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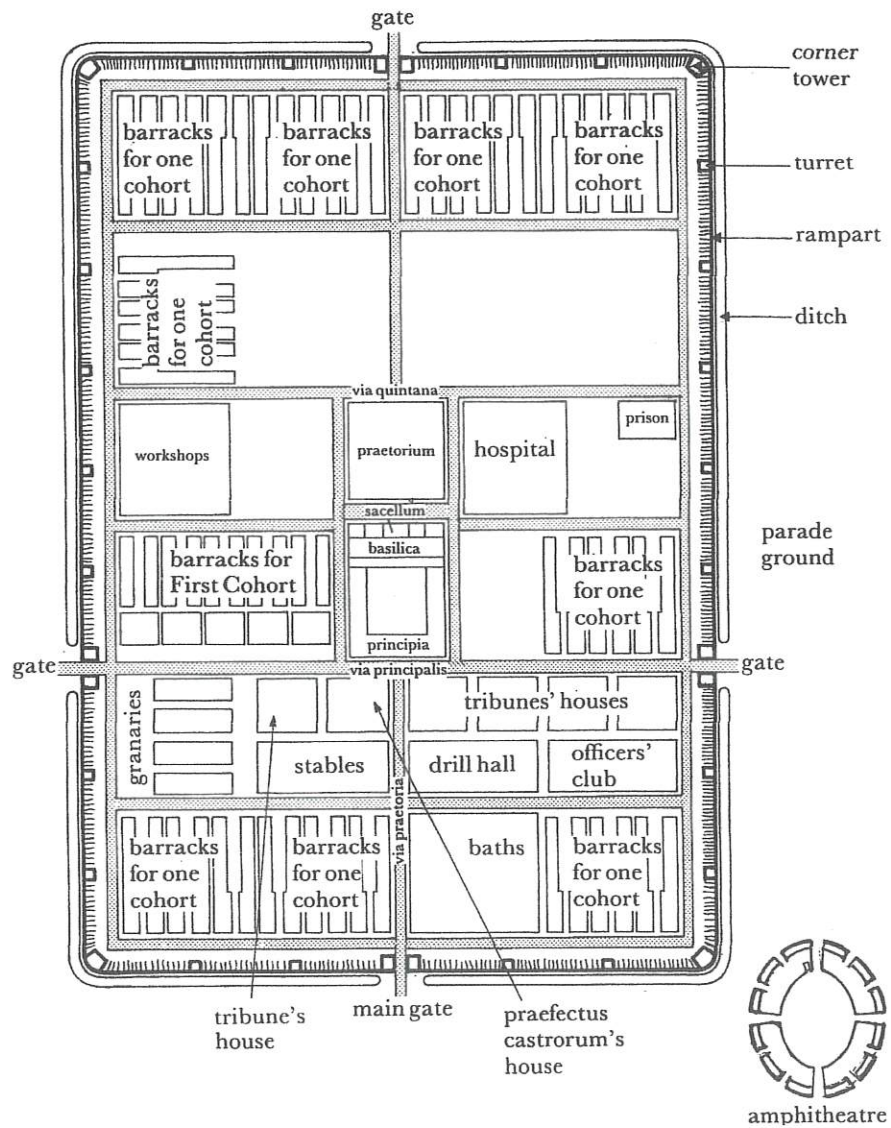
The legionary fortress

If the legion itself was like a miniature army, the fortress in which it lived when not on campaign could be compared to a fortified town. It covered about 20–25 hectares (50–60 acres), about one third of the area of Pompeii. The design of the fortress was based on a standard pattern, illustrated below.

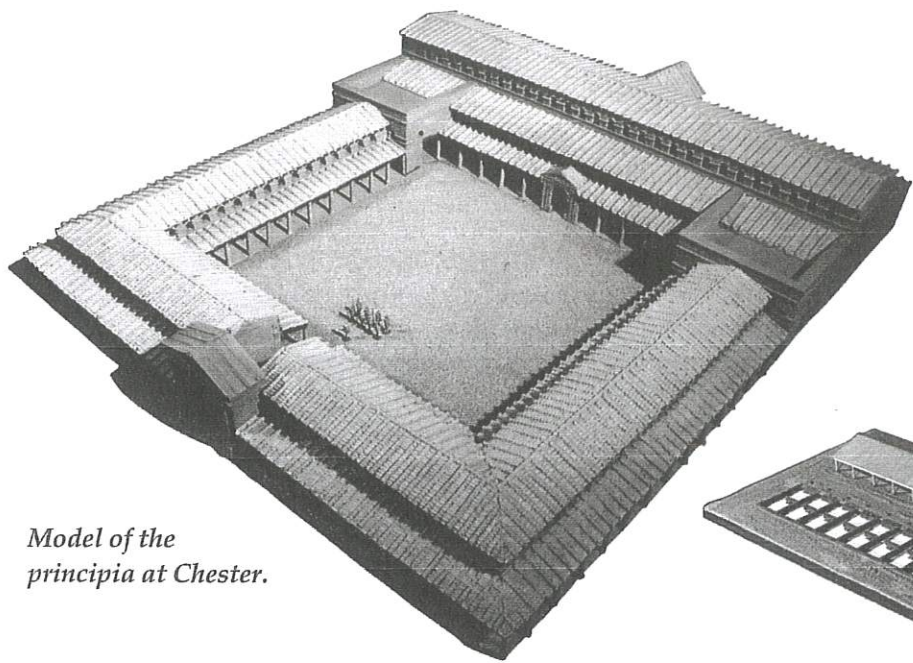
The chief buildings, grouped in the centre, were the headquarters (**prīncipia**), the living-quarters of the commanding officer (**praetōrium**), the hospital (**valētūdinārium**), and the granaries (**horrea**). Numerous streets and alleys criss-crossed the fortress, but there were three main streets: the **via praetōria** ran from the main gate to the front entrance of the principia; the **via prīncipālis** extended across the whole width of the fortress, making a T-junction with the **via praetoria** just in front of the principia; the **via quīntāna** passed behind the principia and also extended across the width of the fortress. The fortress was surrounded by a ditch, rampart and battlements, with towers at the corners and at intervals along the sides. Each side had a fortified gateway.

The principia was a large and impressive building at the heart of the fortress. A visitor would first enter a stone-flagged courtyard surrounded on three sides by a colonnade and storerooms. On the far side of the courtyard was a great hall or basilica, where the commander worked with his officers, interviewed important local people and administered military justice. It was a surprisingly large hall and would have looked rather like the interior of a cathedral. The one at Chester, for example, was about 73 metres long; its

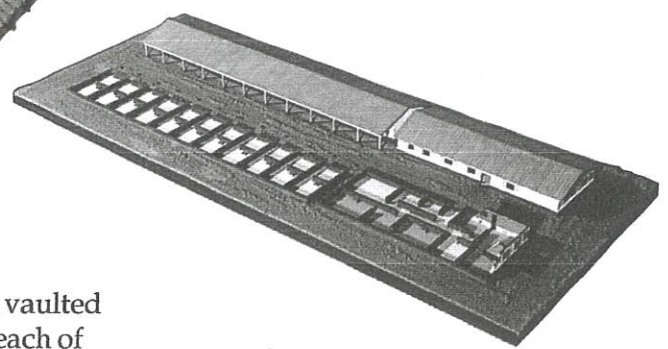
Plan of a legionary fortress (based on Chester).



2



Model of the principia at Chester.



Cutaway model of a pair of barrack blocks.

central nave, bounded by tall columns supporting a vaulted roof, was 12 metres wide and flanked by two aisles each of 6 metres.

In the centre of the far long wall of the basilica and directly facing the main gate was the most sacred place in the fortress, the **sacellum** or chapel. This housed the standard of the legion, the **aquila**, an image of an eagle perched with outspread wings on the top of a pole. It was made of gold and in its talons it clutched a bundle of golden darts that represented the thunderbolts of Jupiter. The aquila represented the spirit of the legion and aroused feelings of intense loyalty and an almost religious respect. To lose it in battle was the worst possible disgrace and misfortune; it rarely happened. The soldier who looked after the aquila and carried it in battle was called the **aquilifer** (eagle-bearer). He was always a soldier of the first cohort.

On either side of the sacellum were the rooms where the clerks kept the payrolls and attended to all the paperwork that was needed to run a large organisation. Close by and usually underground was the legion's strong-room, in which pay and savings were kept under lock and key.

The praetorium was situated by the side of or just behind the principia. It was a luxurious villa in the Italian style and it provided the legatus and his family with those comforts which they would regard as necessary for a civilised life: central heating, a garden and a private suite of baths. The very high standard of the commander's quarters would demonstrate the attractions of Roman civilisation to any local civilian leaders



entertained in the praetorium. However, whether this display of wealth made them any happier about the taxes which they had to pay to the Romans is another question.

The valetudinarium or hospital contained many small wards which were designed to ensure peace and quiet for the sick and injured. There was also a large reception hall to accommodate an influx of casualties from the battlefield and a small operating theatre equipped with running water.

The horrea or granaries were skilfully designed to keep grain dry and cool for long periods. In the first century AD, like many other buildings in the fortress, they were built mainly of wood, but from the second century stone was the regular material. A granary was a long and narrow building; the roof had wide overhanging eaves to carry the rain-water away from the walls; and to prevent damp rising from the ground the floor was supported on small piers or low walls which allowed air to circulate freely underneath. There were several of these granaries in a fortress, often arranged side by side in pairs, and they could contain stocks of grain sufficient for at least one year and possibly two.

The barrack blocks, housing 5,000–6,000 men, occupied the largest area. They too were long and narrow; and they were divided into pairs of rooms, each pair providing accommodation for an eight-man section (**contubernium**).

A stone-built granary at Housesteads near Hadrian's Wall.

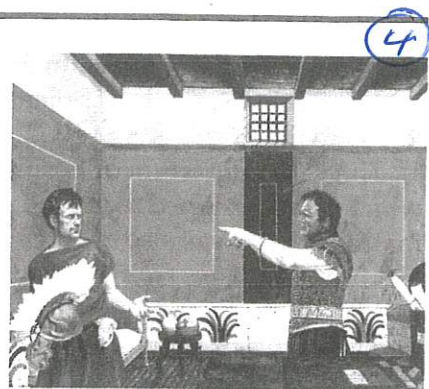


Along the front of the block ran a colonnaded verandah. Each section cooked for itself on a hearth in the front living-room, which was slightly the smaller of the two rooms, and slept in the larger room at the back. Each block housed a century (80 men). At the end of the block a larger suite of rooms was provided for the centurion, who may have shared it with his optio. The blocks themselves were arranged in pairs facing each other across an alleyway, as in the model on page 116.

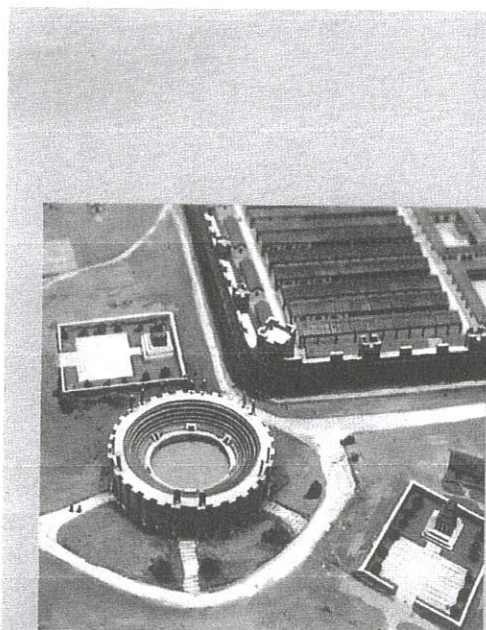
The bath house was important both for hygienic reasons and because it provided a social centre for the troops; every fortress and many smaller forts had one. Like the civilian baths, it consisted of a tepidarium, caldarium and frigidarium. Sometimes it was outside the fortress, by a nearby stream or river, sometimes inside.

One other building, always outside, should be mentioned: the amphitheatre. It had the same shape and layout as the civilian amphitheatre and could seat the whole legion. It was used for ceremonial parades, weapon training and displays of tactics, as well as for occasional gladiatorial shows.

Not surprisingly, civilians also tended to gather round military bases. At first they were traders who set up little bars to sell appetising food and drink to supplement the plain rations served in the barracks. Naturally, too, these bars gave soldiers opportunities to meet the local girls. Legally soldiers were not allowed to marry, but the army tolerated unofficial unions. While the father lived in barracks his family grew up just outside; and his sons when they were eighteen or nineteen often followed his profession and enlisted. Many such settlements



A centurion's quarters, based on remains of a wooden barrack block with painted plaster found at Chester.

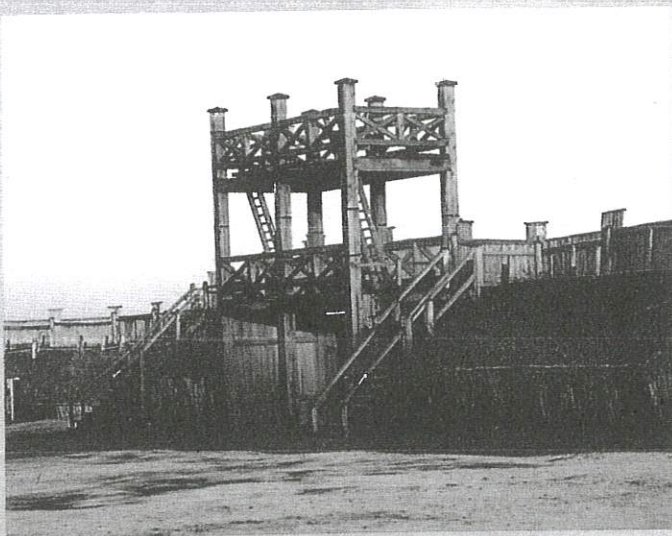


The remains of the Chester amphitheatre today.

Barrack blocks and the amphitheatre.



(*vīci*) developed gradually into towns. A few became large, self-governing cities, such as Eboracum (York). Thus the military fortress, which had begun as a means of holding down newly conquered territory, ended by playing an important part in the development of civilian town life.



The Roman fortress – from timber to stone

The Romans first built their fortresses of wood, for speed, and later rebuilt them in stone. The top picture shows a reconstruction of a wooden gate at the Lunt fort, Coventry (seen from the inside). Below is a stone gateway (seen from the outside) rebuilt at Arbeia fortress, South Shields, a supply base.

