

Where is Praesidium?

by Paul Elliott

The red star on the blue field is the shield emblem of the Legio Praesidiensis, but where was this legion based? Was it Newton Kyme, Bridlington or elsewhere? How do we know? And what was the legion's fort actually like?

The Legio Praesidiensis is mentioned once in the Notitia Dignitatum, a list of all units and officers of the empire circa 400AD. The Praesidiensis appears in the listing for the mobile Gallic field army (one of the powerful 'comitatenses'), under the command of the Master of Infantry. So was it a Gallic unit? Many of the unit names give an indication of their origins, and in Britain there are three historical accounts of a fort called 'Praesidium' or 'Praetorio'. With so many British units being marched across the Channel to fight in Gaul (Magnus Maximus, Constantine III and Stilicho all took troops to join the field army in Gaul), it is reasonable to assume that the Praesidiensis came from Praesidium. So it is a British unit, but where is this Praesidium?

Lots of Roman forts in the UK have been only tentatively identified. We know for certain that South Shields is Arbeia, that Doncaster is Danum, that York is Eboracum; but some forts remain unidentified. We have no epigraphical evidence of their Roman name. In other cases, we know the names of several Roman forts, but are in the dark as to their whereabouts. Praesidium is one of these.

The name of the fort occurs in the Antonine Itinerary of the second century (essentially a list of stopping points on journeys across Roman Britain). It is also mentioned in the Notitia Dignitatum as a base for a cohort of Dalmatian cavalry. Lastly the mysterious fort of Praesidium is mentioned in the seventh century Ravenna Cosmology between two other unidentified entries, Camulosessa and Brigomono. Praesidium is also referred to as 'Praetorio'.

The First Antonine Itinerary (Iter I), plots a course from Bremenium (High Rochester, north of the Wall) to Praetorio, a distance of 161,000 paces.

"A limite id est a vallo Praetorio usque mpm clvi" (From the frontier, that is, from the entrenchments [ie. Hadrian's Wall], all the way to Praetorio one-hundred and fifty-six thousand paces)

The list of stopping points is as follows: Bremenium (High Rochester), Corstopitum (Corbridge), Vindomora (Eborchester), Vinovivum (Binchester), Cataractoni (Catterick), Isurium (Aldborough), Eboracum (York), Derventione (Malton), Delgovicia (suspected posting station near Millington, East Yorkshire), Praetorio. Delgovicia is listed some 13 miles from Derventio (Malton) and 25 miles from Praetorio. Tracing this route on a map one finds that it is straight-line travel to York, followed by a NE trip up to Malton, a southerly trip to Millington and then ...? Praetorio or Praesidium is in the area somewhere.

The next stage of this investigation is to identify a suitable unnamed fort in the area. This task is not too difficult. Newton Kyme near Tadcaster has been identified by crop marks as a Roman fort of the period. It is unattributed and could be a candidate for Praesidium, but it lies west of York, which means that the Iter I would have to back-track through Eboracum to get there. Also, is Newton Kyme a suitable stopping place for a route? Would not York or Brough or somewhere on the coast make more sense? There are no other suitable forts in the East Riding. The fort at Brough-on-Humber was abandoned 125AD. The fort at Lease Rigg in North Yorkshire was abandoned 120AD. There are unattributed forts at Hayton and also Roall Manor Farm (discovered 1991) but both are under 1.5 hectares, suitable in size only for a quingenary cohort of 500 men). Praesidium was probably constructed for a milliary cohort (1,000 men), since our thousand-strong Legio Praesidiensis must have been accommodated there. Note that the fort at Newton Kyme is, at 4 hectares, easily big enough to hold the Praesidiensis.

But the Iter I route is moving eastwards, and the Roman roads head east too, straight toward Bridlington and Flamborough Head. There are no Roman remains in the vicinity, however, so why do two roads converge here? Ptolemy's Geography (early second century) describes Bridlington Bay as "Gabranticorum Sinus, with many harbours". None have been found, and it is thought that coastal erosion has destroyed all trace of these ports as well as a possible Theodosian signal station at Flamborough and a fort in the general vicinity of the harbour or beyond. Could this be Praesidium, now lost to the North Sea?

Reconstructing Praesidium

If the Praesidiensis **was** based at a now missing fort at Bridlington, what did it do there? What did the fort look like?

Praesidium/Praetorio was most likely a Flavian construction, of standard playing card shape, built to hold a milliary cohort (double cohort) of 1,000 men. Like Housesteads, Birrens, Crammond, Lyne and Chesters, it would cover at least 2.1 hectares, possibly 2.3 or more, and have dimensions somewhere in the region of 200m x 130m. As with most milliary forts it would have ten barracks blocks, not six (for a standard quingenary cohort). Its fortifications and inner buildings would be of stone, and would follow the plan of other forts of the same size. Look to Housesteads, which has many outstanding remains, and which has been faithfully reconstructed by Peter Connolly and Ronald Embleton. Praesidium was of the same size and must have looked very similar.

In the fourth century Count Theodosius established signal stations on the North Yorkshire coast to warn of Saxon raids. Many believe that Flamborough Head would also have had one of these stations (probably on Beacon Hill, now a gravel quarry). From the Headland you can see Filey, Scarborough Castle and the Whitby promontory.

A fort at Bridlington would be well placed to act as centre of operations for these forts. A network of signal stations stretching **south** around the broad Bridlington Bay has also been suggested. This counterpart to the northern chain would guard this huge and accessible anchorage from barbarian piracy. Would Praesidium have some part to play in manning and supplying these southerly stations?

In the end I am speculating. All of Bridlington's Roman remains (and there were surely **some**) have gone into the sea, and Scarborough's signal station is headed the same way. Despite this argument for Bridlington, and the romantic appeal of having a Roman fort and signal station guarding the white cliffs of Flamborough on my doorstep, I won't be convinced until I see archaeology attested remains, found either on land, or on the seabed.

There is an image of Praesidium I can hang my re-enactment ideas on, though. Of a large auxiliary fort of Flavian date, on flat ground out past the present day harbour where the Gypsy Race stream meets the sea. This position is coloured by Ravenglass, Dover, Porchester and other forts, which don't dominate from cliff-tops, but place themselves directly where people, vessels and supplies will congregate, by the seashore - near freshwater. Troops of the Praesidiensis might be assigned to signal stations, to inland or cliff-top patrols, to guarding warehouses, or searching ships. They might be sent to chase rebels in the North Yorkshire Moors or reinforce northern units on the Wall ready for raids into Pictland. Swan-necked cargo vessels might transport supplies out to the harbours and signal stations along the south coast as far as Spurn Point. The beacon might sit ready at the top of Flamborough's own signal station, a towered fortlet that would resemble the Scarborough station in many ways. Finally a bustling vicus on the landward side of the fort, with small temples, perhaps inns, tradesmen and a bath-house fill in the picture.

Signal Station at Goldsborough

