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"The Possibility of PTSD in Roman Soldiers Stationed at Vindolanda on the British Frontier"

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The Possibility of PTSD in Roman Soldiers Stationed at Vindolanda on the British Frontier

In the late 1970's, at Vindolanda, a fort near Hadrian's wall on the northern frontier of Roman Britain, archaeologists first discovered a series of tablets with writing dating to the first and second centuries C.E. Since the initial discoveries, more tablets have been discovered at the same site; the current body of writing from Vindolanda now numbers upwards of one thousand tablets. These documents, now called the Vindolanda tablets, are an extremely rare example of primary source documents from the Roman Empire, and scholars have used them to determine everything from the ethnic makeup of the Roman army to early trade practices in Britain. I would like to investigate the Vindolanda tablets to gain insight into what life would have been like for Roman soldiers during the occupation of Britain. After this, I will attempt evaluate whether or not extreme conditions presented by being abroad could have caused PTSD or PTSD-like symptoms in the soldiers, or otherwise how they may have been mentally affected by their deployment.

Several scholars, such as Jonathan Shay and Jason Crowley, have attempted to diagnose, or refute the diagnosis of, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in soldiers of classical antiquity. Rather than using the medical definition of PTSD, Shay asserts that moral injury, or the betrayal of "what's right," is an essential part of combat trauma, whether in Vietnam or in Homer's *Iliad*.¹ Other scholars, however, focus more on how ancient soldiers reacted to the conditions of battle

¹ Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, (New York : Maxwell Macmillan International, 1994) 3, 29. However convenient the idea of moral injury might be, it is not acknowledged by the medical community as a factor that influences whether or not soldiers, or other people, have PTSD.

and the administrations of war. Some sources refer to how ancient soldiers may have been armoured against PTSD due to the fact that they were very close, both physically and emotionally, to their comrades in arms, and that having both a sense of community and a shared goal made ancient armies more effective.² Crowley also makes the argument that ancient warriors could have been resistant to PTSD because ancient battles rarely forced soldiers to travel to unfamiliar locations and stay in hostile conditions for extended periods of time.³ Indeed, these scholars do not note what conditions and mental states would have been like for ancient soldiers who were stationed far from home in regions that they were not familiar with, facing enemies who they likely knew nothing about. While the medical diagnosis of PTSD is a burgeoning and valuable field, it is difficult enough to pinpoint in living people; therefore it seems almost absurd to attempt to assign this disorder to people who have been dead for centuries, and who we know almost nothing about besides. It may be more valuable to assess the mental states of Roman soldiers in the same manner as previous classical scholars, in terms of the extent to which the society, circumstances, and environment of the ancient world may have created situations where ancient soldiers would be either more susceptible or less susceptible to PTSD.

SOURCES AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF VINDOLANDA

The Roman conquest of Britain began with Gaius Julius Caesar in 55-54 B.C.E.⁴ Prior to the period when the Vindolanda tablets were written (85–130 C.E.), under the emperors

² Daniel Tompkins, "Greek Rituals of War," in *The Oxford Handbook of Warfare in the Classical World*, ed. Campbell, J. B., and Tritle, Lawrence A., (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) 537-539; Jason Crowley, "Combat Trauma in Classical Antiquity," in *Combat Trauma and the Ancient Greeks*, eds. Meineck, Peter, and Konstan, David, (New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 114-115.

³ Crowley, 114-115.

⁴ M. Millett, "Roman Britain," in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, (Oxford University Press, 2005).

Vespasian and Domitian, the governors of Roman Britain had considerably expanded the Roman frontiers in Britain, covering almost the entire island. The fort of Vindolanda was constructed in the early 80's C.E.⁵ However, when Hadrian became emperor in 117 C. E., revolts in Britain caused the emperor to withdraw the northern border of Roman territory to just north of Vindolanda, where the construction of a defensive wall began in 122.⁶ Since the Vindolanda tablets do not extend past 130 C.E., when Septimius Severus began his campaign against Scotland, this paper will not involve events or sources dating from after 130 C.E.⁷

The Roman historian Tacitus, who lived from 56–120 C.E. wrote and published *Agricola* in 97–98 C.E., a chronicle of his father-in-law Agricola's life and years in Britain, which provides a useful historical background to the Vindolanda tablets.⁸ Agricola (40–93 C.E.) served in both the Roman army and government in various positions, and was governor of Britain from 77–84 C.E.⁹ While holding this position, Tacitus claims, Agricola was able to extend the borders of Roman Britain, and continue the subjugation of the natives of the British Isles, west into Wales and north as far the coast of Scotland and the Orkney islands. Some highlights of his campaign included putting down continued rebellions at Anglesey, which had been a locus of Celtic resistance, the battle at Mons Graupius—which defeated the British soundly enough that Agricola's troops could make their way to the northern coast of Scotland unmolested—and the establishment of military forts and garrisons along his path to the north. In writing this biography, Tacitus had the advantage of utilizing personal communications with both Agricola

⁵ Richard Brilliant, *The American Historical Review* 83, no. 5 (1978), 1236.

⁶ A. R. Birley, "High Officials of the Undivided Province, 43–c.213," in *The Roman Government of Britain*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁷ Eric Birley, *Roman Britain and the Roman Army; Collected Papers*, (Kendal (Eng.): T. Wilson, 1953), 38.

⁸ Cornelius Tacitus, et al. "Introduction to the *Agricola*," *Agricola*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: London: Harvard University Press, 1970).

⁹ Tacitus et al., "Introduction", 15-16; Birley, A. R., *The Roman Government*.

and those who knew and served with him; additionally, Tacitus would have had access to “copies of official communications, imperial instructions, and the like in the archives at Rome.”¹⁰

However, just because Tacitus had authentic sources does not mean that he felt obligated to be unbiased or historically faithful. E. Birley suggests that Tacitus credited his father-in-law with more accomplishments than he was due. Other historical sources, such as Statius, Pliny the Elder, and Silius Italicus, imply that Agricola’s predecessors, M. Vettius Bolanus (69–71 C.E.) and Q. Petillius Cerialis (71–73/74 C.E.), were able to penetrate much further north than Tacitus admits.¹¹ Furthermore, Agricola’s harrowing journeys across the swamps and forests of Britain, which Tacitus has Agricola himself recount in a rousing speech to his troops, could have been a “stock description of a good general”; the poet Statius uses similar language when praising the exploits of Bolanus.¹² Though it is still possible to attribute the decisive and important victory at Mons Graupius to Agricola, and to acknowledge his contribution in establishing military forts in Britain, Birley concludes that Tacitus likely exaggerated Agricola’s accomplishments, and that Agricola “was a relatively minor ray of sunshine” when compared to the conquests and battles occurring simultaneously throughout the Roman Empire.¹³

Archaeological sources include remains of Roman architecture still present in Britain, hidden in present-day cities or half-buried underground. Tombstones and altars provide inscriptions, and excavations have revealed artefacts, such as shoes, remnants of tankards, and even fragments of food.¹⁴ In addition to artefacts and structures from Vindolanda itself,

¹⁰ Tacitus et al., “Introduction,” 16.

¹¹ E. Birley, 13-14.

¹² *Ibid.*, 15.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁴ Rob Sands, and Jonathan A. Horn. "Bring Me Three Large Beers: Wooden Tankards at Roman Vindolanda," *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 36, no. 1 (2017), 71-83; Anthony R. Birley, "Some

archeological finds at other Roman sites in Britain can also provide an insight into what life would have been like for a soldier in this area.

Historians have divided the archeological sections (and the Vindolanda tablets as well) into five periods between 85–130 C.E.¹⁵ The first period stretches from c. 85–92 C.E., wherein the fort was occupied by the 1st cohort of Tungrians. This cohort likely remained at Vindolanda into Period II (c. 92–97/100 C.E.) and possibly even into Period III (97/100–c. 105), although it is certain that the VIII Batavian cohort was present at Vindolanda during the second and third periods. A majority of the surviving tablets are from Period III, when Flavius Cerialis, whom many of the tablets concern, was prefect of the Ninth cohort of Batavians. Period IV, from c.105–c.120, once again saw the 1st cohort of Tungrians among others, including soldiers from *coh. I Vardullorum*. The fifth and final period that tablets survive from is from c. 120–128; it was during this period, in 122 C.E., that construction of Hadrian's wall began. It is possible that the decision to construct a defensive wall was sparked by uprisings among the native British, revolts that may have been “provoked by Roman maltreatment of peoples in southern Scotland.”¹⁶ In the third century, the fort was rebuilt with stone instead of wood, and, also in the third century, a *vicus*, or town, was constructed near the base.¹⁷ A tombstone found near the settlement and fort “indicat[es] some degree of Romanization in the area in the post-Roman

Writing-tablets Excavated at Vindolanda in 2001, 2002 and 2003," *Zeitschrift Für Papyrologie Und Epigraphik* 170 (2009), 286.

¹⁵ Birley, A. R., "Some Writing-tablets," 267. I have chosen to summarize A.R. Birley's list of the archaeological periods at Vindolanda, as it is the most updated and detailed that I could find.

¹⁶ Birley, A. R., *The Roman Government*.

¹⁷ Brilliant, 1236.

period,” but is “insufficient to prove the survival of the *vicus* or its people as a community into the Dark-Ages.”¹⁸

The Vindolanda tablets were written on wooden “leaves” in pen and ink, made from available materials, such as oak, alder, and birch instead of importing papyrus; however, the stylus with which the tablets were inscribed was probably imported.¹⁹ It seems as though someone had tried to burn these tablets as rubbish, but instead they were preserved, likely by “the damp, anaerobic environment” where they were cast off.²⁰ In their present state, the tablets are fragmented, damaged, and rife with bad grammar, spelling mistakes, poor handwriting, and abbreviations. Since my Latin is elementary at best, I am relying primarily on the work of Alan Bowman and his colleagues for clear transcriptions of Latin and English translations.

A plethora of the correspondence in these tablets involves a man named Flavius Cerialis, an equestrian officer and prefect of the Ninth cohort of Batavians; it is supposed that the residence near which these tablets were found was his home.²¹ In addition to the tablets to or from Cerialis, there are many other writings: drafts of letters to officers, complaints, requests for letters of recommendation, invitations to birthday parties, and of course, lists and receipts.²²

THE SOLDIERS AT VINDOLANDA

¹⁸ Peter Salway, *The Frontier People of Roman Britain*, (Cambridge Classical Studies. Cambridge [England]: University Press, 1965) 92.

¹⁹ Bowman, Alan K., *Life and Letters on the Roman Frontier: Vindolanda and Its People*, (New York: Routledge, 1998) 16.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

²¹ Many of the fragments addressed to Cerialis contain nothing more than his name, and sometimes the word *rogo*—“I ask.”

²² Interestingly, most of these lists are made and written by, and subsequently sent to, slaves. Historians suggest that the slaves present at forts such as Vindolanda included both slaves of the army in general and private slaves of the officers. The fact that these slaves wrote correspondances opens many new arguments in regards to literacy in the ancient world.

The troops that were stationed at Vindolanda when the tablets were written were Tungrian and Batavian, rather than being from Rome.²³ Both of these groups were not from the “romanised centre of the empire” but instead from northern Gaul (modern day western Belgium and the Netherlands), which had only been conquered comparatively recently.²⁴

A fascinating connection between the Vindolanda tablets and Tacitus’ *Agricola* is that Tacitus refers to soldiers of these nationalities and their involvement at the battle of Mons Graupius. Tacitus specifically mentions “four battalions of Batavi and two of Tungri,” who Agricola ordered “to bring things to the sword’s point and to hand-to-hand fighting” with the British, a technique that they were experienced and skillful in employing.²⁵ Bowman asserts that “it would be extremely surprising if our three Vindolanda units [the First Tungrian cohort, Ninth Batavian cohort, and Third Batavian cohort] were not among these six;” McElderry, operating with only inscriptions and secondary sources in 1904, also argues that the 3rd and 9th Batavian cohorts, at least, were present at Mons Graupius.²⁶ Throughout *Agricola*, Tacitus does not tend towards graphic language, so his description of this battle is particularly striking: *passim arma et corpora et laceri artus et cruenta humus* (“everywhere weapons and bodies and mutilated limbs and bleeding earth”).²⁷ Tacitus also mentions the aftermath of the battle, wherein the British natives slew their own families and burned their homes, and then fled, describing “the features of victory: everywhere was dismal silence, lonely hills, houses smoking to heaven.”²⁸ If Tacitus’ graphic description of bloody corpses and charred remains are historically valid, then we may

²³ Bowman, *Life and Letters*, 22-24.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Tacitus, *Agricola*, 93.

²⁶ Bowman, *Life and Letters*, 26; McElderry, R. Knox. "Some Notes upon Roman Britain. (Continued)." *The Classical Review* 18, no. 9 (1904), 459.

²⁷ Tacitus, *Agricola*, 94.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 97.

assume that the soldiers of the units stationed at Vindolanda had fought and survived at least one potentially traumatizing battle in Britain. It is possible, though, that the extra gore and pity may be a function of Mons Graupius being the climax of *Agricola*, and therefore Tacitus included these elements for dramatic effect.

Though the boggy ground and “hit-and-run warfare” tactics of the British people may have caused undue trouble for Agricola and his heavily armed legionaries, it is possible that the German and especially Batavian auxiliary units were particularly suited to fight under such circumstances.²⁹ Tacitus mentions the British fighting techniques with distaste, in specific reference to how they utilized their native environment. He claims that “the marshes and forests covered the fugitives” after the British native people fled from a failed ambush, and if not for the Britons’ ability to conceal themselves in the environment around them, Agricola and the Roman army would have ended the war far sooner.³⁰ However, the Batavian troops, in this instance as in others, may have prevailed because of their lighter armor and because they were more accustomed to the wooded terrain of Britain. Similar use of Batavian units occurred in 69 C.E., when Roman troops fought, to their disadvantage, on flooded terrain near the Rhine river; in this circumstance, “the tall light armed Batavians and Germans who were familiar with the terrain and used to swimming” were employed, and moved across the boggy ground more effectively than the Roman legionaries.³¹ The Batavian and Tungrian units who fought at Mons Graupius may have also been lightly armed, mobile, and more comfortable with swampy terrain compared

²⁹ Catherine M. Gilliver, "Mons Graupius and the Role of Auxiliaries in Battle," *Greece & Rome* 43, no. 1 (1996), 62.

³⁰ Tacitus, *Agricola*, 75. Indeed, Tacitus credits a portion of Agricola’s success at Mons Graupius to the fact that the governor had anticipated that the British would try to escape thus, and prepared his soldiers to flush them out of the thickets and woods (Tacitus, 95).

³¹ Gilliver, 58-59.

to the Roman legionaries, factors which gave them a distinct advantage over the native British people.³²

A characteristic of the Batavian units was that, “Rome had traditionally allowed them to be commanded by their own nobles,” meaning that the soldiers stationed at Vindolanda may have been less frustrated with a leader who they perceived as one of their own, instead of the distant authority of Rome or an unfamiliar Roman commander.³³ Shay, in *Achilles in Vietnam*, notes that modern soldiers may have been more susceptible to post-traumatic stress disorder because their officers were rotated at regular intervals, leaving them in the care of officers who they did not know, and sometimes could not trust; soldiers regarded the appointment of incompetent leaders and removal of beloved commanders as a moral betrayal.³⁴ In contrast, Crowly suggests that Athenian hoplites might have been armoured against PTSD because they went into battle with comrades with whom they had spent their entire lives.³⁵ Similarly, the cohorts at Vindolanda likely travelled and fought together throughout their lives even as they were relocated across the Roman empire.³⁶

Furthermore, the journey home to Gaul would have been far less arduous than a journey all the way to Rome; the presence of merchants from overseas in Vindolanda and other ports and garrisons demonstrates that travelling to the continent was feasible. It is not certain, however, if soldiers often, or ever returned home after service in Britain. We do know, from inscriptions on tombstones, that Roman veterans lived out their lives in Britain, sometimes with their families,

³² *Ibid.*, 59-63.

³³ Bowman, *Life and Letters*, 26.

³⁴ Shay, 16.

³⁵ Crowly, 114-116.

³⁶ Birley, A. R., *The Roman Government*.

though perhaps not to the same extent as other regions.³⁷ Additionally, within the Vindolanda tablets that involve requests for leave, soldiers were granted furlough in nearby cities such as Coria.³⁸ Similar cases occur in the Florida Ostraca, fragments of pottery with ancient writing (dated to approximately 130-170 C.E.), which were from a Roman fort possibly located “in the Nile Valley or near it,” and associated with the modern-day city of Edfu in Egypt.³⁹ One of these fragments includes a request for leave. In this case, the soldier is granted ten days’ leave with an additional two days to travel; the translator proposes that the soldier is only going down the Valley of the Nile, which would have been relatively close to the fort.⁴⁰ Requests for leave from both Egypt and Vindolanda indicate that when soldiers did have time off, they were not able to travel particularly far, and though the journey home to Gaul might have been possible, there is no evidence within the Vindolanda tablets of soldiers actually making this trip.

LIFE AT THE FORT

A factor that may have contributed significantly to quality of life in Vindolanda was the weather. Tacitus makes brief mention of the atmospheric conditions in Britain: he states that “the sky is overcast with continual rain and cloud, but the cold is not severe,” and makes a reference to how the length of days differs greatly from what he is familiar with.⁴¹ Northern Britain is known to this day for having unsavory weather, and this appears a few times in the

³⁷ Salway, 29.

³⁸ It has been suggested that Coria could have been the fort Corstopitum or present-day Corbridge; however, there is insufficient evidence for either of these (Breeze, *Review*). The topic is still debated and the location of Coria remains unknown, though it is supposed to be near Vindolanda and along where Hadrian’s Wall now stands.

³⁹ Roger S. Bagnall, and Robert Manning Strozier Library, *The Florida Ostraka (O. Florida) : Documents from the Roman Army in Upper Egypt*, (Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Monographs; No. 7. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University, 1976) 16 and 26-27.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

⁴¹ Tacitus, *Agricola*, 49.

documents from Vindolanda. One tablet discusses goods “by means of which we may endure the storms even if they are troublesome,” and another refers to times “when the roads are bad,” possibly owing to the weather. Bowman acknowledges that the fort of Vindolanda had resources including a bath-house and a hospital that could make life more tolerable for the Roman soldier, but “it would be optimistic to suppose that even the Roman army could stop the rain pattering out of the sky in a climate notorious for its *tempestates molestae*.”⁴² However, the fact that the Tungrian and Batavian soldiers were from Gaul, rather than Rome, may have made a difference on how they were affected by living in Britain. For people accustomed to the weather of north-western Europe, English weather might not have seemed so dismal as it would to soldiers who had been raised in Rome or elsewhere on the Mediterranean.

It is also noteworthy that there are no villas in this part of England, and relatively few cities.⁴³ This region was not a particularly desirable place to live, due to the fact that “the area is physically not particularly suitable for agricultural estates,” and furthermore, was potentially dangerous in terms of the threat of native British people.⁴⁴ The scarcity of inscriptions involving veterans suggests that Britain was a less than ideal place to retire, as “the conditions (and the climate) [were] too grim.”⁴⁵ Cities that did emerge were often connected to the forts and garrisons, because the presence of the Roman army ensured security from the potentially hostile British.⁴⁶ In addition to the extra safety, “the largest settlements naturally grew up where good communications and busy traffic” abounded—namely, close to the military bases.⁴⁷ However, in

⁴² Bowman, *Life and Letters*, 79.

⁴³ Salway, 61.

⁴⁴ Salway, 37.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

the period of the Vindolanda's history when the tablets were written, there was no *vicus* attached to the fort, meaning that there was no established residence dedicated solely to civilians near Vindolanda.

Many of the Vindolanda tablets—“slightly more than half”⁴⁸—are associated with Flavius Cerialis, and enough of his correspondence remains that scholars are able to identify his penmanship.⁴⁹ Lists and receipts associated with this household, of which there are many, can provide insight into what life would have been like both in general at Vindolanda, and specifically for an officer. Several of these documents detail prices and amounts of staples such as wheat, barley, poultry, pork, and Celtic beer. Accounts of goods also suggest that in addition to having wooden or leather goods imported, Vindolanda had its own means of providing for itself, such as producing wool, repairing weapons, brewing beer, and assembling structures. Indeed, both documents and archaeological evidence suggest that Vindolanda had its own bath-house, hospital, and a residence that may have served as a guest house.⁵⁰ And furthermore, within the lists of utilities, there is evidence of luxury, at least in Flavius Cerialis' residence. One list mentions the purchase of pepper, which was native to southern Asia, rather than Britain or Europe; pepper would have been “an expensive luxury item.”⁵¹ Another list catalogues a dining service, including three vinegar-bowls and three egg-cups, creature comforts that a modern-day soldier would find unthinkable in a military fort. *Tab. Vindol.* III, 596, contains a list of a rather confusing assortment of miscellaneous objects and prices, the purpose of which

⁴⁸ Robin Birley, "Vindolanda," in *The Oxford Companion to Archaeology*, (Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁴⁹ Alan K. Bowman, J. David Thomas, and J. N. Adams, *The Vindolanda Writing-tablets : (tabulae Vindolandenses II)*, (London: British Museum Press, 1994) 199.

⁵⁰ References to the “builders of the bath-house,” construction materials, and what might be the building of a hospital appear in *Tab. Vindol.* I, 155, which dates to the early 90's C.E. (Bowman, *The Vindolanda Writing-Tablets*, 98-99).

⁵¹ Bowman, *Life and Letters*, 46.

has yet to be determined. However, some of the goods mentioned here are further evidence of a more luxurious lifestyle, such as necklace-locks and red, green, and purple curtains.⁵²

Though it is unlikely that all Roman military personnel had their families nearby—though some scholars speculate that soldiers’ families may have lived in the *vicus*, or small city, attached to Vindolanda after it had been constructed in the 3rd century—there is documentary evidence that Flavius Cerialis and other high-ranking officers did live with their wives and children at Vindolanda and other forts. One renowned correspondence from Vindolanda is a birthday invitation from Claudia Severa (the wife of Aelius Brocchus, another officer) addressed to Flavius Cerialis’ wife, Sulpicia Lepidina. The former urges Lepidina to “come to us, to make the day more enjoyable for me by your arrival.”⁵³ The two women were evidently close, as is suggested by Claudia Severa’s farewells: “my sister, my dearest and most longed-for soul.”⁵⁴ Claudia Severa also mentions her own “little son” (*filiolus*). Severa’s husband, Aelius Brocchus, also writes of their son, telling Cerialis that *filiolus meum salu[t-*, the ending of the final word being *salu[tat*, *salu[tamus*, or *salu[tant* (“my little son [and possibly others] says hello”).⁵⁵ Another noteworthy fragment from Vindolanda includes a line from Virgil’s *Aeneid*, written on the back of a discarded draft of a letter. Alan Bowman suggests that, since passages from the *Aeneid* were sometimes used as writing exercises, this may have been written by someone practicing their letters and penmanship, perhaps a child.⁵⁶ The fact that

⁵² *Tab. Vindol.* III, 596. This list also cryptically includes an item of nine pounds of hair, priced at 51.75 *denarii*.

⁵³ *Tab. Vindol.* II, 291.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Tab. Vindol.* III, 623.

⁵⁶ Bowman, *The Vindolanda Writing-Tablets*, 65-67. However, A. R. Birley suggests that if this and other fragments of Virgil recovered from Vindolanda were exercises, they may have been adult soldiers practicing Latin penmanship and comprehension. (Birley, A. R., “Some Writing-tablets,” p. 278).

Flavius Cerialis, at least, lived at Vindolanda with his wife and possibly child, means that it is possible he was armoured against homesickness and separation from his loved ones—seeing that he had brought them to Britain with him.

Various mentions of hunting for sport suggest that the soldiers, or at least the officers, stationed in British forts had leisure time. An altar located in Northern Britain states that the altar was dedicated by Sabinianus, “commandant of cavalry” on the occasion of catching a particularly elusive boar, “which previous hunters had hunted in vain.”⁵⁷ A similar interest in hunting is reflected in several of Flavius Cerialis’ correspondences. Cerialis writes to Brocchus about hunting equipment, saying, “if you love me, brother, I ask that you send me some hunting-nets.”⁵⁸ Another tablet catalogues nets and snares for capturing various types of birds, including thrushes, ducks, and swans.⁵⁹ *Tab. Vindol. III*, 594, also mentions hunting dogs—*segosi*, relative of the modern bloodhound, and *vetragi*, ancestor of the greyhound—and dog-collars (*collares kanum*), possibly for the same hunting dogs, also appear in a list of material items.⁶⁰ Both the archaeological sources and Vindolanda tablets imply that officers were able to dedicate time to activities for their own enjoyment, such as hunting, in addition to their regular duties.⁶¹

While the multitude of documents associated with Flavius Cerialis offers many valuable insights into the life of an officer, it also results in a dearth of documentary evidence regarding the soldiers, slaves, and other persons at Vindolanda. However, that is not to say that the tablets

⁵⁷ Leonard Cottrell, *A Guide to Roman Britain*, 1st American Ed. (Philadelphia: Chilton Books, 1966), 196.

⁵⁸ *Tab. Vindol. II*, 233.

⁵⁹ *Tab. Vindol. III*, 593.

⁶⁰ *Tab. Vindol. III*, 597.

⁶¹ Birley, A. R., “Some Writing-tablets,” 282.

and the archaeological finds from Vindolanda cannot provide more information about other facets of life at the fort.

Duties of soldiers stationed at Vindolanda most likely included both “the protection of the lowland zone of Britain and its outliers from the north” and “also involved...a very serious problem of internal security.”⁶² In addition to military duties, the soldiers likely also did some amount of construction work. Vindolanda underwent several periods of reconstruction, as the fort was initially constructed from wood, and it is likely that the soldiers themselves aided in building; Breeze suggests that instead of strict periods of reconstruction, “the building/re-building/amending process may have continued for years.”⁶³ After 122 C.E., the soldiers stationed at Vindolanda were probably also engaged in the construction of Hadrian’s wall.

In all of the surviving texts from Vindolanda, relatively little mention is made of the actual military work done by the soldiers. Only a single text details the British themselves and their military tactics. The word that the unnamed writer uses to describe the British natives—*Brittunculi*—suggests distaste for the native people (the literal translation is akin to “British assholes”). The same document alludes to the fighting tactics of the native people of Britain, stating that they did not wear armor, and that they had many cavalry, but did not utilize cavalry and weapons in the same manner that the Roman soldiers did.

There is also evidence of misdirected violence, committed by a Roman centurion against a civilian, perhaps a merchant, from overseas.⁶⁴ The surviving tablet appears to be an appeal to some kind of authority for justice on behalf of a civilian who was flogged and possibly detained

⁶² Salway, 5-6.

⁶³ David J. Breeze, *Britannia* 36 (2005), 507.

⁶⁴ *Tab. Vindol.* II, 344; Bowman, *The Vindolanda Writing-Tablets*, 329-330.

at Vindolanda.⁶⁵ The victim stated that he was “bloodied by rods as if [he] had committed some crime,” and vehemently protests that he, “an innocent man” with an attested reputation, did not deserve such a punishment.⁶⁶ The text also implies that the victim’s possessions, had been poured “down the drain” by the centurion.⁶⁷ Though there is no way to guarantee that the perpetrator of this violence was unprovoked, it could be an example of a soldier unable to discern that the situation did not require the same violence that would be necessary on the battlefield.

The salutations and farewells of personal correspondences demonstrate that almost every person who wrote a letter to a comrade was on familiar and kind terms. The soldiers and correspondents often referred to each other as *frater* (“brother”), regardless of whether or not the people involved were related.⁶⁸ This sign-off is so common, in fact, that one wonders if it was simply a polite convention, akin to the modern-day tradition of beginning letters with “dear.” However, there is only a single instance of a correspondence that conveys actual malice, in which the writer states *opto male tibi eueniat* (“It is my wish that it might turn out badly for you”).⁶⁹

One tablet, most likely a draft of a letter that was delivered from Period III, mentions that a daughter (*filia*) of the recipient—or, in this case, possibly a young woman that he was familiar with—sends greetings to him.⁷⁰ Bowman suggests that this was a letter written “by a superior

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Amy Zoll, *Review*, in *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 35, no. 3 (2003), 453.

⁶⁹ *Tab. Vindol.* II, 321.

⁷⁰ *Tab. Vindol.* III, 643.

giving instructions to subordinates”; if this is true, it would mean that it was not just the officers who had families or associated with women at Vindolanda.⁷¹

There is also evidence, both in the Vindolanda tablets and archaeologically, that the soldiers at Vindolanda drank together in a community and celebratory sense. Certainly there is mention in the tablets of the consumption of beer (and also of wine in Flavius Cerialis’ house). *Cervesa*, or Celtic beer, appears in various lists, receipts, and requests, and it is likely that this drink was produced locally in Britain: *Tab. Vindol.* II, 182 and *Tab. Vindol.* III, 646 mention a “brewer” and “maltster” respectively, both occupations associated with the production of beer. Masclus, a decurion, specifically requests beer from Cerialis after asking for military instructions, writing, “My fellow-soldiers have no beer. Please order some to be sent.”⁷² Additionally, archaeological evidence for the consumption of beer among the soldiers exists in the form of fragments of three tankards, including one from Per. IV, recovered from a structure that archaeologists suppose served as living quarters for the soldiers.⁷³ Sands and Horn’s in-depth analysis of the social, cultural, and historical meaning of these tankard fragments concludes that the drinking vessels and the act of celebrating with them “formed a significant and integral part of social interactions during the first few phases of occupation at Vindolanda.”⁷⁴ However, not all incidents associated with revelry and intoxication are wholesome. A fragmentary tablet mentions things being broken (*rumpantur*) and the presence of an inebriated person (*ebriacum*).⁷⁵ Unfortunately, as the translator notes, “so little can be recovered that the context is wholly obscure,” and connecting the broken items with drunkenness is a guess at best;

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Tab. Vindol.* III, 628.

⁷³ Sands and Horn, 75.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁷⁵ *Tab. Vindol.* III, 662.

connecting this incident with anything else, such as the alcohol abuse so often comorbid with modern PTSD, would be a stretch.

In conclusion, the archaeological and textual evidence discovered at Vindolanda and elsewhere on what once was the frontier of Roman Britain proves that life for the Roman soldiers serving in this region was not particularly harsh or strenuous, but rather tolerable and even luxurious, at least for officers. Tacitus puts words in the mouth of a British chieftan, Calgacus, who rallies his troops by listing the disadvantages and demoralization of the Roman forces:

“That army, recruited from races widely separate...Gauls and Germans, and even...many of the tribes of Britain, who lend their blood to an alien tyranny...there are no wives to inspire the Romans, no parents to reproach the runaway: most of them have no home or an alien home. Few in numbers, uneasy in their unfamiliarity, all that they see around them, the very sky and sea and fests, strange to their eyes...and beyond these, there is nothing to fear: empty forts, settlements of veterans, and feeble and quarreling towns, made up of ill-affected subjects and unjust rulers.”⁷⁶

This speech was allegedly given in 83C.E., but it is evident from Agricola’s reply that things were already changing for the Roman soldiers—his speech refers to all the deeds that the soldiers completed in the past, for the most part a catalogue of overcoming the obstacles of British terrain.⁷⁷ However, within at least twenty years of Calgacus’ speech, it is markedly clear that the state of the Roman army on the frontier of Britain was far less abysmal. The soldiers were stationed with familiar cohorts, who, in writing at least, they most often referred to as

⁷⁶ Tacitus, *Agricola*, 85-87

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 87-89

“dearest brother,” and some soldiers lived with their wives and even children. Amidst their daily tasks, which included tasks from police work to construction, the officers and soldiers were able to make time for leisure activities such as hunting, birthday celebrations, or communal feasting. Furthermore, the economy, which continued to grow with help from roads and familiar trade routes, was able to provide not only basic commodities, but also luxury items like pepper or multiple colors of curtains.

COMPARING ROMAN BRITISH SOLDIERS AND MODERN DAY PEACEKEEPERS

The role of the soldiers stationed on the frontier of Roman Britain and at Vindolanda seems primarily to have been acting as defenders of the already-present territory. Their main duties most likely included police work, rather than guerilla warfare and constant siege and bloodthirsty sacking conquest. Additionally, unlike modern soldiers, they had not only homes and residences, but also bath houses, families, workshops, and flourishing economies. Furthermore, Roman soldiers in Britain were colonists and conquerors, seeking to establish permanent residence and garner wealth from the land. Since, in the present day, it is hard to find studies done on PTSD in colonial oppressors, I attempted to investigate whether parallels could be drawn between the mental states of soldiers stationed on the frontier of Roman Britain at Vindolanda and modern-day peacekeepers. When comparing very different time periods and possibly even a different situation altogether, it is vital to be careful and not to take a “universalist” approach to the experiences of these soldiers.

The United Nations defines a peacekeeping mission as one wherein peacekeepers “are called upon not only to maintain peace and security, but also to facilitate the political process,

protect civilians, assist in the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former combatants; support the organization of elections, protect and promote human rights and assist in restoring the rule of law.”⁷⁸ The comparison between Roman soldier in Britain and modern-day peacekeeper is not exact—the Romans were by no means administrators of humanitarian aid, and hopefully peacekeepers do not have notions of economic and colonial conquest. Additionally, Roman soldiers were not bound by the moral and legal limitations of today’s society: their concerns would not have included the preservation of favorable international relations, adherence to global peace treaties such as the Geneva Convention, or morals in the sense of a Judeo-Christian tradition. Additionally, over the past 1,900 years, the technology associated with warfare has changed drastically. However, there are similar elements in the jobs of peacekeepers and the Roman soldiers at Vindolanda and on the frontier, namely deployment far from home in unfamiliar conditions, working and living in close proximity to civilians, and tasks that deal with the maintenance of civil order.

Psychiatric studies observing post-traumatic stress disorder and PTSD-like symptoms in modern-day peacekeepers report differing results depending on the location and situation where the peacekeeping missions occurred. Several studies, done by B. Litz, S. Orsillo, et al., attempt to observe PTSD and psychiatric symptomatology in American soldiers in Somalia in the 1990’s. Their findings report that from the peacekeepers who returned from this mission, 8% “were found to meet diagnostic criteria for PTSD” under the DSM-IV’s definition of PTSD.⁷⁹ Another

⁷⁸“What Is Peacekeeping,” Peacekeeping, United Nations, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/what-is-peacekeeping>.

⁷⁹ Brett Litz, Susan Orsillo, Matthew Friedman, and Peter Ehlich, “Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Associated with Peacekeeping Duty in Somalia for U.S. Military Personnel,” *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 154, no. 2 (1997), 178. This study was published in 1997, and it is worth noting that the medical community now operates under the DSM-V, published in 2013.

study, looking for psychiatric symptoms, but not necessarily PTSD, found that peacekeeping duty in Somalia was associated with “hostility, psychoticism, depression, and paranoid ideation” in more than one-third of the peacekeepers evaluated.⁸⁰ Both studies find that exposure to a “malevolent environment”, including the actual natural environment as well as proximity to hostile citizens, resulted in the greatest frustration and negative mental effects.⁸¹ Han and Kim’s 2001 study, evaluating psychiatric symptoms in peacekeepers in the Western Sahara Desert, likewise concludes that the “most common stressors...included environmental adaptation,” as well as homesickness.⁸²

It is worth noting that the peacekeepers in Somalia were deployed for periods of about six months, and were “assigned peacekeeping responsibilities under conditions of life threat”;⁸³ the Roman soldiers at Vindolanda may have, on some occasions, been operating in situations where their lives were at risk, but it was most likely not a constant state, as Britain was not in consistent military turmoil in the period between 85–130 C.E. A 2008 study, published in 2012, seeks to examine the differences in psychological effects between peacekeepers deployed on missions in warlike versus non-warlike environments (the more warlike deployment being in East Timor, and non-warlike in Bougainville, both operations conducted by the Australian Defense Force) and reports that “a more warlike deployment may be associated with greater general frustration

⁸⁰ Susan M. Orsillo, Lizabeth Roemer, Brett T. Litz, Pete Ehlich, and Matthew J. Friedman. 1998. “Psychiatric Symptomatology Associated with Contemporary Peacekeeping: An Examination of Post-Mission Functioning Among Peacekeepers in Somalia.” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 11 (4), 619.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 623; Litz et al., (1997), 181.

⁸² C.S. Han, Y.K. Kim YK, “Psychiatric symptoms reported by international peacekeeping personnel in the Western Sahara Desert,” *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disorders*, 2001, 189 (12), 858–860.

⁸³ Litz et al., (1997), 178.

with the more routine aspects of life on deployment”, possibly owing to the fact that a combat zone would be a more stressful work environment.⁸⁴

These studies, all of which were conducted by means of subjective surveys completed by the soldiers, reveal some discrepancies in the comparison between modern peacekeepers and ancient soldiers. Significant sources of frustration for peacekeepers in all of these studies included “ambiguous, inconsistent, [or] unacceptable rules of engagement,” “lack of clarity about the goals of the mission itself,” and “inherently contradictory mission experiences—*i.e.*, humanitarian versus more dangerous police activities.”⁸⁵ Roman soldiers in Britain, however, were not engaged in missions promoting humanitarian values. Furthermore, they likely had few compunctions about committing violence against civilians who threatened or irritated them; indeed, *Tab. Vindol.* II 344, discussed above, may present an example of a centurion flogging a civilian. Additionally, some peacekeepers report receiving great satisfaction from their humanitarian work. Roman soldiers, who were not administering benevolent aid to the British people, would not have experienced this. However, Orsillo et al.’s study of Americans in Somalia reported that “feeling [*sic*] of pride and cohesion with one’s unit were rated as significantly more rewarding aspects of duty than exposure to a new culture,” a category which, in terms of the criteria presented on the surveys, “captured items relating to the humanitarian nature of the mission.”⁸⁶ It is possible that, like the American peacekeepers in this survey, the Roman soldiers also found satisfaction in the bonds they formed with their cohorts, and took pride in their unit’s military accomplishments.

⁸⁴ Michael Waller, et al., “Traumatic Events, Other Operational Stressors and Physical and Mental Health Reported by Australian Defence Force Personnel Following Peacekeeping and War-like Deployments.” *BMC Psychiatry* 12 (July 2012).

⁸⁵ Han and Kim.

⁸⁶ Orsillo et al., *Psychiatric Symptomatology*, 618 and 622.

CONCLUSION

In evaluating modern and historical sources both, one must conclude that even if it were possible to diagnose ancient soldiers with PTSD, it is highly unlikely that the Roman soldiers stationed at Vindolanda would have been subject to PTSD. While some aspects of life at the fort, such as the weather, or local resistance from native British people, may have been unpleasant, tedious, or dangerous, the soldiers lived in relative comfort, surrounded by a close-knit cohort and perhaps even family members. Batavian and Tungrian soldiers were fortified against the potentially hostile environment and had some advantages, compared to the standard Roman legion member, in combat against British native people. In contrast to modern-day peacekeepers, the soldiers at Vindolanda did not struggle with complicated rules of engagement or vague mission objectives, meaning that they may have experienced less frustration with their superior authorities and systems of power. It is worth noting that the methods of identifying PTSD and PTSD-like symptoms in modern soldiers relies in part on personal accounts and testimonies, which are particularly hard to find in primary sources from both the ancient world and specifically at Vindolanda. In the future, perhaps further excavations and refined translations will bring more clarity to this topic.

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