

Constructing the Roman Tent

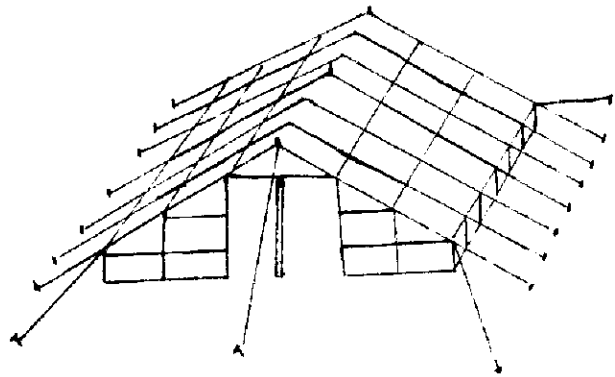
Until recently, I was under the impression that a Roman tent looked just like a Viking A-frame tent with different poles.

But some simple research has suggested a much more complex and unique design for the typical Roman campaign tent.

The tent of the average soldier (*papilio*) was 10' square, and a centurion's tent might be 20' square. The material used in most cases was calfskin leather, cut into panels measuring 2' by 18." The panels overlapped and the tentmakers stitched them together, usually with a simple basting stitch. Often, a strip of leather was stitched over the seam. Exposed edges were usually hemmed. Extra layers of leather reinforced areas under strain. Guy ropes attached to thick hoops made from strips of leather that had been twisted together. The hoops attached to leather patches sewed to the main tent.

The trick to reconstructing this tent will lie in the selection of the fabric. The Romans used leather, and probably treated their tents with oil or grease. They designed the tents to roll up for easy transportation.

I have estimated the price of a 10 x 10 leather tent at about \$1,000, using 3-4 oz. calfskin. The necessary thickness is purely speculative and requires further research. Building this tent out of nylon or vinyl or a synthetic fabric will defeat the project. The fabric used has to at least LOOK like leather on both sides. I will make a couple of suggestions, but I'm open to ideas from some of you



Sketch based on Strong & Brown

people with stagecraft and textile expertise.

* Imitation leather — I have found some stage recipes for creating imitation leather from felt. The trick will be to find a coating material that is both flexible and waterproof with which to soak the felt. Any ideas?

* Canvas — While it's not the real thing, some canvas has a dense enough weave to at least feel like leather.

I'm including a sketch based on the archaeology. You should be able to draw up your own plans easily. Just keep in mind that the tent shapes were square, and use only narrow sections of fabric or leather, 2' x 18." If you do build one of these, please send us a full account and a set of your plans and helpful tips.

References

Donald Strong & David Brown, eds. *Roman Crafts* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 186-187.