the effect of the weather and various diseases which attack untreated wood. This alone would lead to many reconstructions of the fort; the changes in the garrison of Vindolanda over the years would also lead to the demolition of some structures and the construction of others. Together, these multiple and successive layers of demolished timber, which were followed by a layer of turf or clay to provide a clean area for the next new structure, created anaerobic conditions for the survival of objects covered by the layers. As no air could have reached artefacts made of material such as wood or leather, these objects would not have rotted, but would have survived in almost the same condition as they were when the turf or clay was put down on top of them. These conditions for excellent survival would have been accentuated if the next layers of clay or turf were laid down quickly, before the abandoned artefacts were exposed to the elements for long, and before other rotting processes occurred (Birley 1993, ix).

Another factor which has ensured good preservation of artefacts at the site has been the processes of waterlogging. Vindolanda has always been a very wet site: it lies on a sloping platform above the junction of two streams; there are also natural springs in the ground below the site of the fort, and these seeped into the founda-

tions of the stone buildings. The water from the springs did not penetrate the layers of clay and turf on top of the timber structures, as the weight of the debris above them has led to their compaction. The water table at Vindolanda can thus be reached within a metre of the surface and continues to a depth of around 2.5 metres. Below that, the land is merely damp (Birley 1993, x).

Although this amount of water has caused a serious problem for archaeologists trying to excavate the site, it has also preserved nearly all the Roman debris. Not only have the more robust types of material survived (artefacts made of glass, pottery, iron and bronze, coins and bone); but also finds of leather, wood (such as writing tablets), textiles and various environmental specimens. However, some types of fragile material did not survive so well, such as untreated hides and fish bones (*ibid.* xi). Below I discuss some of the more exciting discoveries from Vindolanda.

Archaeological discoveries at Vindolanda

Organic remains are, arguably, some of the most fascinating to archaeologists, as these are often the very items which do not survive archaeologically at other sites; therefore, the survival of objects of leather at Vindolanda have elicited much excitement. At the time of the new series of Vindolanda research reports, written from 1993 onwards, nearly four thousand leather 'find numbers' had been recorded. The find number is the number given to each 'find' or object as it comes out of the earth. Sometimes one 'find' was found to comprise several artefacts upon later cleaning and conservation. Because leather cannot survive on the surface of the ground for any length of time, the general condition of the leather enabled archaeologists to work out which phases of the fort were left exposed to the elements for a long time before the layers of turf or clay were laid down, and which phases were quickly rebuilt.

It would appear that, normally, soldiers at the fort would take their rubbish, including leather off-cuts, out of the fort; however, when a garrison was preparing to withdraw, abandoned heaps of refuse were levelled out by demolition crews, resulting in the separation of items and the spreading of pieces belonging together across several of the demolished rooms. Matching pairs of shoes have thus been found spread apart.

The leather finds ranged from shoe soles to tent panels (Van Driel-Murray 1993, 1). Many of the items of footwear were discarded by the Romans when they were al-

ready quite worn: many of them showed signs of having been deformed by sweat, or having come apart at the seams, or having been broken or decayed before being thrown away (*ibid.* 2). Shoes are numerous enough at Vindolanda to give archaeologists the opportunity to follow the development of fashion of footwear; in fact, in 2002, so many shoes were found (at least 400), that the Vindolanda website jokingly announced that it was regrettable to have found so many – perhaps most regrettable of all for the conservators!

In contrast to the shoes, the tent panels have survived so well that frequently stitch holes can be seen and adjoining panels can be matched. Sometimes a sheen, suggestive of polishing or oiling (perhaps for waterproofing) is visible on the outer surface. Enough tent panels have survived for an accurate reconstruction of a Roman tent to be carried out; however, there is growing evidence from Vindolanda that more than one type of tent was in use.

The most spectacular piece of leatherwork from Vindolanda is a complete chamfron (a piece of leather which goes over the front of the face and ears of a horse for protection and display). It was made of thick cowhide, with a goatskin lining at the back to prevent chafing to the horse's skin. The entire surface was covered by patterns executed in round-headed brass studs in conjunction with brass plaques. Although most of these decorations are now missing, the impressions left behind by the studs are clearly visible. Evidence that such chamfrons were being manufactured at the site is provided by the presence of off-cuts. As the chamfron would be individually made, it still preserves the proportions of the head of the horse it was intended for; pleasingly, it fitted correctly on the relatively narrow and finely proportioned horse skulls from the excavation.

As a total of 7 or 8 chamfrons were found in a restricted area, within the *praetorium*, all dating from Period III, and as the chamfron is a very special type of equipment, it would seem that several were being made and repaired at the same time, which would associate their use with a group of riders rather than a single individual – perhaps the Governor's grooms (Van Driel-Murray 1993, 10). Other horse gear found at Vindolanda includes five fragments of saddles and some straps (perhaps horse harnesses).

Excavations and finds of the last ten years

As well as the new series of Vindolanda Research Reports, the popular journal *Cur-*

rent Archaeology has kept the general public in touch with the latest exciting finds and developments at Vindolanda. In 1993, the editor, Andrew Selkirk, reported that Robin Birley had found the remains of a proposed 'Hadrian's palace', just outside the west gate of the stone fort, below the *vicus* and within the early timber forts. This huge building was located within the fifth earth and timber fort, which dated to the Hadrianic period. It was timber built, and used wooden beams of ten metres in length. Because no such massive timber remained within miles of Vindolanda by AD 120, having been used up in the construction of the four earlier forts, and because of the grandeur of the rooms, many of which were plastered or had concrete floors, it was suggested that the building was erected to accommodate Hadrian and his staff; it was certainly far too big for the commander of a legionary fortress, or even for the governor of Britain (Selkirk 1993). A number of wooden writing tablets were also found during this excavation, although they were riddled with wormholes, unlike the better-preserved ones which were waterlogged.

In 1997, *Current Archaeology* reported on a new huge cache (between 280 and 360) of writing tablets from Vindolanda, first found in 1993. These were in addition to the 1,300 or so already known, and dated to AD 105, when the commander of the battalion of Batavians at Vindolanda received the command to leave Britain and march to the Danube to aid Trajan in his second Dacian war. Birley hypothesised that the commander cleared out his buildings before leaving and had a bonfire of the old things he did not want to keep, such as wooden tablets, boots and shoes and other objects. Robin Birley described the discovery of the bonfire as 'the most wonderful experience of my archaeological life' (Selkirk 1997, 350). In fact, when Birley found his first writing tablets back in 1973, his reaction, as summed up a few years later (1977, 132) was: 'If I have to spend the rest of my life working in dirty, wet trenches, I doubt whether I shall ever again experience the shock and excitement I felt at my first glimpse of ink hieroglyphics on tiny scraps of wood.' Clearly, a life in archaeology has been a rewarding one for Birley!

In an interview in 2001, published in *Current Archaeology*, Robin Birley outlined the major change in tactics decided upon after a year of non-excavation in 1996. In 1997 and 1998, the team led by the Birleys excavated the *praetorium* (commanding officer's residence) within the stone fort. In 1832, Anthony Hedley had found three altars on the site, but the notes left behind were too vague and contradictory to discover where the remains lay. When re-excavating, Birley found the tombstone of one Titus Annius, centurion of the First Cohort of Tungrians, '*in bello interfectus*' – 'killed

in the war'. As the only 'war' was that being conducted in Britain when Hadrian became emperor, and as the Vindolanda Tungrian cohort appears to have been reduced from 1,000 to 500 men at this time, it is possible that this was due to an event around 30 years after the Agricola conquest, when the Britons of the north staged an attack on the Romans. It is possible that Titus Annius died in this conflict. Birley suggests that the decision to build the Wall soon afterwards may have been influenced by this rebellion (Selkirk 2002, 438).

The *praetorium* was relatively orthodox in structure, with 22 rooms on the ground floor. It was constructed in around AD 220 and collapsed in around AD 400 but, surprisingly, had an unusual structure erected after AD 360 on the courtyard site. This building was small and rectangular and had a semi-circular apse at the western end. It is tentatively identified as an early Christian church, despite its western apse and lack of altar or chi-rho symbols, although these latter absences were due to mediaeval ploughing, which had removed the floor. In 1999, a worn rectangular slab of stone with a chi-rho in one corner was found, and although it dates to around AD 600, it provides evidence for a Christian community on the Wall.

In 2000, during excavation on the southern defences of the fort, a bath-house was found. This was an earlier and larger pre-Hadrianic version of the third and fourth century military bath-house that had been found in 1970/71. This bath-house had even been mentioned in the Vindolanda tablets found in the 1970s. Its size was appropriate for the garrison of 1,000 men who occupied the fort then, rather than the later 500 men. It contained thousands of complete and broken bricks and flue tiles, and over 300 of the bricks had the footprints of animals (dogs, cats, a pig and an ox) and humans who had walked over them before firing.

In 2001, the decision was made to excavate at the western limit of the *vicus* to search for an ornate temple once described by the historian John Wallis. A Romano-Celtic temple was found, but it was not the one that the Birleys were searching for, even though Roman temples are very rare discoveries on Hadrian's Wall. This new temple had been demolished by the Romans before the middle of the second century, and the site was later used for cremation burials, of which seven have been discovered so far. The temple had a rectangular shrine, with bench seating around three sides, lying within a rectangular perimeter. An eighteen inches high altar was also found, dedicated to a god who might be the Batavians' chief deity, Magusanus (Selkirk 2002, 444; Birley 2002, 30); however, only the word DEO, 'to the god', can so far be read on the altar.

The latest finds from Vindolanda are often announced on the website (www.vindolanda.com), and it was here that the discovery of some interesting stone altars were announced last year. While working through the civilian and Severan military remains of the *praetorium* of period IV (c. 105–c. 120), excavators found a Severan well on the inner edge of the rampart. It was 15 feet deep, built of un-mortared stones, and filled with demolition material when the Severan buildings were levelled to the ground around AD 212. Near the bottom were found two small stone altars, one without any inscriptions and the other dedicated to the god HVVETER, assumed to be a spelling variant of VETERIS or VETERES – a deity recorded on over fifty little altars from the frontier region. A few feet to the east of the well, another stone altar was discovered, dedicated to DIBVS VETERIBVS ('the Old Gods'). Eleven dedications in total to this god have now been found in the central sector of Hadrian's Wall, and are believed to have been made by German troops. The variation in spelling indicates that the name could not readily be expressed in the Latin alphabet (Birley 2002, 163).

Ritual deposits always interest archaeologists, and this year the website gave the details of a human skull, found in a sealed second century ditch, exhibiting signs of brutal treatment. It is thought to be from a 23 to 30 year old man, perhaps a native warrior or sacrificial victim. Alongside the skull lay the complete skeleton of a small dog, which is also thought to have been sacrificed.

Because of the excellent preservational conditions in the early buildings at Vindolanda, many artefacts have been found in outstanding condition. From the 2001 excavation season, this includes 126 boots, 60 more writing tablets, a collection of complete tools (including a joiner's wooden mallet, a cobbler's hammer, a mason's trowel, a set of shears, and a variety of punches and chisels). Textiles were also recovered in 2001, as was the hair from a centurion's helmet crest – a unique find.

Over much of the 14 acres of Vindolanda's principal complex, the build up of occupation layers is never less than two metres, and in places it extends to six metres, and the environmental conditions are such that the exceptional quantity of finds have to be dealt with. This makes excavation a very slow and time-consuming occupation. Robin Birley has now retired as Director of the Vindolanda Trust after 31 years in charge, and 52 years after his first excavation at the site. However, he believes that it will take over another 100 years to complete the job – a sobering thought for his descendants.

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