

# A battle in the mists of the Lake District?

## Ambleside Roman fort under attack

Recent research has shed new light on a Roman fort in the Lake District, and the violent events that may have taken place there. [Manuel Fernández-Götz](#), [John Reid](#), [Lawrence Keppie](#), and [Ian Hardwick](#) report.

**I**n the heart of the Lake District, on the northern edge of Lake Windermere, lies one of the most beautifully located Roman forts in Britain: Ambleside. Most likely occupied between the late 1st and the 4th centuries AD, this Cumbrian site covers an area of around 3 acres on a relatively marshy plateau with a number of rocky outcrops, and flanked on two sides by water (the River Rothay to the west and Lake Windermere to the south). In the Roman period, Ambleside fort occupied a strategic position guarding the road that ran west-east between the port of Ravenglass on the Cumbrian coast (probably the ancient Itunocelum) and the fort of Brougham

(Brocavum) near modern Penrith. It has been suggested that further roads run from Ambleside towards the south (in the direction of the Roman fort of Watercrock near Kendal) and the north (towards Carlisle, ancient Luguvalium). It is possible that Ambleside fort was the site of Galava, mentioned in the Antonine Itinerary, although an identification with Clanoventa has also been suggested. Whatever its Roman name, though, the idyllic location of the stone fort's ruins makes it an ideal visitor attraction for the numerous tourists that every year come to enjoy the beauty of Lake Windermere. However, little is known about the more-violent moments of the site's history.

**ABOVE** Ambleside fort lies on the northern edge of Lake Windermere, in the Lake District. Does its picturesque location belie a violent fate for the Roman garrison who occupied the spot?

### RESEARCH HISTORY

While the existence of a Roman fort at Ambleside had long been recognised by antiquarians, systematic excavations were not carried out at the site until the second decade of the 20th century, led by the famous Oxford-based scholars F Haverfield and R G Collingwood. The latter had a personal local connection, as he was born not far away from the southern shore of Lake Windermere. Their investigations, together with some later work carried out by



**LEFT** The National Trust's reconstruction of how the Roman fort may have looked.

the granaries (*horrea*) documented in the fort lends support to the idea that Ambleside may have acted as a regional storage and distribution centre. The establishment of the fort would have helped to consolidate and guard Roman power in the Lake District since at least the AD 90s – something particularly important in a region that, due to its mountainous topography, could have been more likely to host resistance against the conquerors.

archaeologists such as M E Burkett and R Leech in the second half of the 20th century, indicated the presence of two superimposed Roman forts and an extramural settlement. Most of these discoveries have been published over the years in the *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society*, and more recently geophysical surveys and other investigations have further expanded our knowledge of the fort and its environs.

Finds from the fort are currently exhibited at the Armitage Museum in Ambleside and at the Kendal Museum of Natural History and Archaeology, but despite the investigations that have taken place, research at Ambleside is still comparatively limited. Many aspects of the fort's history and its occupants remain unknown, including the identity of its garrisons.

What can we deduce about the site's history? It seems likely that the first fort at Ambleside was built of turf and timber at the end of the 1st century AD, possibly post-dating Agricola's campaigns. Some decades later, probably during the reign of the Emperor Hadrian (AD 117-138), the fort was rebuilt in stone. Previous excavations have provided information on the site's ramparts,

gates, granaries, headquarters, and part of the commander's residence. There were also areas for barracks and perhaps stables within the fort. Furthermore, traces of a large extramural settlement have been identified, extending to the north-east.

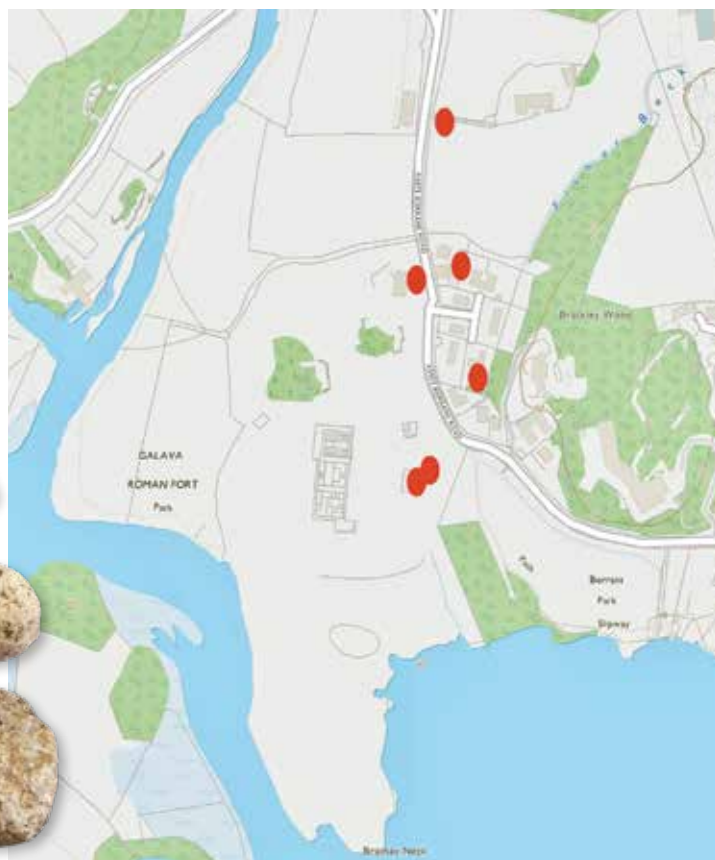
Ambleside fort could have acted as a regional Roman supply-base at the intersection of various roads, and would have benefited from the transport of goods by boat through Lake Windermere. The substantial size of

## SLING BULLETS AND A TOMBSTONE

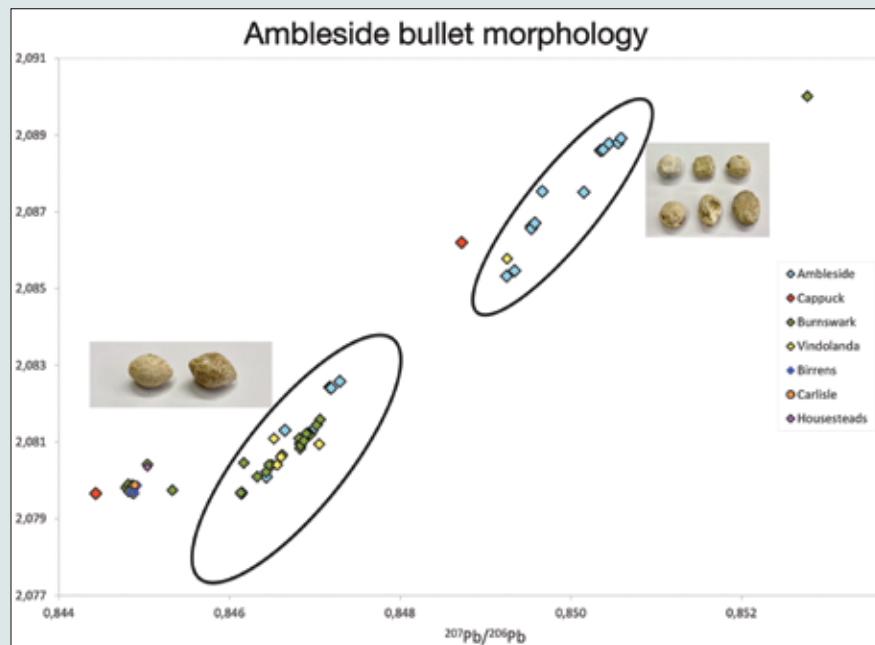
Among the many findings from Collingwood's excavations in the early 20th century were some lead sling bullets. In later decades, more Roman lead sling bullets and a ballista bolt tip have been found scattered around the fort, forming a pattern that would be atypical for casual loss or simple storage. As recognised within battlefield archaeology research, a focal concentration of sling bullets at the ➔

**BELOW** Roman bullets have been found at Ambleside since the earliest excavations on the site, headed by Haverfield and Collingwood.

**RIGHT** Locations of some of the bullets recovered from the land around the fort.







**ABOVE** The bullets from Ambleside can be categorised into two groups, based on their morphology.

**LEFT** This tombstone was found outside the fort. Its inscription, unique in Britain, commemorates an individual who was 'killed in the fort by enemies'.

same location usually suggests a storage place, whereas a wide dispersal is more likely to signify a conflict scenario. At Ambleside, the preliminary evidence from examining the distribution of sling bullets points towards the fort undergoing an external attack, with the garrison troops defending themselves by shooting missiles outwards. In this context, it is worth mentioning that Haverfield had already noted that the stratigraphy of the excavated towers seemed to indicate that the fort was destroyed once or twice in the 2nd and/or 3rd centuries AD, although the evidence from the early excavations is not completely clear in this regard.

Further indication for conflict at Ambleside is provided by the discovery in the 1960s of an exceptional Roman gravestone, which was found outside the fort. The inscription on the tombstone states that the deceased was 'killed in the fort by enemies' (RIB 3218). There is no other known gravestone from Britain with an inscription detailing this phenomenon, and its text is clearly suggestive of a significant assault on the Ambleside fort – although the fact that the tombstone could be erected does suggest that occupation at the fort resumed after the attack.

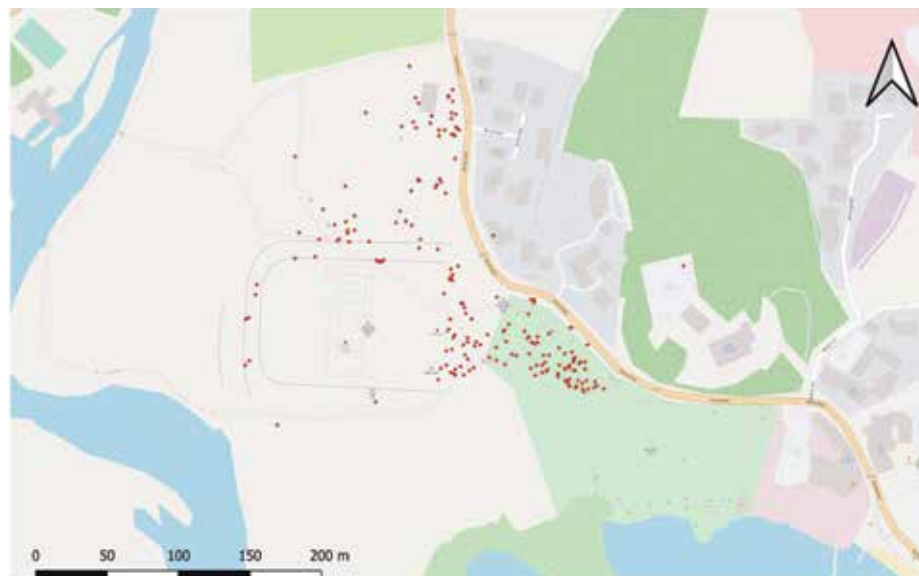
## NEW INVESTIGATIONS

A combination of these different sources of evidence (missiles, the tombstone inscription, and possible destruction as indicated by the towers) served as the starting point for a new conflict archaeology research project which was initiated in 2021, as a collaboration between members of the Trimontium Trust and the University of Edinburgh. So far, the project has collated and reanalysed evidence from previous investigations, but has also used field recording and LiDAR to assess the possible assault routes on the fort, and carried out non-invasive metal-detector surveys in the environs of the site.

Regarding the lead sling bullets, to date there are 21 known examples from Ambleside, and last year 18 of them were studied in the collections of the Armit Museum. The morphology of these objects makes it possible to identify two clearly differentiated groups, and microscopic samples of lead were extracted and sent for isotopic analysis. The preliminary results are very interesting, as the lead used to manufacture the shot appears to originate from two separate sources that align with the two different

**BELOW** Detecting and marking non-ferrous targets during the most-recent research on the site.





**LEFT** This distribution map shows non-ferrous finds identified during the recent survey.



**LEFT** What happened at Ambleside fort? This map shows possible attack routes constrained by the local topography.

morphological groups. The more-regular group appears to have close similarities to the bullet shape and lead ore of many of the missiles used by Roman troops at Burnswark around the mid-2nd century AD (see CA 317), whereas the second more irregular group has a more-hastily manufactured appearance and an as-yet unidentified source.

The survey campaign, meanwhile, was completed in September 2021 with

the participation of volunteers from the Trimontium Trust. This involved non-invasive metal-detector surveys carried out in 14 sectors of the site, with the collaboration of the National Trust and with consent from Historic England. Seven machines set in 'all metal' mode were used to ensure as complete a capture of data as possible, and point data were resurveyed using a single

reference detector to ensure conformity of metal-profiling. The likely metal type and GPS coordinates were then individually recorded to <1m accuracy on a survey database.

This work yielded over 1,000 data points, of which some undetermined iron signals were discarded, leaving over 800 recorded targets. The distribution map of possible lead points indicates a wide dispersal of sub-surface

non-ferrous metal objects. While not all would correspond to Roman sling bullets (confounding factors could include Victorian coinage and non-Roman lead debris), comparison with the fieldwork carried out at Burnswark Hill in south-west Scotland suggests that a number of them could actually be Roman projectiles, information that would add significantly to the existing ballistic data.

Overall, the evidence at Ambleside points towards the existence of at least one attack on the fort by an external enemy, perhaps comparable to the situation encountered at the Roman fort at Velsen in the Netherlands. The suspected assault on Velsen is thought to have taken place in AD 28, when the Frisian tribe revolted in response to excessive taxation by the occupying Roman forces. At that site, more than 500 lead sling bullets of various types were found outside the perimeter of the fortifications, indicating a strong defensive response by the besieged Roman garrison. Bullets were of varying quality of craftsmanship, suggesting that many had been made rapidly under highly stressful conditions. At Ambleside, the identity of the attackers remains unknown, so it is currently not possible to elucidate if they were locals from the Lake District or warriors from Caledonia on a southern incursion. While future research may help to refine and expand this picture, at this time it seems increasingly likely that Ambleside was the scene of a hitherto forgotten battle amid the mists of the Lake District. ■

### Acknowledgements

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### Further reading

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