

# Roman Corbridge and the Corbridge Hoard: Reconstructing the World of Roman Britain

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The last vestiges of the Roman-British world exist throughout modern day Britain and Scotland, ranging from coin hoards in the countryside to Roman urban remains in modern English cities. In particular, the Roman town of Corbridge in northeastern England played an important role throughout the history of Roman Britain and also is home to a variety of material culture evidence that has helped shape how the modern world views and understands Roman Britain. By examining modern Corbridge, its history, and the Corbridge Hoard, one can reconstruct and better understand the Roman world of Britain during this period both militarily and culturally.

The Roman site at Corbridge, also known by its Latin name *Coria*, played an important role throughout the duration of Rome's occupation of Britain, from Agricola's campaigns in the late first century to Septimius Severus' northern campaign in 208 CE and beyond. The town had both military and cultural importance during the Roman era, serving as a supply depot for the Roman military and a strategic outpost along the Stanegate Frontier prior to the construction of the Hadrian's Wall Frontier, begun in 122 BCE.<sup>1</sup> Archeological evidence shows that the first Corbridge fort dates to the late first century, in the midst of the Roman governor Agricola's campaigns into northern Britain and Scotland. Agricola probably constructed the original Corbridge fort, known as the Red House Fort, during his fourth cam-

<sup>1</sup> Patricia Southern, *Roman Britain: A New History, 55 BC-AD 450* (Gloucestershire: Amberley Publishing, 2013), 178.



paigining season in 80 CE. It served as a supply base for his ensuing Scottish invasion and also guarded Roman communication routes along the eastern coast of Britain.<sup>2</sup> Rome continued to garrison the Red House Fort until the late 80s, when archeological evidence shows the fort was purposely dismantled and destroyed.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 4: The Stangate Frontier

The Red House Fort is important for several reasons. Most importantly, it provides evidence of the location and direction of Agricola's fourth campaigning season in 80 and helps outline the Stanegate Frontier. It also contributes to the layout and modern understanding of a Roman fort.<sup>4</sup> The excavation site at Red House contains defensive ditches, a military workshop, and a barracks complex. It also

shows evidence of a bath complex at the fort, which is an indication that Roman cultural customs spread to, and were present at, Roman outposts along the northern frontier. The Red House Fort site also includes a tombstone from the first century of a Roman cavalryman, who served as the signifer of the ala Petriana, a Gallic cavalry unit.<sup>5</sup> This tombstone, seen below, reveals that Rome used auxiliary units to garrison its forts throughout Britain, as opposed to exclusively Roman legions. This is extremely important in assisting modern scholars better understand the organization of Roman provincial armies and troop placements.

Following the dismantling of the Red House Fort, Rome built a series of forts located at the modern day Corbridge site from the late 80s until 160, resulting in a permanent legionary fort.<sup>6</sup> The first fort dates from the 80s until 105 when charred remains show the fort burned down and had to be replaced. Due to Corbridge's strategic location

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 137.

<sup>3</sup> "History of Corbridge Roman Town," Corbridge Roman Town – Hadrian's Wall, English Heritage. <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/corbridge-roman-town-hadrians-wall/history/>.

<sup>4</sup> "Beaufront Red House Agricola's Military Site," Roman Britain Organization (27 January 2016) [http://roman-britain.co.uk/places/red\\_house.htm](http://roman-britain.co.uk/places/red_house.htm).

<sup>5</sup> "RIB 1172. Funerary Inscription for Flavinus," Roman Inscriptions of Britain. <https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/inscriptions/1172>.

<sup>6</sup> "History of Corbridge Roman Town," Corbridge Roman Town – Hadrian's Wall, English Heritage.

on the eastern flank of the Stanegate road and early Roman frontier, Rome used this fort to guard a crossing at the River Tyne. The second and final fort was constructed of stone following the destruction of the first fort and was used as a supply depot and support base during the construction of Hadrian's Wall from 112 to 128. Remains of several granaries dating from this period have been discovered, showing that Corbridge evolved into an important supply center and depot on the northern frontier, even when the frontier moved north to Hadrian's Wall.<sup>7</sup>



Figure 2: Tombstone of ala Petriana's signifer at Red House Fort

The stone ruins at Corbridge that are visible today are the remnants of Corbridge's second fort and the accompanying town, much of which dates to 160 and after. During the 140s and 150s, when Antoninus Pius moved the Roman frontier north to the Antonine Wall, Corbridge temporarily lost its strategic importance along with Hadrian's Wall, and the old frontier fell into disuse and disrepair. At the beginning of his reign, the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius abandoned the Antonine Wall and moved the frontier back to Hadrian's Wall, increasing Corbridge's strategic value.<sup>8</sup> Inscriptions dated to 161 reveal that legionary detachments from the Sixth Legion Victrix and the Twentieth Legion Valeria Victrix were stationed and undertook several major building projects at Corbridge.<sup>9</sup> Corbridge was important for both military and civilian reasons following the return to Hadrian's Wall. It served as a supply depot and provided men for the garrisons at Hadrian's Wall, the outpost forts beyond the Wall, and it also served as a civilian urban center and important market on the frontier.<sup>10</sup> Corbridge continued to remain an important military and economic hub along the northern frontier for the next several decades. There is evidence at Corbridge that there was a widespread fire at the Roman site towards the end of the second century. While there are Roman recordings of a Scottish invasion across the "Wall" during the 180s, the actual cause of the fire

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Southern, *Roman Britain*, 210.

<sup>9</sup> "RIB 1148. Inscription," Roman Inscriptions of Britain. <https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/inscriptions/1148>.

<sup>10</sup> "History of Corbridge Roman Town," Corbridge Roman Town – Hadrian's Wall, English Heritage.

and damage at Corbridge is not known.<sup>11</sup>

Corbridge continued to play an important role in Roman Britain during the third century. In 208, the emperor Septimius Severus arrived in Britain with the intention of conquering Scotland, revealed by coins commemorating his victory that he distributed following its success in 210.<sup>12</sup> While Septimius Severus established new forts north of Hadrian's Wall, Corbridge is believed to have served as a supply depot and launching site for the invading army due to its granaries. Inscriptions show that one Corbridge granary was also rebuilt prior to Severus's invasion.<sup>13</sup> A paucity of recordings and inscriptions dating from the rest of the third century and the fourth century makes it difficult to understand what function Corbridge served during this time, but it is assumed that it remained an important commercial center along the northern frontier.<sup>14</sup> It was most likely incorporated into the short-lived Gallic Empire during the Crisis of the Third Century, but there is no evidence as to what role the town played within the Gallic Empire. A lack of sources plagues historians of Corbridge during the early fifth century, but it was most likely abandoned along with the rest of Roman Britain in the early 400s as the western half of the Roman Empire disintegrated.

While Corbridge is better known as a military site and for its role in Roman Britain's military history, the civilian town surrounding the fort also played an important role during the Roman period and helps reveal what civilian towns and life were like in Roman Britain. The civilian town grew after the frontier line's return to Hadrian's Wall around 160. The town's growth can also be attributed to Corbridge's location along the north-south Dere Street, which was a strategic Roman road that passed through Corbridge. There are multiple remains of buildings that can help us recreate what Roman Corbridge looked like. Several granaries, an aqueduct, a massive open air market, and even a large decorative fountain reveal the large size and extent of the Corbridge town.<sup>15</sup>

It is not known whether Corbridge was a Roman civitas center or

<sup>11</sup> David J. Breeze and Brian Dobson, *Hadrian's Wall* (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 128.

<sup>12</sup> "RIC IV Septimius Severus 241," Online Coins of the Roman Empire, <http://numismatics.org/ocre/id/ric.4.ss.241>.

<sup>13</sup> Breeze and Dobson, *Hadrian's Wall*, 134.

<sup>14</sup> "History of Corbridge Roman Town," Corbridge Roman Town – Hadrian's Wall, English Heritage.

<sup>15</sup> J. O. Bevan, *The Towns of Roman Britain* (London: Chapman & Hall Ltd., 1907).

not, but it is possible, considering that its western counterpart on the Stanegate Road, Carlisle, is recorded as one.<sup>16</sup> The portion of Dere Street that passes through the Corbridge site is one of the best preserved Roman roads in Britain and provides an excellent example of how Roman roads were constructed. The granaries at Corbridge are preserved well enough to show that they were built with raised floors and a ventilated underfloor in order to keep the grain from becoming damp and ruined.<sup>17</sup> Corbridge's buildings and organization, including the granaries, are also important in understanding the layout of Roman towns. While Corbridge was not as large as several southern British towns, including London, it incorporated a developed street network.<sup>18</sup> This helps modern scholars reconstruct the architectural layout of the average Roman town in Britain. Overall, the architectural remains of Corbridge's fort and town have been tremendously helpful in reconstructing the world of Roman Britain.



Figure 3: Corbridge Granaries with raised floors and ventilated underfloors

The ruins of the various Roman forts and civilian town at Corbridge are also important because of the dozens of inscriptions discovered at these sites, providing both military and cultural evidence from the Roman Britain period. These inscriptions are invaluable to modern understandings of Roman Britain, due to the lack of other written sources in Britain. Various inscriptions from around the Corbridge site are dedicated to a variety of deities and gods. One such religious inscription in Corbridge was found on an altar dedicated to Apollo Maponus.<sup>19</sup> The altar also depicted engravings of Apollo and the Roman goddess Diana. In this particular case, this inscription is important because it provides evidence of a blending of Roman and British religion; Maponus was a Celtic deity whereas Apollo was the more traditional Roman god. This evidence reveals that British religion survived during the Roman period despite the influx of Roman gods, altars, and temples throughout Britain. Other inscriptions and altars found in Corbridge are dedicated to a variety of deities from across the Roman Empire.

<sup>16</sup> David Mattingly, *An Imperial Possession: Britain in the Roman Empire* (London: Penguin Group, 2007), 261.

<sup>17</sup> "History of Corbridge Roman Town," Corbridge Roman Town – Hadrian's Wall, English Heritage.

<sup>18</sup> Mattingly, *An Imperial Possession*, 288.

<sup>19</sup> "RIB. 1121. Altar Dedicated to Apollo Maponus," Roman Inscriptions of Britain. <https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/inscriptions/1121>.



Figure 4: A Corbridge altar similar to the one dedicated to Apollo Maponus. This one is dedicated to Jupiter Dolichenus.

Inscriptions throughout Britain are also some of the best sources that show where legionary and auxiliary units were stationed, when they served and fought, and the building projects in which they participated. Corbridge is no different from other Roman forts and towns and has a wide variety of inscriptions revealing which military units were garrisoned in Corbridge. One inscription, dated between 197 and 202, reveals that a detachment of the Sixth Legion's Pia Fidelis Unit worked on Corbridge's headquarters under the governor Virius Lupus.<sup>20</sup> Various other inscriptions reveal further building projects conducted in Corbridge by various military units between the first and fourth centuries. While many legionary and auxiliary records have been lost since the end of the Roman Empire, inscriptions allow modern scholars to determine which legionary and auxiliary units served

in Britain, where and when they served, and the work that they accomplished while in Britain.

These inscriptions also help modern scholars and experts determine Roman leadership during the various periods of the Roman occupation. Besides a small number of governors such as Agricola and Julius Frontinus, who are known through Tacitus' Agricola and an aqueduct building manual respectively, many of Rome's British governors' names are either rarely mentioned or recorded or not at all. Inscriptions throughout Corbridge assist historians in piecing together the tenures and actions of various Roman governors during the Roman occupation. A building inscription in Corbridge dated from around 140, for example, reveals that this construction occurred under the Roman governor Quintus Lollius Urbicus and was dedicated to the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius.<sup>21</sup> This inscription is important because it gives scholars and historians names and dates. In this case, the inscription mentions who the Roman governor and emperor were

<sup>20</sup> "RIB 1163. Inscription," Roman Inscriptions of Britain. <https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/inscriptions/1163>.

<sup>21</sup> "RIB 1148. Inscription," Roman Inscriptions of Britain.

at the time. It also helps scholars understand Roman troop stations by mentioning the Second Legion Augusta on the inscription. Without these inscriptions, both in Corbridge and the rest of Britain, it would be much more difficult to piece together the actions, dates, and campaigns of the various Roman emperors and governors during the period of Roman Britain.

One of the most important contributions the Corbridge site has made to modern scholars' understanding of Roman Britain and the Roman Empire as a whole is the Corbridge Hoard. While dozens of hoards have been discovered throughout Britain, the Corbridge Hoard in particular has proved to be a goldmine of information and material culture evidence that provides a view of the Roman world. Starting in 1947, Britain's Durham University conducted annual excavations at the Corbridge site as part of its archeological program. In 1964, Durham students excavating the Corbridge fort's headquarters discovered an iron and wooden chest extremely close to the headquarters site.<sup>22</sup> At first, archeologists had trouble dating the hoard. The area that the hoard was discovered in indicates that the hoard could have been from Hadrian's reign between 122 and 138, but it could have been buried any time between the later first century and early second century.<sup>23</sup> The contents of the hoard included weapons, armor, construction tools, and various other domestic items. It is possible that the hoard belonged to a Roman military workshop or armory in Corbridge due to its collection of weapons and tools, but this cannot be determined until further evidence is discovered.

The Corbridge Hoard has proven valuable by assisting in both understanding and reconstructing the military and cultural worlds of Roman Britain and the Roman Empire. Although the hoard includes a wide variety of items, its most important content is its lorica segmentata remains. Lorica segmentata, the primary armor of the Roman legions, was made up of segmented plate armor made of soft iron that wrapped around a man's torso, chest, and shoulders.<sup>24</sup> The style and design of this armor changed throughout Roman history, but the Corbridge Hoard's pieces illustrate the armor's design from the early second century. Prior to the Corbridge Hoard's discovery, Roman experts and scholars knew that Roman soldiers wore segmented armor to protect themselves, but no complete set or collection of

<sup>22</sup> M. C. Bishop and L. Allason-Jones, *Excavations at Roman Corbridge: The Hoard* (English Heritage. UK Archaeological Data Service, 1988), 3.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>24</sup> M. C. Bishop and J.C.N. Coulston, *Roman Military Equipment* (London: BT Batsford Ltd., 1993), 85.



the segmented plates had been discovered to show how this armor functioned and was put together. Before this discovery, the modern understanding of lorica segmentata came primarily from Trajan's Column in Rome, which featured thirty different carvings of soldiers wearing lorica segmentata armor.<sup>25</sup> While the lorica segmentata reliefs engraved on Trajan's Column provide a basic outline and view of the armor, how the Romans used it, and what it looked like, they did not provide any insight as to how the armor functioned or was worn. The lorica segmentata segmented plates in the Corbridge Hoard, as seen below, provided scholars and historians with a much-needed example of how this armor functioned and was put together and worn.



Figure 6: Reconstruction of a Lorica Segmentata similar to those used by the Corbridge Hoard

The Corbridge Hoard also included a variety of weapons that help the modern world understand how the Roman military fought and how it was armed. In particular, it contained dozens of spearheads of various shapes and sizes that both Roman infantry and cavalry forces used. These spearheads include javelin pilum heads, lancae cavalry spear heads, and hastae thrusting infantry spear heads. Most of the spearheads from the Corbridge Hoard appear to be cavalry lancae spear heads and cavalry javelin pilum heads, due to the high number of larger and lengthier spearheads. These spearheads were “low shouldered,” meaning they had a longer length of entry which would inflict more damage.<sup>26</sup> Because these spearheads are low shouldered, more of the blade was exposed, which meant it could penetrate further than a “high shouldered” spearhead. Roman cavalrymen used their spears to thrust down at enemy soldiers in close combat, and the length and size of many of the Corbridge spearheads would be ideal for this purpose. The hoard's javelin pilum heads were probably used by both Roman cavalry and infantry forces. Javelins were a staple weapon of the Roman soldier, who often threw his javelin into the enemy forces prior to contact. Made of soft iron, pilums were designed to bend upon impact, making it impossible for enemy soldiers to reuse them.<sup>27</sup> The Corbridge Hoard also included a number

<sup>25</sup> Jon Coulston, “The Human Figure Types,” Trajan's Column Project, University of St. Andrew's. <http://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/trajans-column/the-project/the-human-figure-types/>.

<sup>26</sup> Bishop and Allason-Jones, *Excavations at Roman Corbridge*, 9-13.

<sup>27</sup> Benjamin Hollis, “The Pilum (Spear),” RomanMilitary.net, 2016. <https://romanmilitary.net/tools/pilum/>.

of artillery bolts that could be used for catapults or other Roman artillery pieces. These artillery bolts prove valuable in understanding the Roman military during the first and second centuries. Usually, auxiliaries, non-Roman forces, composed Roman artillery forces, but auxiliary forces did not use lorica segmentata as their armor, which was reserved for the Roman legions. The combination of lorica segmentata and artillery bolts in the Corbridge Hoard means that legionary, not auxiliary, forces used artillery during the first and second centuries.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to military armor and weapons, the Corbridge Hoard included a variety of domestic items. One of the Hoard's most intriguing contents is its abundance of writing materials, including both writing tablets and papyrus. The wooden writing tablets found in the chest were in terrible condition at the time of discovery, but are still valuable in understanding the mediums that Romans used to write on. More well-known are the Vindolanda tablets, which were wooden tablets that the Romans used ink to write on. The Corbridge tablets differ from the more famous Vindolanda tablets in that they used wax, rather than ink, to inscribe words onto the wood.<sup>29</sup> These Corbridge tablets were be hollowed out and then filled with wax, which could be written on. The Corbridge chest also included small fragments of papyrus, which is an extremely rare discovery in Britain. Although it is almost impossible to translate the inscriptions on these writing mediums due to their deteriorated state, they still contribute to the modern understanding of how Romans wrote and communicated during this period.

Various other non-military items were also found in the Corbridge Hoard chest that help reconstruct daily life in Roman Britain and the Roman world. A gaming set, furniture fittings, beads, window glass are all unique material culture items found in this particular hoard.<sup>30</sup> The furniture fittings, beads, and window glass provide insight into Roman home life in Britain, while the gaming set is an example of the leisure activities of the Roman soldiers. The Corbridge Hoard even included a number of feather remains, which may have been used to stuff cushions or furniture, or as a writing tool. Another possible explanation for the presence of these feathers can be found in Rome on the Arch of Constantine. While Constantine's name graces this monument, he built it using spolia: pieces of older monuments dedicated

<sup>28</sup> Bishop and Allason-Jones, *Excavations at Roman Corbridge*, 105.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

to past Roman emperors. These emperors included Trajan and Hadrian, who were both emperors around the time to which the Corbridge Hoard dates.<sup>31</sup> Scientific examination of the feathers indicates they were most likely from a fluffy bird that matches the helmet plumes and crests found on the Trajanic and Hadrianic spolia reliefs on the Arch of Constantine. Therefore, it is possible these feathers were intended to be used as helmet decorations. These non-military items included in the Corbridge Hoard are both interesting and important, contributing to the material culture record of Roman Britain and enabling its reconstruction through a modern view.

While Britain today no longer looks as it did between the first and fifth centuries, there is enough material culture and archeological evidence to reconstruct Roman Britain's history along with the military, cultural, and religious conditions of that era. The archeological site and findings at Roman Corbridge are a treasure trove of material culture for modern historians, allowing them to reconstruct the typical Roman border town in northern Britain and its daily life and buildings. The dozens of inscriptions discovered at this site provide valuable information on religion, Roman leadership, and the military units stationed at Corbridge during this period. The dates from these inscriptions also assist in piecing together the chronological parameters and history of the Roman-British period. The Corbridge Hoard, one of the most valuable remnants of Roman Britain, helps modern scholars reconstruct and understand the Roman military, from its armor to its weapons, and includes multiple domestic and non-military items that help create a modern view of Roman domestic and daily life in Britain. Just as Corbridge played an important role throughout the Roman occupation of Britain, it is playing just as important a role today in helping the modern world recreate and understand Roman Britain and the Roman Empire.

<sup>31</sup> Jas Elsner, "From the Culture of Spolia to the Culture of Relics: The Arch of Constantine and the Genesis of Late Antiquity Forms," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 68 (2000): 152.

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