

ART. IV – *The Ambleside Roman Gravestone*

BY JOHN THORLEY

THE gravestone of Flavius Fuscinus and Flavius Romanus, found at Waterhead in October 1962, was briefly reported in the *Journal of Roman Studies*¹ by Richard Wright (from work by Eric Birley), and in these *Transactions*² by Mary Burkett, but so far no more detailed analysis of the stone has been published. This article is an attempt to provide such an analysis.

To summarise briefly the main points in the article by Mary Burkett (which contains most of the material from Wright and Birley's brief notice): the stone was found in the grounds of Wanlass How, Waterhead, in October 1962; it is a piece of local slate, 1.47 m high, 71 cm wide, and 5 cm thick at the bottom and 2.5 cm thick at the top, and it records the deaths of Flavius Fuscinus and Flavius Romanus. Mary Burkett suggested that the stone might be the same stone as that mentioned in the *Archaeological Journal*,³ where it is reported that an inscribed stone was found beside the east gate of the Roman fort and then lost before the text could be recorded (the east gate is only 100 m from where the stone was found in the Wanlass How grounds). However, the stone reported in 1864 was said to have been of limestone and 4.5 inches thick, which makes this suggestion unlikely.

Since the stone is large and heavy it is unlikely to have been moved very far. It is probably safe to assume that the gravestone was originally on the side of the road leading from the east gate, a location that fits well with the established Roman custom of placing graves outside the inhabited area along the main thoroughfares.

After its discovery the stone was in the care of the discoverer, Mr Alexander Maxwell Mann, a Director of Marathon Knitwear which owned Wanlass How, and was housed for some years in the Kendal Museum, but in 1999 it was given to the Armitt Museum by Mr Mann. The Friends of the Armitt Trust funded the restoration and presentation of the stone and it is now mounted in a prominent position on the wall of the north room of the Armitt Museum.

The text and an expanded version in standard Latin are given below, with a translation:

1	D B M	DIS BONIS MANIBUS
2	FLA FUSCINUS EME	FLAVIUS FUSCINUS EMERITUS
3	EXORDIVISI ANIS LV	EX ORDINATO VIXIT ANNIS LV
4	D B M	DIS BONIS MANIBUS
5	FLA ROMANUS ACT	FLAVIUS ROMANUS ACTARIUS
6	VIXIT ANNI XXXV	VIXIT ANNIS XXXV
7	INCAS·INTE·AB·HOSTI	IN CASTRIS INTERFECTUS AB HOSTIBUS

TO THE GOOD GODS OF THE UNDERWORLD
FLAVIUS FUSCINUS, RETIRED
FROM THE CENTURIONSHIP, LIVED 55 YEARS

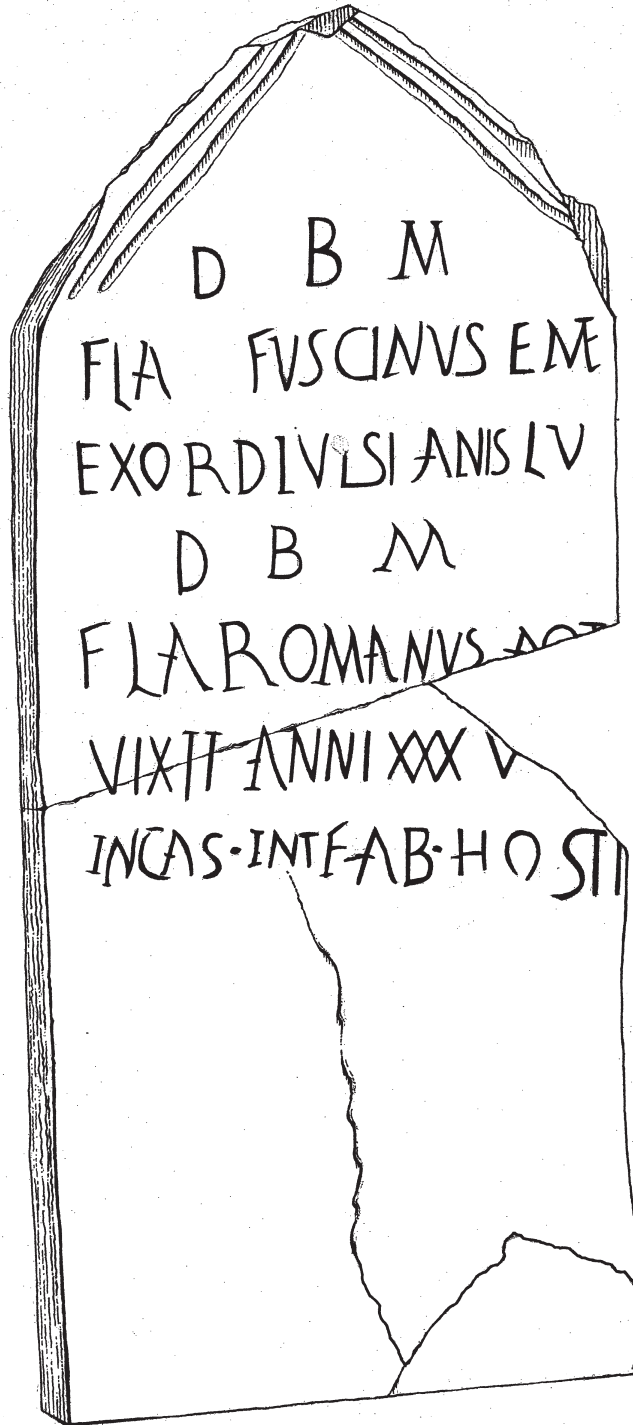


FIG. 1. The Ambleside Roman Gravestone
(based on a drawing supplied by David Sherlock of English Heritage)

TO THE GOOD GODS OF THE UNDERWORLD
 FLAVIUS ROMANUS, CLERK,
 LIVED 35 YEARS,
 KILLED IN THE CAMP BY THE ENEMY

Style of the Inscription

At the top of the stone the only attempt at decoration is in the form of a large inverted “V” inscribed in two parallel lines to create a kind of upper border for the monument. The stonecutting is extremely rough throughout, and is done to a depth of no more than 2 mm.

The whole text exhibits the same stonecutting technique throughout, though the upper section of text, referring to Flavius Fuscinus, is rather more neatly inscribed than the lower section. There are fine parallel lines drawn as a guide to the writing, except above the first line and below the last line. The upper section follows these guide lines, more or less, but the last line of the lower section slopes downwards as the letters increase in size. There are other differences between the two sections, which include the following:

- In the 3rd line three words are run together; other than INCAS (see above) the lower section has clear word division
- M is written differently in the two sections. The upper section has in fact two variants (the one in line 2 also has an adjoined E)
- The upper section uses both a straight-sided and a curved-sided V; the lower section uses only the straight-sided V (though one has to be careful with such comparisons; in the lower section there are three varieties of “I”)
- The upper section has ANIS and VISI; the lower section has ANNI and VIXIT

It seems possible, perhaps probable, that the lower section was added a few years after the upper section (perhaps not many years, if Romanus was in fact Fuscinus’ son – see below). The lower inscription may well have been done by the same inexperienced stonecutter, but to instructions that display a higher standard of literacy, or perhaps a better knowledge of inscriptional practice. However, this interpretation is certainly open to question, and the variations in the stonecutting may simply be the result of careless workmanship. It is therefore possible that the deaths of both Fuscinus and Romanus were recorded at the same time. These alternative explanations do have consequences for the interpretation of the circumstances of the deaths and burials (see below).

Commentary on the Text

The inscription contains several non-standard abbreviations, as is to be expected in a fairly informal monument such as this. Whoever inscribed the text was clearly not a professional at the job.

In line 1 D B M is found only here as a heading for a gravestone. D M (for Dis Manibus) was the usual heading, an ancient formula meaning “To the Gods (or

Spirits) of the Underworld”. But the gods were often referred to as “boni”⁴ (“good”), and in fact the expression “di boni” (“the good gods” – cf. our “Good God”) was a common expletive. D B M is therefore an intelligible extension of the normal formula.

FLA(VIUS) FUSCINUS (line 2) is a typical name of a provincial free man. As the Roman Empire expanded the custom was for most provincial people to latinise their personal name and to add before it the name of a prominent Roman family, often their patron or the emperor himself; this name, always written first, then became a kind of surname for the family. The name FUSCINUS is derived from the Latin word “fuscus”, meaning “dark, swarthy”. FLAVIUS was the family name of the emperor Vespasian (69-79) and his two sons who succeeded him, Titus (79-81) and Domitian (81-96).⁵ It may be that an ancestor of Flavius Fuscinus took his name from one or other of these emperors, although the name Flavius was in fact not uncommon. Actually, the standard abbreviation for Flavius is FL, not FLA.⁶ EME at the end of line 2 is an abbreviation for EMERITUS, meaning one who has completed his term of service (it is normally used as a noun).

This is followed in line 3 by the term EX ORDI. Eric Birley suggested that the term intended was EX ORDINATO, meaning “from the centurionship”, and this interpretation has been adopted by the editors of the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*.⁷ *Ordinatus* (in full or shortened to ORD or ORDIN) occurs on only four other occasions in inscriptions from Roman Britain,⁸ and in each case the word is used to mean “centurion”, whereas here it is apparently an abstract noun, “centurionship”. But an *ordinatus* was probably not a legionary centurion; the term seems to have been restricted to auxiliary centurions,⁹ though these are also referred to as *centurio*. There may be a distinction here that we cannot now explain.

VISI in line 3 is short for VISIT, a variant spelling in inscriptions of VIXIT (lived), which probably indicates a colloquial pronunciation (though this spelling is not found elsewhere in Roman Britain). ANIS is a non-standard spelling of ANNIS.¹⁰ In literary Latin of the classical period it is the accusative case that indicates length of time, but the ablative (which always did indicate “time within which” as well as “time when”) gradually encroached on the accusative usage in expressions of time. In most Roman inscriptions ANNIS is used in such cases, though ANNOS is also found.

FLAVIUS ROMANUS (line 5) was apparently buried in the same grave as Flavius Fuscinus, and since they share a common “surname” as well as a common grave they were presumably closely related. Romanus was buried either shortly after or at the same time as Fuscinus, and from their ages at death¹¹ it seems likely that Romanus was Fuscinus’ son rather than his brother. Romanus was an ACTARIUS, a clerk. The stone is broken at this point, but the letters ACT are clearly visible, and there is no room for any other letters in this line. The only feasible reconstruction from this abbreviation is ACTARIUS.

ANNI in line 6 is not the nominative plural, but is short for ANNIS (ablative plural – see above).

The final line of the inscription is unique on this kind of monument. If it is assumed that Romanus died after Fuscinus, then this line refers only to Romanus, but the text could refer to both Romanus and Fuscinus. The stonemason clearly wished to record the circumstances of the death of Romanus (and possibly also of

Fuscinus), but he had no parallels on which to base his text. He therefore had to use a series of non-standard abbreviations. But he did help the reader by inserting some word divisions – though he begins the line by omitting one. INCAS is for IN CASTELLO (in the camp, or possibly IN CASTRIS; *castellum* was usually smaller than *castra*, but we do not know whether the inhabitants viewed the fort at Ambleside as large or small). The linking together of a preposition with the next word is not uncommon in inscriptions. INTE must be for INTERFECTUS (killed), or INTERFECTI (plural) if both men were involved (unfortunately the stonemason did not write this in full, and hence the ambiguity). This is a non-standard abbreviation but one which is clear from the context. AB (by) is this time separated from the noun. Though the last word comes to the edge of the stone it does look as if the last letter is I and not E, and the word is therefore not HOSTE (enemy, singular), but a shortened form of HOSTIBUS (plural, and the commoner form in Latin).

It is difficult to decide whether both men were killed “in the camp”, or whether only Romanus suffered this fate. If Fuscinus had died first in the peace of his retirement, it is perhaps strange that Romanus did not have his own name added as the one who dedicated the monument to his father’s memory, as was the customary practice. On the other hand, if both men died “in the camp” this implies that a 55-year old retired centurion was in the camp and in the thick of the fighting. This is certainly not an impossible situation, but it is to say the least unexpected.¹²

The Date of the Inscription

The style of the inscription unfortunately offers only a broad indication of its date. The style is generally “late imperial”, a designation used for those inscriptions that incorporate some letter forms more usually found in manuscripts. Such lettering is common from the 3rd century A.D., but examples are found before this.¹³ From the style of the inscription alone one can therefore only say that the date is probably after the middle of the 2nd century A.D., and it could be from as late as the last occupation of the fort in the later 4th century. But there are clues from the local context and from the distinctly amateur cutting of the inscription itself which might help to establish a more precise date.

The fort at Ambleside had quite a long history. The first fort was probably established around A.D. 90, and the latest clearly datable material from the excavations is a coin of Valens (364-378) and some 4th century pottery.¹⁴ But the *vicus* does not seem to have had such a long history, at least as far as the rather fragmentary excavations of it have so far revealed. The *vicus* was in fact quite large, extending about 360 metres north of the fort, and perhaps at its widest some 300 metres east to west. But so far all the pottery from the *vicus* comes from the late 1st to the 3rd centuries, with the main concentration being from the 2nd century.¹⁵ Presumably Flavius Fuscinus had been living in retirement in the *vicus*, and on present evidence that implies that he died in the 2nd or 3rd centuries. The size of the *vicus* at Ambleside could indicate that it contained a veteran settlement, such as the one that is known to have existed at Ribchester,¹⁶ and this would accord well with the presence of a retired centurion.

However, the whole style of the gravestone does seem decidedly poor for an ex-

centurion. Many other gravestones of centurions have survived, and they are all much grander affairs than this one.¹⁷ Centurions were highly paid and on their retirement they received pensions to match, even though the precise details are still unclear.¹⁸ There was probably a distinction in pay between the legionary centurions and those serving in the auxiliaries as Flavius Fuscinus did, but in normal circumstances even for auxiliary centurions the pay and pension was probably considerable, and certainly a lot more than for an ordinary auxiliary soldier. Any centurion could normally have expected a very comfortable retirement, so the fact that Flavius Fuscinus was commemorated by such a modest inscription is in itself surprising. It seems that Fuscinus had decided to be close to his son during his retirement and he therefore lived in the *vicus* near the Ambleside fort where his son happened to be serving. It is quite possible, though we cannot tell for sure, that he had himself served in the unit based at Ambleside, and his son had followed him into the same unit.

Another inscription from northern Britain offers an interesting comparison with the Ambleside gravestone. There is actually a gravestone of another centurion's son that was found at Vindolanda.¹⁹ His name was Cornelius Victor, and he was a *singularis consularis*²⁰ (a member of the special guard attached to the provincial governor). He came from Pannonia (his mother was probably Pannonian, though he would have been a Roman citizen because of his father's citizenship²¹), his father was Saturninus, a *primus pilus*, and he died at the age of 55, still in military service. Victor must have been an auxiliary (the *singulares consularis* always were), but he probably owed his position in this elite corps at least in part to his father's influence. And his gravestone, set up by his wife, is neatly carved, in sharp contrast to the Ambleside gravestone. Rather than offering a close parallel with Flavius Romanus, Victor does in fact illustrate what the son of a provincial mother could achieve if his father was a centurion (admittedly a very senior one in this case).

The poor quality of the Ambleside gravestone does therefore present a problem. If Fuscinus died first, then his poorly carved gravestone seems to indicate that it was made in difficult times, when an ex-centurion was not able to enjoy an easy lifestyle. If both Fuscinus and Romanus were killed in a raid on the camp, then the poor quality of the inscription is easy enough to explain – it was done in haste by a survivor of the raid. Either way, then, the poor quality of the gravestone indicates that it was made in difficult circumstances.

If one searches for a likely context for such difficult circumstances, then the years from 196 to 207 seem a possible candidate. In 196 Clodius Albinus, the governor of Britain, transferred much of the army in Britain to the continent in order to establish his claim to be emperor. But he was defeated by Septimius Severus, and Britain suffered several years of disruption, including local uprisings against Roman control, until Severus' campaign in 208-11 restored order in the province.²²

Of course, we do not know the history of the Ambleside fort well enough to propose this period as the only time of disruption that can account for the circumstances of the gravestone. There were certainly other difficult times in Roman Britain that are well enough recorded,²³ and there were doubtless yet others of which we know nothing. It is perhaps safer to say that the end of the 2nd or the early 3rd century is the earliest likely date for the gravestone, but that the later 3rd or even the 4th century is not out of the question.

Summary

The Ambleside gravestone is a modest monument to two Roman soldiers, most probably father and son. Flavius Fuscinus, the father, had retired from the army as an auxiliary centurion. He had apparently come to Ambleside (or maybe stayed on in Ambleside, if he was a centurion in this unit) to be with his son, Flavius Romanus, who was a clerk in the local fort. Then at the age of 55 he may have died as a civilian, in straightened circumstances which may have been the result of war and disruption in the province, and his son died a short time later in a raid on the fort at the age of 35. On this reconstruction, the gravestone was erected firstly over the grave of Flavius Fuscinus some distance from the east gate of the fort, the inscription carved perhaps by a friend. When his son was killed his remains were buried in the same grave as his father and a further inscription added, perhaps by the same family friend. But it is possible that both father and son died in the same raid on the fort, and that a survivor of the raid made the gravestone for them both, in circumstances that were still fairly chaotic after the attack on the fort. The present evidence on the date of the Ambleside *vicus* would suggest a date at the very end of the 2nd century or in the early years of the 3rd century A.D., though later dates are certainly possible.

Acknowledgements

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Notes and References

- ¹ *Journal of Roman Studies*, lxiii (1963), 160-4.
- ² Mary E. Burkett, "Recent discoveries at Ambleside", *CW2*, lxxv, 86-7.
- ³ *Archaeological Journal*, xi (1864), 395.
- ⁴ This was suggested by Eric Birley.
- ⁵ Flavius was also part of the name of the later emperor Constantine (Flavius Valerius Constantinus), who ruled 306-37. If one allows a 4th century date for the gravestone (see the arguments later in the article), then Flavius Fuscinus may have taken his name from Constantine.
- ⁶ There are in fact six other instances from Roman inscriptions in Britain where FLA is used instead of the much commoner FL. Three of these can be dated with certainty: RIB 605 (FLA AMMAUSIO) is from A.D. 262-266 (see Eric Birley, *CW2*, xxxvi, 1-7); and RIB 1778 and 1820, both from Carvoran and both recording the same FLA SECUNDUS, is from 136-8 (see RIB *ad loc.*). Unfortunately therefore the spelling FLA is no help in dating the Ambleside gravestone. It seems to have been a rather rare personal choice.
- ⁷ *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* (Munich, 1900-), see under *ordinatus*.
- ⁸ R. G. Collingwood and R. P. Wright, *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain* [RIB] (Oxford, 1965) 640 (from York), 805 (from Moresby, Cumbria), 858 (from Maryport), and 1022 (from Piercebridge, Co. Durham).
- ⁹ See note under RIB 805.
- ¹⁰ Not a common variant, but it is found twice on RIB 934.
- ¹¹ The ages of both Fuscinus and Romanus may be rounded to the nearest five, as is commonly found on gravestones, though this does not significantly affect the argument here.

- ¹² This might indeed be an argument for a mid- or even late-4th century date for the gravestone, at a time when the *vicus* was much reduced and even civilians and ex-army personnel may have been living inside the fort – though there is no evidence that this was so.
- ¹³ See Laurence Keppie, *Understanding Roman Inscriptions* (London, 1991), 28-29 for a discussion of dating from letter forms.
- ¹⁴ See R. G. Collingwood, *CW2*, xxi, 14.
- ¹⁵ See R. G. Collingwood, *CW2*, xxi,13; M. E. Burkett, *CW2*, lxxv, 86 ff, M. E. Burkett, *CW2*, lxxvii, 179-80; R. H. Leech, *CW2*, xciii, 51 ff.; S. Mann and A Dunwell, *CW2*, xcv, 79 ff. These record all the excavations of the *vicus* to date.
- ¹⁶ See e.g. S. Frere, *Britannia* (London, 1967), 187.
- ¹⁷ For example the gravestone of Marcus Favonius Facilis in Colchester Museum, frequently illustrated, e.g. in Laurence Keppie, *op. cit.*, 81-82.
- ¹⁸ See discussion in Graham Webster, *The Roman Imperial Army* (London, 1979), especially 256-60, and article under *Stipendium* in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*.
- ¹⁹ RIB 1713.
- ²⁰ For a discussion of the role of the *singulares consularis* see R. W. Davies, “Singulares and Roman Britain”, *Britannia* 7 (1976), 134 ff.
- ²¹ Though the stone may date from after Caracalla’s grant of citizenship to all free subjects of the Roman Empire in 212 or 214 (see e.g. S. Frere, *op. cit.*, 186).
- ²² See e.g. P. Salway, *Roman Britain* (Oxford, 1981), 217 ff. for an account of this confused period.
- ²³ The period of the “Gallic Emperors” (259-273), when Britain was a part of the “Imperium Galliarum”, might have led to some partisan divisions within the army and hence to some internal fighting. But on the whole this period seems to have been fairly calm in Britain (see P. Salway, *op. cit.*, 276-7). If the gravestone is from the later 3rd or 4th centuries, then the likely contexts would seem to be either the period of the usurpation of the province by Carausius and Allectus (287-296) and its subsequent reunification with the Empire by Constantius I; or the disaster of the invasion of the Picts and Scots in 367 (though the period immediately before seems to have been one of some prosperity). But from the present evidence on the date of the *vicus*, these perhaps seem less likely than the period 196-207.