Chapter I: Roman Britain in a glimpse

1.0 Timeline of Roman Britain[1]

The Roman control of Britannia lasted from 43 to about 410 CE, a tumultuous occupation indeed, often characterised by a difficult relationship between the local population and the Romans. From these centuries of uproar and coexistence, we can collect the most emblematic case studies of orthographic variation in non-literary texts written on tablets, showing how these realities are fragmented in micro-entities; each of them carries different linguistic, cultural, and historical backgrounds. Table 1 shows relevant episodes of this occupation and highlights the period covered by the non-literary documents under consideration. One might notice that the non-literary documents analysed in this book cover a large part of the Roman occupation, with a concentration of evidence from c. 77–210 CE and involving the main corpora on writing tablets from Roman-Britain[2]: the Londinium–Bloomberg, Carlisle, Vindolanda, and the Romano-British curse tablets (see Table 1, *Appendix*).

This historical period was particularly relevant for the foundation of Roman Britain, because it encompasses the time span after the Iceni revolt and Agricola's campaigns to assert Roman authority in the territories corresponding to Northern Wales. The non-literary corpora analysed in this book are a key source of historical material as well as linguistic information (see Chapter II). The constant turmoil in the province required the presence of auxiliaries and military forces in general; in a large majority of the non-literary texts investigated, the writers were involved with the military establishment to a certain extent (mainly Carlisle and Vindolanda[3]). This also put emphasis on the relevant role played by the Roman army as a vector for the spread of literacy from the late 1st century onwards and how specific writing materials for everyday writing (ink and stylus tablets, mainly – papyrus was not really an option here) were also part of military life. In Roman times, literate activities may have ranged from an ability to sign a document or read a text – whether a

1 The information for drawing up the timeline come from Mattingly (2007) and Todd (2008).

2 There is also a small batch of documents written of various writing material, already mentioned by Pearce (2004: 41) which do not belong to any specific corpus. Chronologically speaking they belong to the period between Agricola's second campaign in Britannia (83–84 CE) and 122 CE, when Hadrian prompted the construction of his eponymous wall not far from the Stanegate road. Even though some of them may be interesting as they represent evidence of legal documents in this province, the vast majority of them are too grounded in the classical norm or do not bear readable text to show relevant linguistic variation. This can depend on the topic dealt with on the tablets and the writing support in use. Many of these documents, as already documented by Pearce (2004), are stylus tablets on which legal documents have been written (e.g. the deed regarding the five-acre woods in Kent, see Hassall, Tomlin 1994: 302–304) and in general they show a higher degree of accuracy compared to the ink-written tablets. The analysis of these documents would allow a complete investigation of known non-literary texts from Roman Britain written on tablet. Nonetheless, many do not bear readable text or are too grounded in the classical norm to show relevant linguistic variation. The stylus tablets collected for this analysis often show a higher degree of accuracy compared to the ink-written tablets: this is also noticeable in the tablets from Londinium, in which the number of words diverging from the classical norm is very low (Tomlin 2016: 307–313).

3 The documents from Vindolanda and Carlisle belong to the non-literary production of two military forts, or addressed to them; however, the documents from Londinium–Bloomberg or the later documents from the curse tablets corpus show how there are alternative models for the sociocultural environment, the text types, and the writing materials involved.

letter or an inscription on stone – to skilled composition, as will be shown in the different non-literary sources analysed in this book.[4]

Date	Historical Events	Non-literary documents			
55–54 BCE	Julius Caesar's first and second military expeditions				
43 CE	Claudius' expedition				
48 CE	The Romans conquered the territory between the Hamble and the Severn Estuary				
51 CE	Caratacus[5] is captured[6]	Londinium Bloomberg			
60 CE	The Romans attack the Druid stronghold of Anglesey. Iceni revolt				
61 (65) CE	Boudicca leads a rebellion of the Iceni against the Romans[7]				
77–78 CE	Agricola's first campaign in Britannia		Carlisle		
83–84 CE	Agricola's second campaign in Britannia				
84 CE	Battle of Mons Graupius			Vindolanda	
100 CE	New frontier on an East-West line (Stanegate)				Curse tablets
105 CE	The Romans retreat behind the Stanegate road				
122 CE	Emperor Hadrian orders the construction of a wall				
139–140 CE	The Antonine Wall is built				
163 CE	The Antonine Wall is abandoned, and Roman troops withdraw back to Hadrian's Wall				
182 CE	Different revolts against the Romans[8]				
191–192 CE	Clodius Albinus is appointed governor of Britannia				
196 CE	Clodius Albinus is hailed as emperor by the legions of Britannia and Hispania				
197 CE	Clodius Albinus is killed at the Battle of Lugdunum				
209 CE	The emperor Septimius attempts to subdue the Caledonian tribes				

4 It is difficult to provide an unambiguous definition of literacy because on one hand the term can encompass the ability to read and write as well as degrees of cultural refinement, but on the other hand it is also often in relation to different levels of competence and learning (see Bagnall 2011: 2; Eckardt 2018: 3).

5 Leader of the Catuvellauni tribe.

6 Caratacus had led a protracted guerrilla war against the occupying Roman forces for years but was eventually brought to battle by the Roman governor Publius Ostorius and defeated.

7 After burning down Colchester, London, and St Albans, Boudicca was eventually defeated at the Battle of Watling Street.

8 The Brigantes, along with other tribes of Southern Scotland and Northern England, were the first who started to revolt against the Romans.

211 CE	Britannia is divided into two separate provinces[9]				Curse tablets
250 CE	The Picts with Angles, Saxons, and Jutes start threatening Britain				
287 CE	Carausius[10] declares himself emperor of Britain and Northern Gaul				
293 CE	Carausius is assassinated by his treasurer, Allectus				
296 CE	The Roman Empire recaptures Britannia. The province is then split up into four provinces				
367 CE	The 'Great Conspiracy': people from Scotland, Ireland, and Germany coordinate their attacks on Roman Britain				
369 CE	Commander Theodosius drives back the Barbarians from Britain				
396 CE	Large-scale Barbarian attacks on Britain begin again				
399 CE	The province is apparently pacified				
406 CE	Reinforcements stop arriving from the continent[11]				
407 CE	The Roman garrisons that remain in Britannia proclaim one of their generals as emperor (Constantine III)[12]				
410 CE	Emperor Honorius refused to help Britannia dealing with incursions from the Saxons, Scots, Picts, and Angles. This marks the end of Roman Britain as it was				

Table 1: Roman Britain timeline and the chronological collocation of the non-literary corpora[13]

2.0. Different non-literary sources – a short overview

As anticipated (see Chapter I, §1.0), the most relevant non-literary sources written on tablets in Roman Britain are the following (see Figure 1):

- Londinium–Bloomberg (50–80 CE)
- Carlisle (79–105 CE)
- Vindolanda (85–205 CE)
- Curse tablets (mainly Bath and Uley, 2nd–4th century CE)

Not all of the corpora share the same size or have the same relevance. The Londinium–Bloomberg tablets are key in reconstructing the first decades of the Roman conquest – before and after the revolt of the Iceni tribe. The early date of this corpus is of great interest because it means that literacy arrived in Britain in full force: this corpus contains financial and legal documents (25 tablets), together with personal correspondence and accounts (see *Appendix*). This corpus is also important because it is in contrast with an overt lack of a proper pre-Roman literate culture.[14]

9 The South was to be called *Britannia Superior* with the north being named *Britannia Inferior*.

10 He was the admiral of the Roman Channel fleet.

11 In this way, Britain was left to its own devices.

12 He crossed the English Channel to invade Gaul, leaving Britain.

13 Table 1 was created by the author of this book, using the historical and extralinguistic information available.

14 Latin was actually used on different writing materials such as minted coins: for example, the coins of Commius of the Atrebates (1st century BCE) as he was "The first person to use text on coins in Britain" (Creighton 2000: 146) (1st century BCE) or his successor Tincomarus (Creighton 2000: 146, 170). In the case of the pre-Roman occupation, it must be noted that the writing on coins was an exhibition of power on behalf of the different dynasties struggling for power in the Southern part of the region (Creighton 2000).

Conversely, the Vindolanda corpus is still unparalleled in its range, vivacity of text types, and number of tablets; the Carlisle corpus, despite its meagre size, is a good source of comparison to the Vindolanda corpus because they are both composed of documents written in auxiliary forts alongside the Stanegate road[15] (see Figure 2). On a different note, the corpus of curse tablets represents a different type of non-literary documents because they belong to a later period (see Table 1), but more importantly because they appear as the product of the local population which merged its indigenous features with those of the Latin culture. Each corpus shows specific features which deserve a thorough analysis through specific case studies that will be the subjects of the following chapters. However, each corpus needs a few more words for a proper contextualization and to show their dimension, the text types available, and who the writers were, at least on a general level.

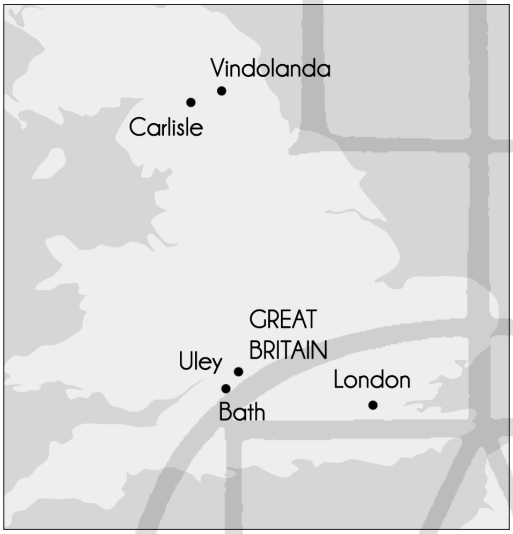

Figure 1: Areal distribution of the main corpora from Roman Britain

2.1. Londinium–Bloomberg (50–80 CE)

The Londinium–Bloomberg corpus mirrors the dynamic city environment with a continuous flowering of commercial activities which was also able to recover in a short timespan after Boudicca's disruption. Its 405 wooden stylus tablets[16] were found at the site[17] of the new European headquarters in London.[18] At present, only 185 tablets are available for linguistic

15 The frontier was first established along the line that during the Medieval period was called the Stanegate (i.e. stone street). This ran from Carlisle to Corbridge. Recent excavations have shown that the fort at Carlisle was occupied from 72–73 CE onwards, whereas the Vindolanda fort was built probably around 79–85 CE (Birley 2009: 183). In both cases, they were built decades before the edification of the Hadrian wall (122 CE).

16 Together with two stylus tags or labels and two ink writing tablets, for a total of 409 elements.

17 The site was already famous for the discovery of the 3rd century CE temple of Mithras (Tomlin 2016: 28). The writing tablets are only a small part of the overall volume and variety of Roman artefacts recovered from waterlogged deposits.

18 One of the most significant merits of this corpus is that here the earliest reference of the name *Londinium* have been unearthed (Tab.Lond. 6 *Ļondinio Mogontiǫ*.) The form *Londinio* is particularly interesting as it gives us information about the history of the toponym and the Celtic etymology as explained by Schrijver (2014: 55): *Londīnium* is a Latinization of earlier Celtic **Londīnjon*, composed of the celtic elements **londos*- 'to sink, to cause to sink' and in a figurate sense 'to be subdued, to subdue' and the suffix *-*injo*- (see also Schrijver 2014:

investigation[19] and published by Tomlin (2016). Following a finer grained analysis, 91 of them are *descripta*[20] (50 %) and 12 are actually not inscribed (6 %) (see *Appendix*). The most relevant documents for the analysis of this corpus are represented by financial documents (25 tablets). Their presence forms a general picture of the more formal, official, legal, and business aspects of life in Roman London. There are also 41 documents labelled as 'miscellaneous'.[21] More interestingly, we can account also for three literary documents, which in this case correspond to writing exercises and numeracy (Tab.Lond. 77, 78, 79).

When retraceable, the authors of these documents are varied: they were Vangiones,[22] Nervi,[23] Lingones,[24] and people coming from Noricum (Tomlin 2016: 51). What varies is not only the alleged provenance of the writers, but also their social status. There were merchants, brewers, and slaves together with prefects and soldiers. For example, Tab.Lond. 7, is addressed to the merchant Optatus, or Tab.Lond. 54, has a clearly commercial topic (Tomlin 2016: 176). There is also the letter of the slave Marcus (Tab.Lond. 27) and the commander of the 6th cohort of the Nervians, Classicus[25] (Tab.Lond. 33). It is also interesting to note the reference to Tertius the brewer (Tab.Lond. 12), who perhaps was already known in Carlisle[26] (*RIB* 2443). The civilian presence in this corpus is more consistent compared to the Vindolanda cases (e.g. Tab.Vindol. 343, 344).

Concerning the palaeographical aspect, all the documents are written in a cursive script called Old Roman Cursive (henceforth ORC) – also known as majuscule cursive[27] – which was widely used in the Roman world from the 1st century BCE to the 3rd century CE.

2.2. Carlisle (79–105 CE)

The auxiliary fort of Carlisle (*Luguualium*) was the most important base in Northumberland (see Figure 2), but the 77 ink tablets written by the Ala I Gallorum Sebosiana[28] and found

57 and Rix *et al.* 2001: 412–413). As emphasised by Schrijver in his description of the etymology of the toponomy, the name *Londinium* reflected a place that was periodically flooded.

19 Special thanks go to Alan Bowman and Charles Crowther for the incomparable opportunity given to the author, who was able to participate in the RTI scan of the Londinium–Bloomberg tablets at the MOLA museum in May 2017. For further reference and updates see Lindsay, Bennett, Ramsey, Crowther 2019.

20 *Descripta* are those documents containing a negligible amount of writing. This definition has been adopted by Bowman and Thomas in their first edition of the Vindolanda tablets (Bowman, Thomas 1983: 344).

21 This tag includes the documents that cannot be subsumed under the other labels for different reasons: only a few words may be readable – and therefore analysable – but it is impossible to determine the topic of the document and the style adopted. The only features that can be counted are the presence of non-classical forms and the script used. This definition can also be found in the first edition of the Vindolanda tablets (Bowman, Thomas 1983).

22 Tab.Lond. 48.

23 Tab.Vindol. 33.

24 Tab.Lond. 55.

25 Julius Classicus named in the Londinium–Bloomberg tablets was very likely the Julius Classicus who played an important role in the Batavian revolt, as he joined the rebellion of Gaius Julius Civilis during the disorder of the Year of the Four emperors (69 CE, cf. Tac. *Hist.* 2.14; 4.13).

26 In this selection of documents, there are also possible references at Vindolanda concerning the brewers (Tab. Vindol. 646), the commercial relationship with Londinium (Tab.Vindol. 310, 588), and also for the text types, such as accounts and writing exercises.

27 Refer to Cencetti (1948; 1950; 1978 *ex multis*).

28 This corpus contains perhaps the earliest evidence of the ala Sebosiana (cf. Tab.Luguv. 44; 46). They were stationed at Worms as part of the army of Upper Germany, but were then moved to north Italy where they un-

in its ditches[29] score a 'poor second' compared to the huge number from Vindolanda (Tomlin 1998: 31). The original name *Luguualium*[30] – 'wall[ed town] of Lugus' – is particularly interesting as it shows how, once again, the Romans picked up an existing local settlement of some kind, probably dedicated to the Celtic god *Lugus,* and turned it into a Roman fort.
These documents are a mixture of accounts and letters (see *Appendix*) and would have been illegible without multispectral (infra-red) photography, because unfortunately they were preserved in a waterlogged context which made the ink fade a few minutes after being exposed to oxygen, in addition to their highly fragmentary state. Most of them are just fragments of accounts or letters, containing just a few – and often tantalising – words. As a matter of fact, nearly half of the Carlisle corpus (48 %) is formed by *descripta.* Carlisle is also less varied

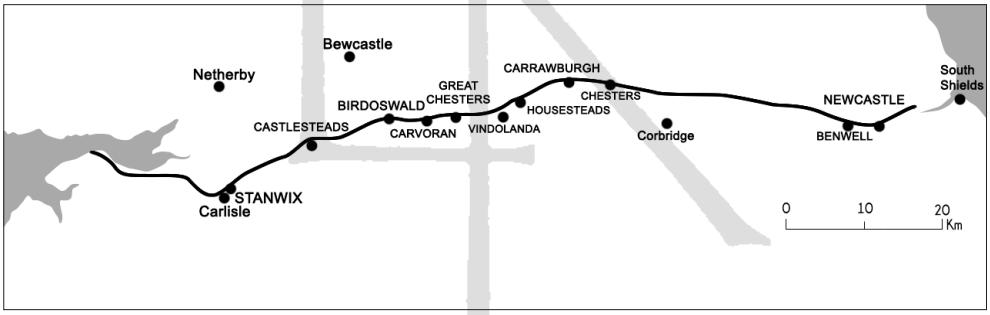

Figure 2: Roman forts on the Hadrian wall (Image made by author)

and more focused on the military life of the garrison, whereas the topics dealt with at Vindolanda range from personal concerns such as the fear of punishment (Tab.Vindol. 344) to military reports (Tab.Vindol. 128). In contrast to the Londinium–Bloomberg tablets, they do not contain financial documents.

Moreover, the references to the Vindolanda and Londinium–Bloomberg corpora allow the tracing of the Roman trading – and possibly also linguistic – network (see Tab.Luguv.

successfully resisted the Flavian until 69 CE; they eventually came to Britain with Cerialis in 71 CE (Tomlin 1998).

29 The archaeological excavation in the 1970s unearthed more than 150 ink-written tablets of which 77 have been considered suitable for linguistic investigation and included in the short corpus published by Tomlin (1998). The other stylus tablets from Carlisle which have been preserved are suitable for linguistic analysis, but the general outcome is not significant in terms of incidence of linguistic phenomena; nonetheless, single cases will be addressed throughout the book.

30 The toponym can be explained as 'Strong in (the god) Lugus' or with a Celtic personal masculine name, *Luguwalos*, whose real identity is now lost. In particular see Jackson (1953: 39): "…This looks like a place-name derived from Brit. […] So too, with Rom.-Brit. *Luguualium* (AI., var. *Luguvallum*, Rav. *Lagubalium*), Carlisle, which, as I have shown elsewhere, is probably from a personal name Brit. **Luguualos* or 'Strong in (the god) Lugus'".

28[31] and Tab.Vindol. 211,[32] 250,[33] 310[34]). It is possible to compare the different text types available, such as the personal correspondence written by men (see Tab.Luguv. 16[35] and Tab. Vindol. 628[36]) and the letters of recommendation (see Tab.Luguv. 33; Tab.Vindol. 250).

2.3. Vindolanda (85–205 CE)

The Vindolanda auxiliary fort has a very well-documented history, deriving both from its writing tablets and from other findings that make its historical and linguistic importance unquestionable. It was located alongside the Stanegate road, 40 kilometres from the fort of Carlisle (see Figure 2). It is very likely that, like Carlisle, the Romans used an existing local settlement as their base: the name Vindolanda itself betrays a Celtic origin and gives important clues regarding the landscape of the area in the 1st century CE. In fact, the name Vindolanda[37] is a Latin word composed of two lexemes of Celtic origin: **windo-* 'white' and **landā* 'open space, covered in vegetation' (Birley 2009: 26). For the adjective **windo-* we refer also to MW *gwynn* and OBRET *guinn* 'white, shiny'. The form **windo-* is also attested in Gaulish personal names like *Vinda* and *Vindus*, but more importantly in toponyms like *Vindobala* or *Vindonissa* (see also Matasović 2009: 423). Also, for **landā*, the etymology of the Celtic form stems from the Proto-Indoeuropean (zero-grade), originating different elements like OIr. *lann* 'land, plot, church', MW *llann* 'church-yard' and the Co. *lan*. The form **landā* occurs as well in toponyms of a Celtic milieu, like *Glanum* (in Provence) or *Mediolanum* (North Italy) (see also Matasović 2009: 232–233).

The anecdote of the first unexpected finding made in 1973 – available in every publication on this topic[38] – will be left aside to make room for the unexpected journey that these wafer-thin tablets, thrown away by their owners, made into the linguistic analysis of language variation and change. The Vindolanda writing tablets offer an unparalleled source of evidence of garrison life at the northernmost border of the Empire and linguistic variation among its writers. Despite the long archaeological history of the fort,[39] the Vindolanda corpus is dated to a very precise period because the documents found are ascribable to the Batavian and Tungrian cohorts – together with their civilian accompaniment – garrisoned at

31 The tablet mentions: *Londịnị ḍiụṭius…*

32 The reading is not clear because the text is full of lacunae, but the surviving text refers to a conversation which the author is about to have the next day at *Luguualium*.

33 This tablet is a letter of recommendation of *Annius Equester*, centurion in charge at *Luguualium*, and addressed to the prefect Cerialis at Vindolanda.

34 This tablet is explicitly addressed to Londinium: *Londini* | *Veldedeio* | *equisioni co(n)s(ularis)* | *a Chrauttio* | *fṛatre*. Translated by Bowman and Thomas (1983): "(Deliver) at London. To Veldedeius, groom of the governor, from his brother Chrauttius".

35 This is a report written by Docilinus relating to missing lances.

36 This tablet is the so-called "request for beer" written by the decurion Masclus of the ninth cohors of Batavians.

37 Adapting a compound from the local language using Latin features was a common practice, as is evident in other names of Roman forts: Vindobona, Vindonissa, and also Vindobala (Breeze 1983: 172). Today, the site of Vindolanda is known by other toponyms connected to the Latin *castrum*, like Chesterholm or Little Chester. It was the finding of an altar – in 1914 – that allowed the original name to be traced. Before that, the site was known as *Vindolana* (Birley 2009: 26).

38 History and updates are available on the web site [https://www.vindolanda.com/].

39 As anticipated, its first foundation dates to the mid-70s to 85 CE. The Romans built a long series of timber and stone forts – nine to be precise – that lasted for three centuries (Birley 2009: 183). At the end of the Roman occupation of Britannia (about 410 CE), the fort of Vindolanda continued to be occupied for the next few centuries, transforming itself from a Roman outpost into a community (Breeze 1983: 167).

Vindolanda between the end of the 1st and 3rd centuries CE. Specifically, the bulk of the Vindolanda corpus belongs to the period when the fort was occupied by the 9th cohort of Batavian (roughly from 95 to 103 ca CE).[40] In this way, together with the Londinium–Bloomberg and Carlisle corpora, this is a source of non-literary documents written on tablet from writers who were from the provinces of Gallia Belgica and the Rhine frontier, and does not represent the Latin spoken by the native population of Britain. As a matter of fact, in this corpus there are a few tablets containing negative remarks about local people. The first is Tab.Vindol. 164, in which the *Brittones* are also defined *brittunculi*. This was a memorandum of uncertain origin – probably an intelligence report written by the *exploratores* or a note left by a departing commanding officer for his successor[41] – in which Britons are described as fighting 'stark naked' as already noted by Caesar[42] and Tacitus.[43] The other evidence is from Tab.Vindol. 344 and can be considered 'indirect evidence' as the author wrote down a request of mercy and wished to clarify that he is a *homo trasmarinus* (sic) – probably from Gaul – distinguishing himself from the natives.

The text types of the Vindolanda corpus are the most multifaceted among the corpora considered; in fact, this is the only corpus in which documents ascribable both to men and women are available; the topics and types of texts range so broadly that it is possible to reconstruct aspects of daily life of the garrison. In the Vindolanda corpus it is possible to recognize a few major categories: personal correspondence (by men or by women); official correspondence (further subdivided between request for leave, letters of recommendation, memoranda, and military reports); accounts, writing exercises, miscellaneous; and *descripta* (see *Appendix*).[44] It should be stressed again that the editorial choice made by Bowman and Thomas sees the first edition of the Vindolanda corpus feature the published tablets ranging from Tab.Vindol. 1 to 117. Then, this first edition was re-edited *ex novo* and the tablets started their enumeration from Tab.Vindol. 118. Thus, the first tablet corresponds to Tab.Vindol. 118.

Vindolanda stems from a historical background in which all the forts were small settlements that were supposed to be self-sufficient.[45] Hence, one may note the large variety of text types ranging from personal correspondence between close friends, to military reports, lists of goods, requests for general supplies, and requests for leave. The Vindolanda writing tablets have added a lot of information, not only according to the linguistic perspective but also regarding onomastics and the lifestyle of the Roman auxiliary. Indeed, many of the letters contain touching moments from two thousand years ago, such as greeting friends and

40 The 9th cohort of Batavians was stationed at Vindolanda in the late 80s to early 90s CE first as a *cohors quinquagenaria*, and later as a *cohors miliaria*. This unit, like all the auxiliary units, was made up of non-citizen recruits, and came from the region of the Lower Rhine, between the Rhine and the Waal (Battaglia 2013: 53).

41 As Bowman and Thomas (1987) argued, the practice of leaving note of instruction is attested elsewhere in the Roman Empire, as in the case of the note from Valacius the dux of Egypt to Flavius Abinnaeus, an *ala* commander, as he was about to relinquish his post (PAbinn. 2. 6–7).

42 Caes., *BGall*. 1.25.4, *nudo corpore pugnare.*

43 Tac., *Ann*. 12.35, ... *nulla loricorum galearumue tegmina*.

44 Bowman and Thomas (1983) and the succeeding editions of the Vindolanda corpus offered less systematic and consistent labels: there was a broad distinction between the different text types distinguishing military documents, documents with the *renuntium* heading (i.e. military reports), miscellaneous documents, applications for leave, accounts and lists, and personal correspondence from people like Genialis, Cerialis and Verecundus.

45 From this perspective, Carlisle is not much different. What probably changes are the series of fortunate events that led to the preservation of such a substantial number of tablets at Vindolanda in comparison with the meagre number at Carlisle.

'messmates' (Tab.Vindol. 310,[46] 346[47]), New Year wishes (Tab.Vindol. 261[48]), invitations to birthday parties (Tab.Vindol. 291), and complaints about the weather requesting socks and underwear (Tab.Vindol. 234,[49] 346[50]). This multifarious material is particularly emblematic of the quality, extent, and nature of literacy in a community of writers from a military fort. The writing tablets collected show how a small proportion of the population was fully literate and therefore able to write and read (e.g. Cerialis, Genialis, high-ranked members of the *auxilia*, trained scribes) whereas in other cases it is possible to notice intermediate levels, in which the author added only final salutations and their signature, or low levels, in which the writing is fully entrusted to a trained person. There are indeed different levels of literacy but attempting at identifying them as Harris (1989) tried to do appears more complicated and not exactly as fruitful as originally seemed (Bowman 2003: 79). The statement recently made by Tomlin (2018: 201) concerning the difficulties within this kind of analysis – "Literacy can only be illustrated, not quantified, but the low assessment in Ancient Literacy can be nudged cautiously upward" – can be wholeheartedly endorsed.

As a matter of facts, corpora like Vindolanda, and to a lesser extent, Carlisle, are tools for considering how written documents (and therefore cases of linguist variations) are embedded in the different institutional and social structures of the society which produced them. Considering the many archaeological campaigns, the complex structure of the text types and writing materials, the corpus has been revised and published in different tranches during the years: from 1983 until the most recent 2019 update, the Vindolanda tablets were edited by Bowman and Thomas several times. The first edition (Bowman, Thomas 1983) contained both ink-written and stylus tablets. However, in the next editions of this publication (Bowman, Thomas 1994), the editors decided to focus only on ink tablets and published updates in 2003, 2010, 2011, and 2019. New publications, also concerning the stylus tablets are forthcoming.

2.4. Curse tablets (mainly Bath and Uley, 2nd–4th CE)[51]

Magic practices are detectable throughout the Roman Empire and the most important source for these practices is indeed curse tablets, intimately connected as they are with written texts. On one hand there is the official Roman religion – which can be described as a civic religion – which played a unifying role in the Roman Empire. On the other hand, curse tablets reflect

46 In particular: *Chrauttius Veldeio suó fratri* | *contubernali antiquo pluri*|*mam salutem…* Translated by Bowman, Thomas and Adams (1990): "Chrauttius to Veldeius his brother and old messmate, very many greetings".

47 In particular: *…ṣaluṭą..* [|]*ṇdem Elpidem Ịų*[|] *enum(?) Tetṛicum et omṇ*[*es*] | [*c*]*ontibernales.* Translated by Bowman and Thomas (1983): "Greet …ndes, Elpis, Iu…, …enus, Tetricus and all your messmates". Compare the [*c*]*ontibernales* from this tablet with the *contubernali* from Tab.Vindol. 310, showing an alternance between classical and non-classical forms.

48 *Hostilius Flauianus Cereali* | *suó salutem* | *annum `nouọm´ fạuṣṭum felicem.* Note also the non-classical form *Cereali*, instead of *Ceriali*. Translated by Bowman and Thomas (1994): "Hostilius Flavianus to his Cerealis, greetings. A fortunate and happy New Year".

49 In particular: *…qui ḟęṛạmuṣ ṭęṃ*|*pestates* ⟦*et hiem*⟧ *`etiam´ si* | *molestae sint.* Translated by Bowman and Thomas (1983): "… by means of which (?) we may endure the storms even if they are troublesome".

50 In particular: *…tibi paria udoṇ*[*um*] | *ṭ ab Sattua solearuṃ* [| *duo ▸ et subligarioruṃ* [| *duo solearum paria dų*[*o*]... Translated by Bowman and Thomas (1983): "I have sent (?) you … pairs of socks from Sattua, two pairs of sandals and two pairs of underpants, two pairs of sandals".

51 The tablets proved hard to date: combining the archaeological, historical and palaeographic data, it is possible to date them in a general way, between the 2nd and 4th centuries (approximately 175 and 400 CE).

the forbidden yet vital face of religion which was not meant to be publicly exhibited. Audollent (1904) classified the many types of enchantments (and therefore text types) available into four categories according to the content: *defixiones iudiciariae, agonisticae, amatoriae,* and *in fures*. The last types – *defixiones in fures* – consists of curses aimed at thieves which are either prophylactic, or, more commonly, against an unknown thief. Afterwards, Versnel defined them as 'prayers for justice' (Versnel 1991; 2010: 257–356). Furthermore, Poccetti (1995: 265–267) argued that the curse tablets available in Britain belong to a specific topic, which is that of the *deuotiones* as they appear as 'juridical prayer', a type of incantation that aims to obtain justice for something (Tomlin 1988: 59).[52] Actually, the definition of *deuotiones* is fitting if we are considering the strategy adopted by the curser asking something of a deity through a curse, so it is like stating which kind of contract the curser is signing because it can be considered a *uotum*; on the other hand, the definition 'prayers for justice' is fitting as well, if we are considering the final aim of the curse, which can be ensuring bad luck to someone, charm someone else's love, vengeance or – in this case – justice. These documents are both devotional testimonies – as they are addressed to local divinities – and also personal records, as they were not meant to be read by other people and they were usually hidden somewhere or thrown into springs and rivers.

Considering the writing material, there is not a standard shape or format, because these leaden sheets are often rolled, folded and pierced with nails, binding the curser's will with the gods' will and the target's destiny in the curse. Roman Britain has the highest number of curse tablets written in Latin: there are 300 curse tablets,[53] of which about 200[54] have been transcribed.[55] There are about 1700 *defixiones* known today from the entire ancient world and of these only 500[56] are written in Latin and published so far (Urbanovà 2018: 10). Due to the random – yet continuous – discoveries of these documents, there are many different publica-

52 Initially, the *deuotio* was an extreme form of *uotum* in which some Roman general binds both his and his enemy's destiny, vowing his own life in battle along with the enemy to chthonic gods, in exchange for victory (cf. Liv. *Hist*. VIII, 9.1.–10). In later times, around the 1st century CE, *deuotio* was adopted to indicate any kind of prayer or ritual that promised some person or thing to the gods, once the involved god had granted a certain request (cf. Nep. *Alc*. 4.5; 6.5; Catull. 64.135.; Tib. 1.8.18; Ovid. *Am*. 3.7.27).

53 The other hundred tablets are not legible because they are worn and/or fragmentary, or because they are mere *laminae anepigraphae*. Also, texts like amulets for protection, bilingual charms on gold, and phylactery are not counted among this kind of text because they belong to a different type of magical practice, which can be labelled as "magical protective text" and use, in some cases, other types of alphabets (see also Tomlin 1997b, 2004).

54 The area identified is shown in detail in *Appendix*.

55 It is difficult to disambiguate the influence of this magical layout and use of magic features of the curse tablets from linguistically relevant misspellings (Tomlin 1988: 174). Many of the linguistic or orthographic features may have been added tentatively to add additional persuasive power (Faraone, Kropp 2010: 377).

56 McKie (2022) accounts for 204 curse tablets for Roman Britain and his study rests on 607 'curse tablets'. However, one might argue that this number also includes religious items such as amulets, phylacteries, and other evidence containing *voces magicae*, *charactêres*, and drawings. However, not all of them can be counted as proper curses as they were made to defend people against magical attacks and not to perpetrate them.