

# Vindolanda

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Vindolanda was a Roman auxiliary fort (castrum) just south of Hadrian's Wall in northern England, which it pre-dated. Archaeological excavations of the site show it was under Roman occupation from roughly 85 AD to 370 AD. Located near the modern village of Bardon Mill in Northumberland, it guarded the Stanegate, the Roman road from the River Tyne to the Solway Firth. It is noted for the Vindolanda tablets, a set of wooden leaf-tablets that were, at the time of their discovery, the oldest surviving handwritten documents in Britain.

## Vindolanda tablets

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The Vindolanda tablets are some of the oldest surviving handwritten documents in Britain (antedated by the Bloomberg tablets from Roman London). They are a rich source of information about life on the northern frontier of Roman Britain. Written on fragments of thin, postcard-sized wooden leaf-tablets with carbon-based ink, the tablets date to the 1st and 2nd centuries AD (roughly contemporary with Hadrian's Wall). Although similar records on papyrus were known from elsewhere in the Roman Empire, wooden tablets with ink text had not been recovered until 1973, when archaeologist Robin Birley, his attention being drawn by student excavator Keith Liddell, discovered some at the site of Vindolanda, a Roman fort in northern England.

The documents record official military matters as well as personal messages to and from members of the garrison of Vindolanda, their families, and their slaves. Highlights of the tablets include an invitation to a birthday party held in about 100, which is perhaps the oldest surviving document written in Latin by a woman.

The excavated tablets are nearly all held at the British Museum, but arrangements have been made for some to be displayed at Vindolanda. As of 2023, more than 1,700 tablets have been discovered.

## Stanegate

*the South Tyne until it meets the next major fort, at Vindolanda (Chesterholm). From Vindolanda the Stanegate crosses the route of the present-day Military*

The Stanegate (meaning "stone road" in Northumbrian dialect) was an important Roman road and early frontier built in what is now northern England. It linked many forts including two that guarded important river crossings: Corstopitum (Corbridge) on the River Tyne in the east (situated on Dere Street) and Luguvalium (Carlisle) on the River Eden in the west. The Stanegate ran through the natural gap formed by the valleys of the River Tyne in Northumberland and the River Irthing in Cumbria. It predated the Hadrian's Wall frontier by several decades; the Wall would later follow a similar route, albeit slightly to the north.

The Stanegate should not be confused with the two Roman roads called Stane Street in the south of England, namely Stane Street (Chichester) and Stane Street (Colchester). In both these cases the meaning is the same as for the northern version, indicating a stone or paved road.

The Stanegate differed from most other Roman roads in that it often followed the easiest gradients, and so tended to weave around, whereas typical Roman roads follow a straight path, even if this sometimes involves having punishing gradients to climb.

A large section of the Stanegate is still in use today as a modern minor road between Fourstones and Vindolanda in Northumberland.

## Northumberland

*Nearly 2000-year-old Roman boxing gloves were uncovered at Vindolanda in 2017 by the Vindolanda Trust experts, led by Andrew Birley. Being similar in style*

Northumberland (nor-THUM-b?r-l?nd) is a ceremonial county in North East England, on the border with Scotland. It is bordered by the North Sea to the east, Tyne and Wear and County Durham to the south, Cumbria to the west, and the Scottish Borders council area to the north. The town of Blyth is the largest settlement. Northumberland is the northernmost county in England.

The county has an area of 5,013 km<sup>2</sup> (1,936 sq mi) and a population of 320,274, making it the least-densely populated county in England. The south-east contains the largest towns: Blyth, Cramlington, Ashington, Bedlington, and Morpeth, the last of which is the administrative centre. The remainder of the county is rural, the largest towns being Berwick-upon-Tweed in the far north and Hexham in the south-west. For local government purposes Northumberland is a unitary authority area. The county historically included the parts of Tyne and Wear north of the River Tyne.

The west of Northumberland contains part of the Cheviot Hills and North Pennines, while to the east the land becomes flatter before reaching the coast. The Cheviot (815 m (2,674 ft)), after which the range of hills is named, is the county's highest point. The county contains the source of the River North Tyne and much of the South Tyne; near Hexham they combine to form the Tyne, which exits into Tyne and Wear shortly downstream. The other major rivers in Northumberland are, from south to north, the Blyth, Coquet, Aln, Wansbeck and Tweed, the last of which forms part of the Scottish border. The county contains Northumberland National Park and two national landscapes: the Northumberland Coast and part of the North Pennines.

Much of the county's history has been defined by its position on a border. In the Roman era most of the county lay north of Hadrian's Wall, and the region was contested between England and Scotland into the Early Modern era, leading to the construction of many castles, peel towers and bastle houses, and the early modern fortifications at Berwick-upon-Tweed. Northumberland is also associated with Celtic Christianity, particularly the tidal island of Lindisfarne. During the Industrial Revolution the area had significant coal mining, shipbuilding, and armaments industries.

## Hadrian's Wall

*required major Roman reinforcements from outside Britannia. A tablet from Vindolanda describes a centurio regionarius who exercised direct military rule from*

Hadrian's Wall (Latin: Vallum Hadriani, also known as the Roman Wall, Picts' Wall, or Vallum Aelium in Latin) is a former defensive fortification of the Roman province of Britannia, begun in AD 122 in the reign of the Emperor Hadrian. Running from Wallsend on the River Tyne in the east to Bowness-on-Solway in the west of what is now northern England, it was a stone wall with large ditches in front and behind, stretching across the whole width of the island. Soldiers were garrisoned along the line of the wall in large forts, smaller milecastles, and intervening turrets. In addition to the wall's defensive military role, its gates may have been customs posts.

Hadrian's Wall Path generally runs close along the wall. Almost all the standing masonry of the wall was removed in early modern times and used for local roads and farmhouses. None of it stands to its original height, but modern work has exposed much of the footings, and some segments display a few courses of modern masonry reconstruction. Many of the excavated forts on or near the wall are open to the public, and various nearby museums present its history. The largest Roman archaeological feature in Britain, it runs a total of 73 miles (117.5 kilometres). Regarded as a British cultural icon, Hadrian's Wall is one of Britain's major ancient tourist attractions. It was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987. The turf-built Antonine Wall of AD 142 in what is now central Scotland, which briefly superseded Hadrian's Wall before being abandoned, was declared a World Heritage Site in 2008.

Hadrian's Wall lies entirely within England and has never formed the Anglo-Scottish border, though it is sometimes loosely or colloquially described as such.

Claudia Severa

*the wife of Aelius Brocchus, commander of an unidentified fort near Vindolanda fort in northern England. She is known for a birthday invitation she sent*

Claudia Severa (born 11 September in first century, fl. 97–105) was a literate Roman woman, the wife of Aelius Brocchus, commander of an unidentified fort near Vindolanda fort in northern England. She is known for a birthday invitation she sent around 100 AD to Sulpicia Lepidina, wife of Flavius Cerialis, commander at Vindolanda. This invitation, written in ink on a thin wooden tablet, was discovered in the 1970s and is probably the best-known item of the Vindolanda Tablets.

The first part of the letter was written in formal style in a professional hand evidently by a scribe; the last four lines are added in a different handwriting, thought to be Claudia's own.

The translation is as follows:

Claudia Severa to her Lepidina greetings.

On 11 September, sister, for the day of the celebration of my birthday, I give you a warm invitation to make sure that you come to us, to make the day more enjoyable for me by your arrival, if you are present. Give my greetings to your Cerialis. My Aelius and my little son send him their greetings.

(2nd hand) I shall expect you, sister. Farewell, sister, my dearest soul, as I hope to prosper, and hail.

(Back, 1st hand) To Sulpicia Lepidina, (wife) of Cerialis, from Cl. Severa."

The Latin reads as follows:

Cl. Severá Lepidinae [suae] [sa]l[u]temiii Idus Septembres soror ad diemsollemnem natalem meum  
rogólibenter faciás ut veniasad nos iucundiorem mihi

[diem] interventú tuo facturá siaderisCerial[em t]uum salutá Aelius meus [...]et filiolus salutant

sperabo te sororvale soror animamea ita valeamkarissima et have

The Vindolanda Tablets also contain a fragment from another letter in Claudia's hand. These two letters are thought to be the oldest extant writing by a woman in Latin found in Britain, or perhaps anywhere. The letters show that correspondence between the two women was frequent and routine, and that they were in the habit of visiting one another, although it is not known at which fort Severa lived.

There are several aspects of Severa's letters that should be regarded as literary, even though they were not written for a wide readership. In particular, they share several thematic and stylistic features with other

surviving writings in Latin by women from Greek and Roman antiquity. Although Severa's name reveals that she is unlikely to be related to Sulpicia Lepidina, she refers frequently to Lepidina as her sister, and uses the word *iucundus* to evoke a strong and sensual sense of the pleasure Lepidina's presence would bring, creating a sense of affection through her choice of language. In the post-script written in her own hand, she appears to draw on another Latin, literary model, from the fourth book of the *Aeneid*, in which at 4.8 Vergil characterises Anna as Dido's *unanimam sororem*, "sister sharing a soul", and at 4.31, she is "cherished more than life" (*luce magis dilecta sorori*). Although this is not proof that Severa and Lepidina were familiar with Virgil's writing, another letter in the archive, written between two men, directly quotes a line from the *Aeneid*, suggesting that the sentiments and language Sulpicia used do indeed draw on a Virgilian influence.

The Latin word that was chosen to describe the birthday festivities, *sollemnis*, is also noteworthy, as it means "ceremonial, solemn, performed in accordance with the forms of religion", and suggests that Severa has invited Lepidina to what was an important annual religious occasion.

### Hand of God (Vindolanda)

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### Anthony Birley

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Anthony Richard Birley (8 October 1937 – 19 December 2020) was a British ancient historian, archaeologist and academic. He was one of the leaders of excavations at the Roman fortress of Vindolanda and also published several books on Roman Britain and Roman emperors of the second-century AD.

### Areani

*"arcani", the secret ones. The term "arcanus" is known from Hadrian's Wall; Vindolanda tablet 162 bears the text "miles arcanu...", written in a good capital*

The areani or arcani were a force of the Roman Empire, based in Roman Britain during the later part of the Roman occupation of the island. They had played some part in the campaign of Constantine in Britain in 343; later they helped to instigate the Great Conspiracy in 367-368. Due to their participation in the Conspiracy, Count Theodosius disbanded them.

The term areani is a hapax legomenon, occurring once only, in a passage in Ammianus:

The duties that Ammianus describes, traveling and reporting the news of the tribes to Roman leaders, are appropriate to military scouts. They may have lived in the paramilitary zone between the Antonine Wall and the Vallum to the south. The term "areani" means "people of the sheep-folds", and many of the homesteads in their frontier region were indeed sheep-folds.

It has been suggested that the term is a misreading of "arcani", the secret ones. The term "arcanus" is known from Hadrian's Wall; Vindolanda tablet 162 bears the text "miles arcanu...", written in a good capital hand.

### Claudius Xenophon

*provides part of the name (Maximus). He is also mentioned in inscriptions in Vindolanda and perhaps at Chesters. His father is thought to be a T. Cl(audius) T*

Claudius Xenophon (or Xenophon) was a governor of Britannia Inferior, a province of Roman Britain around AD 223. He is named on two milestones with nearly identical texts, which can be dated to that year. He succeeded Marius Valerianus, whose rule is attested in AD 222; and his governorship must have ended by AD 225, when another governor is mentioned in a fragmentary inscription, which only provides part of the name (Maximus). He is also mentioned in inscriptions in Vindolanda and perhaps at Chesters. His father is thought to be a T. Cl(audius) T. f(ilius) Papiria Xenophon, who is mentioned in inscriptions and papyri in various procuratorships in Egypt and Dacia under Commodus.

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