

Building camps and bridges were among the skills required of the army. In this picture, auxiliary soldiers (see page 87) stand guard while soldiers from the legions do engineering work.

The legionary soldier

The soldiers who served in the legions formed the élite of the Roman army. They were all Roman citizens and full-time professionals who had signed on for twenty-five years. They were highly trained in the skills of infantry warfare and were often specialists in other fields as well. In fact a Roman legion, consisting normally of about 5,000 foot soldiers, was a miniature army in itself, capable of constructing forts and camps, manufacturing its weapons and equipment and building roads. On its staff were engineers, architects, carpenters, smiths, doctors, medical orderlies, clerks and accountants.

Recruitment

When he joined the army a new recruit would first be interviewed to ensure that he had the proper legal status, i.e. that he was a Roman citizen; he was also given a medical examination. Vegetius, who wrote a military manual, laid down guidelines for choosing recruits:

A young soldier should have alert eyes and should hold his head upright. The recruit should be broad-chested with powerful shoulders and brawny arms. His fingers should be long rather than short. He should not be pot-bellied or have a fat bottom. His calves and feet should not be flabby; instead they should be made entirely of tough sinew.

In choosing or rejecting recruits, it is important to find out what trade they have been following. Fishermen, birdcatchers, sweet-makers, weavers and all those who do the kind of jobs that women normally do should be kept away from the army. On the other hand, smiths, carpenters, butchers and hunters of deer and wild boar are the most suitable kind of recruit. The whole well-being of the Roman state depends on the kind of recruits you choose; so you must choose men who are outstanding not only in body but also in mind.

Training

After being accepted and sworn in, the new recruit was sent to his unit to begin training. This was thorough, systematic and physically hard. First the young soldier had to learn to march at the regulation pace for distances of up to 24 Roman miles (about 22 statute miles or 35 km). Physical fitness was further developed by running, jumping, swimming and carrying heavy packs. Next came weapon training, starting with a wooden practice-sword and wicker shield. Soldiers learned to handle their shields correctly and to attack dummy targets with the point of their swords. Vegetius again:

They are also taught not to cut with their swords but to thrust. The Romans find it so easy to beat people who use their swords to cut rather than thrust that they laugh in their faces. For a cutting stroke, even when made with full force, rarely kills. The vital organs are protected by the armour as well as by the bones of the body. On the other hand, a stab even two inches deep is usually fatal.



A centurion, a legionary and the aquilifer (eagle-bearer) of the legion.

The second phase of weapon training was to learn to throw the javelin (**pilum**). This had a wooden shaft 1.5 metres long and a pointed iron head of 0.6 metres. The head was cleverly constructed. The first 25 centimetres were finely tempered to give it penetrating power, but the rest was left untempered so that it was fairly soft and liable to bend. Thus when the javelin was hurled at an enemy, from a distance of 23–28 metres, its point penetrated and stuck into his shield, while the neck of the metal head bent and the shaft hung down. This not only made the javelin unusable, so that it could not be thrown back, but also made the encumbered shield so difficult to manage that the enemy might have to abandon it altogether.

When he could handle his weapons competently and was physically fit, the soldier was ready to leave the barracks for training in the open countryside. This began with route marches on which he carried not only his body armour and weapons but also several days' ration of food, together with equipment for making an overnight camp, such as a saw, an axe and also a basket for moving earth, as shown in the picture on the right. Much importance was attached to the proper construction of the camp at the end of the day's march, and the young soldier was given careful instruction and practice. Several practice camps and forts have been found in Britain. For example, at Cawthorn in Yorkshire the soldiers under training did rather more than just dig ditches and ramparts; they also constructed platforms for catapults (**ballistae**) and even built camp ovens.



Soldiers marching with their kit slung from a stake.

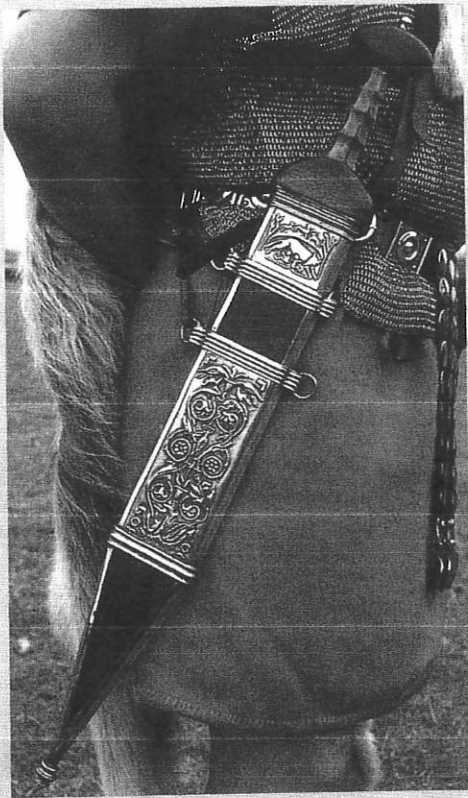
Work

The fully trained legionary did not spend all or even much of his time on active service. Most of it was spent on peacetime duties, such as building or roadmaking and he was given free time and leave. During the first century AD at least, he had good prospects of surviving till his discharge. He was generally stationed in a large legionary fortress somewhere near the frontiers of the empire in places such as Deva (Chester), Eboracum (York), Bonna (Bonn) and Vindobona (Vienna) which were key points in the Roman defences against the barbarians.

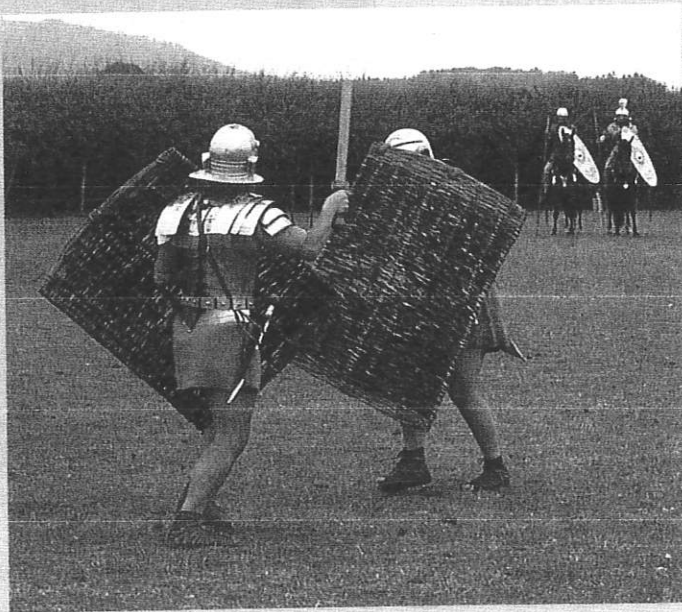
Many of the daily duties were the same wherever he was stationed. A duty roster, written on papyrus, has come down to us and lists the names of thirty-six soldiers, all members of the same century in one of the legions stationed in Egypt. It covers the first ten days in October possibly in the year AD 87. For example, C. Julius Valens was to spend October 3rd and 4th in the limestone quarries, October 5th and 6th in the armoury and October 7th in the bath house, probably stoking the furnace.



A rough carving of a legionary soldier stationed at Bonna, and employed on quarrying duties. He can be recognised as a soldier by his military belt (cingulum).



The Ermine Street Guard demonstrating legionaries' training. Clockwise from top left: replica of a sword found in London; swords were used to thrust, not slash; the pilum; practice with wooden swords and wicker shields.



Pay

In both war and peacetime the soldier received the same rate of pay. In the first century AD, up to the time of the Emperor Domitian (AD 81–96), this amounted to 225 denarii per annum; Domitian improved the rate to 300 denarii. These amounts were gross pay; before any money was handed to the soldier certain deductions were made. Surprising though it may seem, he was obliged to pay for his food, clothing and equipment. He would also leave some money in the military savings bank. What he actually received in cash may have been only a quarter or a fifth of his gross pay. Whether he felt badly treated is difficult to say. Certainly we know of cases of discontent and – very occasionally – mutiny, but pay and conditions of service were apparently not bad enough to discourage recruits. The soldier could look forward to some promotion and eventually an honourable discharge with a lump sum of 3,000 denarii or an allocation of land.

Promotion

If a soldier was promoted his life began to change in several ways. He was paid more and he was exempted from many of the duties performed by the ordinary soldier. Each century was commanded by a centurion who was assisted by an *optiō*. There was also in each century a standard-bearer (*signifer*), a *tesserarius* who organised the guards and distributed the passwords, and one or two clerks.

The centurions, who were roughly equivalent to warrant officers in a modern army, were the backbone of the legion. Most of them had long experience in the army and had risen from the ranks because of their courage and ability. There were sixty of them, each responsible for the training and discipline of a century, and their importance was reflected in their pay, which was probably about 1,500 denarii per annum. The senior centurion of the legion (*prīmus pīlus*) was a highly respected figure; he was at least fifty years old and had worked his way up through the various grades of centurion. He held office for one year, then received a large payment and was allowed to retire; or he might go on still further to become commander of the camp (*praefectus castrōrum*).



Centurion in the Ermine Street Guard, wearing his helmet with transverse plume and decorations, and leaning on his vine-wood staff (vītis).

Diagram of a legion.

*praefectus
castrorum*



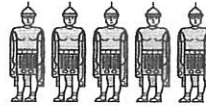
legatus



*tribunus
laticlavus*



tribuni



aquilifer



FIRST COHORT: 5 centuries = c. 800 men

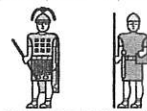
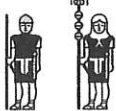
T

S

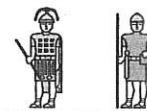
C

*centurio
primipilus* *optio*

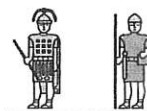
centurio



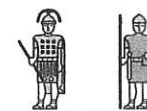
about 160 men



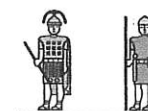
about 160 men



about 160 men



about 160 men



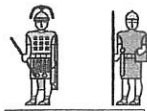
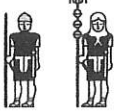
about 160 men

SECOND TO TENTH COHORTS: 9 cohorts, 6 centuries each, total c. 4320 men

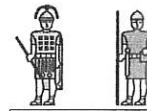
T

S

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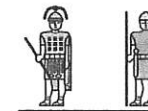
about 80 men



about 80 men



about 80 men



about 80 men



about 80 men



about 80 men

HORSEMEN: about 120

Key

T = *tesserarius*

S = *signifer*

C = *cornicen* (horn-player)

Each cohort had one of each of these.

Each century had a centurion and an optio.

The auxiliaries

The heavily armed legionaries formed the best trained fighting force in the Roman army, but they needed to be supplemented by large numbers of cavalry and other specialised troops. These were provided by men from different parts of the empire who had developed particular skills, for example, archers from Arabia and slingers from Majorca and Minorca. The most important and prestigious were the cavalry, who were regularly used in battle to support the infantry. They were usually positioned on each side of the legionaries from where they could protect the centre, launch attacks themselves or pursue defeated enemy forces.

Auxiliaries were paid less than legionary soldiers, but when they completed their service those who were not already Roman citizens were granted citizenship. This was another way of making people in the provinces feel loyalty to Roman rule.

Inscriptional evidence

Some important evidence about the Roman occupation of Britain comes from inscriptions, particularly on the tombstones of soldiers. On the right is the inscription on the tombstone of a soldier who was buried at Chester.

At first sight, this looks difficult to decipher. The task, however, is made easier by the fact that most of these inscriptions follow a standard pattern. The items are usually arranged in the following order:

D M
L LICINIUS L F
TER VALENS
ARE VETERAN
LEG XX VV AN VL
H S E

- 1 The dedication at the top of the stone – D M – abbreviation for *Dīs Mānibus*, the spirits of the departed.
- 2 The praenomen. This is the first of a citizen's three names and is usually abbreviated to a single letter, as here – L for *Lūcius*.
- 3 The nomen. Always given in full, as here – *Licinius*.
- 4 The father's name. It is usually only the father's praenomen that is given, and this can be recognised in abbreviated form by the single letter which comes before an F representing *filius*. The son often had the same praenomen as his father, as here – L F for *Lūcīi filius*.
- 5 Tribe. Roman soldiers were Roman citizens and were therefore enrolled in one of the thirty-five Roman tribes which were used for voting purposes. The name of the tribe is abbreviated, as here – TER for *Teretīna*.
- 6 The cognomen. This is the last of the three names, usually placed after the father's name and the Roman tribe in which the soldier was enrolled. It is always given in full, as here – *Valēns*. Three names were a mark of Roman citizenship and therefore an important indication of status.
- 7 Birthplace. This can usually be identified as a town in the Roman empire, thus ARE for *Arelātē* (modern Arles in the south of France).
- 8 Rank and legion. They are usually both abbreviated – VETERAN for *veterānus* (a retired soldier or one coming up to retirement); LEG XX VV for *legiōnis XX Valeriae Victrīcis* (20th Legion Valeria Victrix).
- 9 Age. This is represented by AN or ANN for *annōrum*, followed by a number. This number is in most cases rounded off to a multiple of 5. Sometimes VIX (*vixit* = lived) is placed before AN.
- 10 Length of service (not included in the inscription above). This is represented by STIP followed by a number, e.g. STIP X for *stipendia X* (ten years' service).
- 11 The final statement. This is abbreviated, and usually takes the form of H S E for *hīc situs est* (is buried here) or H F C for *hērēs faciendum cūrāvit* (his heir had this stone set up).

The Chester inscription can therefore be interpreted as follows:

D(IS) M(ANIBUS)
L(UCIUS) LICINIUS L(UCII) F(ILIIUS)
TER(ETINA)VALENS
ARE(LATE)VETERAN(US)
LEG(IONIS) XXV(ALERIAE)V(ICTRICIS)AN(NORUM)
VL
H(IC) S(ITUS) E(ST)

This stone is dedicated to the spirits of the departed. Lucius Licinius Valens, son of Lucius, of the Teretine tribe, from Arelate, veteran of the Twentieth Legion Valeria Victrix, aged 45, is buried here.

On the right is the inscription on another soldier's tombstone, also found at Chester.

Try to find out from it the following information:

- 1 The soldier's name
- 2 His rank
- 3 His legion
- 4 His age at death
- 5 The length of his service

In the same way, find as much information as you can from the following inscription:

