

## Military Codebreaking Schools Session (duration 45 min)

### Aims:

- To introduce Old Roman Cursive (ORC) as the ‘everyday’ handwriting of the Romans
- To reflect on how people communicated in a time before email and instant messaging

### Objectives:

*Students should be able to:*

- Recognise and read *Old Roman Cursive* (ORC) letters with the help of a key
- Observe similarities and differences between ORC and the alphabet we use today
- Understand how a Roman used a *tablet* (both wood and wax types), *calamus* (ink pen) and *stylus* (scratch pen) to write
- Recall some details about the Roman fort at Vindolanda

### Materials and Resources:

- DIGITAL SLIDES: ‘Codebreaking in the Roman Army’ (filename: 2 Military codebreaking PRIMARY SCHOOL SESSION - LatinNow ENGLISH)
- PRINT-OUTS: ORC code key (filename: 3 Old Roman Cursive Key - LatinNow (all languages))
- PRINT-OUTS: ‘Military Message in 3 parts’ (filename: 4 Military message in 3 parts - LatinNow English) (enough for each student or small groups)
- Pencils and paper
- Prizes/rewards

### Activity Outline:

Duration (mins)	Slide	Activity
5	Slides 2 & 3	<b>Languages of the Empire</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Look at the map of the Roman Empire</li> <li>• What language did the Romans speak? Have the students heard of Latin?</li> <li>• Do they know that the Roman Empire in the East worked in <i>Greek</i>?</li> <li>• Did they know that, as well as the two <i>official</i> languages, Latin and Greek, the people of the Roman Empire actually spoke <i>many</i> languages?</li> </ul>
5	Slide 3	<b>Multilingualism today</b> How many languages do your students speak? Ask them to talk to their neighbours and find out which languages they know. Do they speak a different language at home or school or their place of worship? Do they speak different languages with different family members/friends? Get them to report back.
5	Slide 4	<b>Latin and the Army</b> One of the ways a man living in the Western Provinces might learn Latin would be in the army: why was it important that all the soldiers knew Latin? It would be chaos if they all spoke different languages!

5	Slide 5	<p><b>Evidence of military messages: Vindolanda</b></p> <p>This site in the north of England is important because archaeologists have found the remains of a Roman fort just south of Hadrian's Wall. Among the remains were a large number of military and personal messages. What do they look like?</p>
2	Slide 6	<p><b>Introducing <i>Old Roman Cursive</i></b></p> <p>There were <b>two types</b> of letters found at Vindolanda.</p> <p>Take a look at the <b>first</b> type on the screen:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the tablet made of? It's a thick frame of wood, filled with a layer of beeswax.</li> <li>• What is the pen made from? This one is metal. Other examples are in wood or bone.</li> <li>• How did it work? You used the stylus to scratch your message into the wax. These tablets were reusable because once the message had been read, the wax could be scraped (using the wide end of the stylus) or melted flat again.</li> </ul>
3	Slide 7	<p>Take a look at the <b>second</b> type on the screen:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the tablet made of? It's a very thin sheet of wood.</li> <li>• What is the pen made from? A reed cut into a point. The Latin name for this is a <i>calamus</i>. More expensive pens could be made from metal.</li> <li>• How did it work? You dipped the point into the ink and then wrote onto the wood (like quills in Harry Potter!)</li> </ul> <p><i>Interesting fact:</i> The tablet on this slide is a very famous letter from around AD 100, sent by a woman called Claudia Severa to her friend Sulpicia Lepidina, inviting her to a birthday party. Both women were married to Roman military commanders stationed in and around Vindolanda.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is this letter easy to read? They're very faint (archaeologists had to use special equipment to see them) and the handwriting is tricky for us to read because the letters look a bit strange. The alphabet these messages use is called <i>Old Roman Cursive</i>.</li> <li>• What is Old Roman Cursive? The 'everyday' alphabet used by Romans</li> <li>• Examine the sheet with the ORC key. Which letters are the same shape as ours? Which are different? Which are missing?</li> </ul>
5	Slide 7	<p><b>Military Message Race</b></p> <p><i>Warm-up</i></p> <p>They are going to step into the shoes of a Roman soldier and decipher some urgent messages. To make it easier, the letters they will be reading will not be writing <i>in Latin</i> but will be English words using Old Roman Cursive letters.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask the students to use the ORC alphabet to write their own first names. If a letter they need is missing, they could try to find an alternative with a similar sound, e.g. <i>c</i> for <i>k</i>, <i>i</i> for <i>y</i>. That's what the</li> </ul>

		Romans did when they wrote names from another language! Note that in Latin the letter <i>i</i> is used for <i>i</i> and <i>j</i> and the letter <i>u</i> is used for <i>u</i> and <i>w/v</i> . Sometimes Romans also used a <i>k</i> borrowed from the Greeks.
15	Slide 7	<p><i>Main Event</i></p> <p>Issue them Military Race Message Part 1, face down. Place Parts 2 and 3 in different locations about the room and point them out <b>OR</b> have the three piles in front of you at your desk.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On your signal, they should turn them over and transcribe correctly into English.</li> <li>• When they are confident they have completed it (<b>OR</b> if you have checked it and are satisfied), they may collect Part 2. Repeat for Part 3.</li> <li>• The first person to bring you a completely correct set of three (with all unusual substitution letters corrected in English) wins.</li> <li>• Continue to check submissions</li> <li>• Award prizes</li> </ul> <p><i>Solutions</i></p> <p>I) Tomorrow at middai (=midday).  II) Vercingetorix advances on the city.  III) Send reinforcements. Caesar in danger.</p>

### Extension work:

#### *How archaeologists read Vindolanda tablets*

Slide 10 shows a screenshot of the computer programme used by archaeologists to read very faint letters (the programme is called RTI, short for *Reflectance Transformation Imaging*). This example shows a wax tablet from Vindolanda. The layer of wax was so thin, and the writer had pressed so hard with their stylus that they had gone through the wax and scratched the wood underneath. The archaeologists used RTI to read these faint traces, even after the original message on the wax had long gone. RTI works by letting us move a light across the surface to make shadows that help us see the marks, and lets us take away distractions like the colour or surface pattern of the tablet.

#### *The Roman fort at Vindolanda*

Look online at [www.vindolanda.com](http://www.vindolanda.com) to see more about where the tablets were found and how they are being preserved. More pictures and translations of the tablets can be found online at <http://vindolanda.csad.ox.ac.uk/> and <https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/tabvindol>