
TRAC Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference

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Paper Information:

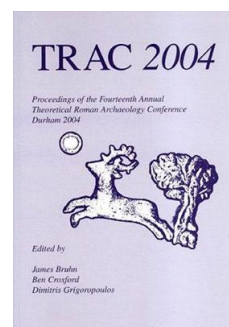
Title: Unifying Aspects of Roman Forts

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Pages: 157–162

DOI: http://doi.org/10.16995/TRAC2004_157_162

Publication Date: 31 March 2005



Volume Information:

Bruhn, J., Croxford, B., and Grigoropoulos, D. (eds.) (2005) *TRAC 2004: Proceedings of the Fourteenth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, Durham 2004*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.

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Unifying aspects of Roman forts

Mark Driessen

Around 16 B.C. a fortress with an area of more than 42 hectares was built on the ice pushed ridge of Nijmegen (The Netherlands). This Augustan camp (Fig. 1) was surrounded by two *fossae* and a *Holzerdemauer*. For the total of 5200 metres of ditches of this camp around 31.000 m³ soil was dug out and transported and for the construction of the 2500 metres of ramparts together with the 88 towers and 4 monumental gates, a volume of more than 2300 m³ of selected timber was needed. For the two legions that were possibly based here, a job of only a few weeks; but one with an important psychological effect. In the Rhine zone, a few large, more or less permanent camps had been constructed in the second decade B.C.. The men who were based here had until then either lived in familiar surroundings or in temporary marching camps. Now they built a permanent camp at a strategically superb location in an unknown environment.

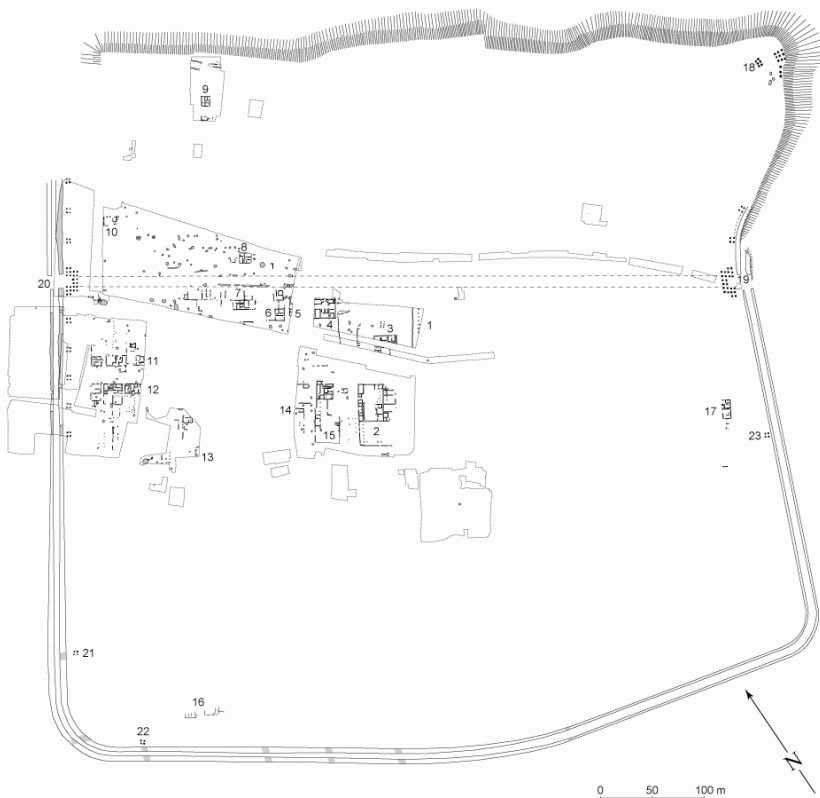


Figure 1: The Augustan Castra. 1: Border of the principia. 2: Praetorium. 3-7: Tribune houses. 8-17: Barracks. 18: North east angle towers (2 periods). 19: East gate. 20: West gate with connecting interval towers. 21-23: Interval towers. (After Haalebos 2002: Abb. 2. 409)

Perception by its inhabitants

This 100 acre camp will definitely have affected their sense of community. Here they built a substitute home, a second fatherland where the tired soldier could relax in a safe and trusted place. That a camp was more than a functional military instrument can be deduced from the comparison Polybius (41) makes between the camp and the soldiers hometown. Thus the soldier will feel at home here and knows his way around as if he really is at home. The following quotation from Livy (44. 39) supports this perception of the military camp:

‘Your ancestors looked upon a camp as a safe haven for the army against every mischance, from which they went out to battle, where after being tossed in the storm of battle, they could find a safe retreat.... A camp is a resting place for the victor, a shelter for the vanquished. Here is the soldier’s second fatherland, here is his abode, with the rampart for its walls; here each finds in his tent, his home and his household gods. Ought we to have fought as homeless wanderers with no place to receive us after our victory?’

According to Livy, the legionaries will recognise parts of their trusted social and cultural background in these *castra* where they will feel at ease. The fortress surpasses its functionality and in the perception of its inhabitants can become an instrument in the realisation of their communality reinforced through sentiments such as pride, excitement, power, security and familiarity.

This unification, proceeding from a wish for communal expression, can according to Giedion (1984: 49) only be achieved within a group with a collective consciousness and a unifying culture that has the power and the capacities to create a symbolised communal sense. At the level of a cohort in a Roman legion (among for instance Italic legionnaires) a unifying expression could originate spontaneously from their common cultural background. Maybe more important than spontaneous creation is the intentional implementation of communal sense. Already in the early Principate, the Roman army in addition to Italic soldiers with many cultural differences, consisted of troops of many different ethnic origins. In this multi-cultural army, which for that time had an excellent level of organisation, the creation of communal sense among the troops was of utmost importance for the army command. With the creation of communality the army command obtained an instrument for the implementation and maintenance of morale, discipline and solidarity among the troops.

Morale, Cohesion and Esprit de Corps

‘in warfare the strength of an army is the product of its mass and something else, an unknown factor x. ... This x is the spirit of the army – in other words, the greater or lesser readiness to fight and face dangers on the part of all the men composing an army, quite independently of whether they are, or are not, fighting under leaders of genius’... Tolstoy IV,3,2.

This army spirit as described by Tolstoy is not a product of *generatio spontanea* among the troops. It concerns a consciously implemented and directed process. Vegetius dedicates several chapters to the creation and maintenance of the proper morale, discipline and group spirit among the soldiers (see for instance I.1; I.7; I.9; I.13; I.20; II.23; III.4 & III.10). In contemporary military psychology: morale, group cohesion and *esprit de corps* are

distinguished to indicate unification at the different levels of echelon. The eagerness and determination with which a soldier participates in the membership of a group and the willingness to conform himself to the obligations of that group can be described as morale (Manning 1991: 455). Tolstoy's X is the essence of morale. Group cohesion that contributes to morale is the strong comradeship that can develop among troops of the same unit. The cohesion in such primary groups ensures that the members maintain their commitment to each other and their unit, as well as accomplishing their mission, despite the stress they experience (Meyer 1982: 1ff). *Esprit de corps* that also contributes to morale is a concept of a higher order. It creates the bond between the soldier and the legion or army regiment as an institution and contributes to the pride and dedication to the reputation of the legion as a formal organisation (Manning 1991: 458). It concerns an invented culture at the regimental level used for this bonding.

How is the desired morale, group cohesion, and *esprit de corps* accomplished? Morale is determined by individual factors. The army has to facilitate in physical conditions such as basic supplies of food and water, sufficient rest and sleep, proper protection against the elements and the enemy, good health etc. (Holmes 1985: 74 ff.). Next to these physical conditions, the army should fulfil some individual psychological needs such as; a goal, a role and a reason for self-confidence for each soldier (Manning 1991: 460–461). The goal concerns the ideological reason behind the mission. The *casus belli* needs to be clear and generally accepted. Moskos (1970: 146–148) uses the term 'latent ideology' to define the widely shared beliefs in their own social and cultural system which reinforces their combat motivation. The objective of their mission does not have to be grand as long as it is not pointless (Manning 1991: 467). The role concerns the expected behaviour as well as placing emphasises on the importance of seeing oneself as a valued member of the force. The self-confidence is nourished by specific and adequate training, which should be realistic and make the soldier accustomed to success (Manning 1991: 461).

Group cohesion and *esprit de corps* which also contribute to morale are determined not by individual but by group factors. Group cohesion is measured by the confidence soldiers have in the ability and willingness of their comrades and superiors of their primary group (for instance at the level of *contubernium* or century) to protect them in dangerous circumstances and the obligation for reciprocal protection they feel (Manning 1991: 468). This confidence and reciprocal commitment in a primary group are results of shared experiences, which are primarily a product of the time this group works together. A longer period of cooperation will result in a greater chance that they will discover, invent and experience commonalities, including a shared understanding of the group's history. Next to the shared period of time, many other factors such as; the kind of activities, the more the members have in common, the size of the group and the variation of settings, are important for the achieved cohesion (Manning 1991: 462). An important event or activity that is accomplished with success in a group with a strong interdependence among the members results especially in a greater payoff in cohesion.

Esprit de corps concerns a created culture at the level of a secondary group (for instance at the level of cohort or legion) used by the army command to commit individual soldiers to the secondary group and its aims and values (Boer 2001: 303–304). This created culture is important to maintain loyalty when the primary group has dispersed. *Esprit de corps* is accomplished by fostering pride through the reputation and the exploits of the legion or regiment. The exploits of real or fictive heroes provide a desired role model. Heroes distinguish themselves from the other troops by means of medals or badges which may have no intrinsic

worth but are of great symbolic value. The creation of specific symbolism and traditions like own jargon, uniforms, monuments, standards, rituals, ceremonies etc. are undeniable instruments to achieve loyalty beyond the primary group (Boer 2001: 309–311).

Community and commitment of the Roman soldier

So far we have discussed modern military psychology, the question arises whether it is justified to apply these contemporary forms of military morale and cultivated solidarity for the Roman army or would this entail an act of projection?

By reading Vegetius it seems that morale among the troops is considered to be of the same importance for the Roman army as it is for present troops. The individual physical conditions that are defining for morale are well taken care of in the Roman army. Not only ancient sources like Polybius, Pseudo-Hyginus, Frontinus and Vegetius prove this, but also the archaeological data point to this, as for instance; the attention and care that is paid to good food and water supplies, extended defence works of the forts, the legionary's basic equipment and personal protection, sanitation and *valetudinaria* etc. Since this is a familiar topic it will not be pursued further here.

The ideological reason behind the mission (the *casus belli*) also seems an important issue for the Romans. The war rhetoric and the ethnographic images Caesar uses in his *de Bello Gallico* may serve a propagandistic purpose and a legitimisation of war towards the senate afterwards, but these can also be used to justify new campaigns against Gaulish and Germanic tribes. Ethnographic and geographic descriptions can be used as ideological arguments to start a war. With these prejudices a threat can be created that leads to bonding (unity, loyalty and pride) and a need for a cause group, finally resulting in a response: a war. The encouraging speeches of Caesar do not have to have actually taken place; the fact that they are described proves that the argumentation of the mission towards the troops is a known and probably a desired phenomenon in Roman thinking.

In addition to their combat duties, legionaries had a specific functional role: about a fourth of the regular troops had a special staff function (Von Petrikovits 1974: 118). Soldiers were selected from desired civilian trades or on their specific skills (Vegetius 1. 7). This role also motivated disciplinary and training purposes. The training, which is important for their skill, their self-confidence and their pride, consists primarily of military training and combat simulation but also of practical matters such as the construction of a military camp (see Vegetius I. 21). The construction of the 42 hectare permanent fortress in Nijmegen, the culmination of years of training on a smaller scale for the marching camps, must certainly have affected the pride and self esteem of the builders. Especially if one bears in mind that the large Augustan fortresses were the first (semi-)permanent camps that had been constructed for decades.

The construction would have been executed by building teams, probably on century level and subdivided into *contubernia*. The cohesion in such primary groups is, as we have seen, accomplished by shared experiences. An important event or activity accomplished with success results in a great payoff in cohesion. Can we imagine, next to shared combat experience, a better mission than the united construction of such a unique and monumental legionary camp in preparation for the *raison d'être* here; the conquest of Germania? The building of these *castra* with a clear group mission can be seen as the ultimate test of capability and alliance before the real war starts. All men work together on the construction of a camp that also facilitates in morale; enhancing individual conditions like protection, health care, safe retreat, and the storage of large quantities of food and water.

The camp contributes not only to the morale and the group cohesion but even on the level of the whole *castra* cohesion, *esprit de corps*, is accomplished. The fortress can become a symbol of unity for the encamped troops. We may assume that this *esprit de corps* is stimulated and planned by the army command because we have so much proof of it in the Roman army. Heroic deeds which are honoured with *dona militaria*, antique medals like wreathes, necklets etc., traditions such as the obligatory saluting and the annual military oath and symbols such as the names and numbers of the legions, army standards, special uniforms and monuments are all characteristics of the Roman army which are not primarily functional but contribute to the unification at cohort or legion level.

The *castra* can if we keep the theoretical architect Giedion in mind, function as a uniting symbol that results in a collective conscience: group cohesion, and a unifying culture: the corporate identity or *esprit de corps* of the legion.

The Nijmegen Augustan Castra

Considering the naturally strategic location of the Nijmegen *castra*, in an area surrounded by loyal local allies – the Batavian tribe – since Caesarian times (Roymans 1999: 30), the size and massive defences may seem excessive for practical purposes. The exaggerated size and emphatic defensive works of the camp can lie in the fact that Batavian *alae* were probably based in this camp, so that the Augustan Camp in Nijmegen needed an extra cohesive impulse. The possible presence of Batavians in or around the Augustan fort can be derived from a remarkably high percentage of native pottery in the ceramic assemblage of this camp.

The equestrian expertise of the Batavians (Tacitus *Historiae* II. 17 & IV. 12; Tacitus *Annales* II. 11; Dio 55. 24 & 60. 20) in combination with their loyalty leads probably to their employment in crucial military operations (Wolters 1990: 246–247) and their selection as the personal body guard of the Julio-Claudian House: the *Germani corporis custodes* (Speidel 1992: 112–114). This, in addition to the fact that from every Batavian family one or more sons must have been recruited (Vossen 2002: 414 ff.), is illustrative of the successful integration and acculturation of the Batavians in the Roman Army for the Julio-Claudian period. Can the construction of this fortress with a majestic view over the land of the Batavians be used as an instrument to create a collective conscience and a unifying culture not only among the regular troops but also for the Batavian auxiliaries based here, and so be part of the basis of the successful integration of these Batavians?

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Carol van Driel-Murray for her critical comments and the correction of my English translation. I would also like to thank James Bruhn and Jason Lucas who organised the TRAC session; Frontiers of the Roman Empire: delineation, interaction, exchange at which the paper was originally presented and everyone who sent me ideas and literature for future research concerning this subject; these will be considered in my dissertation. Thanks also to the editors of these Proceedings who invited me to publish.

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