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Outposts of empire: Vindolanda, Egypt, and the empire of Rome

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One of the earliest modern notices of Vindolanda is that by William Camden (1551-1623), in his *Britannia* first published in 1586, which contains the following note about Vindolanda, in the translation by Philemon Holland (1637, 809):

Neare unto this was a fortification called Old Winchester (I would gladly take it to be that Vindolana) which that Book of Notice so often cited recordeth to have been the frontier station in times past of the fourth cohort of the Gauls.¹

Camden was a friend or correspondent of some of the most distinguished scholars of his day, including Casaubon, Lipsius and Scaliger, all deeply conversant with the major classical authors, including Florus, whom Camden particularly liked; and he would probably have been no less surprised than were his successors of the 1970s to discover large quantities of Latin written material at Vindolanda, waiting to be discovered by R. Birley on the frontiers of Rome's most northerly province. More than three centuries later, the formidable figure of F. Haverfield, the Camden Professor to whom modern study of the archaeology of Britannia owes so much, rather sniffily noted, in his inaugural address on the foundation of the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies in 1911, that

At one university, as I am told, a knowledge of Roman Britain has just been made an alternative for Latin prose.

He was much more positive about the value of archaeological evidence in a broader context:

The more I study the ordinary written materials, the harder I find it to learn the truth from them, the more often I feel that the story which they tell is not the story which is worth telling. I would sacrifice all that tract of Arrian which Professor Pelham was discussing for a little appropriate archaeological evidence.²

By "ordinary written materials" he meant, of course, the Greek and Latin authors. The remarkable discoveries of even more ordinary texts at Vindolanda and elsewhere in the region constitute archaeological evidence and much more than that.³ These difficult texts have repaid more than three decades of study, and we have not reached the end of the road, either in revealing new secrets or in teasing out the implications of the texts which have been deciphered, however imperfectly, and in improving readings with the benefits of developing technology.⁴

From the outset of the work, it was apparent that the Greek and the (far fewer) Latin papyri from Egypt, along with the Latin military documents from Dura-Europos, constituted the major reservoir of documentary evidence which would help us to understand and interpret the Vindolanda texts, both for content and (in the case of the Latin texts) palaeography.⁵ The resulting tendency to compare or contrast the Roman occupation of the frontier of Britain with those of Egypt and Syria through these documents is to some extent inevitable, and it is vulnerable to the criticism that such a highly selective comparison is bound to be misleading, especially if one espouses the view that either Britain or Egypt (or both of those provinces) were in important respects "atypical". One response to that would be to quote R. Syme, who remarked, in defending prosopography against those who deprecate, that "one uses what one

1 There is a good account of Camden's work on Britain in Haverfield 1924, 68-71.

2 Haverfield 1911, xi-xx.

3 Bowman and Thomas 1983, 1994 and 2003 (hereafter abbreviated as *Tab. Vindol.* I, II, III). References to the tablets are by volume and publication number only. Carlisle: Tomlin 1992, 1998 (hereafter *Tab. Luguval.*). Abbreviations used for editions of papyri may be found in the Checklist of editions of Greek and Latin papyri, ostraca and tablets: <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/papyrus/texts/clist.html>

4 Bowman and Tomlin 2005.

5 See also A. R. Birley 2002a, published before the appearance of *Tab. Vindol.* III and in consequence marred by readings in the texts which are incorrect or doubtful.