

Camp Life & Strip-Houses

by Stephen Kenwright

You shall not build a house; you shall not sow seed; you shall not plant or have a vineyard; but you shall live in tents all your days.

Jeremiah 35:7

Re-enactment groups like Comitatus and Regia Anglorum usually prepare some explanation for the relationship between military arena displays and the accompanying, but often apparently civilian, encampment or 'Living History Exhibit'. Perhaps the least satisfying description is the phrase 'tented village', easily misunderstood as a portrayal of everyday village life and begging the question: "Did they all live in tents, then?" (Latham 2005)

On the street where you live

Commonly associated with Roman army bases were the *Vici*, so named after the way ribbon development lined the street leading up to Roman forts, often in the form of long thin 'strip-houses', frequently live-in workshops trading through their narrow street frontage, squashed in together with the odd grander courtyard buildings which may be inns and the like and often huddling up to an all-important social centre such as a bath-house or shrine (de la Bédoyère 2003). Indeed, the often substantial settlements attending legionary fortresses (as opposed to auxiliary forts) are more properly termed *canabae* - possibly 'the hutments' after the four posted huts often employed, or perhaps from the Gallic for 'wineshop' (Stambaugh 1988).

That these settlements could become small towns is emphasised by, for example, their attainment of legal municipal status (Rogers 2005) and the inscription left by the *vicani Vindolandesses*, which Birley (2005) compares to an early Parish Council. Although it must be said that the difficulty of identifying encampments as opposed to buildings means that we cannot rule out the *presence* of tents at the developing edges or early phases of such sites, it is hard to present 'ordinary households' or '*vicus* life' without, as it were, several inconveniently large buildings to carry around.

...for neither did the inhabitants of the land withdraw nor did they wish to conceal anything, but they both furnished a market and served the soldiers in whatever else they wished.

Procopius, *History of the Wars*

The military re-enactor of most periods could usually describe their encampment as that of the army on the march and rationalise the civilians, observable partnerships and family groups under the blanket term 'camp followers'. It is particularly natural to depict family life surrounding the Late Roman army on the move as ordinary soldiers could marry officially, probably after Septimius Severus at the start of the 3rd Century. Decrees by Theodosius I and Arcadius indicate that families would routinely accompany soldiers in the late C4th and were allocated rations in the early C5th (Southern and Dixon 1996). Furthermore, a small detachment, or '*Vexillatio Comitatus*' (although this term

appears to apply specifically to cavalry, rather than infantry, units in the Notitia Dignitatum) would not be expected to erect much in the way of marching camp fortifications, if Vegetius' complaints about the late army's laxity in this area are much to go by (Clark 1767). It should be noted, therefore, that Comitatus portray a unit travelling to or from some posting rather than marching to contact or even campaign, as this would militate against the presence of young children and unnecessary trade production.

Portraying armed but civilian populations such as 'Generic Germanics' however, can present a few more problems. It is often politic to portray the regular inhabitants of the area in order to connect with the public more readily (and will often be billed as such by host organisations anyway). Even with a display at a site such as Bede's World, fully equipped with a period hall & grubenhauser, one might legitimately question why so many tents are about.

In the (admittedly C13th) Saga of Olaf Haraldson describes tents used to house people having travelled to participate in the legal assembly known as a '*Thing*'. While the Icelandic Thingvellir was equipped with semi-permanent stone / turf booths which could be roofed with canvas for use, the sagas indicate that local meetings were called in a wide variety of locations and attended in ordinary tents (Laing 1907). These might be alternative candidates for re-enactment encampments but the frequent focus on displays of craft working might more strongly suggest a trading event, rather than a primarily administrative gathering.

The term '*wic*' has been applied by re-enactors, notably within Regia Anglorum, both to the groups forming a practicable household unit and to a tented encampment itself, meaning a market or trading event (Leahy 2003). However, *wic* or *wik* is more usually applied to permanent continental commercial centres such as Haithabu, Dorestad & Birka, (Ennen 1979) as well as specialised and perhaps royally administered Saxon trading ports, well established and important permanent settlements, which were often also sites of large-scale craft working, *Eoforwic*, for example (Tweddle 1999). Whittaker (1983) states that their 'ancestors' were the rural *vici* of the late Empire and Goetz (1993) gives the meaning of '*Wik*' as simply 'village'.

Early medieval trading ports are also often called *emporia* (Charles-Edwards 2003) harking back to the portside bazaar in Rome and, ultimately, Greek colony-markets and a term applied by Alcuin to Roman York (Rollason 1999). Hodges (1988) suggests different categories of *emporia*, of which 'Type A' might be seasonally-occupied trading centres or fairs, possibly composed of tents or temporary structures which might later develop into permanent sites with buildings (Smith 2005). Clearly this would describe a typical re-enactment camp well, but I hesitate to suggest we put up signs saying "Type A Emporium *see Hodges (1988)*", not least because we are likely to be asked just what sort of Category A merchandise we are selling!

While regular markets and fairs associated with particular saints days were widespread in the medieval period, evidence for their pre conquest forerunners is scant in Britain, but widespread in the continent, based at villas, production sites, villages, *vici* and *civitates* (Stuer 2003). The Carolingian Pepin III (the Younger) ordered every *civitas* to hold a weekly market in 744 (Goetz 1993). Thus British trading events may be inferred (Mate 1996), perhaps as a continuation of the *nundinae*, markets held every 8 days in Roman towns (Stambaugh 1988). While the status of 'productive sites' highlighted by metal detector finds remains controversial, they may support the existence of widespread trading centres unrelated to recognised *wics* or *emporia* and without

associated evidence of permanent settlement or large scale manufacture (Pestell and Ulmschneider 2003). It may, therefore, be safer to describe non military tented displays as a regular market or, if the emphasis is on artisanal production rather than trade, a special gathering, such as an annual fair.

Propria domus omnium optima. (Your own house is the best of all houses.)

One might argue, however, that the purely tented community is that of a mobile Germanic (particularly in the C4-5th) or Slavic population (in the C6-7th) of the 'migrations period'. Various peoples moved into and across Europe in late antiquity, initially as a deliberate part of the Roman policy of settling foederati within the empire by treaty and increasingly in Rome's despite as a result of pressure from the East. One of the more famous of such groups might be part of the Gothic confederacy led by Alavivus across the Danube in 376 A.D. seeking refuge from the Huns and reluctantly settled in Thrace by Valens. However, they are depicted by Ammianus Marcellinus as being in such a sorry state that they traded children for dogs to eat (Maas 2000) and while this may be an exaggeration, displaced peoples may not be the ideal model for modern re-enactment.

Furthermore, the traditional view of Anglo-Saxon settlement in Britain, following particularly Bede and thence Gildas, also included rapid British displacement by whole communities on the move, but there is growing support for the view that smaller scale immigration and integration took place over a greater span of time, making a depiction of an 'invasion period' migrating community arguably misleading (Collins 1999, Moorhead 2001).

However, the circuit of Anglo-Saxon kings would require considerable logistical support, involving large scale local co-operation to supply the food-renders required by, for example Ine's laws and the extended retinues that would accompany the king and his gesithas; his comitatus in the later sense of the word (Charles-Edwards 2003). Bede describes such a visit of King Edwin to Yeavinger and, in this period, Comitatus usually portray the followers of Edwin, travelling north with households and associated craft activities to consolidate his political expansion through Deira & into Bernicia and superimposing a short lived veneer of Paulinus' Roman Christianity after his baptism in York in 627.

References:

Birley, R. 2005 *Vindolanda: Extraordinary records of daily life on the Northern Frontier*, Haltwhistle: Roman Army Museum Publications

Charles-Edwards, T. 2003 'Nations and Kingdoms' in Charles-Edwards, T. (ed.) *After Rome: c.400-c.800 (Short Oxford History of the British Isles)* Oxford: University Press

Clark, J. (trans.) 1767 *De Re Militari*, by Flavius Vegetius Renatus (Book 1.21.25)

Collins, R. 1999 *Early Medieval Europe 300-1000*, (second edition) Houndmills: Palgrave

de la Bédoyère, G. 2003 *Roman Towns in Britain*, Stroud: Tempus

Salvianus

Page 3 of 4

Stenolf

<http://salvianus.livejournal.com/>

- Ennen, E. 1979 *The Medieval Town*, Oxford: North-Holland
- Goetz, H.W. *Life in the Middle Ages from the Seventh to the Thirteenth Century*, London: University of Notre Dame
- Hodges, R. 1988 'The rebirth of towns in the early middle ages' in Hopley B. and Hodges, R. (eds.) *The Rebirth of Towns in the West AD 700-1050*, London: Council for British Archaeology Research Report
- Laing, S (trans.) 1907 *Heimskringla: A History of the Norse Kings*, London: Norroena Society
- Latham, M. 2005 'Time for a change?' in *Chronicle*, Vol 14, (2) (No. 71) Bristol: Regia Anglorum
- Leahy, K. 2003 *Anglo-Saxon crafts*, Stroud: Tempus
- Maas, M. (ed.) 2000 *Readings in Late Antiquity: A Sourcebook*, London: Routledge
- Mate, M. 1996 'The Rise and Fall of Markets in Southeast England' in *Canadian Journal of History/Annales canadiennes d'histoire* XXXI, April/avril, pp. 59-86
- Moorhead, J. 2001 *The Roman Empire Divided 400-700*, Harlow: Pearson Education
- Pestell, T. and Ulmschneider, K. (eds.) 2003 *Markets in Early Medieval Europe: trading and 'productive' sites, 650-850*, Macclesfield: Windgather Press
- Rogers, S. F. 2005 *The Military Vici of Noricum*, PhD dissertation, University of Missouri-Columbia
- Rollason, D. 1999 'Historical evidence for Anglian York', in Tweddle, D. Moulden, J. & Logan, E. (eds.) *Anglian York: A Survey of the Evidence*, York: York Archaeological Trust, pp. 117-40
- Smith, J.M.H. 2005 *Europe after Rome: a new cultural history 500-1000*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Southern, P. & Dixon, K. 1996 *The Late Roman Army*, London: Routledge
- Stambaugh, J. 1988 *The Ancient Roman City*, London: John Hopkins University Press
- Steuer, H. 2003 'The Beginnings of Urban Economies Among the Saxons', in Gren, D. and Siegmund, F. (eds) *The Continental Saxons From the Migration Period to the Tenth Century*, Woodbridge: Boydell Press
- Tweddle, D. 1999 'Historical evidence for Anglian York', in Tweddle, D. Moulden, J. & Logan, E. (eds.) *Anglian York: A Survey of the Evidence*, York: York Archaeological Trust, pp.151-207
- Whittaker, C. R. 1983 'Late Roman trade and traders', in Garnsey, P., Hopkins, K. and Whittaker, C.R. (eds.) *Trade in the ancient economy*, London: The Hogarth Press