CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Bassus to Galates, his brother, many greetings. I beg you, brother, give me news of yourself often, because you know that if there is trouble, I will not just be worried about you. Indeed, I fear for myself, because we are not very many here.

(*O.Krok.* 93)

These words, inked on a fragment of pottery recycled as a letter during the early second century AD, evoke the sense of vulnerability that Roman soldiers could experience during tours of duty in remote outposts. This letter was discovered in the Egyptian Eastern Desert and belongs to a class of documents known as *ostraca*, which have been found in their thousands among the ruins of quarry and military works established in those arid wastes (Fig. 1). As well as testifying to the eye-watering bureaucracy rampant in the Roman army, this remarkable corpus gives voice to the ordinary soldiers united – and separated – by service in outposts, many miles from their home base. Private letters, such as that written by Bassus to a comrade, expose the privations imposed by garrison life in inhospitable terrain populated by roaming bands of unpredictable 'barbarians'. Military reports provide clinical accounts of the skirmishes that erupted when these nomads trespassed on imperial interests, naming Roman casualties and cataloguing non-fatal injuries. The epitaph for their adversaries amounts to little more than a tally of the dead and a terse statement of their transgressions.

Although these reports of martial activity are valuable, not least because eyewitness accounts of Roman combat are rare, it is hardly surprising to learn that military garrisons could be called on to fight. Hints and allegations of

1 The ruins of the Roman *praesidium* of Maximianon, on the Myos Hormos road in the Egyptian Eastern Desert.
Credit: Dylan Bickerstaffe

crimes perpetrated by soldiers are more jarring for some popular perceptions of the Roman army. Correspondence, both official and unofficial, divulges unauthorised absenteeism, bribery, and rogue soldiers being restrained with chains. Entire garrisons would club together to fill their downtime by securing a prostitute's services. Such vivid vignettes permit us to see beyond the sanitised official histories and glimpse the realities of life in a Roman outpost. Integrating this information with the archaeological evidence allows us to view such service in the round. By their very nature the mute structures, finds assemblages, and other evidence interrogated by archaeologists are devoid of such salacious snippets of information. Nevertheless, this evidence speaks in its own way, exposing the gaming boards on which soldiers gambled away their pay, the shoddily surveyed barracks where they slept, and an air of confidence or unease in the strength of the defences that sheltered them. Archaeology is also the only way we can meet the local population unalloyed by the shameless prejudice of Roman sources. It is meticulous study of the dating indices recovered during excavations that hones the chronological hooks on which the study of most outpost networks hang. Weighing the drudgery, deprivation, and danger against the fraternity, whoring, and wheeler–dealing delivers a balanced and – to modern eyes – sometimes uncomfortable view of garrison life.

The installations at the heart of this activity are called *praesidia* in the *ostraca*, but in English we know them as fortlets. Such fortifications were constructed

throughout the frontier provinces of the Roman Empire, but there is little clarity concerning how these posts advanced military agendas. Determining the intentions and impact, whether planned or unexpected, of fortlet use forms the focus of this book. Such a study cannot consider fortlets in isolation, though, because they routinely acted as critical components of wider control, communications, and support systems. Although fortlets could be articulated with the entire suite of Roman fortification types, they were often used alongside towers to build complex networks of installations. Assessing what these networks delivered is essential to determining why fortlets were employed, making their relationship with towers of major significance. Less is known about towers, because there are fewer eyewitness accounts of their use, they are frequently hard to date, and in most cases reconstructions of their height are entirely conjectural. Even so, they share one attribute with fortlets that seemingly distinguishes them from the other permanent installations constructed by the Roman army: so far as we can tell, no single individual would remain permanently stationed in either a fortlet or a tower; instead, they were manned by rotating detachments of soldiers that had been posted out from their home bases.

The following chapters examine how and why fortlets were employed from the first to the fourth century AD, and assess what combining them with towers achieved. For the purposes of this study, fortlets and towers will be collectively referred to as 'outposts'. This deviates from the traditional application of the term more widely in Roman military studies, perhaps most famously to the 'outpost forts' held north of Hadrian's Wall. Narrowing the definition to fortlets and towers alone is not due to the sense the word can convey of lonely sentinels in far-flung locales – although some sites are certainly worthy of this image – but because the term offers a particularly apt description of the itinerant nature of their literally out-posted garrisons. Although evidence will be drawn from across the Roman Empire, this study will focus on the area of north-west Europe corresponding to modern Britain, the Netherlands, Germany, France, and Switzerland. There is a dearth of ancient writing of all kinds directly relating to outposts in this region, but insights can be gleaned from the rich archaeological datasets, and amplified to remarkable effect using information furnished by the desert *ostraca* and other documentation. This approach promises to reveal how the army operated at a local scale by inserting modest garrisons into regions that were often home to sizable local communities. Despite an enduring fascination with the activities of Roman armies, this is a story that has rarely been told. It is not about winning set-piece battles, something that the military excelled at for centuries. Instead, it concerns a struggle the Roman state found harder to resolve: delivering day-to-day security and peace.

OUTPOSTS OF EMPIRE

Any discussion of Rome's security apparatus inevitably turns to, and sometimes does not venture beyond, discussion of the remarkable artificial frontiers that proliferated in the second century AD. These complex and phenomenally ambitious control systems drew on the panoply of existing military installation types and integrated them with linear obstacles to impose barriers where rivers, seas, or swathes of desert did not present a suitable surrogate. By the mid-second century AD the ancient orator Aelius Aristides could declaim, with judicious sycophancy, that 'An encamped army, like a rampart, encloses the civilised world in a ring . . . in all time there has never been a wall so firm. For it is a barrier of men who have not acquired the habit of flight' (*Roman Oration* 26, 80–84). That 'barrier of men' was achieved by employing fortlets and towers in greater numbers and more ingenious configurations than ever before. The sheer numbers involved, the large proportion that were built of masonry, and the fame of frontiers like Hadrian's Wall, the Antonine Wall, and the Upper German and Raetian *limites* have resulted in these fortlets and towers receiving the lion's share of scholarly attention. By far the most famous fortlets in the north-west provinces, and arguably the Empire, are the examples known as milecastles on Hadrian's Wall. Although this renown has elevated the milecastles to the status of literal textbook examples, the unprecedented degree to which they were shaped by the needs of the overarching frontier system also makes them the least representative example of fortlets currently known (Symonds 2013, 53). If the dynamics driving the adaptation of these installations is to be understood, it is essential to take a wider perspective.

By the time the first fortlets and towers were founded along artificial frontier lines, the Roman military had at least a century's worth of experience using them in north-west Europe. As such, the great second-century mural frontiers do not mark the beginning of the story of the Roman military's experimentation with fortlets and towers, nor do they represent the final word on the matter. Instead, they occupy the middle part of the narrative, ushering in what is seemingly the high-water mark of the *pax Romana* within the Empire's bounds. In order to set the frontiers in context, and glean fresh insights into the workings of these border systems, this book is separated into three thematic sections: consolidating conquest, border control and provincial collapse. Although there is some overlap between the time periods these cover, this approach reflects a rough distinction between early, middle, and late Roman imperial period approaches to outpost use. Inevitably, such partitioning runs the risk of creating or entrenching artificial divisions, but it is also essential if the evolution of deployment techniques is to be isolated and understood.

Despite a long-standing scholarly fascination with Roman fortifications, this particular field of study is not oversubscribed. Although many excellent

excavations of fortlets have been mounted, until now no single book dedicated to the broader class has been published. It is fair to say that towers have elicited more attention, but in many cases this focused on their signalling potential. It is not the intention of this book to present an exhaustive account of the specifications of every fortlet founded in the north-west provinces, or even every group combining fortlets and towers. Instead, a series of case studies is employed to illuminate military strategies, while the design and distribution of selected sites are used as vehicles to explore the purpose of these installations and the nature of life within them. Such scrutiny brings the individual building blocks of sophisticated surveillance, communication, and security systems into sharp focus. Surprisingly, perhaps, one corollary of adopting an unashamedly outpost-centric approach is that it delivers a satisfyingly cohesive account of the wider security situation in the north-west provinces. It also permits differing military responses to the trials of holding and consolidating territory to be identified, both in discrete regions and more broadly between Britain and Continental Europe. As such, fortlet use will be examined at both micro and macro levels. By clarifying what these garrisons could achieve in their immediate hinterland, and identifying differences in regional and provincial patterns of use, it is possible to chart the fluctuating fortunes of Rome's drive for security. In order to lay the foundations for this analysis, the remainder of this chapter introduces fortlets and, because of their significance to this study, towers, discusses why Roman armies needed them, and then uses contemporary documentary evidence to provide a taste of everyday life within fortlets.

WHAT IS A FORTLET?

It is an apt reflection of the modest attention fortlets have received that there is currently no universally accepted definition of what precisely constitutes one. This omission can seem surprising, given that they are one of only five installation types routinely employed by Roman armies in the west during the first three centuries AD.[1] Of these, fortresses, forts, fortlets, and towers served as permanent installations, while temporary camps were raised to provide overnight protection for armies on the march, defences for military construction teams, or even practise in the art of castrametation (see Welfare and Swan 1995; Davies and Jones 2006; Jones 2011). Comparing fortlets to the three other permanent fortification types provides a possible explanation for this lacuna in classification.

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[1] Greater diversity occurred in the east, where the presence of sophisticated urban cultures allowed the army to adapt existing fortifications or cities, as well as constructing their own installations (Haynes 2013, 145).

Box 1: The Imperial Roman Military

From the first until the third century AD, the principal elements of Rome's land forces were the legions and the *auxilia*. The legions constituted Rome's iconic heavy infantry and recruited from among Roman citizens. The basic unit of a legion was a century, which comprised eighty men. These centuries were themselves formed of ten sets of eight messmates, known as a *contubernium*, a subdivision that is frequently visible in fortress – and fort – barrack blocks. There were ten cohorts in each legion, and each of these contained six centuries, except for the first cohort, which consisted of five double centuries. This produced a paper strength of 5,120, to which about 120 cavalry should be added (Goldsworthy 2003, 51–55). Tacitus states that twenty-five legions existed in AD 23 (*Annals* 4, 5).

The *auxilia*, literally 'helpers', were recruited from occupied territories, making them both one of the spoils of conquest and the engine that powered further expansion. Many such groups had specialist martial traditions, of which two clichéd examples include Bavarian riders and Syrian archers. Such ethnic stereotypes should not be accepted uncritically (Haynes 2013, 285). Auxiliary soldiers could serve in *alae* (cavalry units), infantry *cohortes*, and *cohortes equitates* (mixed infantry and cavalry units). Infantry cohorts were divided into centuries, just like legions, but the cavalry consisted of *turmae* (Goldsworthy 2003, 55–58). A strength report from Vindolanda illustrates the danger of being dogmatic about notional unit sizes, and discloses how dispersed its members could be (*TV* II 154). By AD 23, the numbers serving in the *auxilia* were roughly equal to those in the legions, and would continue to rise (*Annals* 4, 5; Haynes 2013, 1).

The third century was a time of financial and, in many parts of the Empire, military turmoil. By the beginning of the fourth century, the principal division in the military was no longer between citizens and provincials, but between field armies and frontier forces. The former, or *comitatenses*, were employed as a mobile force to fight set-piece battles, and enjoyed better terms of service. This has resulted in the static *limitanei* on the frontiers being perceived as somewhat second rate, although there is little justification for this prejudice (Collins 2012, 36–37). Unit sizes are believed to have been reduced substantially in the late Roman army, but their precise strength remains a subject of debate.

Forts and fortresses were designed to quarter, supply, and administer auxiliary units and legions respectively (see Box 1), and are celebrated for the 'playing-card' layout of their defences. As auxiliary units have a paper strength ranging from under 500 to over 1,000 men (Goldsworthy 2003, 57–58), while legions comprised more than 5,000, there was a substantial difference in size between these two installation types (Fig. 2). Vexillation fortresses occupy this middle ground and seem to have held an amalgamation of units forming battlegroups during the conquest period. These have been described as 'special groupings which cut across the regimental arrangements of the Roman army',

but they neatly illustrate that such bases were not always designed with a single unit in mind (Bidwell 2007, 26–27). Indeed, the difficulty of reconciling the quantity of accommodation in some auxiliary forts with known unit sizes has been taken to imply that they may have held either elements of two or more different units, or only a substantial portion of a single unit (Hanson 2007, 655). Even in such cases, though, the fort presumably served as the formal head-quarters for many, if not all, of the soldiers brigaded within its walls. Although no two forts or fortresses are identical, the replication of interiors containing standardised building stock laid out according to a generic template created a broad similarity in style. The same is true of towers. Although, as will be discussed, towers came in a variety of shapes and sizes, the essential format remains constant. The upshot is that fortresses, forts, and towers all have core attributes and a distinctive character, which makes it relatively straightforward to distinguish between them.

Fortlet designs are less predictable. This diversity is probably a consequence of individual installations being essentially bespoke compositions, tailored to the tasks that their garrisons were expected to undertake and constrained only by the range of roles that modest numbers of soldiers were deemed capable of fulfilling (Symonds 2015a, 82–84). As has been noted, all of those on duty in fortlets appear to have been temporarily posted away from their home forts or fortresses. The resulting garrisons appear to vary in both size and composition, presumably in accordance with the manpower and range of martial skills judged necessary to deliver the desired outcome. Naturally, this approach would require individual fortlets to hold varying quantities of barrack accom-modation. Further diversity ensued from the occasional provision of specialist ancillary buildings, such as granaries or workshops. The need for these add-itional facilities, as well as numerous other design refinements, was presumably also dictated by operational requirements. This apparent willingness to tailor the fortlets to local needs generated a wide variety of internal sizes and layouts. Tellingly, perhaps, the closest parallel for this flexible approach to design lies not among the other permanent installation types, but the temporary camps. The internal areas of these 'disposable' fortifications vary even more starkly, in line with the size of force the camps sheltered. A further parallel is apparent in the distribution of the camps, which were only constructed where armies or construction parties needed accommodation, or soldiers undertook training. A comparable, demand-based approach to deploying fortlets is suggested by their known frequency. This fits, both geographically and chronologically, with fortlets only being constructed where and when they were actively needed, rather than as an automatic by-product of conquest (Symonds 2015a, 84).

In most cases fortlets are immediately identifiable by virtue of their size (see Fig. 2), but the degree of design flexibility has hampered attempts to determine
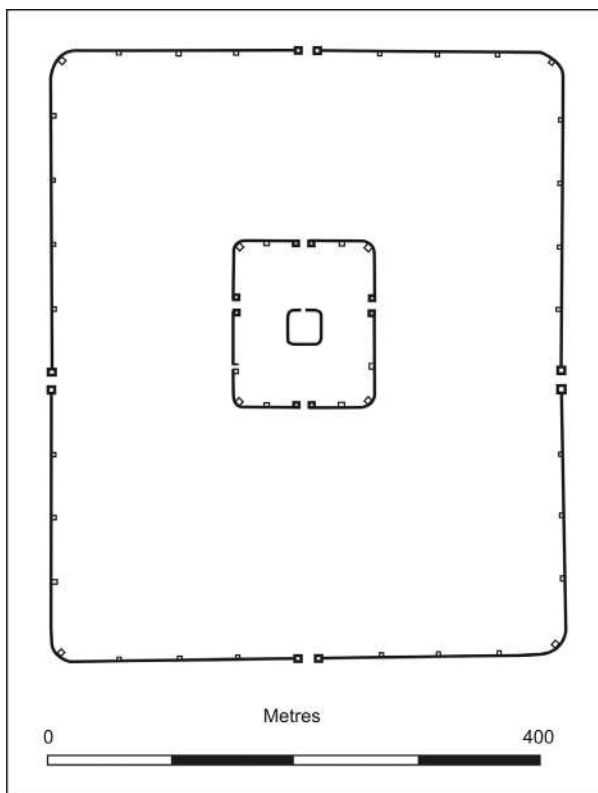
2 A sense of proportion: the superimposed ramparts of the legionary fortress at Caerleon, the auxiliary fort at Wallsend, and the small, internal fortlet enclosure at Old Burrow.

a clear-cut distinction between forts and fortlets. While the smallest fortlets enclose areas of less than 200m², a handful of the very largest have internal areas of more than 4,000m² (Walker 1989, 91–93), bringing them into the size range of small forts. Attempts to distinguish between small forts and large fortlets generally follow one of two approaches. The first advocates a literal interpretation of the modern English, German, French, and Danish names for these installations, which all carry a consistent connotation: fortlet, *Kleinkastell*, *fortin* and *mini-kastell*. Such terminology casts fortlets as, literally, small forts (see Jones 2015, 931). It is in this spirit that attempts have been made to establish an arbitrary size cut-off between forts and fortlets. One obstacle is the absence of an obvious point at which to draw the line, resulting in Mackensen (1987, 69) proposing a maximum size of 2,000m², and Walker (1989, 105) one of 4,150m². The latter figure owes more to the dimensions of the Antonine Wall fort at Rough Castle than any notion of how fortlets themselves were organised and used. Such a methodology also raises the question of why, if the distinction between forts and fortlets is one of size rather than function, separate terms are needed at all.

In order to resolve this ambiguity, Frere and St Joseph devised an alternative means of distinguishing forts from fortlets by focusing on the presence or absence of a particular building type:

> the distinction between a (small) fort and a fortlet has been defined by the absence of an administrative headquarters building (*principia*) from the latter. A military site, however small, which was occupied by an independent unit with its own administration, is a fort; the garrison of a fortlet lacked its own administrative apparatus, because the troops comprised a detachment from a unit whose headquarters was elsewhere.
>
> (Frere and St Joseph 1983, 135)

The *principia* was a monumental complex that lay at the physical and ritual heart of a fort or fortress. It comprised a basilica-like crosshall, offices, and an open-air forecourt, and provided a suitably grandiose setting for the *aedes* (shrine), which housed the standards that Webster (1998, 133) called 'the soul' of a unit. The layout of a fort or fortress reinforced this significance, with the *aedes* usually aligned on the principal entrance: the *porta praetoria*. One reason why Frere and St Joseph's definition has not been widely adopted is that examples of *principia* have been proposed within some fortlets. Two prominent examples include the possible headquarters buildings in the fortlets at Tisavar, Tunisia, and Castleshaw, Greater Manchester (Fig. 3; Walker 1989, 106;
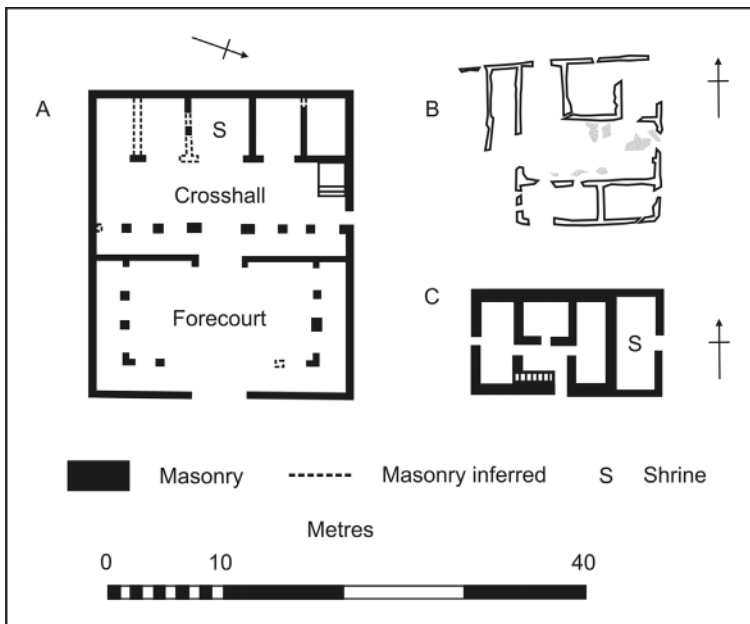
3 The *principia* in the fort on Hadrian's Wall at Housesteads (A), compared to two structures that have been identified as possible *principia* in the fortlets at Castleshaw (B) and Tisavar (C).
After: Bosanquet 1904; Walker 1989; Mackensen 2010

Mackensen 2010, 464). In both cases these identifications can be claimed as a case of mistaken identity. The Castleshaw structure has also been interpreted as a possible workshop, commander's quarters, and *mansio* (Redhead 1989, 62–65), while the central building at Tisavar is likely to be the ground floor of a multi-storey, tower-like structure (Gombeaud 1901, 88).

Rejecting the presence of a formal *principia* within fortlets should not be taken as suggesting that none of the bureaucratic and ritual functions ascribed to this space occurred within fortlets. There is ample evidence for their garrisons generating and circulating military correspondence, and at least some fortlets contained shrines (Reddé 2006, 248–251; Reddé 2015). A distinction should be drawn, though, between dedicated spaces for managing day-to-day military bureaucracy and a garrison's spiritual needs and a formal *principia*. Whether a fortlet garrison would qualify for their own standard is unclear, but it is possible they received a *vexillum* – a flag issued to detachments. A hole to receive such a standard has been claimed in a podium excavated within a shrine in the Eastern Desert *praesidium* at Iovis (Reddé 2015, 42–43). If correctly interpreted, this neatly illustrates that fortlets could contain both administrative space and an *aedes* holding the detachment flag without requiring a monumental *principia* complex. Admittedly, applying the Frere and St Joseph definition following the changes to fort fabric during the late Roman Empire is more challenging (see Box 1 and p. 178). Even so, as nothing that truly resembles a formal *principia* has yet been detected within an installation that is otherwise indicative of a fortlet, the distinction seems viable.

This approach effectively establishes a distinction between not only forts and fortlets but also the four permanent installation types commonly used by Roman armies. As we have seen, forts and fortresses can be thought of as home bases for army units, or at least substantial portions thereof, while fortlets and towers were the preserve of rotating detachments of troops. Naturally, soldiers based within forts and fortresses did not simply reside within the ramparts until they were needed. A famous unit strength report from Vindolanda, Northumberland, revealed that more than half of the unit was engaged on duties away from the fort (*TV* II 154). Daily duties in the fort environs, detachment en masse to an urban centre or different fort, or secondment to a prestigious office would, though, have been a very different experience to outpost duty. That typically seems to have entailed individuals being separated for a period of months or years from their messmates and the lives they had built at their home base (see Breeze 2015a) in order to man a small, Spartan-like and often distant post. The corrosive effect that fragmenting a unit could have on morale presumably spurred Emperor Trajan's maxim that 'as few soldiers as possible should be withdrawn from their standard' (Pliny *Letters* 10, 20). As such, Frere and St Joseph's definition is tantamount to not only a functional difference but also a psychological one for the soldiers comprising the fortlet garrison.