

Join the Army and Learn a Trade

by Stephen Kenwright

*The soldiers must always be doing something, even if no enemy is bothering us.
Habitual idleness spells trouble for an army.
Maurice, Strategikon, Maxims*

Few members of the public seem to question the presence of artisans in a Germanic encampment, but more are surprised by it in a Late Roman military camp. It may be worth reviewing the evidence for Comitatus' living history portrayal of craft workers.

The Notitia Dignitatum indicates that, by the late 4th - early 5th century, regional workshops (*fabricae*) produced a range of key equipment to supply the army's needs, some specialising in shields & armour, arrows, bows, woollen clothing and linen. From the care with which these regional *fabricae* were located with respect to each frontier, it appears that they supplied the majority of basic kit for the legions in the later period, presumably staffed by civilians churning out specific products on a semi-industrial scale under the direction of the military. This was supported by private sales from civilian sources such as *negotiatores* in the *vici* and *canabae* but particularly by production in workshops in the legionary fortresses themselves.

A *Fabrica legionis* appears to have been integral to larger legionary fortresses in the Principate usually located, according to Hyginus, in the *praetentura* of the castrum (between the *Via Principalis* and the *Porta Praetoria*) and seem to have often been purpose-built. For example, at the first century fortress at Inchtuthil the site of a huge hoard of nails was arranged as a partitioned and aisled hall around a courtyard and with access for vehicles. A similar building at Exeter appears to have included a small room with workbenches around three walls (Bishop and Coulston 2006). In the late period existing buildings within fortresses were sometimes modified to become workshops, such as the former north tower of the West gate at Birdoswald converted into a smithy in the third century, or the nearby store building partitioned and adapted for smithing and bronze working and probably leather working (Wilmott 2001). This implies a greater demand for independent manufacture, perhaps echoed by the introduction of metalworking in the town basilicas of Silchester in the mid 3rd century and of Caerwent in the mid 4th (de Bédoyère 2003).

An army is improved by labour and enfeebled by inactivity.

Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, Maxims

Vegetius reports that the "legion had a train of joiners, masons, carpenters, smiths, painters, and workmen of every kind for the construction of barracks in the winter-camps and for making or repairing the wooden towers, arms, carriages and the various sorts of machines and engines for the attack or defense of places" (Book II, XI). The picture that this paints of the military base as hive of industry is supported by the archaeological evidence at Vindolanda. Scrapers and combs for hide processing, off-cuts from leather-working and a very large woodturning core have been found as well as remains of the manufacture or repair of metal objects and a wide range of associated tools.

Much of this local work was performed by legionaries themselves under the direction of a *praefectus fabrum*. Reports of work assignments amongst the Vindolanda tablets provide a wealth of information about the craft activities that appear to have been part of the soldiers' official duties. Tablet 155 notes that 343 men were in the *fabricae* (a large proportion of the apparent total strength), including *sutores* (shoe-makers) and men working at lime-kilns and Tablet 160 records the trades of specific soldiers, including several described as *faber* (smith in the general sense of 'maker'), some of whom seem to have been making swords. Tablet 184 refers to men who may have been either traders or soldiers: *Tullio Carpentari* translated at face value as 'son of Carpentarius' by some but taken for an abbreviation of 'carpenter' by others, as well as the original '*Lucius scutarius*', Lucius the shield maker.

While we are used to the idea of the legions engaged in large scale construction works, this suggests that smaller scale crafts were pursued on an ongoing basis by legionaries and perhaps by specialists. The existence of such specialists is attested by literary and epigraphic evidence. After serving in the ranks as a *munifex* for several years, many soldiers became *immunes*, exempted from fatigue duties, often after a period of specialist training as a *discens*. The sixth century Digest preserves a list of *immunes* compiled by Tarruntenus Paternus in the late second-century which includes amongst many others: *optio fabricae* (the optio in charge of a work-shop), *architectus* (a master-builder), *fabri* (craft workers), *custodies armorum* (armourers), *ballistrarii* (men making and/or operating ballistae), *acuarii* (bow-makers), *sagitarii* (arrow-makers), *gladiatores* (sword-makers), *aerarii* (bronze-smiths), *plumbarii* (lead smiths), *ferrarii* (blacksmiths), *cornuarii* (makers of cornua, i.e. musical instruments), *carpentarii* (carpenters), *scandularii* (roofers), *naupegii* (shipwrights), *specularii* (glass-fitters), *lapidarii* (stonemasons), *qui carbonum cadent ac torrent* (charcoal burners) and *polliones* (millers).

This selection obviously supports the resemblance of a military camp at peace to a colony of artisans, or *artifices*. Of interest for further development of our portrayals there were also the *librarii quoque qui ducere possint* (book-keepers and those in training for this work), *stratores* (grooms), *qui silvam infidunt* (woodsmen), the *praeco* (herald), *bucinator* (trumpeter) and *auspices* (priests) (Digest, 50, 6, 7, in Webster, 1998, Birley 2005). Maurice confirms that late soldiers also might specialise as "armourers, weapon makers, bow makers, arrow makers, and the rest, according to the regulations" (Book XII, B7) and suggesting carpenters and metalworkers join the artillery crews under a separate command (Book XII, B6).

All arts and trades whatever are brought to perfection by continual practice.

Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, Book III, X

Would these specialists have had their own tools? The Vindolanda tablets suggest that, unsurprisingly, craft working was closely directed to provide for the needs of the unit. Vegetius recommends that "tools of all kinds" (Book I, XXVIII) should be centrally provided for camp construction and Maurice allocates a light wagon to each squad, bearing "a handmill, an axe, hatchets, an adze, a saw, two picks, a hammer, two shovels, a basket, some coarse cloth" and a scythe (Book XII, B6). In the Principate, Josephus reported that each legionary carried a *dolabra* & sickle and, perhaps less famously, a saw. However, these may have been less 'general issue' than a 'general requirement': for example, the naval recruit Claudius Terentianus begged, in the 2nd century, for his legionary father to send him one *dolabra* and then another to replace it,

as an *optio* had taken the first from him (Bishop and Coulston 2006). In the context of fortress building, Shirley (2001) suggests that, while basic tools were issued individually and heavy equipment provided on a unit basis, more experienced specialists would probably collect their own tools in the same way that armour & other personal equipment was owned and embellished privately.

Were there women *artifices*? A 2nd-3rd Century papyrus from Egypt records civilians and camp servants working alongside *cohortales* and legionaries in a legionary workshop (Bishop and Coulston 2006), but it is more likely that the craftswomen in the camp are producing goods privately, either directly for a family member just as socks, sandals and underwear were sent to legionaries at Vindolanda, or for sale or barter to those who lacked such support.

Would *immunes* be craft working on the march?

They had also traveling workshops in which they made shields, cuirasses, helmets, bows, arrows, javelins and offensive and defensive arms of all kinds. The ancients made it their chief care to have every thing for the service of the army within the camp.

Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, Book II, XI

The legion should carry with it wherever it moves, whatever is necessary for every kind of service so that the encampments may have all the strength and conveniences of a fortified city.

ibid, Book II, XXV

Vegetius may have exaggerated the preparedness of his ideal legion and perhaps only essential repairs would be undertaken *sub tentoriis* but, as we portray camps in friendly areas, some more portable occupations seem to have been part of the standard routine alongside drill, training and cooking. Clearly neither Maurice, nor Vegetius would have us idle.

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