

THE OFFICER CORPS IN ROMAN BRITAIN

by

Benjamin James Ziegler

Submitted to the Faculty of

The Archaeological Studies Program
Department of Sociology and Archaeology

in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

University of Wisconsin-La Crosse

2013

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Benjamin J. Ziegler, B.A.

University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, 2013

This thesis explores the level of change in the Roman officer corps in Britain from A.D. 43 to 410. This is a period of conquest and stability operations followed by a slow withdraw of the Roman military presence on the island. In addition to generic information on the Roman military during this period, information is drawn from the sites of Metchley, Inchtuthil, and York. Cemeteries and graves are briefly examined. Results are largely limited by the extent of excavation in the living areas of these sites, however some evidence for the amount of change and leadership structure was obtained.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Kimberly Witalka and Shawn Vaughan for their comments and suggestions throughout the process of working on this thesis; Dr. Mark Chavalas for his guidance throughout my research and writing; Dr. Joseph A. Tiffany for his patience and continuous help in finding resources and formatting. My family's support throughout this process has been invaluable. Lastly I would like to thank the U.S. Army for their financial support of my studies.

INTRODUCTION

The Roman military is one of the best known and extensively studied militaries in history. Its legions made conquests from North Africa all the way to southern Scotland. At the head of these armies was a corps of officers representing a variety abilities and levels of experience and ethnicities.

It has been widely commented that the Roman military was extremely conservative and over the course of time made very few changes (Keppie 1984:179). However, it has also been noted that as armies transitioned from field armies to frontier garrisons, the character of legionaries began to change (Watson 1969:141). The question remains of the effect this transition had on the officers on the frontier and accompanying changes in the material culture found. In order to gain a more specific understanding of what changed in the officer corps (if it changed at all) it is necessary to have a consistent geographic focus where this transition can be studied. I chose England for my investigations due to our common language. Another characteristic that makes England ideal is that it is an island. This degree of isolation distinguishes England as a specific region both in our mind and that of the Romans. Additionally, the logistical complexity of accessing the island limits the number of variables impacting any observed change in the officer corps. Within this region there is also a temporal space from A.D. 44 to the early fifth century A.D., spanning the transition from invading army to frontier garrisons and local police authority (Watson 1969:145). In order to view the changes in

the Roman officer corps in Britain most clearly, the focus of this investigation is on the beginning and end of this period.

It can be expected that the officers went through a similar process of attachment to the frontier territories as the enlisted soldiers did. Reasons for this may include the difference in prestige between a campaigning army and a garrison army, increased non-citizen recruitment, and the presence of families surrounding military posts.

BACKGROUND

In order to understand the significance of the findings there must be an understanding of the historical and institutional context from which it emerges. More specifically the organization of the Roman military and a brief history of the campaign and ensuing occupation must be understood.

Structure of a Legion

Before any investigation can be made into the Roman officer corps, it is necessary to have a basic understanding of the underlying history and structure of the force. The army that conquered Britain was in many ways different from that which secured the Italian Peninsula for the Republic of Rome. It had transformed from a levy of citizens (Webster 1985:102) to a paid and increasingly professional force (Keppie 1984:58). The reforms included pay, enlistment of the lowest class of society, more regimented training by experienced instructors, and a new legionary organization (Keppie 1984:64). Of these the most important to understanding the role of a Roman officer is the composition of a legion.

While the total number of legions in the empire unknown, it may have exceeded thirty (Webster 1985:109). On paper each legion was comprised of 5,400 soldiers. This included 120 equates, or cavalry, and ten cohorts. The equates were dispersed throughout the legion so they did not comprise an organizational structure, but still count towards the total number of soldiers. The first cohort consisted of five double centuries, or a total of 960 soldiers. The other nine cohorts consisted of five centuries, equaling a total of 480 soldiers in each cohort.

Each century numbered eighty soldiers broken into ten *contubernia*, or squads (Webster 1985:109). The *contubernia* was the smallest size of an element but was too small to serve any significant tactical value. Instead it mainly served administrative and organizational needs for billeting, food, and laundry. The century was the smallest tactical unit and thus contains the lowest level of officer.

Each legion was commanded by a *legatus legionis* (Webster 1985:112). This position was comprised of men usually over thirty years of age and senatorial background, chosen by the Emperor to command a legion. The post generally only lasted three to four years until the appointee moved on in their political career. With this said, their experience and abilities varied greatly. Each *legatus legionis* reported to a provincial governor who was more carefully chosen and more experienced.

Under the *legatus legionis* served six tribunes (Webster 1985:112). The most senior of which was called a *tribunus laticlavus* who came from a senatorial background. The term of the *tribunus laticlavus* was usually short and was meant to provide the individual with military experience should they be chosen as a *tribunus laticlavus* in the future. The remaining tribunes were *tribune angusticlavii*, who were also young men but came from the equestrian class. This

class was privileged but not as prestigious or influential as the senatorial class. The role of the tribunes was primarily an administrative position.

In the absence of the *legatus legionis* the *praefectus castrorum* took command (Webster 1985:113). The normal responsibilities of the *praefectus castrorum* was the management and administration of a fortress. Generally someone of this position had worked their way up through the ranks of centurion and was in their fifties or sixties (Keppie 1984:177; Webster 1985:113).

The backbone of the legion was the centurionate. The standard path to becoming a centurion was through the ranks and various postings in both the centuries and the legion (Webster 1985:114). The process typically took fifteen to twenty years (Keppie 1984:179). It was possible to join directly as a centurion, but this required connections within the upper ranks of the legion (Webster 1985:115). There were sixty centurions in each legion; the senior most being the *primus pilus*, or the chief centurion of the first cohort.

METHODOLOGY

In order to gain a certain level of diversity of occupation, three sites were chosen: Metchley, Inchtuthil, and York. The first is representative of the initial invasion force of 43 A.D. and contained the remnants of three Roman camps. The second site was drawn from Agricola's invasion of Scotland in AD 83 (Ferere 1987:94). This site was abandoned before its completion with the withdraw from Scotland around AD 86 (Ferere 1987:102). Preservation at this site allows a greater view of a campaign army than other sites investigated. The last site, York, provides a view of a long term occupation beginning shortly after the initial conquest and ending

with the end of Rome's occupation of Britain. Additional information will be drawn from article and or site reports detailing information on grave sites from both periods.

Information gathered from a residence can provide useful insight in understanding the person or people who lived there. This can be viewed from many levels. The most removed level is the floor plan or general layout of the fort. The location of the officer quarters in comparison to the gates, headquarters, hospital, and enlisted barracks may give clues about where and how they spent their time. Where their time was spent may in turn provide insight into how they led, whether it was distant and through subordinates or even along side of their soldiers.

The type of structure may also tell about the character of these leaders. The size of their billeting in proportion to that of their soldiers may indicate differences in social status. Whether or not the officer housing is divided for individual officers, in groupings of officers, or in mass may also provide insight into how they worked with fellow officers and related to their peers. Within the structures themselves, the quality of the building material or any structural amenities may also be indicators in the same way as the size of the structure. It could be more insightful as to whether they had things much better off or if the size was only symbolic. An example of structural commodities could be heating systems in the floors or private latrines.

At the most intimate level of examination is the artifact content. One indicator could be the presence or absence of artifacts. This can be applied both between time periods and within each fort. The concentration of artifacts can be compared in each building, from barracks to barracks, or on the open ground and roads. This may indicate either their apparent wealth or discipline of the units occupying the forts. The types of artifacts recovered may tell about officers' daily lives and the quality of the finds can be compared to that of artifacts left by their soldiers.

As was mentioned above, grave sites also provide valuable information to this investigation. This comes in the context of the grave, the burial goods within the grave, and finally the burial itself. The context of the grave includes its relation to other graves; its relation to settlements, forts, or battlefields; and the grave marker. The relation to other graves may indicate whether the individual received special treatment or was given an eternal resting place with other officers or soldiers. The grave site's general location may indicate the reason for that particular patch of land being chosen, whether out of convenience or for a specific purpose. Perhaps most useful in identifying basic information about the burial is the grave marker. The material and design of the grave marker may be symbolic and indicative. Most practically speaking is what is inscribed on the grave and what information it gives about the individual buried there.

Burial goods may show what was important to the army or the individual. If they had nothing with them or were dressed in full gear could give clues to the way they thought. The presence of awards and decorations can give an account to their valor or experience. The quality of the material and design of their artifacts may reflect their status. Any ethnically or culturally unique artifacts may shed light on the composition of the officer corps and how they were recruited.

The body itself may also provide valuable insights. In some cases bones may even reveal the cause of death, particularly if it was in battle. Bones can also provide information on health, age, and ethnicity. The remains can demonstrate whether or not the standard height for a centurion was being enforced. The position and orientation of the remains may also show meaning and purpose (or lack thereof) to the burial technique.

By examining the fortifications and burials, the Roman officer corps in Britain can be better understood as it integrated itself into Britain. The camps and forts can be examined for their layout, size, quality, and artifact content. The burials can also provide information through their context, burial goods, and human remains.

Sites

As mentioned above, the forts used for this investigation are located in Metchley, Inchtuthil, and York. The locations of these sites are depicted below in Figure 1. The time of occupation of each of these sites varied significantly. Each was developed for a specific reason and when it was no longer needed the legion moved elsewhere.

Multiple camps have been located in Metchley and Birmingham and have been of interest to historians and archaeologists since the eighteenth century (Joseph and Shotton 1934:69). The site is composed of a large camp with a smaller camp or fort within it. Occupations of this site were for no longer than a season and it dates between AD 50-60 (Joseph and Shotton 1934:76). This site is smaller than the other ones used in this investigation and likely only housed up to half a legion (Joseph and Shotton 1934:79). Since these investigations the site and surrounding area has experienced a high level of urban development.

The last site used was Inchtuthil, a fort used during the invasion of Scotland (MacDonald 1919:113). It is located on a plateau overlooking the Tay River. Construction at this site was never completed and it was likely only occupied from AD 83-86 (Shirley 1996:113) and it was likely occupied by *Legio XX* (Ferere 1987:94). At the end of its occupation the site was deconstructed as the legion withdrew. Today there has been little human interference with the site and preservation has been excellent.

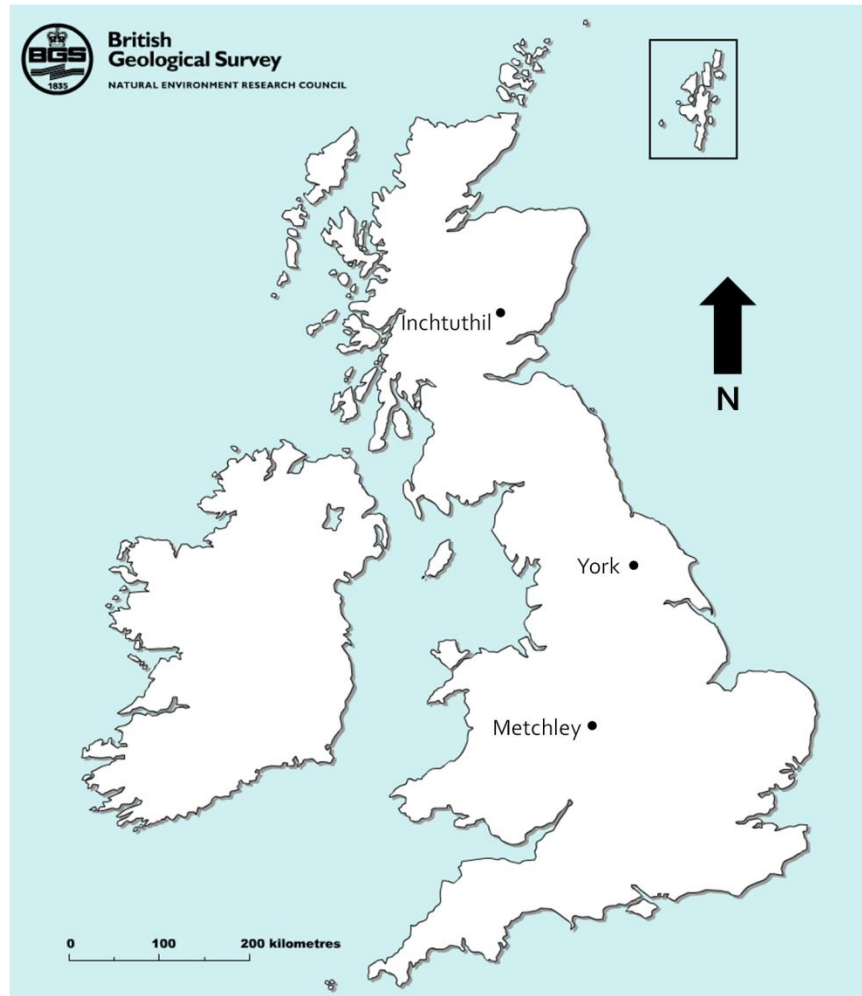


Figure 1 Location of Forts (modified from British Geological Survey 2013).

York, or *Eboracum* as it was known (Miller 1928:75), appears to have first been occupied by elements of the *IX Hispania* in AD 71 (Miller 1925:183). *Legio VI* replaced *Legio IX Hispania* during the reign of Hadrian and York continued to be a military center until the fourth century when Roman forces withdrew from Britain (Miller 1928:99). The city of York has been occupied ever since and a government ministry building now sits on the grounds of the Roman Fortress, but parts of the site are still intact.

In addition to forts, a cemetery and an overview of Roman graves were also used. The cemetery is located near Caerleon (Evans et al. 1995:170). This cemetery is a combination of

military and civilian graves (Evans et al. 1995:190). The other article by Hope (2003) is an investigation of Roman military graves throughout the empire with a focus on how the dead were remembered.

RESULTS

Throughout the occupation of Britain, the layout of legionary fortresses and camps remained highly standardized. Changes in the defenses and structures were primarily related to the permanence of the site. In a chronological order of occupation the sites will be described as follows: Metchley, Inchtuthil, and York.

Metchley

This site was first described in 1783 as thirty acre earthwork encloser (Joseph and Shotton 1934:69). At the time it had already been heavily damaged by agriculture. Artifacts from this site were routinely ploughed up. Another description in 1822 included a fifteen and a half acre enclosure within the thirty acre enclosure (Joseph and Shotton 1934:70). The site was further damaged by a canal in the nineteenth century and a railroad in the twentieth century (Joseph and Shotton 1934:71). Since then the city of Birmingham has expanded through the area including a medical school that was built on the site of the camp (Duncan 2008:ii).

The excavations were most detailed on the ramparts and ditches, but trenches also extended across the site (Joseph and Shotton 1934:74). No stone structures were found at the camp, but trenches suggest that timber structures filled the interior (Joseph and Shotton 1934:76). The pottery recovered from the site dates between AD 50 and 60. The seems appropriate for half a legion (Joseph and Shotton 1934:79). Since the site lies midway between

the Roman cities of Alauna (or Alcester) and Etocetum (or Wall), it was likely a convenient stopping point for armies on the road (Joseph and Shotton 1934:70).

Apart from the dimensions of the ramparts, little was reported about the layout of the camp. Further more detailed excavations would be required to gain this information. However this is now impossible considering that the City of Birmingham has completely engulfed the camp. Continued surveys continue on the site but they are unlikely to yield information concerning the layout of living conditions.

Inchtuthil

This site provides a unique opportunity because a city never developed in the vicinity of the fort in Roman or modern times. It is a fifty acre site is located near the Tay River and was part of a series of campaigns intended to subdue Scotland (MacDonald 1919:113). The fort likely began with timber structures in AD 82 or 83 (Shirley 1996, 113). Not long after its occupation, construction with stone began. Stone had to be transported from a quarry two miles away (MacDonald 1919:113). Construction was never completed, but included: a *principa*, hospital, *fabrica*, four tribune houses, six granaries, sixty six barracks, and one hundred and seventy store rooms (Shirley 1996:113). Two bath houses were also found on the perimeter of the wall (MacDonald 1919:121). The remains of a hypocaust were found in the house of the *primus pilus* and concrete floors were found in parts of the officers' quarters (Shirley 1996:114). The legionaries torn down all of the buildings when the fort was abandoned in AD 85 or 86, (Shirley 1996:113).

Of the sites selected, Inchtuthil has the best structural preservation. Its layout follows the same basic pattern of camps and forts throughout the empire (Webster 1985:185). A peculiarity about this site in comparison to others is the relative size between the *principa* and the hospital.

As shown below in Figure 2, the *pricipa* is central in the fort and the hospital is in the northeast section next to three sets of barracks. Cohorts within this fort are clearly organized and given six barracks each. The first cohort is particularly notable since it had nearly twice as many rooms as the other cohorts. Storage rooms are located along roads between quadrants of the camp.

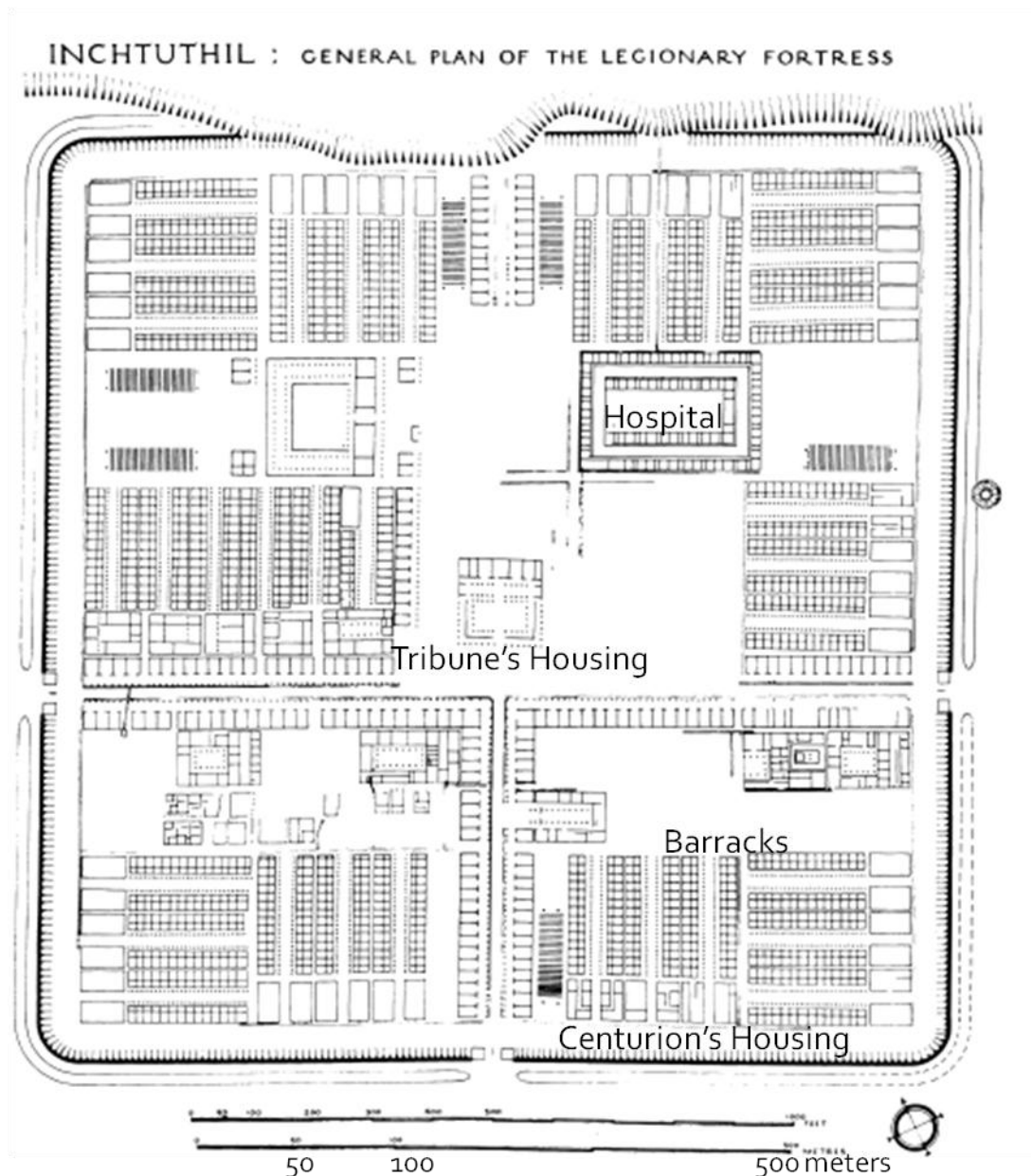


Figure 2 Layout of Inchtuthil (modified from Frere 1980:53).

York

York is the longest occupied of the selected sites. It has a multi-phased occupation lasting from AD 71 (Miller 1925:183) till the fourth century (Miller 1929:92). The site encompasses fifty acres and now is embedded in the modern city of York (Miller 1929:98). One of the only remaining structures from the fort today is the multi-angular tower which belongs to the last phase of occupation in the fourth century (Miller 1925:192).

Miller (1925) creates a chronology of walls based off of his excavations in 1925. Originally the fort was surrounded by a rampart and ditches (Miller 1925:185). The next phase he describes as a “massive rampart of clay.” In AD 108 or 109 a stone wall was erected and following its destruction the final stone wall was built in 182 (Miller 1925:190). Improvements to the fortress continued, such as the multi-angular tower listed above which reflects a style that did not emerge till the end of the third century (Miller 1925:192). The only non defensive structure he comments on is what he calls a barrack near the wall that was demolished midway through the occupation (Miller 1929:99). He attributes this demolition to the shift to a more localized army that was increasingly housed among and drawn from the local populace and housed outside of the fort. This interpretation was disputed by Ramm who claimed it was a storage building (Ramm 1955:77). Regardless of the function of the building, it may still be an indicator of a transition to a localized army since the structure was never rebuilt. Further excavations of the interior of the fortress are limited because a modern ministry building stand in the middle of the fort.

Graves

The most significant factor impacting Roman military burials is if it is a time of war or a time of peace (Hope 2003:80). In war bodies were deposited in mass graves while in peace individual

burials were more common. During mass burials officers were usually segregated into their own mass grave (Hope 2003:90). Until the third century, almost all Roman burials were cremations (Collingwood and Richmond 1969:166). Additionally tombstones were only popular in the first and second centuries (Hope 2003:85). Tombs were always placed outside of cities, usually along the roads leading into them (Collingwood and Richmond 1969:166). Grave goods were limited to vessels of food and drink and any items that the individual was wearing when they were cremated (Collingwood and Richmond 1969:167). Remains were then put in pottery or vessels of metal, glass, or lead.

When inhumations were practiced remains were either buried directly in the ground or in coffins of wood or stone (Collingwood and Richmond 1969:167). Individuals were buried in the extended position and if they were Christian then their body faced east. When tombstones were present at military graves they usually included their name and unit (Collingwood and Richmond 1967:169). If they were in the cavalry then it was common for a sculpture of a rider and horse to be included.

ANALYSIS

While the Romans in Britain have been heavily studied, there are still many details missing. This can be a result of their own doing, difficulties of preservation, or the development of methods in archaeology. Although a comprehensive answer is not as readily available as hoped, there are clues that have been recovered which can help explain the nature of the Roman officer corps.

Issues

The availability of information is far more limited than was expected at the onset of this investigation. Age alone did not remove the clues that were desired. One of the most immediate issues is how artifacts are left behind in the first place. It must be understood that these sites were once the property of a highly disciplined military force. In general such forces do not litter their own facilities. This is especially true given various floor types (Hoffman 1995:131). While artifacts may be easily lost on a earth or clay floor, they are much less likely to be left behind on a timber or concrete floor. Sites have also had to endure the test of time. This is not only fostered by the elements but by human activity. Metchley was ploughed to near destruction (Joseph and Shotton 1934:69). In addition to the affects of agriculture on archaeology, cities have covered sites such as Metchley and York. The last challenge is in the recovery and recording of the information in these sites. As Hoffman (1995) wrote “It might also be useful to compare the distribution of finds from the centurions’ quarters with finds from the men’s quarters, something which past excavation and publication standards have not made possible.” Whether it was by poor techniques in the early twentieth century, a lack of resources, or lack of interest in publications, the details of these excavations is simply not commonly available.

Roman burial practices further complicate the process of gaining information through grave sites. Since remains were typically cremated, gaining information on the age, gender, or cause of death. For example, of the one 121 graves excavated in Caelereon, only 34 clearly indicated a gender (Evans et al. 1995:189). Since gender is one of the most distinguishable forensic indicators, it is hard to imagine that the ethnicity of the remains can be easily determined. Another difficulty is the lack of tombstones (Hope 2003:85). Since tombstones would indicate rank, the lack of them presents an issue. Lastly, since grave goods were also

limited, comparison between graves becomes increasingly difficult (Collingwood and Richmond 1969:167).

Answers

The sites of Metchley, Inchtuthil, and York remained consistent in size during the first century of occupation. Both Inchtuthil and York were made for a legion and each were approximately fifty acres in size. If Joseph and Shatton (1934) were correct in their conclusion that the large camp at Metchley was occupied by half a legion, then this would compare well with the size of the other two sites for this time frame. It is possible that York may have downsized slightly as Joseph (1915) contends, but with walls arranged as they were this seems doubtful. This would seem to indicate that the organization and size of legions during the occupation of Britain remained relatively stable.

The level of preservation at Inchtuthil allows for a more detailed analysis of the layout than the other two sites as shown in Figure 2. At the end of each barrack block on the side facing the outer wall are the centurion quarters. The consistent location of these quarters may be a clue to how these men led. Being the closest soldiers to the wall meant that they would hypothetically be the first ones to the fight besides any guard posts along the walls. This implies a lead from the front attitude and a high level of dependence on the ability of centurions to lead their centuries independent of the tribunes. This location also gives clues to the relations between officers of different rank. The quarters of the tribunes and *legat* are centrally located within the fort. This suggests tribunes had far greater interaction with the *legat* than the centurions. While the *legat* and tribunes may have spent their time in the headquarters, the centurions were among the troops. Another factor that suggests that the centurions spent little time at the headquarters was

the large number of them. It would be chaotic and inefficient to have centurions from each century reporting to the headquarters.

The size of each housing unit may also be a clue to the status of the officer corps. Certainly the *legat* had the largest billeting in the fort, indicating his supreme status. The housing of the tribunes was smaller and the housing of the centurions was a little less than half the size of that. This left the space allotted to soldiers as a fraction of that given to centurions. While the centurions likely worked with and among the soldiers, they were clearly distinguished from them.

With the absence of data from graves and quarters in the archaeological record, it is difficult to assess how their composition changed throughout this time frame. Historical references to officers such as Maximus the Spaniard (Frere 1987:353) seems to suggest that at least the upper echelons of the officer corps remained diverse. The more generally observed shift from gladius to scatha (Collingwood and Richmond 1969:304) remains as evidence for more localized legions.

CONCLUSIONS

Evidence directly relating to the officer corps of Roman Britain remains scarce. The nature of the officer corps seems to have remained fairly stable from the invasion in AD 43 till the final withdraw in 410. The institution as a whole underwent many changes, but the structure of the organization remained the same. *Legats* seem to have led from a centralized location in the fort and centurions likely had limited interaction with them. Centurions on the other hand appear to have led from the front but remained visibly separated from their soldiers. Perhaps with

improved excavation techniques and greater interest in the legionaries themselves more information will become available to understand the Roman military on a more personal level.

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