

## ADDITIONAL PIECES OF ROMAN MILITARY GEAR

In 2 Timothy 3:14-17 Paul mentions that the believer should be “...thoroughly equipped...” for the spiritual battles of life. So, what were some of the rest of what a Roman soldier would have to fill out his gear so he would be thoroughly equipped? While Paul does not directly mention these other items, they are alluded to in various places in the New Testament. First century Christians would certainly understand and relate to this gear from their own observations and experiences.



Jesus told His listeners that if they were compelled to carry a load one mile, they should carry it two miles (Matthew 5:41). In another place He told followers to “pick up their cross and follow Him” (Matthew 16:24ff). He was undoubtedly referring to what the Romans called a *furca*, or carrying pole. The original *furca* was nothing more than a forked stick or branch about 5 feet long (like a large sling-shot or “Y” shape) onto which military gear could be tied for a soldier to carry; or that he could force a subjected local to carry for him as per Jesus’ comment in Matthew 5. Later the *furca* became two poles tied together in a Latin cross or “T” shaped carrying pole.

Additional gear tied to the carry pole would be: canteen, several spears or *pila*, a cooking pot and frying pan, a leather bag, a flint and fire-starting striker, a *dolabra* or pick-axe, a turf cutter, and one or two palisade pieces about 5 feet in length with both ends tapering to a four-sided point; the center (lengthwise) would be cut to a hand grip size. These palisade pieces could be used in the construction of a temporary protective picket fence type wall or three could be tied together to form a large caltrop which would stop any enemy from charging the encamped troops while away from a more permanent fortress.

Tying all of these onto the carry pole made it possible for the soldier to handle all of his needed gear with some degree of ease. Josephus likened Roman soldiers packing all their gear to pack animals, perhaps echoing an earlier statement calling soldiers Marius’ mules (after the Roman general who revamped Roman military procedures in 107 BC).

Each group of eight soldiers comprised a *contubernium* that worked, marched, lived, and formed a basic grouping among the legions. Teamwork was paramount. Soldiers needed each other to help put on their armor, to cook, to put up the eight man tent, to form the *testudo*, and to build the temporary fort with their combined palisade pieces and sod cutters.

Many soldiers carried a *tabla*, or a wax filled writing tablet made of two flat pieces of wood carved out to hold melted bees wax which had been tinted with charcoal. The *tabla* helped the soldier keep track of data, statistics,

and other important information. Essentially it was the Roman equivalent to our modern pocket tablet or basic PDA. A bronze stylus sharpened on one end would be used to write in the wax. The other end of the stylus was flat and would be used to erase unwanted or unnecessary data.

Each of these pieces had a place in the survival of the Roman soldier. They were essential parts of his gear and well known to anyone who lived in the first century. Many of them have application to contemporary spiritual life and battles as well.



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