



# Arbeia

a David Meadows et Amicis



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Expeditiones Primae Cohortis Auxiliaris  
Morinorum ad Finem Septentrionalem

a David Meadows et Amicus

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The Campaigns of the First Auxiliary Cohort of  
Morini on the Northern Frontier

by David Meadows and Friends

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## THE PROLOGUE

It was a dark and stormy night.

According to the veteran Marcus, it was always dark and stormy in Britannia Secunda<sup>i</sup>, and he should know as it was the land of his birth. But then, he was a professional worrier who could see the worst side of any situation.

Meus Inconhare Pugna regularly complained to anyone who would listen to his appalling Latin that this was the worst land he had ever known, though all he had to compare it with was his own home province of Cappadocia, where, he claimed, it never rained. His only consolation, he declared, was that there should soon be some barbarians to fight.

The young recruit Beaux Gestius of Anatolia kept silent on the matter, privately convinced that it was the excessive complaining that had caused their contubernia<sup>ii</sup> to be placed in the last position of the last centuria<sup>iii</sup> of the cohort and therefore having to suffer the mud churned up by the rest of the column as it marched through the incessant rain.

Servius Simplicius Cattianus, the Gaul, was explaining in malicious detail about 'snow' to a horrified Meus, when their centurio<sup>iv</sup>, Gaius Gormus Velius, called their column to a halt.

The First Auxiliary Cohort<sup>v</sup> of Morini<sup>vi</sup>, as you may have surmised, was a mixed bag of recruits from all over the empire. The cohort was originally raised from the conquered Morini tribe of north-eastern Europa, but that was long ago in the time of Caesar Vespasianus Augustus, and Roman policy was to fill vacancies in units with whatever recruits were available, regardless of their origin. Now, in the second year of Ceasar Flavius Valentinianus Augustus<sup>vii</sup>, there were none in the cohort who even remembered what the Morini tribe was.

The men had been in a mood to match the foul weather ever since disembarking on the shore of this gods-forsaken island. For days, the cohort had marched ever further north. On reaching the city of Eboracum<sup>viii</sup>, they were looking forward to a relaxing billet, but fate, or in this case the city's military commander, had other plans for them. It seemed that the Praefectus<sup>ix</sup> of some frontier fort even further north was asking for reinforcements, and the Morini were selected for the task. Specifically, the sixth, or most junior, centuria of the cohort was deemed sufficient. This may be because the other five centuriones all hated Gaius Gormus Velius, the centurio of the sixth centuria, or it may simply have been that the gods<sup>x</sup> hated him.

Whatever the reason, the eighty men of the centuria found themselves marching a further four days along the Great North Road<sup>xi</sup>, every mile of it in the rain.

Aponus, the decanus<sup>xii</sup> of the contubernia, came hurrying back from where the centurio had called the decani to a briefing.

‘Are we pitching the tent?’ asked Servius hopefully.

‘No, the milestone we just reached makes it three miles to Arbeia<sup>xiii</sup>, and Velius wants us to press on and reach it tonight.’

There was a babble of debate among the men of the contubernia, some eager to march on to proper shelter, others preferring stop and have a cooked meal in the relative shelter of their tent.

‘Did I call for a debate?’ Aponus asked sarcastically. ‘The centurio says march, so we march. Form up!’

Meus had been staring intently into the woods to the west of the road.

‘Aponus, I see a light over there. A campfire, I think.’

‘Nothing to do with us, lad. Form up and march on.’

‘I think someone should tell the centurio, he’ll probably want us to investigate.’

‘No need—’ began Aponus, but Meus was already gone.

Aponus and Marcus rolled their eyes at one another as Meus sprinted to the front of the column to alert the centurio. Veterans with almost fifty years of service between them, they knew that the first rule of staying alive and comfortable was *don’t* tell the centurio that you want to investigate mysterious lights in the woods.

It was going to be a very long night.



- i After A.D. 293, emperor Constantius divided Britannia into four provinces each with its own governor. Britannia Secunda was the province that covered what we now call northern England.
- ii Eight men who shared a single tent, pack mule, and common supplies while marching, comprise a contubernium. They would generally have two servants to help with their equipment, but the servants of the tenth contubernium won't appear in this narrative. It seems likely that they deserted a long time ago, and honestly I can't blame them.
- iii Eighty men comprise a centuria. The six centuriae of the cohort are ranked in order of prestige and combat performance, with the sixth centuria considered the worst.
- iv A centurio leads a centuria. It's a position often gained through political favour rather than combat merit, and that is certainly the case with centurio Gaius Gormus Velius, as his men are painfully aware.
- v A cohort is usually a part of a legion, but an auxiliary cohort such as the First Morini is not attached to a legion but formed independently, usually consisting of recruits from conquered territories. A full-strength cohort will contain six centuriae, around 480 fighting men plus officers and support functions. The cohort marches in a column, with the most senior (determined by ability in battle) centuria leading and the most junior bringing up the rear. You should by now realise how low down the pecking order our 'heroes' are.
- vi The Morini occupied an area in what is modern day Belgium, and were conquered by the Romans around A.D. 70.
- vii A.D. 366.
- viii Modern day York.
- ix Praefectus is a military rank. A praefectus is usually the commander of a cohort but could also command a town, or a fort and its surrounding civilian precincts.
- x Although the emperors had converted to Christianity, it was not yet mandatory in the empire, and most soldiers would believe in and worship a plurality of gods.
- xi Roughly the route of the modern A1 road.
- xii The leader of a contubernium. Not a military appointment in the chain of command in the way that we would recognise, for example, a sergeant today, more of a 'team leader' who would speak for the men in his contubernium, as well as ensure they kept in line.
- xiii A fort at the extreme northern border of the province of Britannia Secunda, located on the south bank of the mouth of the river Vedra (today's river Tyne).