In the past two years British archaeologists have discovered and in some part deciphered more than 240 fragments of 1st century A.D. Roman cursive writing on thin slivers of wood in a far corner of the Imperium where the survival of such material would have been thought most unlikely: in a fort on Hadrian’s Wall.

The material was brought to light in 1973 and 1974 by Robin Birley, Director of Excavations of the Vindolanda Trust, controllers of the fort, a mile or so south of the Wall, and of the civilian settlement (vicus) adjacent to it. The site, known since the 18th century, was first seriously investigated by Eric Birley, father of the present excavator. His son’s work makes Vindolanda one of the most important and exciting digs now under way in Britain.

Of itself, and quite apart from the written fragments, Vindolanda (perhaps meaning “white lawn”) is a remarkable site. More than 18 acres in all, in the Tyne Valley of Northumberland near Hexham, it has revealed no less than five different periods of occupation, from the first epoch of Roman presence in the north of England after the conquest of Claudius, i.e., from A.D. 60 to ca. 125, to their

1 Writing tablet fragments. The larger pieces were bound together by thongs (note holes near bottom). The piece on right, however, was bound, as shown here, upside down. Courtesy of Vindolanda Trust.

2 Detail map, showing location of Vindolanda. From Guide to the Central Sector of Hadrian’s Wall, by Robin Birley, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1973 (Northern History Booklet No. 19), p. 31.
Hadrianic period, for example—an abundance of cloth in almost perfect condition, and a good many wooden artifacts. The wet soil under a clay packing served, it seems, as a preservative rather than a disintegrator.

The Vindolanda forts and vicus are not unique, but nonetheless superb in themselves and valuable extenders of the knowledge of Roman occupation gained from such other forts along the Wall and the Stanegate as Housesteads, Corbridge, Chesters, etc. What is unique is the collection of writing tablets. They are doubly precious in coming from the pre-Hadrianic fort, just outside the later fortifications, under at least two superimposed timber buildings of the later period. They date almost certainly from the earliest period—that between the conquest of northern Britain in the second half of the 1st century and the time when Hadrian’s Wall was begun in 122 —the exact time span which remains the least known of all the four centuries of the Roman presence and hence the most needful of clarifying information.

A word first about Roman writing in general: Until the advent of vellum (not common in the Roman world until the 3rd or 4th century) most writing—excluding of course inscriptions on marble and stone—was on papyrus, very little of which could survive except in the dry climate south and east of the Mediterranean. But there was also writing, much less of which has been preserved to us, on wood. Most of this was on tablets, rectangles with a small rim, covered with wax and inscribed with the sharp end of a metal stylus and erased when necessary by the opposite blunt end. There are also occasional examples of writing with pen and ink on the wood itself of an unwaxed tablet. Finally, there was writing on and in wooden boxes, examples of which are, like papyrus writing, very rare except where the dry climate of Egypt and the Near East preserved them. Several tablets or strips could be bound together in a kind of book by thongs threaded through holes drilled through each piece of wood.

To find a trove of them, even in the fragmentary form that the waterlogged soil of Vindolanda has preserved, is exciting indeed, and the more so since they are almost entirely of the relatively unknown post-Flavian, pre-Hadrianic period in Britain.

The fragments are on sheets from one to two mm. thick, some as small as postage stamps and none, so far, larger than 12 by 4 cm. The wood is extremely fragile and the writing tends to disappear almost at once on exposure. A triumph of the excavators and technicians in several British laboratories and universities has been the development of a preservative for the wood and a second tri-
puzzling in the identification of the room in which the writing tablets were found. The locus is almost certainly a building within the earliest fort, below a three-foot layer of dumped clay on which later constructions were built. Beneath were five feet of occupation material, waterlogged, but sealed by the clay. The combination, curiously, made for preservation of the material.

Sections of walling, of timber and wattle, a large gate lying on its face, heavy oak uprights, and the timber base of what may have been a small catapult or boist were uncovered in good condition.

The occupants of the building had been unpleasant—and one would have thought un-Roman—habit of putting down a fresh carpeting of bracken, straw and other uncleanliness in a dirty floor without removing the rubbish. Layer after layer was put down, one on top of the other. It is now compacted into a mat 18 inches thick which must be cut like peat and hoisted in blocks 8 or 10 feet to the surface and then taken apart again and laid by hand, to disclose the huge wealth of organic material in it.

There is a scatter of pottery and glass; quantities of oyster shells (expensive luxuries); lost items such as a brooch, two iron keys, ballis, bone gaming counters, a favissa, a bronze lion-headed pincers and iron bolts and rings; a multitude of food bones of pig, sheep and hare and skulls of oxen pierced by round holes suggesting that they were used for target practice; a huge deposit of leather—of more than 2,000 items, including worn-out boots, portions of garments and testa and some leather goods in undamaged condition; tools for working leather and material for treating hides: 60 textile pieces, some in almost loom-fresh condition and two or three still showing a purple stripe which suggests they were from the weft of the oyster-eating commanding officer.

The straw and bracken floor was suffused with the pappus of stable flies, an estimated one million of them, finding a strongly indicative of urination, in turn often associated with leather tanning. There are also quantities of excrement, some probably human. And in this ugly mixture are the 240 wooden writing tablet fragments, 13 apparently from the wax tablet variety, and 14 styli pens only one of which was unscorched; the rest must have been dropped and lost, not thrown away.

The evidence seems also ample that leather-working and the treatment of hides were carried on. The excreta—and some of the textiles in 4- or 5-inch squares—proclaim a toilet.

The likeliest answer is that it was some sort of workshop-cum-writing room within the command building of the officer's quarters, used by occupants with a very casual attitude about hygiene. The whole finds call into question the notion of the Romans, with their aqueducts scores of miles long to obtain unpolluted water, and their inevitable installation of baths, as the original cleanliness-next-to-godliness folk.

In that it may, the find of the writing tablets remains all important and suggests even greater discoveries to come. For the soil and water conditions at Vindolanda are not unique among the Wall: they must be duplicated, more or less, at other forts and settlements. Accordingly, future diggers can expect to find other tablets elsewhere equally well preserved, that will throw light on a period and a technique about which all too little is now known.

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