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Autor: Driel-Murray, Carol van
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Women in forts?

Carol van Driel-Murray

Recently, Prof. S. von Schnurbein has drawn attention to the highly selective nature of Roman influences on Germanic society, listing a series of conundrums which demand consideration¹. Some of these may be paraphrased here: Why, when weapon technology was transformed, was hand-made pottery retained, why were only certain forms of sigillata imported, why is there no trace of improved Roman agricultural products or of imported herbs, spices or fruit?

I would suggest that the answer is extremely simple: aspects of life controlled by women remain unchanged, those associated with male prestige display are strongly influenced by Roman technology and ideas. The study of "women" is more than just a list of notable ladies taken from Classical literature, and it encompasses more than a list of excavated objects which can be added up to "prove" that women were – or were not – present². Quite apart from the inherent difficulties in relating specific elements of material culture to the exclusive sphere of one gender or the other, such approaches fail to take account of the silent discourse between men and women in the fulfilment of their separate roles and activities in everyday life. It is to whole packages of attributes that we must look. The range of specialised activities essential to the welfare and reproduction of society which can be classed under "maintenance activities" already offer a key³. Food storage and preparation, refuse disposal, manufacture of clothing, the care and sustenance of all members of the group, including children and the sick, all are activities which maintain the structure of society. Viewed in these terms, a remarkable proportion of archaeological material is used and disposed of in the female domain. Yet where are the women in pottery studies? Studying the pottery perhaps, but not the people who made, chose, used and broke them. By focusing on the concept of maintenance activities, the constraints imposed by simple reliance on categories of material culture to "identify women" can be transcended.

It is in Roman military studies that the exclusion of women is most extreme. How can there even be any doubt about the presence of women, when a large percentage of males spent 25 years – for many of them their entire life span – in the army, and the system was maintained over 400 years? The marginalisation of women and their exclusion from the archaeological record is all the more worrying when the literary and epigraphic sources are reviewed. Usually the written record takes precedence over archaeology, but when women are concerned, it seems that preconceptions take over and the texts, papyri, tomb stones and diplomae – with their quite specific information – are studiously ignored or misinterpreted. Dio records that in 9 AD Varus

was encumbered by numerous women and children: do their bones also await discovery at Kalkriese⁴? And at Velsen, the Tiberian harbour outpost overrun by the Frisians in 28 AD, upto 15% of the fibulae are from women's clothing⁵.

Nevertheless, the concept of a celibate army still dominates all aspects of historical and archaeological research and, under the inevitable snigger about prostitutes around the camp gates, stifles any investigation of what must have been highly complex relations between military authorities, host communities, and communities taxed of their manpower. That, along some frontiers, receivers of occupying forces were themselves major contributors to units stationed elsewhere only serves to complicate matters still further. The role and status of women is crucial to any assessment of the relations of the army to society at large: there were women in forts, many more around them and even more women were drawn into the military sphere by being mothers, sisters, wives, daughters of soldiers.

Now fibulae are notoriously difficult to "sex" and find distributions in abandoned forts equally difficult to relate to the occupation – especially when the excavator has already decided that he is not going to find any evidence of family life. Better suited is footwear, for the size of shoes is related to the biological conditions of growth from infancy to maturity, displaying a marked difference between females and the much larger feet of males⁶. Characteristic of archaeological "shoe populations" is, in addition, the exaggeration of the peak for women's sizes caused by the presence of juveniles growing through them to reach their ultimate adult size. This is a pattern found in virtually all urban complexes, whether ancient or modern, and the similarity of the graphs for the late Second-early Third Century vicus at Vindolanda to those from medieval

¹ S. von Schnurbein, *Römer und Germanen. Zwei Forschungsprojekte der Römisch-Germanischen Kommission des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts*. C. J. C. Reuvsenlezing 7 (Leiden 1996).

² E. Scott, *Writing the Roman Empire*. In: E. Scott (ed.), *Theoretical Roman Archaeology: First Conference Proceedings* (Avebury, Aldershot 1993) 5–22.

³ M. Picazo, *Hearth and Home: the timing of maintenance activities*. In: J. Moore/E. Scott (eds), *Invisible People and Processes: writing gender and childhood into European Archaeology* (London 1997) 59–67.

⁴ Cassius Dio 56.20, 2–5.

⁵ E. van der Kuil, undergraduate thesis, IPP Amsterdam 1994.

⁶ W. Groenman-van Waateringe, *Shoe sizes and paleodemography?* *Helinium* 18, 1978, 184–189; C. van Driel-Murray, *Gender in Question*. In: P. Rush (ed.), *Theoretical Roman Archaeology: Second Conference proceedings* (Aldershot, 1995) 3–21; id *A Question of Gender in a Military Context*. *Helinium* 34, 1994, 342–362.

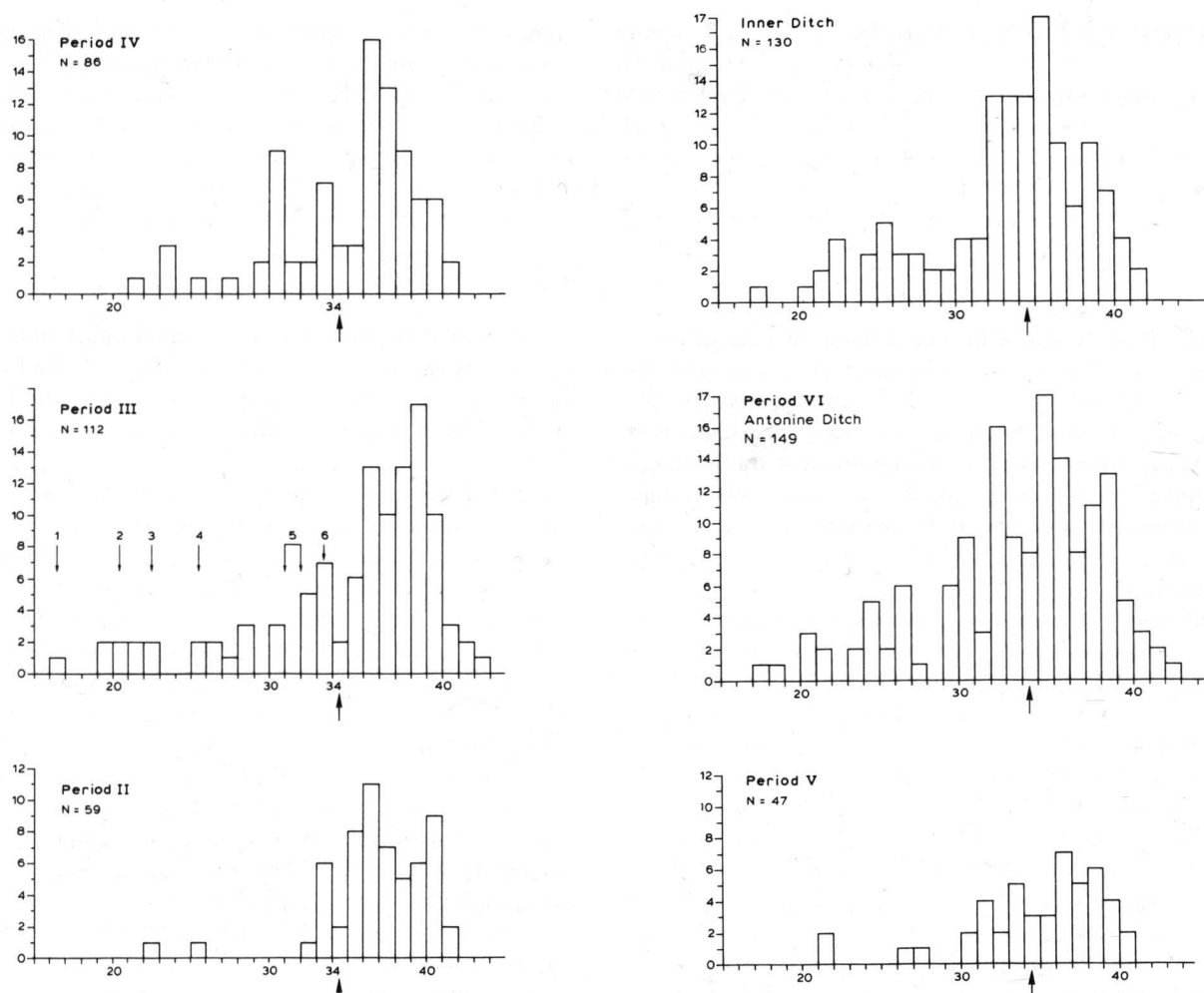


Fig. 1 Distribution of shoe sizes from Vindolanda, by period. The arrow points to the male/female overlap, numerals in Period III indicate discrete individuals (Per I c. A.D. 85–90; Per II c. 90–95; Per III 95–103/4; Per. IV c. to c. 120; AD = “Antonine Ditch” late Second Century; ID = “Inner Ditch” Third/Fourth century).

Lübeck⁷ suggests that at this period at least we have a normal balanced population of men, women and children around the Roman fort (Fig. 1, graphs AD and ID). However, the well dated earlier periods show rather different patterns⁸. Filled out with information drawn from the remarkable series of written documents, we can begin to see the living population of this settlement in a way no other find category can emulate⁹.

The evidence of shoes: a case study

Vindolanda, an auxiliary fort on Hadrian’s Wall¹⁰, was occupied till well into the Fourth century, but the first four phases are particularly well dated, falling between 85–120 AD. The footwear from Period II (c. 90 AD) comes from the praetorium, the quarters of the commanding officer and his staff, as is reflected in the mainly male sizes (Continental size 34 and above). In addition there appears to be at least one woman and a child belonging to the praefect’s household.

Period III, ending in 104 AD shows a very different pattern, due to the presence of a number of distinct individu-

als, each represented by several shoes, sometimes in pairs. Again these finds are from the praetorium. The texts provide copious information about the commander of the Cohors IX Batavorum, Flavius Cerialis, his wife, Sulpicia Lepidina and their children, who we can visualise more clearly through their shoes (Fig. 2)¹¹. Lepidina is particularly distinctive with her narrow, straight foot – it is, indeed, the shape of Swiss Bally shoes, very different to the wide, blunt shapes which dominate northern footwear complexes. She also had beautifully made summer sandals, stamped with the maker’s name: Lucius Aebutius Thales –

⁷ W. Groenman-van Waateringe (note 6) fig. 1.

⁸ C. van Driel-Murray, *The Leatherwork*. In: *Vindolanda Research Reports III* (Hexham 1993) 1–75.

⁹ A. R. Birley, *Review of the texts*. In: *Vindolanda Research Reports II: the Early Wooden Forts. Reports on the auxiliaries, the writing tablets, inscriptions, brands and graffiti* (Hexham 1994) 18–72; A. Bowman/J. D. Thomas, *Vindolanda: The Latin Writing-Tablets*. *Britannia Monograph Series 4* (London 1983); A. Bowman/J. D. Thomas, *The Vindolanda Writing-Tablets (Tabulae Vindolandenses II)* (London 1994).

¹⁰ R. Birley, *Vindolanda Research Reports I: the Early Wooden Forts* (Hexham 1994).

¹¹ The “pueros tuos” of the text Tab. Vindol. II 260 and 291? Bowman/Thomas 1994 (note 9) 233–4, 258.

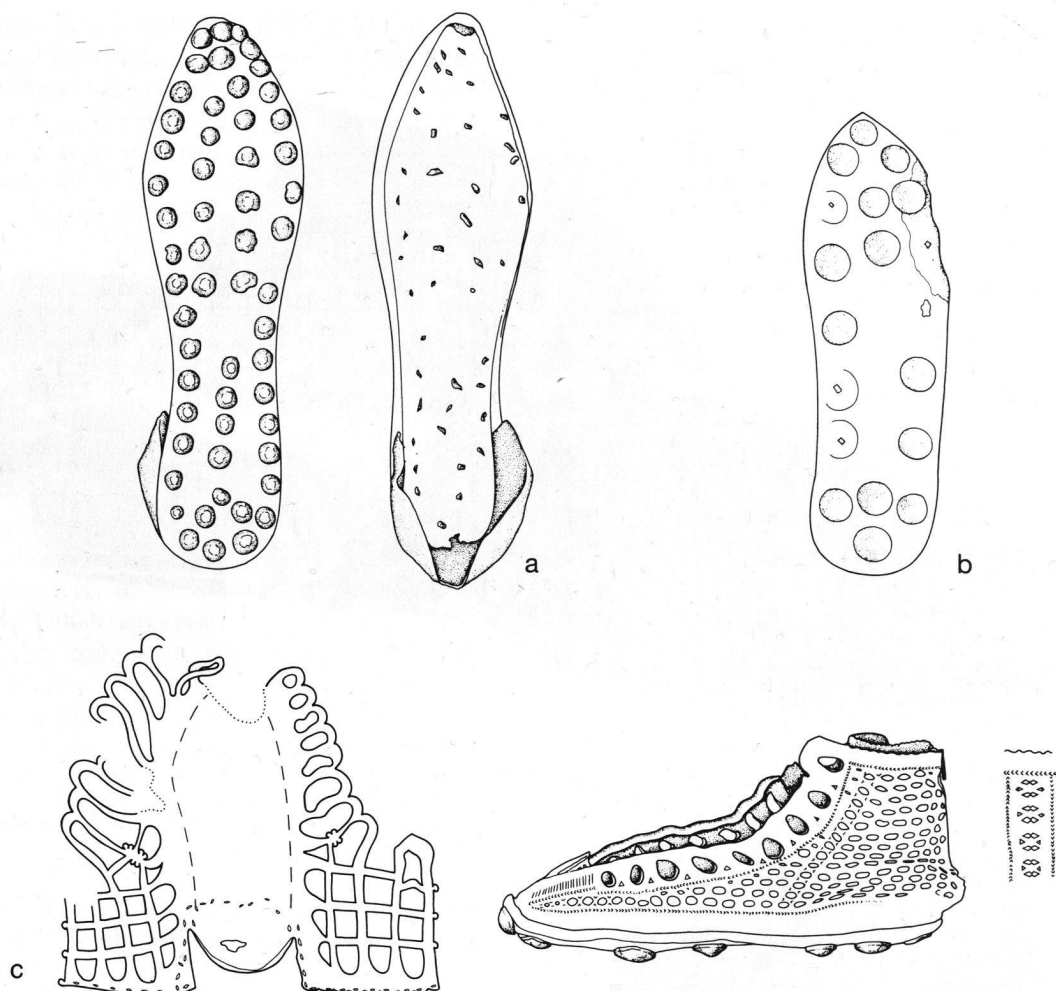


Fig. 2 Vindolanda: shoes of Lepidina (a) and two of the children (b, c). Scale 1:3.

the first designer label in history, and one – intriguingly – perhaps also present on a scrap of leather from Vindonissa (Fig. 3a, b)¹². There is a group of perhaps three children, one with the signs of a strange walking defect on each left shoe, contrasting with the expensive open-work of the uppers (Fig. 2b). It is known that officers could marry, and here the family was evidently living inside the fort.

In 104 the Batavian garrison was replaced by a unit of Tungrians, who built barracks over the site of the former praetorium. In turn, these were demolished around 115/120, sealing large amounts of rubbish left behind by the inhabitants. Looking at the graph of shoe sizes, it is evident that though the individuals of Period III have disappeared, there are still a remarkable number of shoes belonging to women and children, here actually *inside* the barracks (Fig. 4 and 5).

Women in colonial armies

Our unconscious analogy has always been the British colonial forces, with camp followers kept firmly outside the camp and any serious involvement with native women

actively discouraged. But the Dutch in Indonesia were far more tolerant, and there, families were an accepted part of military life. As in the Roman army, Dutch soldiers were not allowed to marry. The reason was unashamedly financial: men could be paid less and the military authorities were spared the responsibility of organising transport and housing, while the payment of widow's pensions was restricted to those ranks officially permitted to marry. But Dutch servicemen in Indonesia did have wives, unacknowledged concubines, taken from the native population. Though officers had a small private cubicle, the wives of ordinary soldiers slept in the communal dormitories, with the children suspended in hammocks or sleeping under the bed. The Dutch military authorities not only tolerated, but even sanctioned concubinage, despite upholding the formal ban on marriage. They even defended the institution in public when moral pressure began to rise in the Netherlands towards the end of the century. Concubinage was seen as a stabilising factor, reducing crime and drunkenness and encouraging soldiers to sign on for a longer term of duty. To encourage thrift, rations and even part of the

¹² A. Gansser-Burckhardt, *Neue Lederfunde von Vindonissa*. Jber GPV 1948/49, 29–52 Abb. 18.



Fig. 3a Vindolanda: Lepidina's sandal, stamped by the maker: L. Aebutius Thales. Length c. 22 cm.

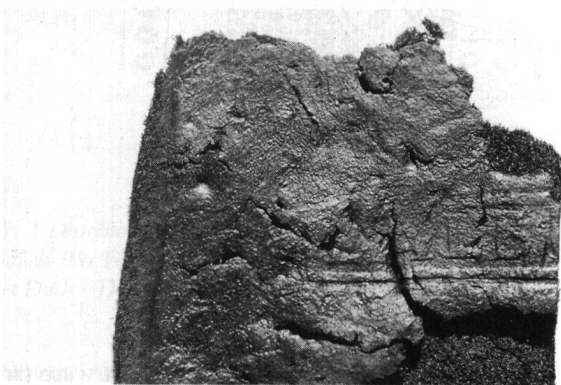


Fig. 3b An off cut from Vindonissa, possibly bearing the same name (after Gansser-Burckhardt, *Jber GPV* 1948/49 Abb. 18). Scale 1:1.

salary were paid directly to the concubine. Growing criticism was countered by placing curtains between the beds in dormitories¹³.

The women left the camp in the morning, spending the day in a specially built woman's hall, cooking and doing jobs to earn some money – taking in mending and washing, preparing snacks for sale. Here the barbecued chicken wings and spare ribs found in the legionary bath house of Caerleon take on a new significance¹⁴. I would suggest that some of the large buildings outside Roman camps require reinterpretation as locations for female maintenance activities rather than as “commercial” venues. Even in the First Century families of legionaries supported themselves in this way. Aurelius Flavinus, son of a soldier of the Leg. X Gemina was, at 18, a *lixa*. As his father had been in the legion since his birth, his mother had presumably accompanied the legion on its long march to Nijmegen¹⁵. And at Vindonissa we find a woman exploiting a tavern, apparently *inside* the fort¹⁶.

Concubinage may have had advantages for men and authorities, but for the Indonesian women it was a case of

¹³ A. de Braconier, *Het kazernconcubinaat in Nederlandsch Indië*. *Vragen van den Dag* 28, 1913, 974–995; C. van der Wurf-Bodt, *Het kazernconcubinaat in Indië*. *Spiegel Historiae* 24, 1989, 222–226.

¹⁴ T. P. O'Connor, *Aspects of site environment and economy at Caerleon fortress baths, Gwent*. In: B. Proudfoot, ed. *Site, Environment and Economy*. *British BAR S* 173 (Oxford 1983) 105–113, esp. 107.

¹⁵ “Titus(?) Aurelius Flavinus, son of Titus, of the voting-tribe Galeria, from Calaguris, soldier of the Legio 10 Gemina, aged 40, with 18 years' service; and Marcus Aurelius Festus, son of Titus, of the voting-tribe Galeria, from Calaguris, aged 38, with 17 years' service and Aurelius Flavinus, son of Flavinus, *lixa*, 18 years old, are buried here. May the earth lie lightly on you. Placed by the heir.” *CIL* XIII.8732. cf. M. P. M. Daniëls/H. Brunsting, *Romeins Nijmegen IV. De Romeinse monumenten van steen, te Nijmegen gevonden*, *Oudheidkundige Mededelingen Rijksmuseum van Oudheden Leiden OMROL* 36, 1955, 21–72, no. 76. Illustrated in J.-K. Haalebos' contribution to this volume, p. 34.

¹⁶ M. A. Speidel, *Die römischen Schreibtafeln von Vindonissa*. *Veröffentl. GPV* 12 (Brugg 1996) no. 45, 188–189; M. A. Speidel, *Das römische Heer als Kulturträger*. In: R. Frei-Stolba/H. E. Herzog (ed.), *La politique éditiale dans les provinces de l'Empire romain II^e–IV^e siècles après J.-C.* (Bern 1996) 187–209, esp. 193.

survival. If a soldier died or was killed in action, she had no rights, and she and her children were turned out immediately, their only hope being to find someone else to take them on. Does this explain the lack of provision for wives in Roman soldiers' wills and, therefore, also the lack of gravestones erected by wives to soldiers? Can we through such analogies begin to understand the bias in our epigraphic sources?

The real problem was of course the children. Boys were expected to join the native colonial forces – as in Roman times. Aurelius Flavinus was presumably waiting to join his father's legion when he so tragically died. But for Indonesian girls there was little hope other than concubinage or prostitution. Here perhaps the Roman situation was rather more favourable, for with very much longer terms of service, men may have been more concerned to settle their daughters respectably during their lifetime, as the Egyptian evidence would seem to support¹⁷. In colonial Indonesia, the camp followers were shunned by both the native population and the Dutch administrative class, coming to constitute a separate community with its own identity, its own traditions of military service and even its own language. In the Roman period, such self-sufficient communities might begin to explain why ethnic unit names continued into the 4th century when local recruitment had long been the norm. If young men could still recall Tungrian or Batavian ancestors with heroic deeds, the survival of the ethnic designation is less incongruous, than if the intake was entirely from local youths. A. R. Birley has noted the occurrence of Greek names amongst both the Batavian bodyguards of the Julio-Claudian emperors and amongst the correspondents at Vindolanda¹⁸: a fashion for such names lasting several generations certainly implies a tradition of service running in families, and is unlikely to have been preserved solely by veterans returning home after 25 years. And in the maintenance of such traditions, the army wives play a prominent role.

Some consequences

Application of this model to Roman forts has a number of consequences. Women spend most of the day outside the fort, so most female activities and their attendant losses of personal ornaments or equipment will also be found outside. Indonesian women returned to their families to give birth to their children, so we would not even expect to find dead new-borns buried under the barrack floors as proof of women living in. These women would have been largely invisible in the material culture of the fort itself. So it is not surprising that many a thesis setting out to find evidence of women via bangles and dead babies has in fact only served to reinforce the celibate ideal. There are some interesting implications for the actual number of soldiers

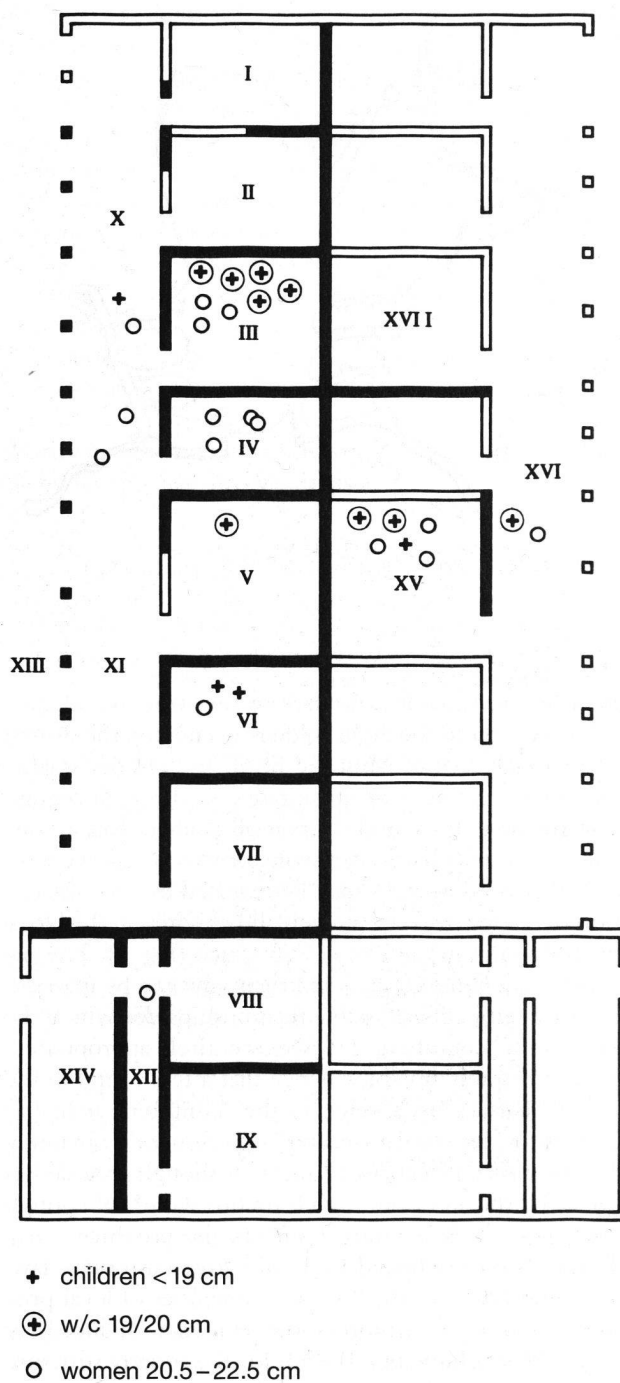


Fig. 4 Vindolanda: distribution of women's and children's shoes in the barracks of Period IV.

¹⁷ V. A. Maxfield, *Soldier and Civilian: Life Beyond the Ramparts* (The Eighth Annual Caerleon Lecture, Caerleon 1995); R. Alston, *Soldier and Civilian in Roman Egypt* (London 1995) 132.

¹⁸ Birley 1994 (note 9) 55.

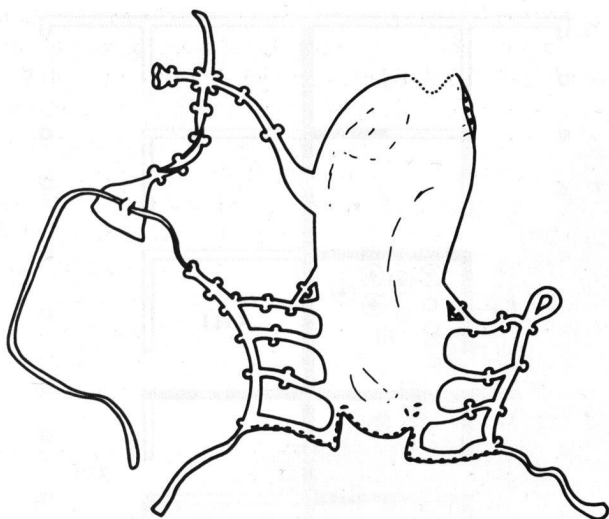


Fig. 5 Vindolanda: Period IV child's shoe. Scale 1:3.

present in a fort, for it is difficult to see women and children in addition to the eight soldiers occupying the 3–4 m square barrack rooms. Must we begin to consider smaller units? If so, a number of quantitative studies will require drastic revision. It is unlikely that all soldiers had a concubine, and it may be that only one or two rooms were set aside for married men, as may be revealed by the concentration of the footwear of women and children in the block of central rooms in the Period IV barrack (Fig. 4). The Indonesian concubines considered themselves to be married: these were semi-official, stable relationships, for which the Roman term “contubernium” seems entirely appropriate¹⁹. Indeed, it is surely no coincidence that a text found in the Period IV barrack itself, refers to the “contubernalis (*sic*) of Tagamatos, the standard-bearer”, a person who obviously had some control over his finances. Although regarded as irregular by the authorities, such unions were real enough for the individuals concerned and, in the provinces, may well have been reinforced by local native customary law. This is a far cry from the “pleasant amenities of local prostitutes”, and only reinforces the evidence adduced by Sommer (this volume pp. 41–52) for the orderly structure of military *vici*, settlements which have for too long been viewed as a collection of cut-throat taverns and brothels rather than as a source of honourable wives.

For legionaries, however, it may have been more difficult to form stable unions because of the laws of citizenship. Documented cases from Egypt seem, indeed to be more concerned with the problems of cross-status unions than the fact that the union existed in the first place²⁰. On the other hand, the case of Aurelius Flavinus illustrates one of the strategies employed by men to circumvent the marriage ban²¹. His father married in Spain and only joined the legion after the birth of his son. The family was then officially “divorced” (which may be yet another reason why wives could not erect gravestones), but nevertheless remained together. Egyptian papyri show soldiers taking pains to provide for their families²², and it may be sus-

pected that the unnamed “heirs” of many military gravestones in fact shield families inheriting via informal agreements. In all such cases, however, the women and children were vulnerable and dependent on the honesty and good will of men who could claim superior rights under Roman law. Even so, at Bonn, in the 130's, the distribution of shoe sizes from this legionary site is remarkably similar to that of Vindolanda Period IV (Fig. 6). In the report, written in 1980, I did not dare to express my suspicions, and made what, with hindsight, were ridiculous attempts to explain the smaller sizes away²³. Thus are we blinded by our own preconceptions! We can now recognise that the Legio Prima Minervia was also surrounded by its families, though we cannot yet prove that they actually lived inside the camp. Some families certainly did in Tiberian Velsen: the fibulae may reveal the women, but it is the shoes which betray the children²⁴.

Women in forts!

Once it is accepted that women did form a significant section of the camp population we can begin to develop the material correlates by means of which their social and economic roles can be investigated. And here we return to S. von Schnurbein's queries. The Roman occupation brought about major changes in the technology of pottery making, basketry and leatherworking – all are tasks which, in traditional societies are performed by women. In all these trades we see a shift from household production by women to specialist, larger scale production dominated by men²⁵. So instead of regarding the hand-made vessels in the praetorium of Valkenburg period 1 as mere containers for native food stuffs, we should be asking whether native women were involved in running this particular household²⁶. These sherds are all the more interesting because they represent at least five vessels built into a hearth, and in the western Netherlands, smashed vessels seem to possess a

¹⁹ S. Treggiari, *Contubernales* in CIL 6. Phoenix 35, 1981, 42–69.

²⁰ Alston 1995 (note 17) 58 and note 23, esp. p. 217.

²¹ see above, note 15.

²² Alston, note 17, p. 56; Maxfield 1995 (note 17) 18.

²³ C. van Driel-Murray/M. Gechter, *Funde aus der Fabrica der Legio I Minervia am Bonner Berg*. Rheinische Ausgrabungen 23, 1983, 1–83 esp. 23.

²⁴ There are at least four children's soles amongst the footwear from Velsen, as yet unpublished.

²⁵ D. P. S. Peacock, *Pottery in the Roman World, an ethnoarchaeological approach* (London 1982) 8 and 13–15; although wheel-thrown wares had been supplanting hand-made pottery in some areas of Europe since the late Iron Age, the role of the family in production must not be underestimated. In particular, finishing and decoration remain in the female domain, id. 17ff.

²⁶ W. Glasbergen/W. Groenman-van Waateringe, *The Pre-Flavian Garrisons of Valkenburg Z. H.* (Amsterdam 1974) 34ff. In room W, which is regarded by Glasbergen as “a special compartment for the commandant”.

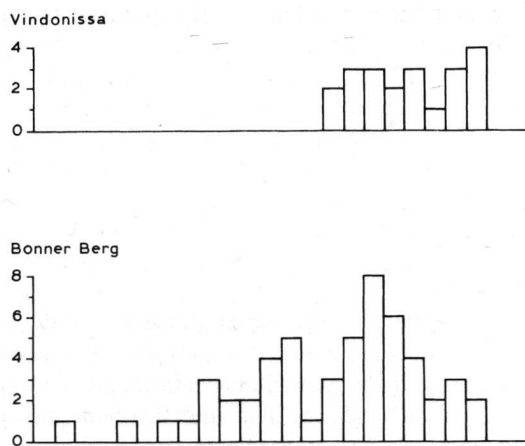


Fig. 6 Distribution of shoe sizes from Bonn and Vindonissa.

particular significance in hearth construction²⁷. Here we perhaps have local women – concubines, slaves? – creating their own ritual space within one of the central rooms of the Roman praetorium. Hand-made pottery in northern Britain has been used to trace the Frisian origin of the numerous Hnaudifridi and the cuneus Frisiorum, stationed at Housesteads on Hadrian's Wall²⁸, but the true significance of the distribution is that it reveals that women also travelled overseas in some numbers²⁹. There is, therefore, nothing new in Germanic women accompanying their men folk into Roman military service: it is only because women in forts have been ignored that the highly visible Germanic women of the Late Roman forts come as such a shock: women had been travelling for centuries, only Roman costume leaves fewer visible traces in the archaeological record. I have already mentioned the preparation of snacks: the presence of chicken bones, the seeds of herbs, pollen of fruit and garden produce around the forts are indicative not so much of "Romanisation" as of the changing economic roles – the survival strategies – of women. These are all marketable commodities, luxuries to tempt the well paid soldiers, the home-grown products with which to obtain money, the only security for women faced with legal systems which no longer guaranteed their rights. Germanic women beyond the frontier were not confronted with such problems of survival and continued to cook their traditional foods, serving it in the traditional vessels they made themselves.

Thus the evidence from Vindolanda compels us to turn the question around. As there *were* women and children inside the forts, why is it so difficult to identify them by archaeological means? Are we only asking the wrong questions, or is it our material consistently biased in a way we hardly recognise? Vindonissa is a case in point. Looking at the graph of shoe sizes (Fig. 6), we see a simple, male curve. I have myself regarded this as evidence for the difficulty surrounding family formation in the early, campaigning

phases of the Roman Empire³⁰. But in fact the most striking thing is just how few shoes have been found in the Schutthügel. The leather complex consists overwhelmingly of specialist military equipment such as shield covers, tents and saddles³¹. It is clear that this is not ordinary domestic refuse, but the rubbish from the military fabrica where such equipment was being made and repaired. Consequently, the lack of shoes belonging to women and children is hardly significant in this context. Consequently, for a site such as Vindonissa, the question will have to be formulated differently: not "which find categories show that women are present?", but "how are the women we know to be present, reflected in the material record?"

Work enough with which to celebrate the next centenary of the Gesellschaft Pro Vindonissa.

²⁷ L. Therkorn, The inter-relationships of materials and meanings: some suggestions on housing concerns within Iron Age Noord-Holland. In: I. Hodder (ed.) *The Archaeology of Contextual Meanings* (Cambridge 1987) 102–112, esp. 108. Also observed during the recent excavations of Late Iron Age and Roman period sites in Midden Delfland, pers. comm. Ms. H. van London, IPP.

²⁸ I. Jobey, Housesteads ware – a Frisian tradition on Hadrian's Wall. *Archaeologia Aeliana* (5th Series) 7, 1979, 127–143.

²⁹ As implied by the tombstone of Ursa, sister of Lurio a German, buried at Chesters, RIB 1483.

³⁰ W. Groenman-van Waateringe, Römische Lederfunde aus Vindonissa und Valkenburg Z.H. ein Vergleich, *Jber GPV* 1974, 62–84, esp. 79; van Driel-Murray 1995 (note 6).

³¹ A. Gansser-Burckhardt, *Das Leder und seine Verarbeitung im römischen Legionslager Vindonissa* (Basel 1942).

BAR S = British Archaeological Reports International Series
OMROL = Oudheidkundige Mededelingen Rijksmuseum van Oudheden Leiden

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