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Ambleside Roman fort under attack: New research on a forgotten battle in the Lake District

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The fort at Ambleside is among the most beautifully located Roman remains in Britain. Between the late first and fourth centuries CE, it guarded the important west–east road connecting the port of Ravenglass and the fort of Brougham, near Penrith, helping consolidate Roman power across the region. Ambleside Roman fort was partly excavated in the early twentieth century by F. Haverfield and R. G. Collingwood. Later research has expanded our knowledge of the site and its environs, revealing the existence of an extramural settlement. Since the beginning, the research history of the site has been linked to the Society, with many new results appearing in *Transactions*.

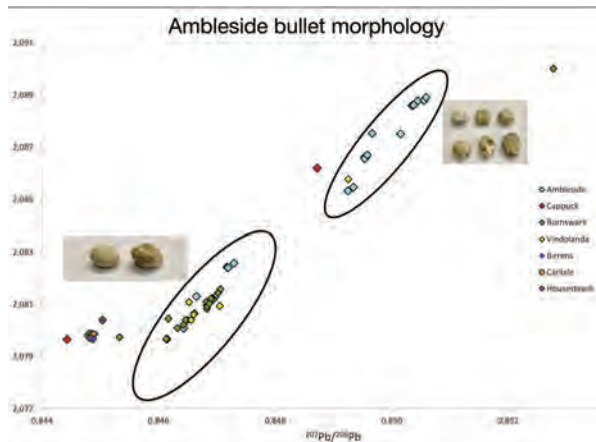
An interesting, although often overlooked aspect, is the appearance of lead sling bullets scattered around the fort. This, together with the discovery in the 1960s of a Roman gravestone that states that one of the deceased was ‘killed in the fort by enemies’ (*RIB* 3218), triggered our interest. Within the framework of a new project supported by a Society grant, in 2021 we initiated a review of the existing conflict evidence. This included the study of 18 Roman sling bullets at the Armitt Museum. In addition to the typological analysis of the bullets, samples of lead were sent for isotopic analysis. The preliminary results suggest that the lead used to manufacture the shot originated from two separate sources that correspond with two morphologically distinctive groups. The regular group of sling bullets has close similarities to the bullet shape and lead ore of missiles used at the attack on Burnswark hillfort (SW Scotland) around the mid-second century CE, whereas the second group has an as yet unidentified source and a more irregular shape that suggests a hasty production.

Battlefield archaeologists conventionally interpret a focal concentration of sling bullets at the same location as indicating a storage place (e.g., a workshop or barrack), whereas a wide dispersal most likely reflects a conflict scenario. At Ambleside, the distribution of sling bullets suggests an external attack, with the Roman troops defending themselves by shooting missiles outwards. To expand our knowledge and identify further potential sling bullet locations, in September 2021 we carried out metal detector surveys

in the environs of the fort. The results yielded over 800 recorded data points, including many non-ferrous points that indicate a wide dispersal of sub-surface metal objects. Not all of these will correspond to Roman sling bullets, but a comparison with fieldwork at Burnswark suggests several could actually be Roman projectiles.

Overall, the evidence suggests the existence of at least one attack on the fort. However, future research is required to refine and expand this picture: for example, using micro-extraction of finds at selected locations to test how many of the metal detector signals correspond to Roman sling bullets.

Further information on our research at Ambleside can be found in an article in *Current Archaeology*, issue 393, which will appear later this year.



Top: Ambleside Roman fort at the shore of Windermere;
bottom: lead isotope analysis of Ambleside bullets with
examples from other bullet-find sites,
images courtesy of J. Reid