

Portraying the Legionary

Historical background for members of the Legio Praesidiensis - 400AD

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INTRODUCTION

As a disclaimer I should say that some of the information given here is very subjective, and the nature of early 5th Britain can only be given cursory examination in such an article. However this article is aimed at giving the level of information often requested by members of Comitatus, portraying the very real members of the Praesidiensis that lived 1,600 years ago.

BACKGROUND

The Roman army of Late Antiquity was divided into two. The field army or *comitatenses* consisted of relatively well-paid, well-motivated troops held centrally and able to respond rapidly to major threats. The static frontier troops or *limitanei* were more than just part time soldiers or soldier farmers, as some writers seem to believe. They were drilled and capable of dealing with small-scale incursions and routine policing actions. On occasion they were called to serve with the field army and such units were called *pseudocomitatenses*. All ranks were basically career soldiers in an army of over 500,000 men, with a well-defined path set out in front of them.

The Praesidiensis served the Western Emperor Honorius, who reigned from 393-423AD. He is often considered ineffectual and weak, but he ruled for thirty years of Rome's most turbulent history. By 400AD our Emperor would have been 16 years old. The power in the West was Stilicho, the *magister militum* or *magister peditum praesentalis*. His character and motives have been much questioned, but he was certainly not a Vandal barbarian. His father was a Vandal serving under the Emperor Valens in the East, and Stilicho served his whole adult life as an officer in the Roman army. Stilicho's position was assured by his marriage in 384AD to Serena, the beloved niece and adoptive daughter of Theodosius the Great. Upon the death of Theodosius, Stilicho was left as the real power in the west in 395AD. His legitimacy was based on his reform of the military administration to bring it firmly under his power. By the end of the fourth century Stilicho was locked in a grand power struggle against Alaric and his Visigoths. He needed troops from Britain to aid him in this struggle.



The Praesidiensis was a new style of Legion, consisting at best of 1,000 men, presumably acting as a garrison of Praesidium. However most units must have been well below strength, and it is possible to assume a notional strength of 500. It is not known when the unit was raised, but sometime after the reign of Constantine seems likely, when the military reforms establishing the permanent field armies had come into effect. It may

have been instituted after one of a number of military crises, such as the so-called "Great Barbarian Conspiracy" of 367 AD. Or it may just have evolved from a unit who had always garrisoned the fortress of Praesidium. The unit name means "garrison", and must have originally been classed as *limitanei*, under the

control of the *Dux Britanniarum* based at York. The *Dux* was a rank, which often involved commanding troops spread across more than one province.

The location of Praesidium, literally "the defensive enclosure", within the province of Britannia II is unknown. It has been suggested that it may be the major fort at Newton Kyme near Tadcaster. But a more persuasive argument based on the Antonine Itinerary of the second century, places it at Bridlington. The bay was described as having "many harbours", now lost to coastal erosion. Much of the transport of the Roman world was water-borne, and it is easy to forget the importance of such sites.

Such a fort would be an important link in defending the north east coast against Pictish and Germanic raiders from the sea. There was a chain of watchtowers along the north east coast, possibly from Bridlington all the way to the River Tyne, constructed by Theodosius after 367AD or Magnus Maximus after 383AD. It is possible to imagine a small flotilla of light galleys operating from the bay, trying to intercept sea-borne raiders. The Praesidiensis would intercept raiders on land, act as marines at sea, and as a police force patrolling the surrounding area. Praesidium may have been a second century fort, modified at a later date to include platforms and towers to enfilade the walls. It is possible that the fort was located close to the seashore, perhaps modified to enclose an area to beach galleys such as has been found at Caer Gybi in Anglesey and Kodenica on the Danube. Evidence from York suggests that families and industry moved into the forts, and rubbish may have been thrown on to derelict sites no longer in use to produce the so-called "dark earth" found today.

The Notitia Dignitatum is a list of army units and officerships of the Western and most of the Eastern Empire. The document also gives shield designs. The original manuscript was copied twice, and our shields are based on the most reliable version. When it was written is a matter of debate, but it seems to have been occasionally updated. For northern Britain a date of the early 5th century seems likely. By this time Praesidium is home to a unit of Dalmation Horseman, while the Praesidienses are now a *Legio Comitatus* in the Gallic field army. We need to consider why this is the case.



There are various possible occasions when the unit may have moved. Magnus Maximus was proclaimed Emperor in Britain in 383 AD and moved units to the continent, especially from the north west of Britain. The defences of Britain were reorganised by Stilicho at the turn of the century. Either Stilicho himself or more likely one of his generals campaigned north of the Wall with locally raised forces around 398-9AD, returning to the continent with these forces at the end of the campaign in 402AD. Finally Constantine III took an army across to France in 407 AD to

re-establish Roman control after the barbarians crossed the Rhine in force. Of these I feel the time of Stilicho is the most likely for the relocation of the

Praesidiensis, but this is pure supposition. However the troops taken to France from Britain in 402AD came from the right area. Interestingly *limitanei* were taken from the German frontier to re-enforce the Gallic field army at the same time, as if Stilicho was trying to re-centralise his available manpower.

The last issues of Roman coinage seem to coincide with the withdrawal of troops in 402AD. The last issues of coinage to reach Britain in bulk were bronzes of the house of Theodosius. These coins were minted in Gaul until 395AD when the mints closed. Then coins were supplied from Rome, and a few from Aquileia. The latest issues to arrive were in the names of Honorius and Arcadius. New issues dated to 403AD did not reach Britain, suggesting that state wages were not paid after 402AD. Clipping was common, but local copies of official issues were not produced, suggesting a very rapid collapse of the cash economy. The Praesidiensis may have got out while the going was good!

THE MEN

By the 4th century soldiers were expected to serve at least 20 years. The *honesta missio* given after 20 years could be turned into an *emerita missio* after 24 years, giving the full privileges of a veteran. These included the exemption from poll tax for themselves and their wives, market dues, custom dues and the like. Veterans were given land allotments with oxen and seed corn, or, if they preferred a cash bounty. Soldiers retiring due to wounds, illness or age could receive a *causaria missio*, but they may have had to serve a qualifying period.

According to Vegetius new recruits should have alert eyes, straight neck, broad chest, muscular shoulders, strong arms, long fingers, small stomach, be slender in the buttocks and have muscular calves and feet. Rural recruits were considered more hardy than urban dwellers. These could be toughened by drill, enduring heat and dust, by carrying heavy loads, feeding them a moderate rural diet and making them camp in tents. This is of course all applicable to modern members of the Praesidiensis.

Some troops would have been volunteers, but many would have been conscripts. Some would have been the sons of soldiers who were legally forced to serve, some would have been conscripted from the local communities who would each have to provide a quota of men. Communities tried to pay a conscription tax to avoid sending quotas of men, but this system was open to abuse. A recruit was valued at 36 *solidi*, 6 of which were for equipment. The money could be used to obtain low quality recruits, and any difference pocketed by the officers. Some men resorted to mutilation to avoid serving in the army by cutting off their thumbs. However in 381AD Theodosius stated that two such mutilated recruits could serve instead of one whole man. Desertion seems to have become common. Recruits were citizens or barbarians, mainly Germans. Slaves, freedmen, innkeepers, cooks and provincial officials were excluded from service. The recruit or *tiro* was to be between 19 and 35 years old. Some seem to have been branded or tattooed to try and reduce desertion. The height limit was set as 5'7" (Roman). Recruits were exempted from poll tax.

New recruits took the military oath, the *sacramentum*. One recruit was chosen to recite the entire oath, after which the rest would in turn say "*idem in me*", meaning "the same in my case". The recruit was then entered into the records of the unit, the final legal stage of becoming a soldier.

The real value of the soldiers pay was poor. Empire-wide inflation and the breakdown of trade between the provinces made the situation worse. The area became largely self-sufficient in pottery. Crambeck, between York and Malton, became an important pottery producing area for the whole of northern Britain. A

fragment of Crambeck ware found in York may portray a soldier of the late fourth century, armed with sword and perhaps a drum. Pottery was also produced at Holme-on-Spalding Moor. Pay was supplemented by payments in kind of clothing, rations, fodder for animals and imperial donatives. The most important payment was given on the accession of a new Emperor and thereafter on every fifth anniversary. This quinquennial donative was five gold solidi and a pound of silver equal to four solidi on the accession, and five solidi on the quinquennial celebration. This amount was paid for every Augustus in the Empire.

Clothing and equipment was issued by the state and manufactured in state run imperial factories. There were twenty in the west and fifteen in the east. In the west there were just two linen mills but fifteen woollen mills and nine dying houses. Troops received a shirt, tunic, cloak and possibly boots. It is not known how long these items were to last. Perhaps just a year as in the gunpowder era. Whilst in garrison men lived in the forts, perhaps in easy maintenance chalet-blocks alongside their families. Food was drawn daily from storehouses, *horrea*, within the fort, supplied by the army but perhaps grown by the men themselves in the local area. As part of a field army troops would be billeted on the unwilling local population. As well as growing food men would be engaged in producing and mending military equipment, tasks such as basket weaving and making jet objects from local materials.

On campaign, decrees of the mid fourth century suggest soldiers would be issued with rations for twenty days. Soldiers were to receive *bucellatum* or hardtack for two days and bread on the third. Ordinary wine, *vinum*, and sour wine, *acetum*, were served on alternate days. Sour wine mixed with water could make a refreshing drink, *posca*. Mutton was provided two days out of three, with salt pork on the third. One can imagine soldiers taking every opportunity to draw, beg and extort rations. Bread was supplied by the baker's guild and landowners. Wine had to be the cheap new vintages, sweet or sour, and supplemented by malted wheat or barley beer, *cervesa*. The main meals of the day were lunch *prandium* and supper *cena*.

Gradually the delivery of supplies in kind were commuted to cash payments. By our period *limitanei* received supplies for nine months and money payments for three. Unit records would be kept locally and by the *princeps* of the *Dux* based in York. These men wielded great power, and worked with the *numerarii* to deal with financial matters. There were generally two *numerarii* for each unit.

Old-fashioned ranks were still retained alongside new titles. A legio would be probably commanded by a *praefect*, as would a fleet based at Praesidium. A *praepositus* commanded a detachment, or a post. It is likely that the Praesidiensis was commanded by a *praepositus* or a *praefect*. The last inscription of Roman Britain so far discovered tells us that the construction of the watchtower, *burgus*, at Ravenscar was carried out under Justinianus, a *praepositus* who may have been responsible for constructing all the watchtowers along the coast, and Vindicianus, the *magister* commanding the work party. Officers received their commission from the Emperor Honorius via the office of the *magister peditum*, after serving as a *protector*, a sort of staff college come bodyguard. However influence and money could buy an appointment. The officer commanding the Praesidiensis would have been appointed by Stilicho himself, to serve under the *Dux* based in York.

Promotion was decided by length of service, added by bribery. Ranks in new units were in order of seniority, *semisalis* (1 ½ rations), *circitor* & *biarchus* who may have organised the food supply (2 rations), *centenarius* possibly the commander of 100 men (2 ½ rations), *ducenarius* who commanded 200 men (3 ½ rations),

senator(4 rations) and *primicerius* (5 rations). Rations seem to have been generous, and designed to feed the soldier, his family and slaves. Senior officers would be in receipt of large quantities of rations, part of which could be transmuted into money. They certainly could legally draw rations which belonged to their men. Custom also allowed them to continue drawing rations for dead and missing soldiers. In 443AD it is recorded that *limitanei* lost one twelfth of the *annonae* or rations, to the *dux*, the *priceps* on his staff, and the *praeposti* of the forts. NCO's often chose to serve more than their allotted 24 years. There were also specialists like the drill instructor, the *campidoctor*, the standard bearer, *draconarius*, the trumpeter or *bucinator* and the *medicus*. Transfers between units were discouraged, and Stilicho reminded his officers in 400AD that such transfers needed imperial authorisation. Soldiers, commonly called *pedes*, could obtain a commission by becoming one of the *protectores*, under the *magistri militum*.

Leave is something of a grey area. Initially it would have had to be granted by the Dux in York, however by 402AD the unit commander may have been able to grant leave to a certain number of men at one time.

Troops were expected to build marching camps, be able to bridge rivers, handle small boats. They could still march in full armour to the field of battle, route march carrying their spears but with their heavy equipment on wagons, or operate as light troops away from their supporting units carrying small shields and light equipment. Tents are mentioned, and some leather fragments have been recovered. They would be taught to use the whole range of weapons available to the *pedes* of the late fourth century, and may have specialised in some. Infantry were drilled in order to get them to the battlefield, and able to deploy from column to line. They would engage in mock battles using staffs or naked swords. Soldiers were praised for physical strength, and wrestled "soldiers' fashion". They would have hunted wild boar, wolves, deer and foxes. Soldiers played board games such as *tabula* and *latrunculi*, as well as dice. They could relax in the civilian settlement outside the walls, the *vicus*, where as Severus Alexander said, soldiers could "make love, drink, wash".

RELIGION

Christianity had been making considerable headway since the late third century. A *pede* in the Praesidiensis would have been subject to laws ensuring the primacy of the church for most of their adult life. At various times these laws would have been proscriptive, prohibiting the worship of household gods and confiscating property in pagan shrines. There is some evidence that pagan temples and even a mausoleum were destroyed in York, presumably by Christians in the fourth century.



Despite this extremism, it is possible to suggest that the enforcement of such laws were inefficient and still allowed the expression of pagan beliefs, if not their practice. A mere eight years before the Praesidiensis were probably moved to Gaul, the Western Empire was effectively ruled by pagans for a period before they were defeated by Theodosius at the Battle of the Frigidus. Pagan beliefs were perhaps still held by a small minority, who could not afford to attract attention to themselves.

Therefore all decoration and outward display on military equipment would be Christian, but the *pede* himself may have retained some pagan belief.

In 400AD some German tribesman still may have believed in Arianism, stressing the humanity of Jesus at the expense of his divinity. But this sect had been proscribed in 381AD and 388AD and for Romans had come to an end. However puritan Donatists were strong and active, but in North Africa. More common in Britain was the Pelagian heresy. His philosophy can be summed up as stressing self-help, with heaven helping those who help themselves. A man's free will could make him a better person, help the state, and help him achieve goodness.

Mainstream Christianity had its best advocate in Saint Augustine. Augustine accused Pelagius of teaching that man could achieve goodness without the help of God at all. Augustine had humility and eloquence on his side. His view that Grace was man's only hope undermined human effort. The Roman State was flawed, and only a poor imitation of the kingdom of heaven. While soldiers have a duty to stay at their posts, and that wars can be just and necessary, victories bring death with them and the victors themselves are doomed to death. Man's salvation lies with God alone, and not in this world. Such a doctrine meant that there are examples of Christians refusing to fight or trying to withdraw from the army. It was not what the Empire needed at this time! How much of this affected the *pedes* of the *Praesidiensis* is impossible to gauge.

WHAT CAN BE SEEN TODAY?

Even after 1,600 years we can visit sites which would have been known to the men of the *Praesidiensis*, and even see mosaics and artefacts that they would have seen.

The troops of the *Praesidiensis* would have been familiar with the small villa at Rudston. This was a primitive structure consisting of a group of freestanding structures, including a simple farmhouse with a projecting bath suite. The mosaics were primitive, and the lettering of the captioning for the surrounding scenes is illiterate. The mosaics can be seen today in the Hull Museum.

The fort at Malton can be visited and the local museum has many interesting finds on display. The *Numerus Supervenientium Petuariensium*, the "anticipators" originally based at Brough-on-Humber, are the garrison given in the *Notitia*.

The five known signal towers are at Huntcliff near Saltburn, Goldsborough, Ravenscar, Scarborough and Filey. Scarborough is the easiest to visit. Although partially lost to coastal erosion is in the care of English Heritage, within the castle grounds. It could have held around 40 men, and perhaps more in semi-permanent barracks inside the enclosure. They could have stood over 70 feet high, dominating the immediate area. The signal station at Filey is on the headline at Carr Naze on the narrowest point. The signal station north of Scarborough is at the Peak, Ravenscar, under the old Raven Hall Hotel. Goldsborough stands 400 yards inland on a low hill near Kettlewell Station overlooking Runswick Bay. The next tower at Huntcliffe lies a mile east of Saltburn, right on the high cliff edge.

There is evidence that the fortress of York was refurbished in the late fourth century, perhaps at the orders of Theodosius after the 367AD conspiracy. The Minster undercroft contains some very fine painted wall plaster from a room built out into the portico space of the basilica. It has been suggested that this may have been one of the private rooms of the Dux himself. The so-called "Anglian Tower" behind York library may also have been built in the later fourth century. The multi-angular tower retains something of the riparian façade of the fortress.

Ammianus Marcellinus, a serving officer of the fourth century, describes the barbarian as inhuman, vicious, and discouraged by the slightest setback,

disorganised, incapable of following any coherent plan, and unable to foresee a train of events. In this light we should see the men of the Praesidiensis as real professionals, positive and well organised, with very definite aims and objectives. If they suffered a reverse, they would work hard to put matters right. All in all, not a bad example to follow.