

# Macdonald Educational

# The

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*The measurements in this book are metric. There is a conversion table at the end of the book after the index. Where miles or feet are mentioned in the text, these refer to the Roman measurements. These are slightly shorter than modern miles and feet.*

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# The Frontiers



**The distribution of the 28 legions in AD 68**

## The frontiers

After the conquest of Gaul, Rome was involved in 20 years of civil war. Supreme power fell into the hands of one man, Augustus, the nephew of Caesar. At the end of the civil war there were some 60 legions. Augustus reduced this number to 28.

Three legions were subsequently lost in an ambush in the forests of Germany, but by the end of Nero's reign, a hundred years later, the number had again been raised to 28. Twenty-five of these were garrisoned along the borders of the Empire. In the east, five legions were garrisoned near Antioch in Syria and three more were stationed in Egypt. Of these eight eastern legions, two Syrian and one Egyptian were on active service in Judaea putting down the Jewish revolt. There was only one more legion in the rest of North Africa.

No one doubted that one day the Empire would extend to the Baltic, but the northern advance of the legions had stopped at the natural frontiers of the Rhine and the Danube. Thirteen legions were encamped along this frontier poised to invade north-eastern Europe. Of the remaining six legions, three were stationed in Britain and one each in Spain, Gaul and Italy.

Besides these forces there were a similar number of soldiers drawn from the population along the frontiers. These were known as auxiliaries.

## Permanent camps

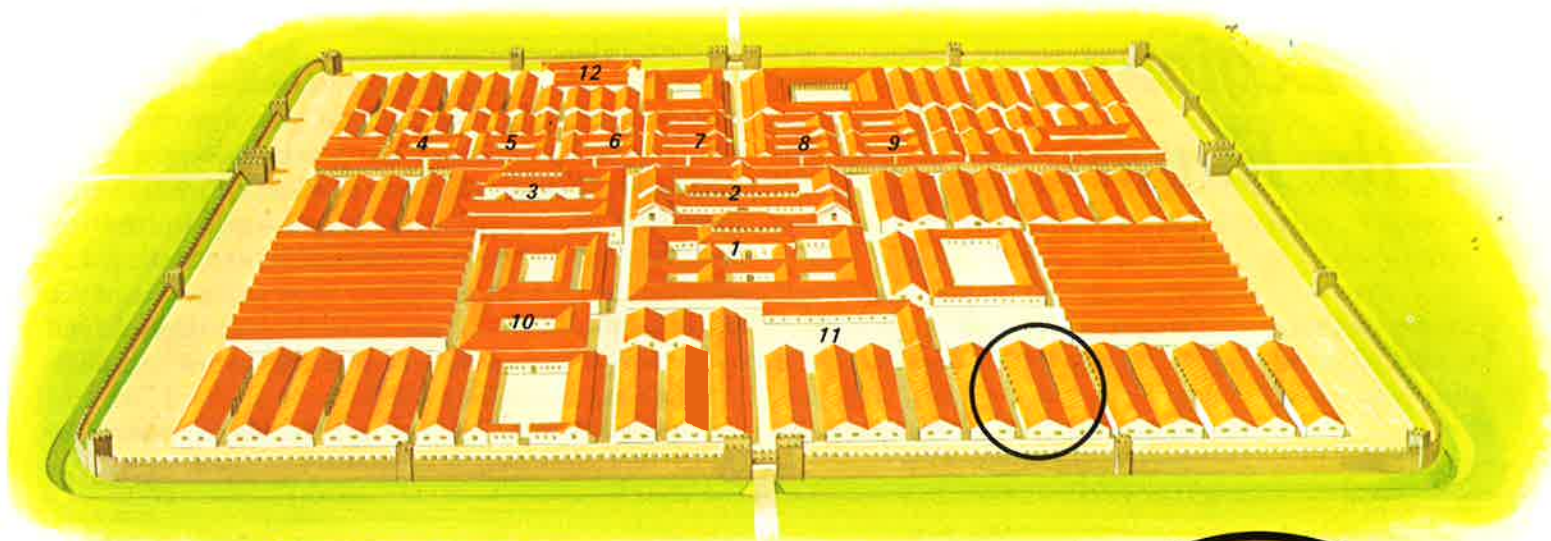
The legions had built permanent camps at strategic points along the Rhine and Danube. These were similar to marching camps but had far stronger defences and the tents were replaced first with timber and later with stone buildings.

Along the Rhine, camps were already being built of stone by Nero's time. The British camps, being established much later, were not stone-built until around the end of the 1st century AD. The rebuilding of camps in stone took place probably when the timber camps were no longer serviceable.

The permanent camps were like small towns, completely self-sufficient with hospitals, workshops, schools etc.

The barrack blocks were built to hold a complete century each. The soldiers' accommodation was composed of ten or eleven sets of double rooms at one end of the building. Each double room consisted of a large bedroom about 4.5 metres square to hold eight legionaries, and a smaller room for their equipment. At the other end of the block were the century offices and the centurions' living quarters.





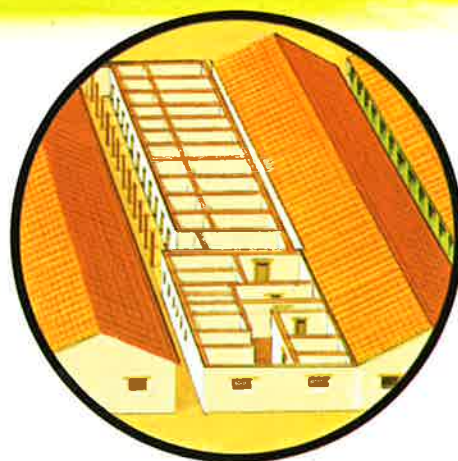
### Layout of the camp

The barrack blocks were grouped in pairs facing each other in a way which echoes the manipular system of the Republic. They formed the perimeter of the built-up area of the camp; they were built about 30 metres back from the rampart to be out of range of missiles.

The camp was divided down the middle by the *via praetoria* which led straight to the administrative centre (*principia*) and the legion commander's house (*praetorium*) in the middle of the camp. Behind these was the main lateral road (*via principalis*), and beyond this, facing the road, were the tribunes' houses.

**Above:** The fortress of Legion XVI at Novaesium (Neuss) on the lower Rhine. It covers an area of 450×650 metres.

1. The commander's house (*praetorium*).
2. Legion headquarters (*principia*).
3. Hospital.
- 4-9. Tribunes' houses.
10. Workshops.
11. Market place.
12. Granaries and cookhouse.

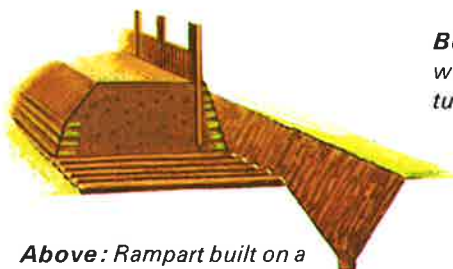


**Above:** The inset shows a century barrack block with double rooms for legionaries at the far end, and the centurions' quarters at the front.



**Left:** The *principia* and behind it the *praetorium*.

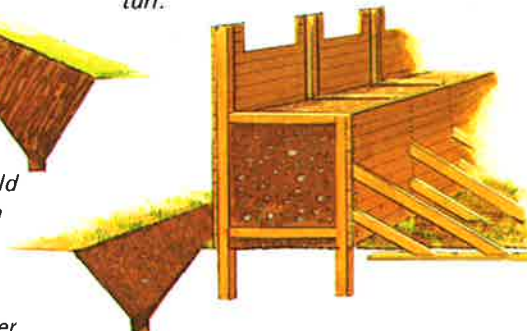
### Defences of timber-built camps



**Above:** Rampart built on a corduroy of logs. There could be several lines of ditches in front of a rampart.

**Left:** A reconstructed timber gateway.

**Below:** A box rampart used where there was insufficient turf.





# Frontier Defences

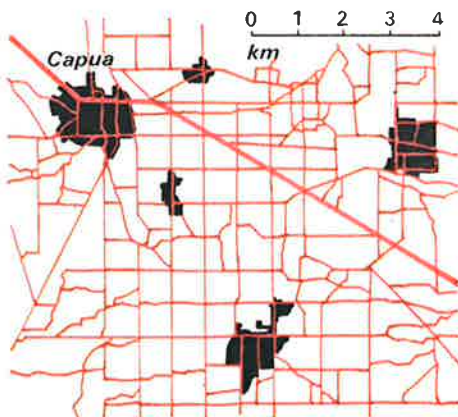
## Military colonies

Colonization meant the settling of groups of soldiers at strategic points in newly-conquered territory. The purpose was two-fold: to act as strongholds in the event of revolt and to "Romanize" the local population. Colonies served Rome well in her war with Hannibal, giving her a long chain of fortified posts inside Carthaginian-held territory.

In the Republic, every eligible citizen was also a soldier, and colonies were formed from those on the military roll. Later they were formed from retired veterans.

The colony was divided up into lots one *centuria* (about 700 metres) square. This was farmed by four families. "Centuriation" was practised over the whole Roman world. Even today the system of square plots shows up on aerial photographs and may sometimes be seen clearly in the road systems on maps.

The site at ancient Capua (below) is interesting because it was colonized at about the same time as Cremona which was set up to control the Gauls of the Po valley in the year that Hannibal crossed the Alps, 218 BC.

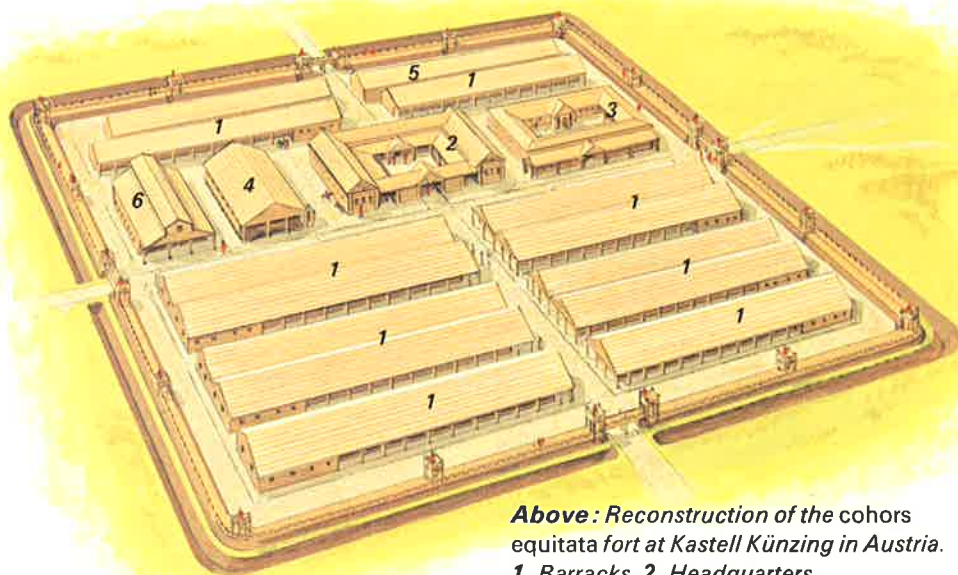


**Above:** Map of ancient Capua showing the roads and paths that still follow the Roman centuriation grid.

## Primus arrives at Cremona

Primus had already exceeded his orders by advancing into the valley of the Po. Now the soldiers refused to fortify their position and demanded to be led against the enemy. Pushed on by his soldiers, Primus advanced on Cremona hoping to force a battle with the smaller part of the Vitellian forces while their commander was absent.

Meanwhile, unaware of Primus's plans, the dispirited Vitellian forces in Hostilia decided to join their fellows at Cremona, leaving open the route to Rome. But Primus had already gone. In two days he



**Above:** Reconstruction of the cohors equitata fort at Kastell Künzing in Austria.  
1. Barracks. 2. Headquarters.  
3. Commander's house. 4. Granary.  
5. Stables. 6. Hospital.

## Frontier control

When Augustus became Emperor he inherited an unwieldy mixture of races. Most had been under Roman control for less than 50 years. He made some conquests but spent most of his long reign trying to organize his inheritance. When he lay dying he begged Tiberius not to try to extend the Empire but to continue his work of consolidation.

Apart from the invasion of Britain in AD 43, this was the policy of all the emperors of the 1st century. When Trajan came to the throne in AD 98, the Empire was hardly different in extent from that which Augustus had taken over 130 years before.

The Romans believed that one day the Empire would be extended both in the north and east. For this reason, no formal borders were drawn. The frontier zones were controlled by a series of auxiliary forts backed up by the legionary fortresses which were usually some distance back from the frontier.

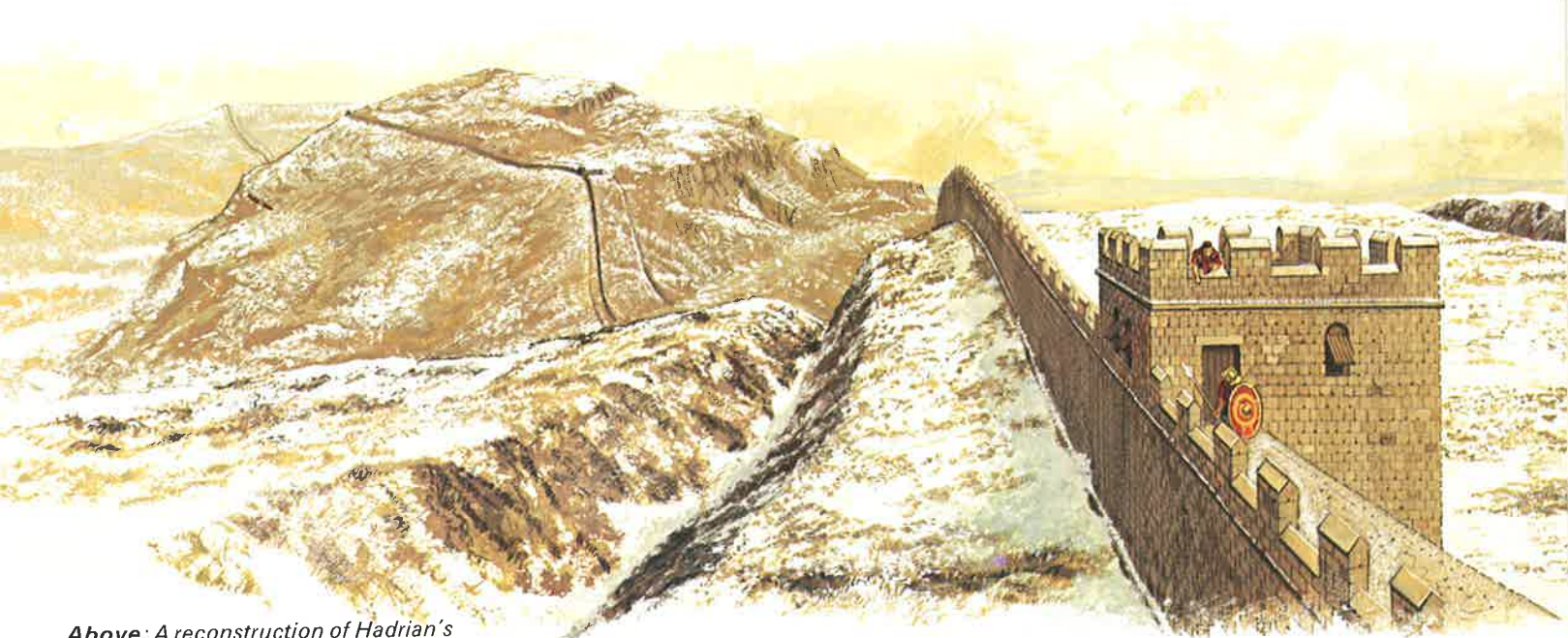
**Below:** A reconstruction of a watch/signal tower from Trajan's Column.





had reached the site of Otho's defeat. The next morning he sent forward his cavalry to try and force a battle. He himself arrived at Cremona in the afternoon with the five legions. His troops clamoured to be led against the town.

By this time, the other half of the Vitellian army had heard of Primus's march and was racing towards Cremona. They arrived at nightfall, having covered 30 miles during the day. Primus was far from his base and unable to fortify a camp. He had no alternative but to offer battle. He drew up his forces on either side of the road; he was massively outnumbered.



**Above:** A reconstruction of Hadrian's Wall showing turret 41a. Mile castle 41 is in the distance.

**Below:** A reconstruction of a wall turret from the Rhine-Danube defences in Bavaria.



### The barbarian threat

For some years Rome had been troubled by barbarians invading across the Danube. There was also a periodic threat from Parthia in the east. Trajan invaded both these areas and extended the Empire to include Romania in the north and the Persian Gulf in the east.

When Trajan died in AD 117 he left the Empire at its greatest extent. His successor, Hadrian, decided that this disjointed mass was impossible to govern effectively. He abandoned most of Trajan's conquests and erected a rigid frontier defence system, aiming not to control the frontier people but to exclude them.

### The Rhine defences

Hadrian made the Rhine the frontier from Bonn to the sea. A series of auxiliary forts and the legionary fortresses fortified the west bank. These were supported by signal and watch towers, as may be seen on Trajan's Column.

### The link with the Danube

The river Danube was similarly fortified from Regensburg to the Black Sea. A ditch and palisade were constructed from a point just south of Bonn to one near Regensburg to join the two rivers.

These fortifications stretched for about 450 kilometres. They were reinforced by a fort every 8-10 kilometres. In places towards the Danube the palisade was replaced by a wall with turrets.

The defence of the east and south remained much the same as before.

### Hadrian's Wall

In northern Britain Hadrian erected his most lasting monument: the wall that bears his name. It was 2.5 metres thick and 5 metres high. It stretched for nearly 120 kilometres, defended by 80 small mile-castles 1.6 kilometres apart and about 160 turrets. Like the Rhine-Danube defences, Hadrian's Wall also had a fort every 8-10 kilometres.