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Roman Camps in Scotland

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Historical sources and the problem of classification

2.1 Historical sources

Classification of Roman military remains has traditionally placed more emphasis on the permanent structures, such as forts and fortresses, than the more ephemeral remains such as ‘temporary’ camps. There is no full agreement on the classification of the temporary enclosures that were constructed by the Roman army, and no convenient classical source that gives us a full definition. Indeed, the

surviving classical texts mention *castra aestiva*, *castra hiberna* and *castra stativa* (summer, winter and permanent camps respectively). On the assumption that both summer and winter camps may be ‘temporary’ in nature, it is almost impossible to detect these differences archaeologically, and these are terms that are not now in common use.

Nevertheless, the classical texts do provide us with valuable information, whether from remarks in histories (eg Appian’s *Ἰβηρικὴ* and Livy’s *Histories*); digressions on the Roman military (eg Polybius’ *History* and Josephus’ *Bellum Iudaicum*), or more detailed text books on the layout of the camp (eg ‘Pseudo’ Hyginus’ *de munitionibus castrorum* and Vegetius’ *Epitoma Rei Militaris*).

Many such texts provide valuable contemporary or near contemporary accounts of the Roman army in the field and supply additional details on their activities (illus 2). Further details of the classical texts can be found in numerous publications (such as Campbell 1994; Fabricius 1932; Gilliver 1993a, 1999; Grillone 1977; Keppie 1984; Lenoir 1979; Leslie 1995; Miller & DeVoto 1994; Milner 1996) and will not be repeated here.

No mention of classical sources can omit the columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius in Rome. Both columns have friezes which depict campaigns on the Danube; that of Trajan relates the story of two Dacian Wars (AD 102–3 and AD 105–6) and that of Marcus Aurelius his wars against the Marcomanni (AD 172–3) and the Sarmatians (AD 174–5). In particular, the column of Trajan is extremely valuable when studying the artistic depiction of the Roman army in the field, with several friezes depicting the construction of camps (Cichorius 1900; Coulston 1990; Lepper & Frere 1988; Richmond 1982) (illus 3). Although it is unlikely that the sculptors knew the intricate details of Roman military life, it is believed that they were using Trajan’s *Commentaries* on the war as a source. Certainly, ‘they illustrate, with a care and fullness never before attempted and never afterwards surpassed, the adage that the Roman army owed as much to the spade as to the sword’ (Richmond 1982: 5).

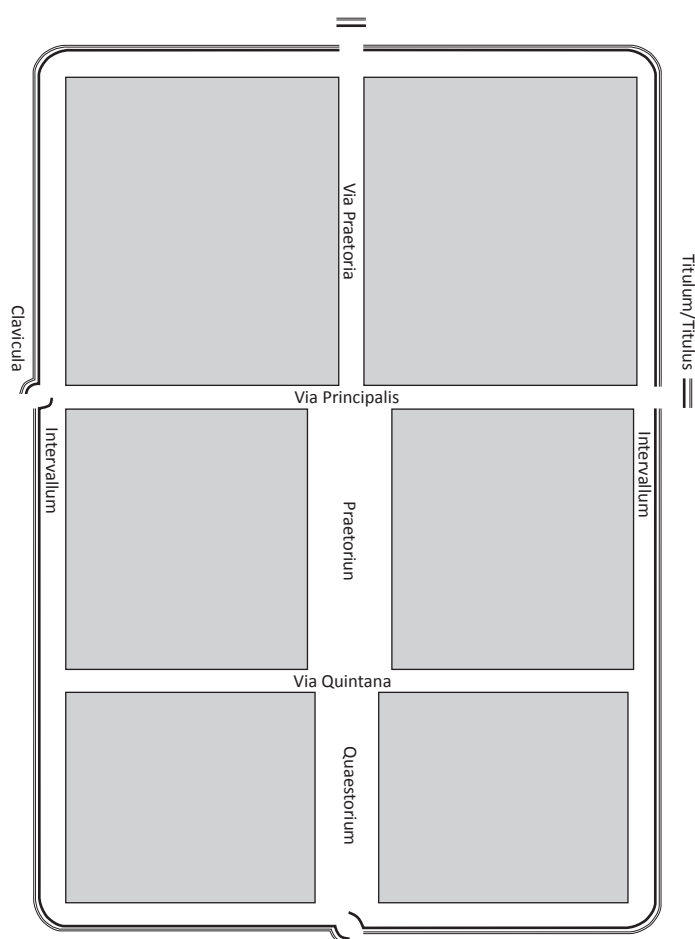


Illustration 2

Schematic drawing of a marching-camp, based on Hyginus’ *de munitionibus castrorum* (after Maxwell 1989 fig 3.1).



Illustration 3

Relief of a camp on Trajan's Column. A *clavicula* gate is depicted on the left of the image, and officers' tents within the camp to the right (ref: Cichorius 1900: cxxviii). Copyright: Angus Lamb.

More relevant to the campaigns by the Roman military in Britain and Scotland are the writings of Tacitus. In addition to his *Historiae* and *Annals*, he wrote a biography of his father-in-law, Cnaeus Julius Agricola, Governor of Britain from AD 77–83. This biography has been over-used as an archaeological indicator and, as a result, has had a tendency to skew interpretations of the evidence (see Hanson 1991). More recently the pendulum has swung the other way (eg Woolliscroft & Hoffmann 2006), but it is highly unlikely that Tacitus, writing about events which took place in the living memory of many of his contemporaries, would invent many of the activities undertaken by Agricola rather than massaging the details in his favour.

Certainly, recent attention has been drawn to other literary sources of evidence for the initial conquest of Scotland. For example, several scholars (eg Birley 1953: 13; Woolliscroft & Hoffmann 2006; Breeze 2009) have observed that the panegyric by Statius (*Silv.* 5.6.142–49) to the son of Vettius Bolanus (governor of Britain in AD

69–71) refers to the latter's activities in Caledonia. But this reference must be used with extreme caution, and does not necessarily mean that Bolanus was active in modern-day Scotland; the potential substitution of Tacitus' biography by Statius' poem leaves us in danger of replacing one literary dogma with another.

It is apparent that a wealth of historical source material on the contemporary Roman army has survived from antiquity, ranging from military handbooks through histories and biographies to sculptural relief. Yet, literary and sculptural sources should be seen in their historical context, secondary to the archaeology rather than as a primary dating mechanism. Nevertheless, they provide additional flesh on the bones of the archaeology and give welcome additional information, even though this information must be treated with prudence.

2.2 Classification

Roman temporary camps are regularly grouped into one of four classifications (categories proposed by

Lepper & Frere (1988:260–1) following Richmond (1955: 300–3)):

- *Marching (or campaign) camps* – temporary bases of a tented army on campaign or manoeuvres away from their base.
- *Practice camps* – small camps which often cluster together indicating the exercise grounds and training regimes of the soldiers, including the construction of ramparts, ditches and gates. Many examples are known in upland areas of Wales (eg Davies & Jones 2006: 67–90).
- *Siege camps* – enclosures constructed to house troops besieging a nearby site. Well known examples include Numantia in Spain (Dobson 2008) (illus 4) and Masada in Israel (Richmond 1962) (illus 7).
- *Construction camps* – temporary enclosures housing soldiers involved in the construction of a nearby fort or frontier. The best examples in Britain are those along the line of the Antonine Wall (Hanson & Maxwell 1983: 117–19; Jones 2005b).

In theory, the division between these broad functional classes should be clear-cut; in practice this is rarely the case. The majority of camps in Britain are usually regarded as marching camps, perhaps *castra aestiva*, large enough to have held a body of men on campaign. Groups of camps have been identified since the 1950s as being of similar

size and morphology, situated about a day's march apart, and identified as marching camps belonging to the various Roman campaigns in Scotland (for example, St Joseph 1958: 93). The majority of these lie to the north of the Forth–Clyde isthmus (Jones 2009a: 872–4; see Chapters 9 & 10).

But this 'marching camp' category covers a multiplicity of potential functions: conquest, supply, manoeuvres, reconnaissance, policing, and scouts (*exploratores*) gathering intelligence (Jones 2009a; in prep). To avoid such classification problems, the volume on camps in England opted to refer to all camps as 'temporary' without further refinement (Welfare & Swan 1995). In Wales, the camps were divided into 'marching' and 'practice' with the division seeming to be fairly clear-cut, although there are naturally 'grey areas' in this distinction (Davies & Jones 2006).

Practice camps are usually small, cluster close to forts, and display a concentration on the elements being practiced, namely the turning of rounded corners and construction of gate defences. A number are known in upland areas in Wales (Davies & Jones 2006: 67–90) (illus 5 & 6). However, despite similar small camps existing in England, largely close to Hadrian's Wall, only about six have been tentatively proposed as probable practice camps (Welfare & Swan 1995: 24), although additional work is currently being undertaken to further categorise the camps along the Wall (Welfare in prep).

The group of at least sixteen camps now known outside the fortress at Chester (see Philpott 1998; Davies & Jones 2006: 143–6) have been suggested as possible practice camps, but they exhibit markedly different forms to those in Wales. They also appear to be broadly similar to the four camps now known outside the fortress at York (four of a potential eight recorded in the 18th century – Welfare & Swan 1995: 135–6; Johnston 2003). The camps in Wales are largely located outside auxiliary forts, and it seems likely that auxiliaries and new recruits were being trained in the craft of castrametation. Those outside Chester and York are markedly larger than the camps outside the Welsh auxiliary forts (which average about 0.1ha in



Illustration 4

View of the Siege camp of Peña Redonda, near Numantia, Spain, in 2006.



Illustration 5

Aerial view of practice camps III, IV and V at Dolddinas, Wales, taken from the north-west in 1994. © Crown copyright: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales DI2005_0299.

size and are all smaller than 0.5ha), and range from 0.9 to 2.2ha outside Chester (excepting one, Christleton 3, which is only 0.5ha) and from 0.9 to 1.3ha outside York. It is possible, given the clustering of the camps around these two legionary fortresses, that they can be associated with legionary field training and manoeuvres, representing camps that did house troops, even if these troops were on exercise rather than campaign. On the continent, similar clusters of camps are recorded around legionary fortresses such as at Xanten (Vetera) and Bonn in Germany (eg Horn 1987: 333, Abb.280; Scollar 1965), and Brigetio (Komáron) in Hungary (Visy 2003: 34–8), and again range from c 0.5 to 1.8ha and more. There can be little doubt that these camps were able to, and almost certainly did, accommodate soldiers in tents, although the purpose and length of their stay is unknown. Excavations in the interior of one of the camps outside York revealed little evidence apart from a few pits and post-holes of unknown date (Johnston 2003).

There was presumably an element of manoeuvres and military training in the construction of many camps, when physical defences were not necessarily demanded by the prevailing conditions, hinted at by Tacitus when describing some of the training regimes demanded by Corbulo (*Annals* XIII: 34–5; Wheeler 1996). Those near York and Chester and outside legionary fortresses on the continent act as evidence of troop movements in the area and should not be grouped in the same category as the very small practice camps common in Wales, which demonstrate evidence for

concentration on elements of camp building rather than occupation. Indeed, it is doubtful whether a single Roman tent could be accommodated in the interior of some of the very small Welsh camps (such as Llyn Hiraethlyn IV, Davies & Jones 2006: 183–4).

The Roman Gask project has undertaken a limited survey and excavation programme on a series of small enclosures along the Gask Ridge in Scotland (see Woolliscroft *et al* 2002). Only one of these sites, **Easter Powside** (illus 122), appears on the current evidence to be the remains of a camp. A further enclosure, at East Mid Lamberkine (also called Tibbermore), has been interpreted as the remains of a possible practice camp (Woolliscroft *et al* 2002: 38), but the evidence is not sufficient because the camp has very angular corners and looks more typical of an indigenous rectangular settlement common in parts of Scotland in the Iron Age. Any camp commander or training instructor would surely have severely punished the troops who constructed such poor corners and irregular gateways, but whether the apparent *clavicula* on one side was deliberately copying a Roman type is not possible to ascertain. The only dating evidence, a radiocarbon date from the ditch fill of AD 585 to 700 (cal BP 1365–1250; Woolliscroft *et al* 2002: 37), does little to help.

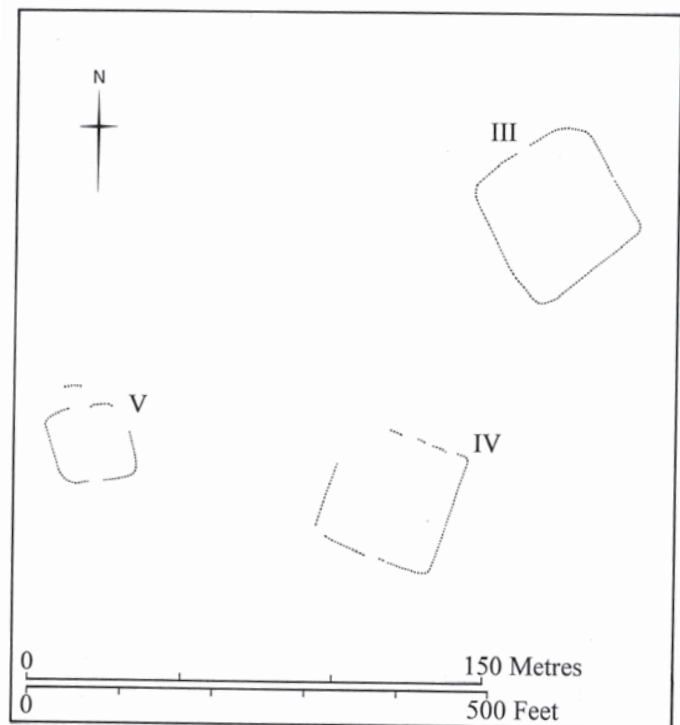


Illustration 6

Plan of practice camps III, IV and V at Dolddinas, Wales. Copyright: J L Davies & R H Jones.

Therefore, camps that are proposed as practice camps are all located outside Scotland, and, indeed, there do not currently seem to be any practice camps north of the Hadrian's Wall zone.

When it comes to siege camps, these are well attested in classical literature (eg Appian *Ἰβηρικὴ* 90–7; Caesar

de Bello Gallico VII.75–89; Josephus *Bellum Iudaicum* VII.275–406) and the remains of siege works are scattered throughout the Roman Empire, some of the more famous examples being Numantia (Spain) (illus 4), Alesia (France), Masada (Israel) (illus 7) and Machaerus (Jordan) (eg Davies 2006). Siege works were sometimes, but not always,

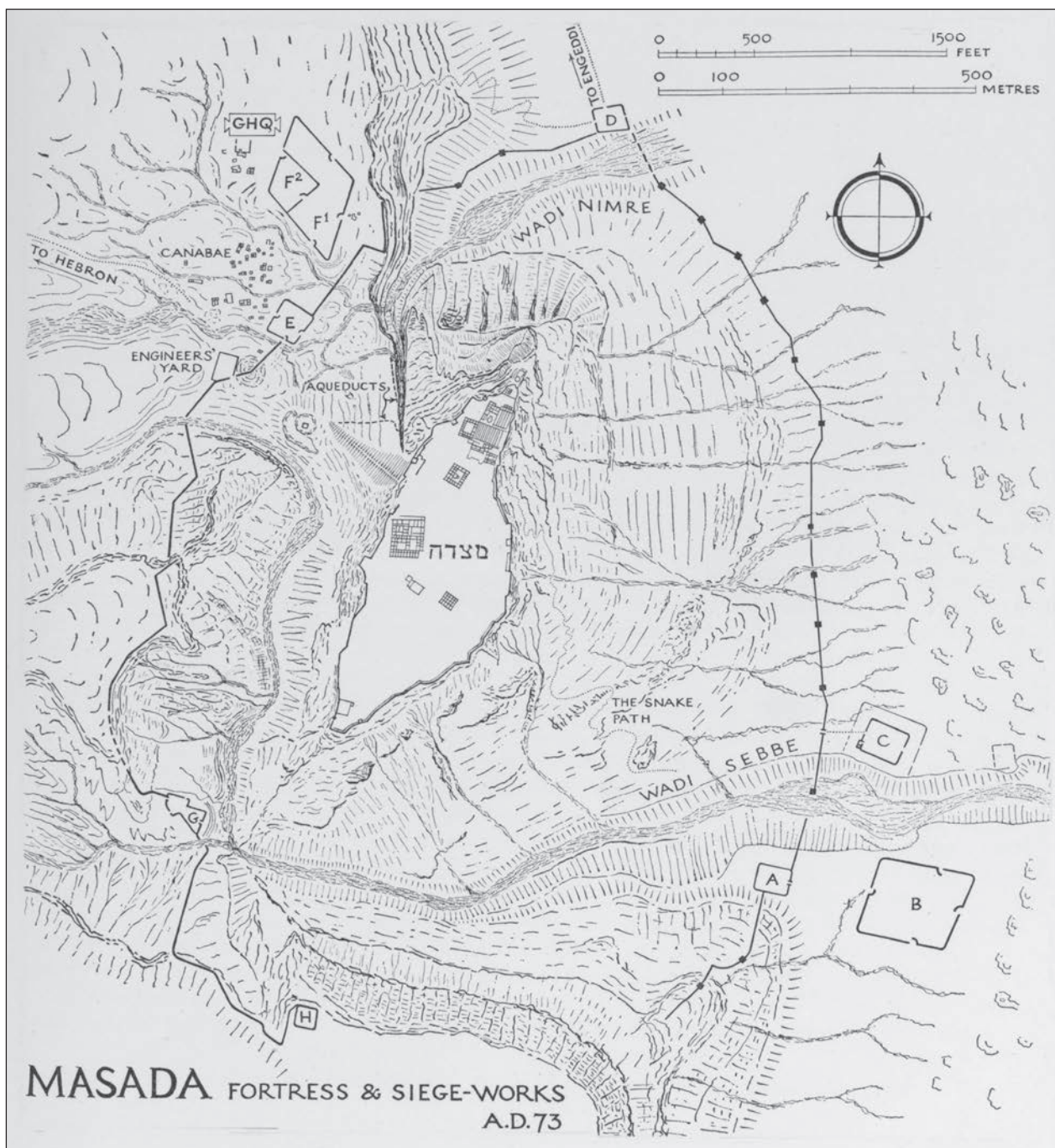


Illustration 7

Plan of the camps and siege works at Masada, Israel, made by Ian Richmond in 1960. (Reproduced from the *Journal of Roman Studies* 1962). The Hebrew in the centre reads 'Masada'.



Illustration 8

Aerial view of Burnswark Hill and the South camp, taken from the north-east in 1990. © Crown copyright: RCAHMS. SC1164088. Licensor www.rcahms.gov.uk.

accompanied by a running breastwork or circumvallation. There are disputed claims at several sites in Britain, with that at Llanymynech Hill on the Montgomery/Shropshire border proposed as the site of Caratacus' last stand against Rome in AD 51 (Jones 1990: 59–63), but now dismissed (Davies & Jones 2006: 156–9). The earthworks on Woden Law in Roxburghshire, once proposed as Roman training siege works (RCAHMS 1956: 169–72; Richmond & St Joseph 1982) are now thought to be of Iron Age date (Halliday 1982: 80–3).

However, the other potential siege camps in Britain are the two which flank Burnswark Hill in Nithsdale. These have been variously interpreted as siege camps (Barbour 1899) and practice siege camps (Steer 1964: 24; Davies 1972), and, more recently, convincing attempts have been made to reinstate them as the site of a genuine siege (Campbell 2002; 2003; Davies 2006: 57–60; Keppie 2009; Hodgson 2009: 187). Besides this debate as to their function, it has recently been observed that one of these camps, the South camp (illus 8, 58 & 92), might overlie an earlier marching camp (Maxwell 1998a: 49), but their function is still debated and they remain enigmatic.

The site of **Burnswark** is an anomaly in terms of explication, along with the so-called 'practice-camps' or 'practice siege camps' at Cawthorn in North Yorkshire (Richmond 1932); both sites suffer from multiple interpretations and largely insufficient research. Recent attempts have been made to remedy the definition of the latter site (Welfare & Swan 1995: 137–42; Wilson *et al* 2003), but the former continues to yield further information from field survey (RCAHMS 1997: 181–2) and no doubt would yield far more if subjected to additional investigation.

The fourth category is that of a construction (or 'labour') camp. While its definition is relatively self-explanatory, trying to separate these from the general mass of camps is fraught with difficulty. The most obvious examples in Scotland are the 2–2.5ha camps along the line of the Antonine Wall (Hanson & Maxwell 1986: 117–21; Jones 2005b). The plethora and range of camps along Hadrian's Wall means that a similar exercise in searching for construction camps is problematic (Welfare & Swan 1995; Welfare in prep). While the two phase camps at **Inchtuthil** (camps II & III – illus 52 & 145) are frequently termed 'labour-camps' (Frere 1985b), Maxwell has also suggested that one phase of their use may have served



Illustration 9

Aerial view of Woodhead I, taken from the north-east in 1984. © Crown copyright: RCAHMS. SC563287. Licensor www.rcahms.gov.uk.

as a 'seasonal base' (1982a: 113), rather than just housing troops engaged in the construction of the nearby fortress. The term 'seasonal base' provides additional complications – were these for summer or winter seasons? (It is not generally recommended that this term gathers regular usage, and perhaps should only be used on rare occasions when attempting to provide yet another refinement of the 'marching camp' classification.)

Another camp which can be suggested to have had a role in construction is that at **Steeds Stalls, Gourdie** (illus 50 & 198), so identified through the presence of internal 'stalls', possible lime-kilns, which suggest that it may have had a role in the preparation of materials for the construction of the fortress at Inchtuthil, lying about 3km to the south (RCAHMS 1994: 83). Maxwell has proposed a similar 'construction' function for the camp and enclosure at **Woodhead** (illus 9 & 212), suggesting that it was involved in timber felling and logging, potentially for forts such as Elginhaugh, lying some 7km to the north (1981: 45), and this is certainly one plausible explanation for the large irregular enclosure (**Woodhead II** – illus 212) surrounding the small camp.

An attempt to locate construction camps in Britain was undertaken by Sommer, but his selection related to the distance that a camp was located from a fort and the size differentiation between fort and camp (1984: 55–6). Although some of the camps cited by Sommer may be construction camps for nearby forts, or may have had a phase of use as such, there is little consistency, exacerbated by the lack of accurate knowledge of the numbers of troops housed in camps of different sizes. One camp where it has been suggested that the troops were quartered while engaged in the construction of a nearby fort is that at **Oakwood** (Steer & Feachem 1954: 97) (illus 15 & 187). This assumption is largely due to proximity and is currently impossible to confirm archaeologically because any evidence of camp and fort being occupied at a similar time could equally represent campaign troops halting alongside the occupying garrison. There is no independent evidence that this was a construction camp. In contrast, the excavators of the Roman fort at Strageath used the evidence of an early granary within the fort to suggest that it supplied the troops who were living in tents inside the fort while building its ramparts and gates (Frere & Wilkes 1989: 117). This explanation seems eminently possible, because the troops building the fort did not necessarily need to occupy a different patch of land during its construction, although it is dependent on there being enough space for the number of troops to be quartered within the ramparts. While erecting a temporary

camp would not have been overly time-consuming to an army thoroughly trained in such matters, it might be more efficient for the troops to demarcate the area and build from within, assuming that there were sufficient space. It might be presumed that the presence of tents in the interior of the fort would be an obstacle when attempting to build internal structures. Yet troops could live in tents in one part of the fort while constructing their barracks in another. Research on selected Augustan forts in Germany



Illustration 10

Aerial view of the camp at Milton, taken from the west in 1984. The fortlet and part of the annexe to the fort are visible to the left of the photograph. © Crown copyright: RCAHMS. SC1164041. Licensor www.rcahms.gov.uk.

has suggested that shelters were constructed over lines of tents when these were occupied for a longer period (Morel 1991), and this could operate as a forerunner to the development of camp into fort. But not all forts need necessarily have housed the troops involved in their construction in nearby camps, and indeed, camps are not attested at all fort sites.

If some of the camps at the large complexes around forts such as **Ardoch, Dalswinton** and **Glenlochar** (illus 77, 112 & 137) in Scotland were specifically constructed to house troops building the forts, then the question is asked

which camps were construction camps and how can these be identified. The probable variability in troop numbers engaged in the construction of each fort makes it difficult to identify such camps with any degree of confidence. Nevertheless, one or two camps outside forts might also be proposed as construction camps. For example, the camp at **Milton** (illus 10 & 180) lies immediately south of the fort of Tassiesholm (which had both Flavian and Antonine phases) and away from the main concentration of marching camps in this area, at **Beattock**, located 1km to the north (illus 38, 71 & 85). Furthermore, it shares similar morphology and size with many of the camps on the Antonine Wall.

Therefore, all four of Lepper & Frere's classifications (1988: 260–1) can be detected in the Roman province of *Britannia*, despite the dispute over the nature of the 'siege' camps at **Burnswark**. However, even given this fairly straightforward classification into four broad functional groupings, anomalies exist, such as the camps at **Lochlands Three Bridges** (illus 167), identified by Bailey as demonstrating signs of industrial activity (2000). Perhaps too, **Steeds Stalls**, **Gourdie**, could be transferred into a new category of 'industrial camp', although the industry there does appear to be associated with construction. Furthermore, **Kintore** has furnished evidence for a limited amount of industrial activity taking place in the interior

(Cook & Dunbar 2008), and conceivably too much can be read into signs of industrial activity that would have represented standard maintenance work for a mobile force. It is also possible that some structures at **Lochlands Three Bridges** were not temporary encampments at all, but were more permanent storage depots and industrial units servicing the successive forts at Camelon, a possible port on the nearby River Carron, and the Antonine Wall.

The pigeonholing of sites into overarching categories such as these is hardly confined to Roman archaeology; prehistoric sites probably suffer the most (particularly the catch-all phrase 'ritual'), with Roman sites appearing more regimented in their description and classification. Perhaps the argument is partly an issue of semantics amongst modern scholars (see Baines & Brophy 2006), and so it is perhaps easier to return to the catch-all phrase 'temporary camp', defined as non-permanent works by the Roman army, sites which lack any evidence to suggest that an occupation of some length was planned. Some of the simplest and most effective descriptions of temporary camps can be found in the antiquarian sources, with Allan, referring to the camp at **Channelkirk**, noting that, 'Major-General Roy ... affirms the Camp ... to be a Roman one, of the class which he styles temporary. That is to say, it was a camp thrown up while the army was on the march, and was not meant to be permanent' (1900: 642).