



# Tribal Conflicts Case Study - Epiacum: Archaeological and Military-Historical Report

## ABSTRACT

*The fort stands on the Maiden Way, the north–south Roman road linking forts in the central Pennines with the Hadrian's Wall sector to the north and more southerly routes to the south.*

## 1. Location, Landscape and Strategic Setting

Name: Epiacum (Roman), later known as Whitley Castle from the nearby Whitlaw/Whitley holdings.

Location: Upper South Tyne valley, North Pennines, Cumbria/Northumberland border (c. grid ref. NY 6948 4872).

Altitude: Around 330 m (c. 1,050 ft), making it the highest stone-built Roman fort in Britain.

Topography: A narrow, east-facing hill spur with steep slopes to north and south, overlooking the upper South Tyne and controlling local routeways across the Pennines.

Road link: The fort stands on the Maiden Way, the north–south Roman road linking forts in the central Pennines with the Hadrian's Wall sector to the north and more southerly routes to the south.

Strategic context: Epiacum occupies an interior frontier position, providing depth behind Hadrian's Wall, controlling a key upland road and overseeing access to the Alston Moor lead-mining district.

## 2. Chronology and Phases of Occupation

Pre-Roman activity: The hill spur likely saw earlier use in the Iron Age, in line with other defended and enclosed sites in the North Pennines. A small native enclosed settlement, field systems and trackways in the wider landscape predate the fort and provided the human and economic context that Rome sought to control.

Initial construction (early 2nd century AD): Pottery and structural evidence suggest an initial stone fort built in the early 120s AD, broadly contemporaneous with the construction of Hadrian's Wall. Epiacum appears in this phase as part of the wider reorganisation of the northern frontier under Hadrian, acting as a support base and road-fort behind the Wall.

Mid-imperial rebuild: The fort went through a major phase of demolition and rebuilding, dated to around AD 200. This is expressed in the reworking of ramparts, internal buildings and the overall defensive circuit. This phase is associated with the wider Severan reorganisation of the frontier (see Section 3).

Later Roman modifications (later 3rd–4th centuries AD): A further significant phase of rebuilding and modification occurs around AD 300, including changes to the internal plan and the associated bath building. Finds indicate continued occupation into the 4th century, aligning Epiacum with the late Roman frontier system until the gradual withdrawal of imperial control from Britain in the later 4th–early 5th centuries.



Abandonment: By the end of the 4th century the fort appears to have been abandoned as a garrisoned site. Stone from the walls and buildings was later robbed for local use, but the earthworks remained undisturbed under pasture.

### **3. Epiacum and the Severan Crisis (AD 196–211): Tribal Uprisings and Fort Rebuilding**

#### **3.1 Civil War and the Stripping of Britain (AD 193–197)**

In the 190s AD the Roman Empire was wracked by civil war. Following the death of Commodus and a rapid succession of emperors, Septimius Severus emerged as a key claimant. In the west he faced the powerful rival Decimus Clodius Albinus, governor of Britain. In AD 196, Albinus declared himself emperor and led the bulk of the British field army—drawn from the legions and supporting auxilia—across the Channel into Gaul. This left Britain under-strength and politically unsettled.

In AD 197 the opposing forces met near Lugdunum (modern Lyon) in what ancient sources describe as one of the largest battles ever fought between Roman armies. Severus prevailed; Albinus was killed and his supporters were ruthlessly purged. Britain, having lost many experienced soldiers in Gaul, was left exposed at a moment when the northern frontier was already under pressure. Later summaries of the period explicitly note that, while the legions were absent and during the aftermath, Britain suffered attacks and incursions from northern confederations often labelled Picts, Caledonians and Maeatae.

#### **3.2 Northern Raids and the Build-up to Severus' British Campaigns**

The removal of troops for Albinus' campaign and the casualties at Lugdunum created a window of opportunity for northern groups beyond the Wall. Raiding intensified and appears to have become more coordinated, with larger coalitions of tribes harrying the frontier. This pattern fits a recurrent dynamic seen elsewhere in the empire: frontier peoples testing Roman defences when internal civil war distracts the centre.

Once Severus had secured his position as emperor, the disturbed state of Britain demanded attention. In AD 208 he travelled to Britain in person with a substantial field army, initiating a series of northern campaigns that pushed beyond Hadrian's Wall and reasserted Roman control deep into Caledonia. These operations involved reoccupation and strengthening of forts between Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine line, the repair of roads and bridges, and intensive campaigning in difficult terrain with heavy Roman casualties.

#### **3.3 Fort Rebuilding Around AD 200: Archaeology and Interpretation**

Archaeologically, Epiacum shows a major rebuilding phase around the turn of the 3rd century AD. The original Hadrianic fort was partly dismantled and reconstructed, with modifications to ramparts, gateways and internal buildings. Although no inscription explicitly states that this work followed a specific uprising, the timing dovetails with the period of disruption caused by Albinus' rebellion and the subsequent Severan campaigns.

From a military-historical perspective, it is reasonable to interpret this phase as part of a wider Severan programme of strengthening interior forts and key economic sites. An upland fort that guarded a strategic road and controlled lead- and silver-producing districts would have been a natural priority for fortification in an era of heightened tribal pressure and imperial reassertion.

#### **3.4 Tribal Conflicts – Roman Responses: Epiacum as a Case Study**



Placed within the broader pattern of 'Tribal Conflicts – Roman Responses', Epiacum illustrates several recurring themes:

- Tribal opportunity in Roman weakness: Northern groups exploited the removal and loss of British troops in Albinus' cause and the immediate aftermath of Lugdunum, probing and raiding the frontier while imperial attention was fixed elsewhere.
- Roman depth-defence and economic security: The Severan response was not limited to repairing Hadrian's Wall. It also strengthened interior forts like Epiacum, providing greater depth to the frontier and shoring up control of critical economic resources such as lead and silver. Rebuilding the fort with its unusually complex ramparts fits this logic of hardening key nodes rather than merely patching the line of the Wall.
- Escalation and militarisation: Severus' later campaigns, including reprisals against the Maeatae and other confederations, were severe, involving scorched-earth tactics and mass killings according to ancient accounts. Epiacum's elaborate earthworks and prolonged occupation into the 4th century can be read as material expressions of this escalated and more militarised frontier environment.
- Long-term consequences: The Severan crisis thus becomes a hinge in Epiacum's story—linking internal imperial politics, northern tribal resistance and structural investment in frontier infrastructure. The fort's second phase stands as a physical witness to a moment when Britain's interior forts were upgraded to meet both tribal threats and the empire's own economic and strategic needs.

#### 4. Fort Plan, Earthworks and Internal Layout

**Overall form:** Unlike the typical 'playing-card' rectangle of most Roman forts, Epiacum has a lozenge- or skewed parallelogram-shaped plan. The engineers clearly adapted the standard fort template to fit the narrow, angled hill spur, aligning walls with the topography while preserving the internal grid of streets and buildings as far as possible.

**Size:** The fort interior measures roughly 140 m by 115 m (c. 1.25 ha, or about 4 acres), suitable for a standard 600-strong auxiliary cohort with its headquarters, barracks, granaries and commandant's house.

**Defensive earthworks:** Epiacum's defences are unusually complex. Multiple concentric ramparts and ditches surround the fort, with up to seven ditches on the more vulnerable uphill south-west side and four to five ditches on other sides. A stone curtain wall crowned the inner rampart, with rounded angle-towers and gate-towers marking the principal entrances. This 'over-engineering' suggests that the site was considered particularly important or vulnerable, consistent with its role in guarding both a strategic road and nearby mining operations.

**Internal buildings:** Though largely unexcavated, survey and limited antiquarian work indicate the expected suite of Roman fort buildings: a central principia (headquarters building), a praetorium (commanding officer's house), barrack blocks for the auxiliary cohort, granaries (horrea) and workshops. A bath house lay outside the north-west corner of the fort, partially investigated in the early 19th century, indicating the usual facilities for bathing, socialising and hygiene.

**State of preservation:** Because the site has never been extensively quarried or ploughed, the earthworks remain remarkably clear under pasture, and the buried masonry of buildings is likely to be well preserved. This gives the site exceptional research potential as an intact Roman fort and vicus complex.

#### 5. Garrison and Units: Who Was Stationed There?



Garrison type and size: On size and layout, Epiacum is best interpreted as an auxiliary fort designed for a part-mounted cohort (cohors equitata) of around 600 men: around 480 infantry and 120 cavalry. Such mixed units were ideal for patrolling wide upland districts, escorting convoys and reacting quickly to raids.

Identified units: Inscriptions from the site name at least one auxiliary unit and demonstrate links to a legionary base:

- Cohors II Nerviorum: An inscription dedicated to Apollo names the Second Cohort of Nervians, an auxiliary unit originally recruited from the Nervii of the lower Rhine. This dedication is dated on epigraphic grounds to the early 3rd century (c. AD 213–221), showing that the unit was present at Epiacum during or shortly after the Severan period.
- Legio VI Victrix: An altar to Hercules is dedicated by a centurion of the Sixth Legion Victorious (Legio VI Victrix Pia Fidelis), whose main base was at York (Eboracum). This suggests that legionary officers—perhaps attached to building projects, inspection tours or mixed detachments—were active at Epiacum.

Other units may have garrisoned the fort at various times, but the epigraphic evidence confirms that Epiacum was an auxiliary base integrated into the wider network commanded from the legionary headquarters at York and coordinated with forts on Hadrian's Wall.

The wider community: As at other frontier forts, the military garrison was only part of the population. A civilian vicus clustered around the fort brought together traders, craftsmen, families, unofficial partners of soldiers, labourers associated with mining and transport, and local Britons drawn into the orbit of the base.

## 6. Function: Why Epiacum Was Built Where It Was

Support for Hadrian's Wall and frontier depth: Epiacum is part of the depth-defence behind Hadrian's Wall. Instead of sitting directly on the Wall line, it occupies a position from which patrols can move along the Maiden Way and into the surrounding hills. In times of crisis it could receive units from the Wall, act as a secure depot for supplies and equipment, and help coordinate operations across the interior.

Control and protection of mining: The fort's proximity to the Alston Moor mineral field is critical. The Pennines here contain rich deposits of lead ore (galena), often with associated silver. Roman interest in these resources is well attested elsewhere in Britain. Epiacum's siting makes excellent sense as a military base overseeing extraction, securing the labour force, and protecting shipments of ore and smelted metal moving along the road network. In a frontier province, controlling such valuable resources was as important as defending the political boundary.

Policing local communities and routes: In addition to resource security and frontier depth, Epiacum functioned as a policing hub. From the fort, soldiers could monitor movement along upland trackways, river crossings and passes. Patrols could deter cattle-raiding and inter-tribal conflict that threatened Roman interests, while intelligence-gathering among local communities provided early warning of unrest further north.

Symbolic presence: Finally, the fort's prominent position on a hill spur above the South Tyne gave it a strong visual impact. For local communities, the walls, towers, and marching columns of soldiers would have been constant reminders of Roman power, taxation and justice in what had previously been an indigenous upland landscape.



## 7. Civilian Settlement (Vicus) and Daily Life

**The vicus:** Detailed survey has identified a substantial civilian settlement to the north and west of the fort. This vicus would have grown organically over the life of the garrison, consisting of strip-houses, workshops, small shrines and yards lining roads leading from the fort gates. Occupants included merchants, innkeepers, blacksmiths, leather-workers, metalworkers connected to mining, and the unofficial families of soldiers.

**Material culture:** Finds from the fort and its surroundings—recovered through limited excavation, fieldwalking and the systematic sieving of molehills—include Roman coins, pottery (both utilitarian wares and imported fine tableware such as Samian), glass fragments, iron nails, fittings, personal ornaments, leather shoes and small bronze objects. Together these suggest a materially comfortable, if remote, community with access to wider imperial trade networks as well as local craft production.

**Religion and ritual:** Epiacum participated fully in the religious world of the Roman army. Altars and dedications attest to worship of Hercules, Apollo and Mithras alongside the imperial cult focused on the reigning emperor. These deities were invoked for protection in battle, success in building projects, safe return from campaigns and personal advancement. Ritual life would have included formal sacrifices on the parade-ground, private dedications in shrines, and participation in mystery cults like Mithraism for some officers and soldiers.

**Interaction with local traditions:** Although direct evidence is limited, the fort's presence in a landscape already shaped by pre-Roman communities implies ongoing engagement with local sacred sites, seasonal festivals and customary law. Over time, the vicus likely became a place where Roman and Indigenous practices overlapped: native Britons adopted aspects of Roman material culture and religion, while soldiers formed relationships and families with local people.

## 8. Archaeological Investigation and Current State

**Antiquarian investigations:** The earliest investigations at Whitley Castle were conducted in the early 19th century. In 1810, the Revd John Hodgson excavated part of the bath house outside the north-west corner of the fort, recording rooms, hypocaust pilae and associated finds such as tiles and small objects. In 1820s drainage works, leather footwear was recovered, providing an early glimpse of everyday life. In 1833, the geologist Thomas Sopwith produced a detailed survey and plan of the fort, baths and adjacent midden deposits, work which remains an important reference for later scholars.

**20th-century scholarship:** In the 20th century, R. G. Collingwood and others incorporated Whitley Castle into broader syntheses of Roman Britain, drawing attention to its unusual lozenge plan and complex earthworks. Pottery from test excavations helped to refine the dating of the initial construction to the Hadrianic period. For much of the century, however, the site saw little intrusive excavation, which inadvertently preserved it in an undisturbed state.

**21st-century survey:** In the 2000s, English Heritage and academic partners undertook detailed topographic and geophysical surveys of the fort and vicus. These confirmed multiple building phases, clarified the extent of the civilian settlement and mapped the intricate system of ramparts and ditches. More recently, researchers have used non-invasive techniques such as high-resolution earthwork survey, magnetometry and resistivity to refine our understanding of internal layout without large-scale digging.



Molehill archaeology and minimal intervention: An unusual but effective method employed at Epiacum has been the systematic collection and sieving of soil from molehills across the site. This 'molehill archaeology' recovers small artefacts brought to the surface by burrowing activity, expanding the finds assemblage while keeping ground disturbance minimal. As a result, the site retains exceptional potential for future targeted excavation and scientific analysis.

Conservation status: Whitley Castle is a Scheduled Ancient Monument under UK law. The fort and vicus lie under permanent pasture; the imposing turf-covered ramparts and ditches remain clearly visible on the ground. Management by landowners and heritage organisations aims to balance agricultural use with the long-term protection of earthworks and buried archaeology, while enabling controlled public access and interpretation.

## 9. Interpretation: Why Epiacum Matters

From a military-historical perspective, Epiacum is a key example of how Rome structured its frontier in depth. The fort sits behind Hadrian's Wall yet is integral to the frontier system—supporting wall garrisons, securing vital roads and guarding economically important resources. Its long occupation, from Hadrianic foundation through the Severan crisis and into the late 4th century, traces the entire life-cycle of the northern frontier.

The Severan-era rebuilding embeds Epiacum in the wider story of tribal conflict and Roman reaction. The fort's reinforced defences and continued use after civil war and northern uprisings demonstrate an imperial decision to double down on certain strategic nodes rather than retreat from them. Epiacum thus becomes a case study in how Rome responded when internal political crises emboldened external enemies: by reorganising, rebuilding and hardening the military and economic architecture of the province.

Archaeologically, Whitley Castle is important precisely because it is under-excavated. The combination of well-preserved earthworks, rich potential for buried buildings and an intact vicus make it a rare laboratory for studying a Roman auxiliary fort and its community in upland Britain. The site also illustrates the power of non-invasive methodologies and long-term landscape analysis in reconstructing frontier life without extensive destruction of deposits.

In terms of your broader theme—'Tribal Conflicts – Roman Responses'—Epiacum epitomises the intersection of local resistance, imperial civil war and the consequent militarisation of the landscape. It shows how Rome's answer to frontier instability was not only punitive campaigning but also structural investment in forts, roads and resource security across depth, leaving enduring imprints on places that had previously been indigenous hill country.

## 10. Summary for Research Notes

Why Epiacum was built: Whitley Castle/Epiacum was established in the early 2nd century AD as part of the Hadrianic reorganisation of northern Britain. It provided depth to the frontier behind Hadrian's Wall, controlled the Maiden Way road, and—critically—secured access to the lead- and silver-bearing mineral district of Alston Moor. Its upland position allowed the garrison to monitor movements across the Pennines and symbolised Roman command over a previously indigenous landscape.

Who was there: Epiacum housed an auxiliary cohort of around 600 part-mounted troops, likely a *cohors equitata*, supported by a substantial civilian vicus. Epigraphic evidence identifies the Second Cohort of Nervians and shows that officers of the Sixth Legion Victrix were involved in the site's religious and



building life. Around the fort clustered traders, craftsmen, families and labourers connected to mining and transport, forming a mixed community of soldiers, incomers and local Britons.

What went on there: Daily life at Epiacum combined routine garrison activities—drill, guard-duty, road patrols, equipment maintenance and supply organisation—with the specialist functions of resource security and frontier policing. The garrison oversaw and protected lead and silver extraction, guarded convoys, and responded to raids or disturbance in the uplands. Religious life centred on dedications to Hercules, Apollo, Mithras and the emperor, framed within both Roman and local sacred landscapes. During the Severan crisis and later tribal uprisings, the fort was rebuilt and strengthened, standing as part of Rome's structural response to frontier instability.

## 11. Selected References (for Harvard-Style Citation)

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Recent web and heritage resources on Epiacum/Whitley Castle consulted for synthesis, including Epiacum Heritage, North Pennines AONB, and standard online encyclopaedia entries (accessed 2025).