

Contents and background information

# ROMAN SOLDIERS: FIGHTERS OR BUILDERS?



# THE ROMAN ARMY: FIGHTERS OR BUILDERS?

This collection is designed to explore the role of the Roman Army in the territories Rome controlled. Pupils may think of the army merely as conquerors and fighters, but hopefully having explored this collection they will realise they were much more than that; they were builders and engineers too. It was they that built the infrastructure of roads, forts and towns that cemented Roman control but also invited the local populace to adopt Roman ideas and lifestyles (Romanisation).

## THE SOLDIER'S KIT AND OTHER BELONGINGS

### Clothes and weapons



Roman soldiers wore **tunics** (tunica) made of wool, **helmets** (galea or cassis) with neck and ear/ cheek protection, apron belts, and armour made of overlapping plates which provided protection whilst allowing them to move. They carried spears or javelins (pilum), daggers (which doubled as knives for eating and



preparing food), short **swords**, (gladius) and large rectangular **shields** (scutum) made of wood and covered in goat skin.



They might have a soldier's cloak (sagum) or use a **blanket as a cloak** (paenula) which they would fasten around them using a fibula brooch at the neck. Roman soldiers are well known for their **sandals** (caligae), which were often hobnailed for durability. In the cold climate for Britain there is evidence they needed the extra warmth of socks. Sandals allowed soldiers to march long distances or stand guard for hours in relative comfort.



Military camps had bath houses and communal toilet blocks. This **sponge on a stick** was for soldiers to cleaning their bottoms after going to the toilet!! It would be dipped in the water channel that ran through the block to wet it before use and then to rinse it afterwards, ready for the next user.



### The soldiers kit (Scarcina)

Roman soldiers were nicknamed **Marius' Mules** due to the amount of equipment they were expected to carry (Marius was a General who famously reformed the army making it more professional). Besides their weapons, soldiers were expected to carry tools to enable overnight camps to be erected and for long term engineering projects such as road building. Each legionary carried a hammer and nails, a saw, an axe, 3 wooden stakes (sudis - to build temporary camps) and some rope. Other equipment such as **turf cutters**, mattocks (dolabra), or shovels (batillum) were 'squad' tools with different items being carried by individual soldiers which would mean they had a full set of tools between them. Soldiers also had to carry basic food supplies for 15 days and water for one day.

The pack itself consisted of a **furca** (marching pole) which is a wooden pole with a cross piece to which soldiers tied a **rolled cloak or blanket**. Other items were hung from the furca such as their tools and rope, their food supplies, water and cooking equipment. Soldiers also carried leather satchels (loculus) which contained personal belongings, such as money, letters from home, hygiene items and smaller equipment such as wax tablets.



### Here is what our soldier has in his kit: (L to R)

**Top:** a **furca** (carrying pole), a **turf cutter**, some **rope**, a **groma** (surveying tool), a **blanket** (used as bed roll and cloak).

**Bottom:** a **canteen** (for water), a **string bag** containing **onions, carrots, radishes** and some **cheese** and his **loculus** (satchel) in which he would carry many smaller items – detailed on the next page.



The **turf cutter** was used to clear open ground for the construction of new roads and for cutting turves to stack up to make ramparts for temporary camps.

The **groma** was used by surveyors to lay out roads and waterways. They would line up the front and back weights hanging from the cross piece, and when they were in line they would mark the road out with wooden stakes. Beacons were used for the more distant points or where the road direction would change. Gromas were also used to lay out camps and towns as they could be used to mark right angles as well as straight lines.

### Cooking and eating

When out marching on campaign legionaries were required to carry supplies and cook their own food. Supplies could be supplemented by foraging. Extra supplies and heavy weaponry followed the army carried by mules. The soldiers diet consisted mainly of barley gruel, wheat biscuits, vegetables, fruit, cheese and bacon fat. A third of the wages of a legionary went on their food so they generally preferred simple meals.

When more permanent forts were built there was more variety available although, to begin with at least, they were often surrounded by poor farmland and hostile tribes which meant getting enough supplies for the men could be a problem for the camp commander. Once the forts became established, traders and craftsmen often camped outside to sell goods and services to the soldiers. In particular fresh bread, meats and a greater variety of fruits and vegetables were available including lamb, pork, beef and goat. One letter from Vindolanda details a request from an officer to a slave telling him to find *'100 apples if you can find nice ones and 100 or 200 eggs if they are for sale there at a fair price'*. There are also references to Celtic beer, Massic wine from Italy, fish sauce, pig's trotters and oysters.

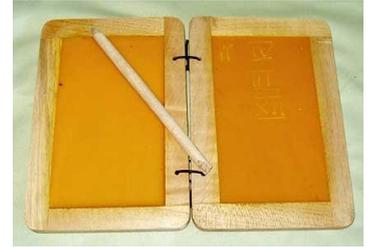
Cooking would have been over open fires. Soldiers carried a cooking pot or saucepan and a cup, plate and spoon. Their dagger (pugio) doubled as a knife for eating or preparing food but they did not have forks (forks did not exist until centuries after the Romans). Plates, cups and spoons could

be made of wood or metal or even horn for spoons and cups. Fires would have been lit using a flint strike (example carried in our soldier's satchel).

### Contents of the loculus (satchel)

The loculus was used for holding mainly personal items and some of smaller pieces of equipment. Here is what our soldier is carrying in his:

**A wax tablet** – endlessly useful - may have listed the day's tasks or have been used to record customs duties paid at frontier posts, supplies delivered or purchased or work/repairs required to whatever camp/ fort/ road/ town he was stationed in or was building.



Our soldier is carrying his toilet items in the satchel – he has a **strigil**, for scraping oil off the body when bathing, although this would have mostly been used in the camp bath house. He also has a chatelaine in a small drawstring bag within the satchel (see below).



**A small leather purse containing coins:** The cost of soldier's food and equipment was deducted from their pay, however they would have a little money left for personal spending in the canabae (civilian settlements that grew up around permanent forts), the nearest town or from travelling traders. The coins are (L-R) an As of Antonius Pius, A dupondius of Hadrian and two silver denarii of Septimus Severus.



There is a **Nine Men's Morris** leather game board and wooden playing pieces **in a fabric sleeve**. This can pass the hours during the long weeks on campaign or during rest periods in camp.



**A copper spoon** and a **flint strike** with its own **fabric sleeve**



Finally there is a **small leather drawstring bag** that contains a variety of small items: a **chatelaine** – toilet implement for cleaning out the nose and ears etc., a carved jet **token** from a loved one, a **thimble** - useful when sewing up tears or splits in tunics etc. and when making/repairing other items and a **fibula brooch** for fastening his cloak (this type of brooch was mostly used by the military).

