

VINDOLANDA 1985: THE NEW WRITING-TABLETS

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Excavations were resumed at Vindolanda in the pre-Hadrianic section of the site in the summer of 1985. The prediction that the area was likely to contain further deposits of writing-tablets was strikingly confirmed and it can now be confidently stated that the publication, by the present authors, of the tablets discovered in 1973-5 was only the first instalment.¹ It is as yet unclear when the full publication of the new finds can be expected or what precise form it will take. This is the justification, if any is needed, for presenting this summary account of the 1985 material.² The inventory numbers under which the new tablets are catalogued run to almost 340; many contain several fragments; most, but not all, have at least traces of writing.³ It is at present envisaged that three more seasons of excavation will be undertaken in 1986, 1987 and 1988, investigating an area which extends some 15-20 metres to the north of the present terminus. There is some reason to think that the writing-tablet deposit may cover the whole or a substantial part of this area and it is therefore possible that the subsequent seasons may yield as many tablets as that of 1985.⁴

New archaeological evidence necessitates a reconsideration of the sequence of fort construction at Vindolanda, which provides the framework for dating the tablet deposits.⁵ Pottery from the early fort's eastern ditch suggests that the site was first occupied in the late 70s or early 80s, but the first period of a decade or so yields no tablets. In the late 80s or early 90s the fort was doubled in size, to about 8 acres, with a new north-south *via principalis* occupying the foundations of the old eastern rampart and a south gate overlying the backfilled south-eastern ditch. The tablets found in 1985 (and all but a handful of those found in 1973-5) came from the laminated floors of a large timber building fronting on to the *via principalis* and close to the gate, or from the demolition deposits outside the walls of that building. Although only a third of the building has been examined to date, there is now no doubt that it was the *praetorium* of the fort. The building was remodelled at least twice during its short history before the site was given over to cattle-pens and then to civilian occupation. The general conditions in the area of the find suggest that there is now less reason to believe that a unique chemical environment ensured the survival of the tablets; in fact, dampness seems to be the only necessary condition.⁶

The general effect of the new information is to force a slight revision of the chronology. An unworn coin of Domitian *cos.* XVII (A.D. 95) was found in the floor of the earliest *praetorium* (Period II) and a similar unworn issue of Trajan from A.D. 110-14 was found in the second-level floor (Period III). The suggested chronology is now as follows:

Period I: *c.* A.D. 80-90 (no tablets)

Period II: *c.* A.D. 90-100

Period III: *c.* A.D. 100-15

Period IV: *c.* A.D. 115-30

Among the published tablets the only one which helped to corroborate the archaeological dating was *Tab. Vindol.* 37, which referred to the governor [Neratius] Marcellus. If we suppose that this tablet belongs at the end of Period II, perhaps contemporary with the letter of *c.* A.D. 101 in which Pliny asked Marcellus for a tribunate for Suetonius,⁷ there is no difficulty in accommodating its information to the revised chronology. The diploma which shows Marcellus in Britain in A.D. 103 will then fall towards the end rather than the beginning of his tenure.⁸

¹ *Vindolanda: the Latin Writing-Tablets*, Britannia Monograph 4, 1983 (= *Tab. Vindol.*).

² It is our present intention to offer full editions of some of the more interesting 1985 texts in an article which we hope to be able to publish in *Britannia* 1987.

³ Throughout this article the tablets found in the 1985 excavation are cited in the form 'inv. no. 00'.

⁴ At the time of writing the first handful of tablets from the 1986 excavation has just emerged.

⁵ For the archaeological information which follows, as for much else, we are indebted to Robin Birley.

⁶ *Tab. Vindol.*, pp 22-3.

⁷ *Ep.* 3. 8. 1.

⁸ *CIL* 16. 48.

The tablets in the 1985 find are identical in format to the earlier discoveries. The leaf tablets overwhelmingly preponderate — in fact there are only three or four fragments of stylus tablets. The condition of preservation is similar to that of earlier finds. Techniques of recovery have significantly improved and we are confident that very little has been lost. Given this, the incomplete state of many of the tablets suggests, as does the general context, that many were broken and fragmented at the time when they were thrown away. It seems likely that the attempt to identify and join diverse fragments of tablets will prove rewarding to some degree, though it will be a long and tedious process. There are few easy identifications of a single hand at work in different fragments (inv. nos 1 and 12 are notable exceptions); indeed, the great variety of individual hands is again very striking indeed (and an important facet of the palaeographical importance of the find).

As before, the content consists of a miscellany of letters and documents. The latter again include the familiar summary accounts of cash and commodities. Several are written in the same format as earlier accounts, across the grain of the wood and parallel with the short edge of the leaf, but the greater number of exceptions suggests that this was far from a hard and fast rule. The format of the letters also offers new and interesting variations. One letter strikingly ignores the two-column format, universal in the earlier finds, and writes in broad lines all the way across the fold of the leaf (inv. no. 42). Other examples show writing on both sides of the leaf, even where it is not apparent that they are simply drafts. But the addresses, where they survive, are written in address scripts similar to the earlier examples and, in the same format, on the back of the right-hand portion of the leaf.

The brief survey which follows is based on a relatively incomplete and cursory examination of the material. It aims to do little more than pick out points of information which emerge with clarity or have some point of contact with the material already published and to describe briefly some items of outstanding interest.

As far as military administration is concerned, there is likely to be more material bearing on military organization, the technicalities of building, accounting procedures and the commissariat. There is no sign that we have anything like the complete official archives of the unit — the evidence again comes from a mixture of documents and letters. There is one brief account whose list includes *mel* and a *sagum* (inv. no. 10), another list of dates with sums in cash is headed *reditus castelli* (inv. no. 43). Of particular interest is the brief intelligence report described below (inv. no. 32). More information can be gleaned on military units. There are at least three references to the *Cohors VIII Batavorum* (inv. nos. 168, 175, 328), which is later attested in Raetia as a military unit;⁹ it too, as well as *Cohors VIII Batavorum* and its *praefectus* Flavius Cerialis, may have been stationed at Vindolanda at some point — at any rate it was clearly in the vicinity. There is also a reference, in a context which certainly is an address, to the *Cohors III Batavorum* (inv. no. 108), attested in Pannonia Inferior in the middle of the second century;¹⁰ the natural supposition must then be that this too was stationed at Vindolanda at some time in the period, perhaps in conjunction with another unit. The cumulative weight of evidence suggests the presence in north Britain of several of the series of Batavian units and perhaps supports the notion that the same units can be traced from Mons Graupius through to their later stations in Raetia and Pannonia.¹¹

Our first interest in the correspondence centres on the archives identified in the earlier finds. The small archive of Genialis is represented in one letter to him (inv. no. 85) and one from him to Cerialis (inv. no. 55); it is difficult to know quite how to make sense of this if the Genialis in both is one and the same person. One fragment with a very clearly written opening address suggests that our 'Archive of Crispinus' probably ought to be emended to the 'Archive of Priscinus'; nothing has yet emerged to undermine our guess that he was the *praefectus* of the *Cohors I Tungrorum*.¹²

⁹ See, for example, M. Roxan, *Roman Military Diplomas, 1978–84* (1985), index, s.v.

¹⁰ Roxan, *op. cit.*, index, s.v.

¹¹ Tacitus, *Agr.* 36, see *Tab. Vindol.* 2, introd.

¹² *Tab. Vindol.* 30–3. An improved photograph of *Tab. Vindol.* 104 now clearly reveals his name there too. Note that this does not affect the two persons called Crispinus in *Tab. Vindol.* 37.

There is a large number of texts belonging to the archive of Cerialis, both letters to him and drafts of his own correspondence. Two lots of fragments (inv. nos. 1 and 12) are written by the same hand and the occurrence of the nominative form of the name leaves no doubt that this is Cerialis' own hand; it is also the hand of *Tab. Vindol.* 37. The outstanding new discovery is the archive of Cerialis' wife, Sulpicia Lepidina, of which one text is described below (inv. no. 57). The presence of officers' families and the correspondence which went between their wives is a discovery of major importance. Scarcely less remarkable is the fact that two tablets, of which inv. no. 57 is one (the other is inv. no. 160B), have closing lines written by Claudia Severa, Lepidina's correspondent, in her own hand.

Of the four texts which we have selected for brief description, the most obviously remarkable is inv. no. 137. On the back of what must be the left-hand section of a letter (or a draft of a letter) is written a line of Virgil (*Aeneid* ix. 473) in a capital script which resembles those found in the headings of military pay-records and the like (cf. inv. no. 244):

INTEREA PAVIDAM VOLITANS·PINNA
TA . U(R)BEM . . .

The end presents some puzzles. After PINNA/TA, the writer may have abbreviated PER to P², although this would be unexpected and it would be an unusual way to mark such an abbreviation. It is difficult to interpret the three (or four?) cursive letters at the end, resembling *seg* or *se.η*. They are certainly not an attempt at the following line, or at a repetition. The piece is presumably a writing exercise, casual practice on the back of a letter or a discarded draft.¹³ Palaeographically the text is of great interest. Most of the letters are in Rustic Capital with some differentiation of thick and thin strokes, but *B* and *P* are in the normal form for Old Roman Cursive; most remarkable of all is the form of *E* in two almost vertical strokes strongly reminiscent of a cursive form of the letter often found in stylus tablets. We know of no other example of this *E* in texts written on parchment or papyrus. It perhaps invites reflection on the relationship between the development of bookhands and the forms of capitals found in military documents.

Inv. no. 32 is tantalizing and puzzling. Two facing leaves, of which one is blank; on the other written across the grain, as in documents, are six lines of text, without heading, address or context of any kind. Our best guess is that it is an intelligence report in the form of a brief memorandum. The hand is an unremarkable cursive; interpunct occurs five times. The lacunose first line ends with the word *Brittones*. The remainder of the text reads:

nimium multi·equites
gladis [*sic*]· non utuntur equi-
tes·nec residunt
Brittunculi·ut·iaculos
mittant.

It is reported that the Britons have too many cavalry, they do not use swords, nor take up fixed positions to throw javelins. The form *Brittunculi* is new. Note also *iaculos* where *iacula* would be expected.

Inv. no. 51 contains a letter in the normal double-column format in which the writer reports the despatch of various items through an agent. The items are listed in the body of

¹³ For early papyri of Virgil see *P. Hawara* 24 (with Dow, *JRS* 58 (1968), 60-70); Gallazzi, *ZPE* 48 (1982), 75-8; Cockle, *Scrittura e civiltà* 3 (1979), 55-75; Hagedorn, *ZPE* 34 (1979), 108; Maehler, *Actes du XVe congrès internationale de papyrologie* II (1979), 18-41 and cf. Horsfall, *Atti del Convegno mondiale scientifico*

di studi su Virgilio (1981), 19; it is interesting to report the discovery, almost simultaneous with the Vindolanda find, of a papyrus from Masada containing part of a line of *Aeneid* iv (we are indebted to Prof. J. Geiger of Jerusalem University for permission to refer to this).

the letter in the form: *modiola [sic] n(umero) xxxiiii*. Then follow quantities of *axses carrarios* including one *axis tornatus*, *radia*, *axses ad lectum*, *sessiones*, (?)*strigilia* and *pelliculas caprinas*. The principals here may be civilians working for the military under contract rather than actual soldiers, and the transport of this kind of manufactured hardware between military posts is of considerable interest.

Finally, the prize exhibit so far, inv. no. 57, certainly the earliest known example of writing in Latin by a woman. The letter is from Claudia Severa to Sulpicia Lepidina (the name appears in full in the address on the back), the wife of Flavius Cerialis. The writer must surely also be the wife of another unit commander in the vicinity, whom she names as *Aelius meus* in line 9.¹⁴ The substance of the text is an invitation to a birthday party:

Iii Idus Septembręs, soror, ad diem'
sollemnem natalem meum rogó
libenter facias ut uenias
ad nos iucundiozem mihi
diem?] interuentú tuo facturá si
uenia]s.

She goes on to greet *Cerialez tuum* and to transmit greetings from her husband and *filiolus*. Four lines are added at the end in what is clearly her own rather unpractised and inelegant hand:

sperabo te, soror.
uale, soror, anima
mea ita ualeam
karissima et haue.

The reading of the penultimate line is slightly problematical but the idiom can be paralleled.¹⁵

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¹⁴ Inv. no. 42 which is also to Lepidina and is very likely to be from the same person has a reference to Brocchus; this naturally takes us back to one of the writers of *Tab. Vindol.* 21; possibly this is C. Aelius Brocchus, known later as the commander of an *ala* in

Pannonia, see H. Devijver, *Prosopographia militarium equestrum* ... 1 (1976), 26.

¹⁵ e.g. Propertius 1. 7. 3; Cicero, *ad fam.* 16. 20. 1: 'sollicitat, ita uivam, me tua, mi Tiro, valetudo'.