

## In Their Shoes

### Shodding yourself unshoddily, hobnailing without hobbling etc. etc.

by Stephen Kenwright

*non sunt adtrita vestimenta vestra nec calciamenta pedum tuorum  
vetustate consumpta sunt*

Your garments are not worn out, neither are the shoes of your feet  
consumed with age. Deuteronomy 29: 5 (Jerome's Vulgate)

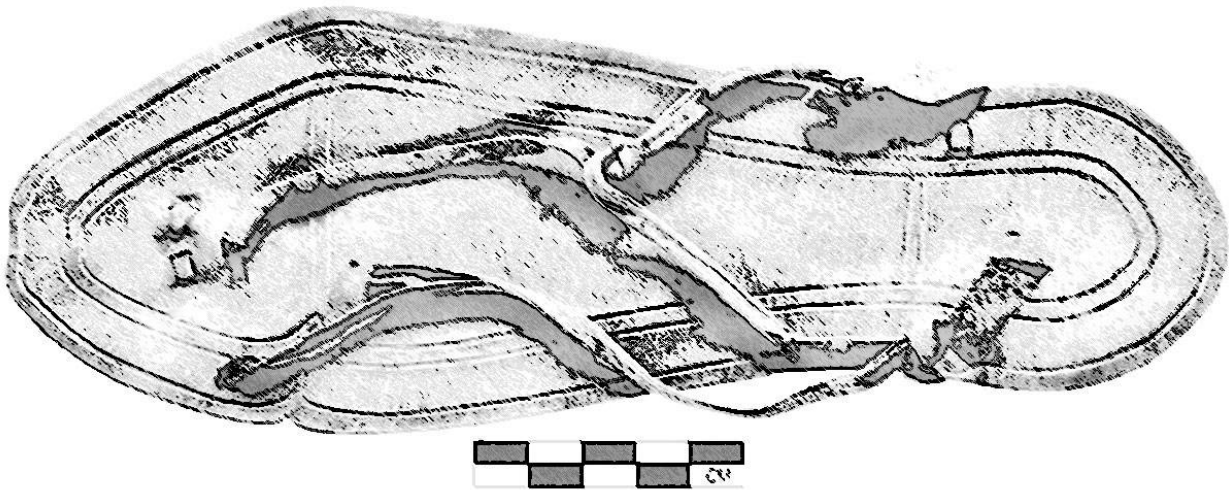
Napoleon's famous metaphor was that an army marches on its stomach, but more prosaically re-enactors don't get far without something on their feet! Appropriate styles are commercially available, while the cheapest option to get something authentic is to make them yourself with the help of the new Comitatus shoe making guide, with large scale templates and step by step instructions, available on the web site. But what did Late Romans really wear and how can the evidence stop us getting wet feet and falling over?

It is difficult to match surviving Roman terminology for footwear (often based on the typical user, colour, the origin of the style or the material used) with representations in art which give a general idea of appearance and the finds themselves which can suggest construction but which may sometimes be distorted in shape and size. According to Driel-Murray, therefore, we should be cautious about being too definitive in applying broad archaeological terms. While authors often divide the types simply into nailed and sewn, the same forms can sometimes be copied with an atypical construction, even turnshoes er... turning up at Dura Europos and elsewhere – though if you wore some to an event, no doubt someone in the crowd would go away thinking they were misplaced Viking kit! Generally speaking, men, women and children appear in art wearing comparable styles of everyday footwear, with finds at some sites that indicate a mixed population differing principally in size rather than form.



Female servant's ankle boots (l) and man's sandals (r), Piazza Armerina (early C4<sup>th</sup>)

**Sandals:** *solea* were simple soles, which could be double thickness leather, hobnailed or even made of edged cork. Earlier designs include the type found at Vindolanda and York resembling modern open toe mules with a broad strap over the instep. Most late finds were shaped like modern 'flip-flops', a thong running by the big toe. Some forms had ankle straps and may have been the types mentioned by Diocletian as 'suitable for runners'. Though rare in Late Roman Britain, they are found in other Roman contexts, European peat bogs and early Germanic graves. They were worn by either sex by our period, often with split-toe socks (like Japanese *tabi*). They developed a 'big toe' shape in the C3<sup>rd</sup> and mens' sandals grew enormously wide, but this impractical fashion seems to have fallen away in the early C4<sup>th</sup>. Finely decorated sewn cloth slippers (*socci*), seem to have been luxuries worn indoors by the elite. Sandals were also made from woven matting or wood (*sculponea*) with two large grip-ridges on the soles similar to Japanese *geta* to help cope with muddy conditions.



Sandal from Cuijk, Netherlands C4<sup>th</sup> (after van Driel-Murray 2007)

**Caligae:** the classic military openwork boots usually called 'sandals' didn't survive the early C2<sup>nd</sup> in art or finds, but the usage of the word goes beyond the Vindolanda tablets, where none are represented in the finds, through Tertullian describing the rank and file as 'caligata' at the start of the C3<sup>rd</sup>, to Diocletian's edict on maximum prices in 301A.D., which lists types suitable for "mule drivers or farm workers", women and children as well as soldiers (sold un-nailed) and the heading includes forms of *calcei* and *campagi*, which might imply that it was or became a broad term for ankle boot.

**Calcei:**

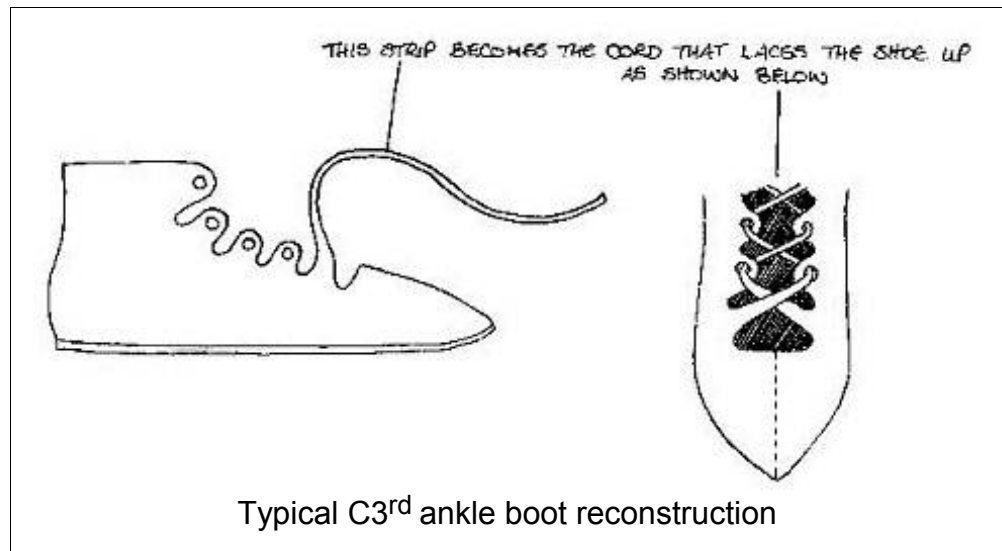
*cuius non sum dignus procumbens solvere corrigiam calciamentorum eius*  
he... the thong of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop and untie...  
Mark 1: 7 (Jerome's Vulgate)

In Late Latin literature, *calceus* is used in expressions generally for a shoe covering the heel (*calx*). However, the name has been applied in modern times more specifically to ankle boots

or alternatively to lasted footwear (constructed with the upper and/or mid-sole sandwiched between an inner and external sole). Ammianus Marcellinus criticises Hunnic *calcei* for being unlasted and so too badly fitted for walking freely and thus infantry fighting, suggesting that lasting was desirable and even usual for *calcei*, but not part of the 'definition' of the term. Some authors simply use '*calcei*' to mean any nailed footwear(!), equating this with lasted construction. It should be emphasised that no period footwear had a heeled sole like a modern shoe.

The term appears in the Vindolanda tablets and Diocletian names the formal classical types "*calcei patricii*", "*senatorum*" and "*equestres*" worn with the toga by those social ranks and which thus often appear in the formal sculptures and diptychs of dignitaries right into the Byzantine period. It is clear from Tertullian's comments on the discomforts of wearing the toga that these formal *calcei* lacked ventilation (De Pallium 5.3) and Goldman uses the term for any footwear which enclosed the foot. Nailed footwear described as *calcei* apparently continued to be deposited by sub-Roman *laeti* in C4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Arras, which would support our use of them for a 400A.D. dateline.

**Dura boots:** often described as *calcei*, C3<sup>rd</sup> finds from Dura Europos in Syria, London, Vindolanda, Zwammerdam in the Netherlands and Saalburg & Welzheim in Germany include an Empire-wide style of ankle boot with inner and outer sole, heel stiffener, toe seam, integral laces, eyelets and, often, hobnails, called the "Ramshaw" by Carol van Driel-Murray and pixie boots by me.



They are very practical, having been proven on Scafell Pike and over the Alps and many Comitatus members own the sturdy version made by Plantagenet Shoes. They were the only form at Vindolanda that was getting more popular as securely dated deposits run out around 230 A.D. but the latest archaeological find, in 275A.D., shows they are probably very old fashioned by our usual 400 A.D. dateline and hard to make yourself, requiring a last and several carefully shaped pieces.

**Fell boots:** Finds at Vindolanda included other external sole ankle boots with separate laces, called "Fell boots" by van Driel-Murray. The "Chesterholm" is a contemporary variant with oval, rather than round, lace holes. While the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century dating on these finds is even

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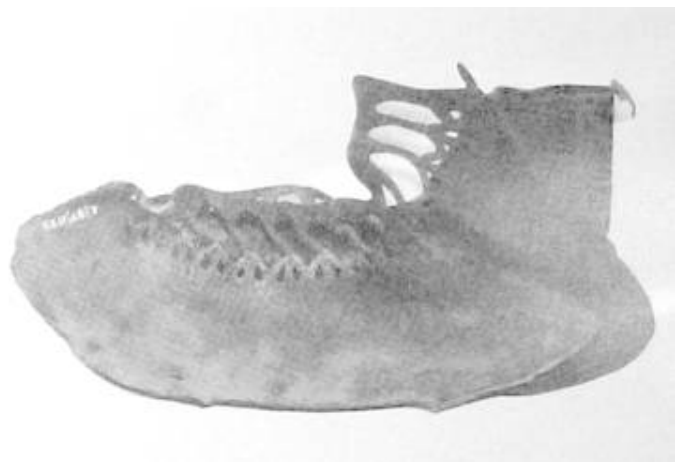
earlier than the Dura type that replaced them at Vindolanda, depictions of shepherds and *orbiculus* and *sagum*-wearing soldiers in the possibly British C5<sup>th</sup> *Vergilius Romanus* manuscript show boots with horizontal lines up the vamp reminiscent of their characteristic ladder-like lace arrangement, which suggests they might be applicable for the Late Roman and Anglian periods (although hobnails should be limited to Roman impressions).



Shepherd, *Vergilius Romanus*



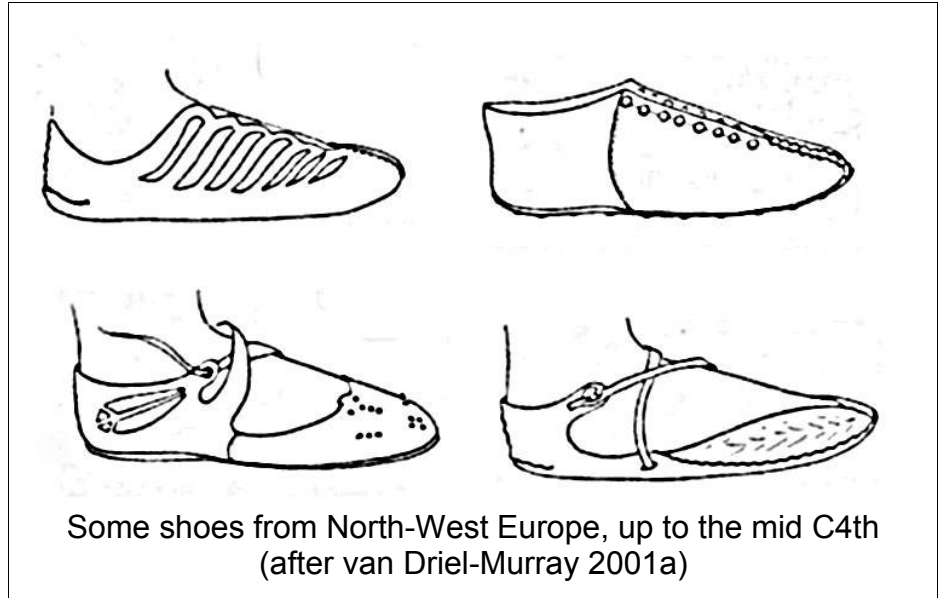
Soldiers, *Vergilius Romanus* (ca. C5<sup>th</sup> )



'Fell boot' L1123 from Vindolanda, early C2<sup>nd</sup>

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Ready made and hobnailed versions of these and other styles have been offered at a discounted price for Comitatus group members by maker Robin Brown of the Legio VIII, trading as Rigorvali at <http://www.rigorevali.co.uk/> - enquire politely before ordering, or go via John Conyard. They are also hard to make yourself, but a basic version can be made by adapting cheap imported models of the Dura type ankle boots.



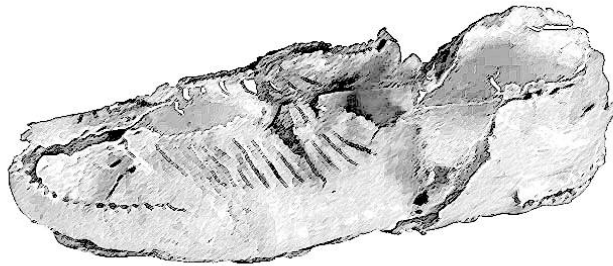
**One piece** shoes generally termed by archaeologists *carbatinae* from the Greek, are typically more enclosed than sandals, but still well ventilated and can have an external and inner sole added for comfort and durability. Such shoes were found in numbers for example at the fortress at Saalburg and Welzheim in male and female sizes including C3rd types with many separate loops extending around the sole which can be drawn roughly together over the foot with thongs, apparently similar to 'native' designs and continue re-emerging in rustic forms such as the 'pampootie' for centuries. These seem to have developed into more enclosed moccasin-like styles with decoratively slashed centrally laced uppers, some with a pronounced central ridge which seem to be amongst those represented on the Piazza Armerina mosaics and the very low shoes with straps across the ankle typical of our period.



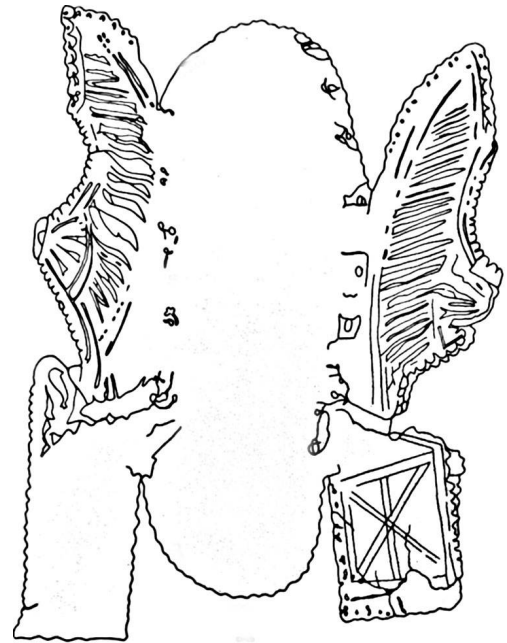
Shoes and leg bindings of a hunter, Piazza Armerina

Three one-piece shoes were found with the early C4<sup>th</sup> inscribed cavalry helmet at Deurne, so we can say with some confidence they were worn at least by *equites*. The most famous has an openwork upper, while the other two just cover the edge of the foot, leaving the instep open. Fortunately, they are surprisingly easy to make yourself, so the Comitatus shoe

making guide focuses on them. Members have very successfully used Mike Bishop's drawing of the more enclosed Deurne find as a cutting pattern, drawing the edges up to form the upper. The original is without additional sole but was worn with spurs, so is clearly a riding shoe, presumably not made for heavy duty walking.



Deurne shoe as worn



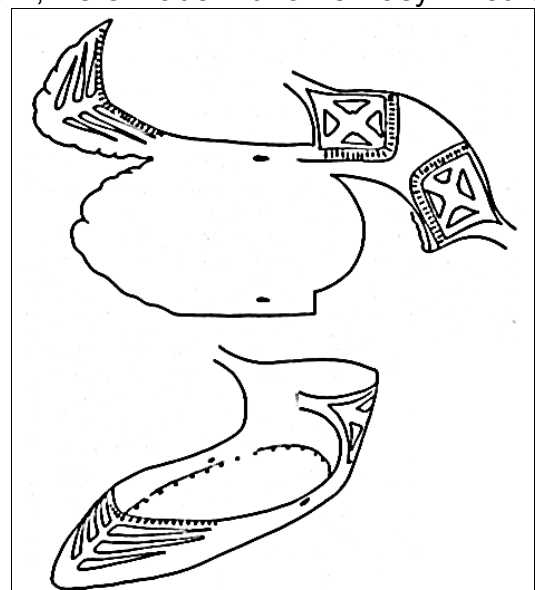
Deurne shoe unfolded (after Bishop and Coulston 2006)

### Campagus

The second Deurne type of shoe has a very low vamp with instep straps which became typical in our period, represented in most Late Roman art from the Piazza Armerina mosaic onwards and described clearly by Lydus in the C6<sup>th</sup> as a *campagus* matching the *campagi militares* listed by Diocletian. The statue of the Tetrarchs, now in Venice, show practical thick soled versions (although the pronounced wedge below them is presumably an artistic effect). Many, like the example found at Low Ham, were made with a new asymmetric cutting pattern, the upper folded around and sewn to the sole at ground level. Some look very low and flimsy, but when made with tough leather, they can still work very well.



Statue of the Tetrarchs, Venice



Low Ham shoe cutting pattern, first half of the C4<sup>th</sup> (after van Driel-Murray 1987)

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It can help to have two pairs of shoes, just as the C2<sup>nd</sup> crew of a grain barge lost in the Rhine each had two sets of footwear – sandals and closed shoes in their case. Hobnailed boots keep you upright on the grass & mud typical of display grounds and hikes and you will find some plain soled shoes useful for otherwise very slippery flagstones and easily damaged modern floors, as well as longer walks on modern roads which are very tough on the ankles with hobnailed shoes as the valiant Antonius demonstrated in his charity walk in Autumn 2008!

*Campagi* are shown worn with footed cloth hose and the many styles with decorative cut-outs seem to have been designed to display these or colourful thick socks. Extra insoles of felt, sheepskin or cork for could be added for comfort and the inner and, sometimes, external soles on latchet shoes at Hardknott were built up from around 5 layers of leather. The finds of cloth or felt booties (*impilia*) often described as socks remind me more of the very effective heavy-duty snow-climbing boot liners sometimes still made of felt. Certainly felted naalbind socks work with proofed leather and leg wraps to keep out most wet conditions.

May your feet always stay dry!



Shoe of a hunter with spear and shield, Piazza Armerina



Soldier's shoes, The 'Two Brothers' sarcophagus, (mid C 4<sup>th</sup> )



Textile foot covering, Vindolanda



Shoes of the Emperor's guard, Kerch Missorium probably circa 357 A.D.

Check out the shoe making guide to see how easy it is. My thanks to John Conyard and Martin Moser for their help in preparing this article.

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Very low shoes, *campagi*, worn with footed hose, similar to those of the Justinian mosaic made 150 years later, Diptych of General Stilicho, circa 400 A.D.