

ART. IV. – *Fieldwork on the Roman fort site at Blennerhasset, Cumbria*

By JEREMY EVANS AND CHRISTOPHER SCULL, with a contribution on the samian by MARTIN MILLETT.

THE fort at Blennerhasset, Cumbria (NGR NY 190413), was discovered in 1984 during aerial survey carried out for R.C.H.M.E. by Mr J. Hampton. Aerial photographs show the positive cropmarks of a rectangular triple-ditched enclosure with rounded corners and an internal area of 3.4 ha., situated on a bluff to the south of the River Ellen. Entrances are visible in the ditches on three sides; some internal features also show as cropmarks (Frere *et al.* 1985, 274; Fig. 2, Pl. 1).

In January 1988 the authors were shown freshly-broken pieces of samian which had been ploughed-up near the north-east corner of the fort during the winter of 1987-8. This part of the site is on land owned by Mr Richard Tinniswood and the sherds were recovered by his son, Peter, who also possessed more material which he had found over a number of years on the eastern part of the site. The quantity of this casually retrieved material and the condition of the samian, which indicated that fresh material was being ploughed-out each winter, suggested that more systematic collection might be valuable. This was undertaken in March 1988 by the authors, helped by Richard Tinniswood and students from Durham University Department of Archaeology. The opportunity was also taken to conduct a resistivity survey over the projected line of the ditches at the south-east corner of the fort, which had not shown in the standing crop in 1984.

Surface Collection

The area marked in Fig. 2 was line-walked at 10 m intervals. Around 90 sherds were recovered. For the most part these were scattered evenly across the interior of the fort, but a small concentration, including the mortarium (Fig. 4.13), was found on the western rampart-back, slightly to the south of the mid-point of the western defences. This was probably from a recently disturbed feature; the cropmark of a building at this point also suggests greater plough-disturbance here than elsewhere (Fig. 2). The sherds are generally small, soft and quite abraded, and it is unlikely that they would have survived in the ploughsoil for many years. It is probable, therefore, that most of the material collected comes from stratified deposits disturbed fairly recently, perhaps mainly from the rampart, which is clearly visible as a dark soil mark along the east side of the fort, and from which much burnt clay, perhaps from rampart-back ovens, is being ploughed up. The line of the ditches along the south side of the fort was detectable as a shallow depression, waterlogged in the wet weather. Dumps of stone cleared from the fields in which the fort is situated include many large river cobbles and some squared blocks, and the possibility that some of these came from the fort's road-metalling or bedding at the rampart-base must be considered. No metalwork was recovered.

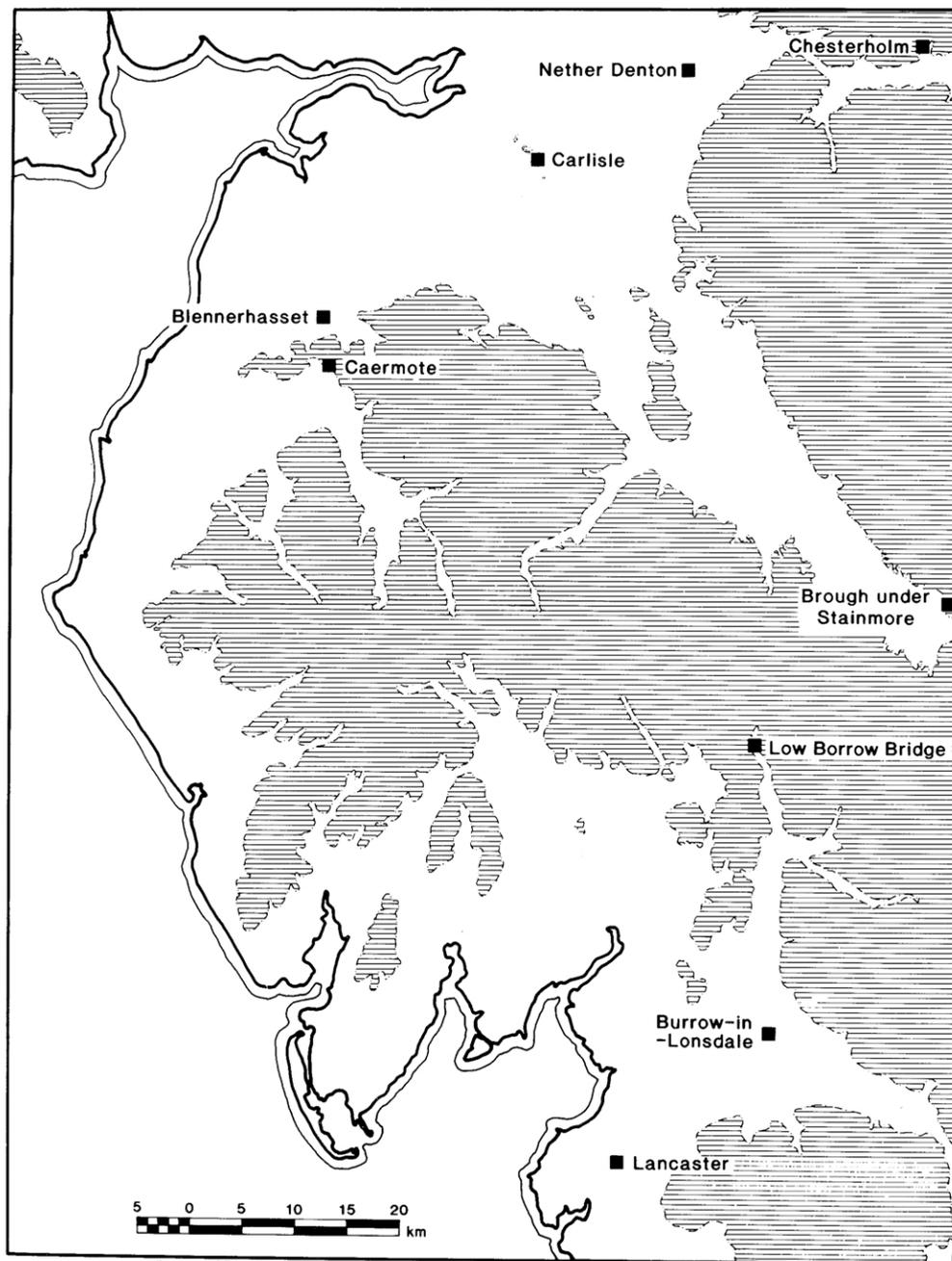


FIG. 1. - Location of the Blennerhasset fort, and other forts with evidence for 1st-century occupation in Cumbria and adjacent areas (after Breeze 1988, 14-15, Fig. 1).

Resistivity Survey

Readings were taken on a 1 m grid over an area of 1200 m², and ranged between 50.2 ohms and 84.7 ohms. The results are presented in grey-scale format in Fig. 3. The line of the ditches shows as a band of lower readings *c.* 12 m wide, but within this it is not possible to distinguish the individual ditches clearly. Other anomalies do not fall into readily identifiable configurations, but in general readings inside the south-east corner of the fort are higher than outside.

The Pottery (Figs. 4, 5)

By Jeremy Evans, with a contribution by Martin Millett.

The material kindly made available for study by Peter Tinniswood and that collected in March 1988 totals 186 sherds. These are mostly small and abraded. The average sherd weight is 3.9g, much lower than that from excavated assemblages, and the average percentage of rim-sherds, at 3.9%, is also notably low. In excavated groups from 13 later Roman sites the average sherd weight does not fall below 10g, and 5% is the lowest average percentage of rim types (Evans 1985).

Coarseware Fabrics

The coarseware sherds have been classified into seventeen fabric types, of which one (fabric 9) is post-medieval and the rest Romano-British. Detailed treatment of the Romano-British material is thought worthwhile because this group, although technically unstratified, comes from a site apparently occupied for only a limited time during a period for which there has been little quantification of northern assemblages.

Fabric 1

Soft mid orange fabric, common finish sand temper *c.* 0.2mm and quite common irregular red-brown to dark brown ironstone inclusions *c.* 1-4mm.

Fabric 2

Soft mid orange-brown fabric, common red ironstone inclusions *c.* 0.5-1mm, rather laminated with frequent white clay trails through the fabric.

Fabric 3

Soft pale to deep orange fabric, occasional fine chalk and sand temper *c.* 0.2mm and occasional red-brown ironstone inclusions *c.* 0.3-2mm.

Fabric 4

Fairly soft orange-brown fabric, common moderate sand temper *c.* 0.3mm and occasional red-brown ironstone inclusions *c.* 0.5-1mm.

Fabric 5

Soft fabric, often with a dark grey core, and generally with pale orange to orange-brown surfaces. General lack of visible tempering, some sand *c.* 0.1mm and occasional red-brown ironstone inclusions *c.* 0.5-2mm.

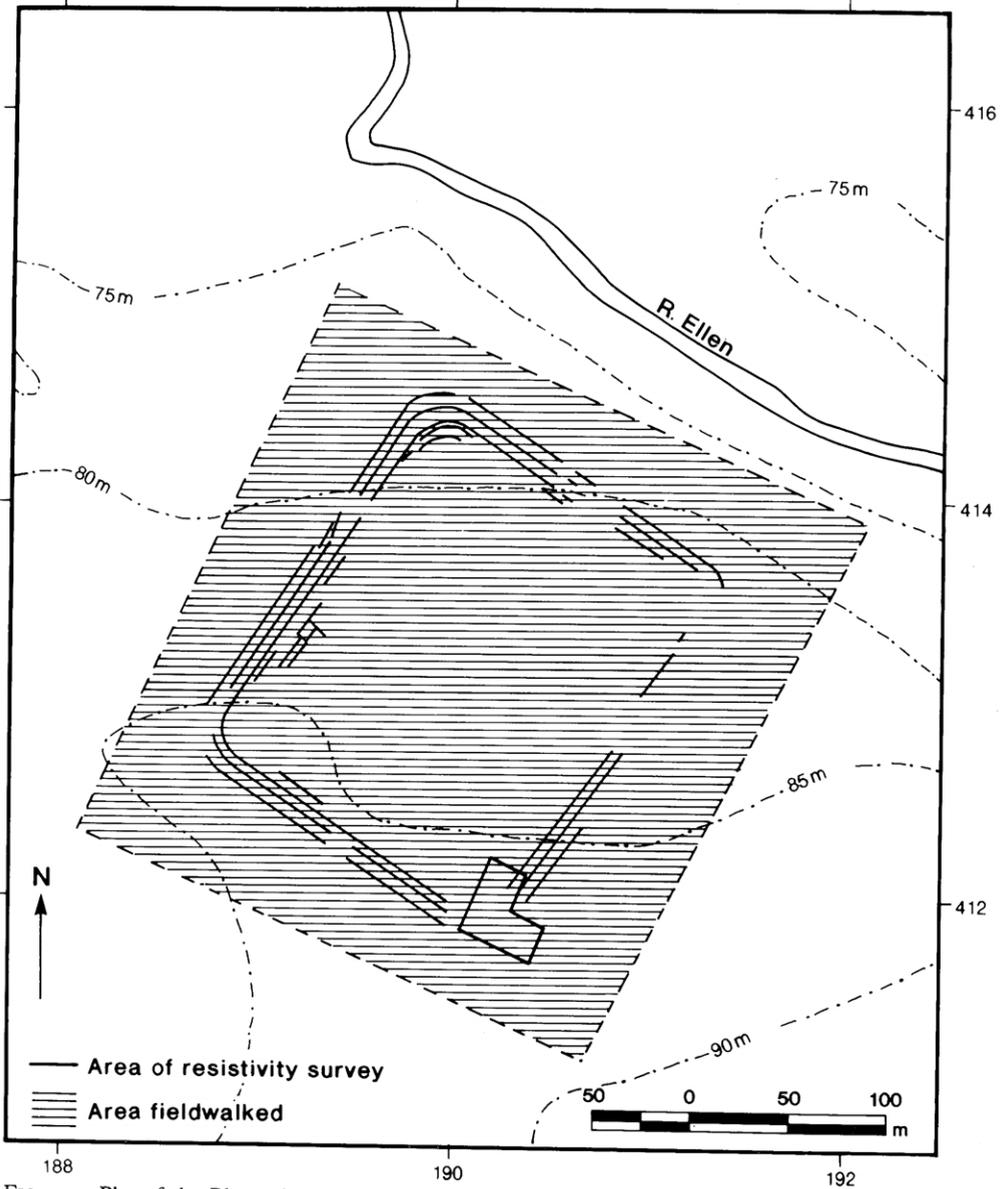


FIG. 2. - Plot of the Blennerhasset cropmark, showing area of surface collection and extent of resistivity survey.

Fabric 6

Fairly soft, pale orange-brown fabric, common abundant orange-brown ?grog and ?ironstone inclusions c. 0.5-3mm. Possibly post Roman.

Fabric 7

Hard brick-orange fabric, sometimes with a grey core, common moderate sand temper c. 0.3mm and common white chalk/limestone sand inclusions c. 0.3mm and 1-3mm.

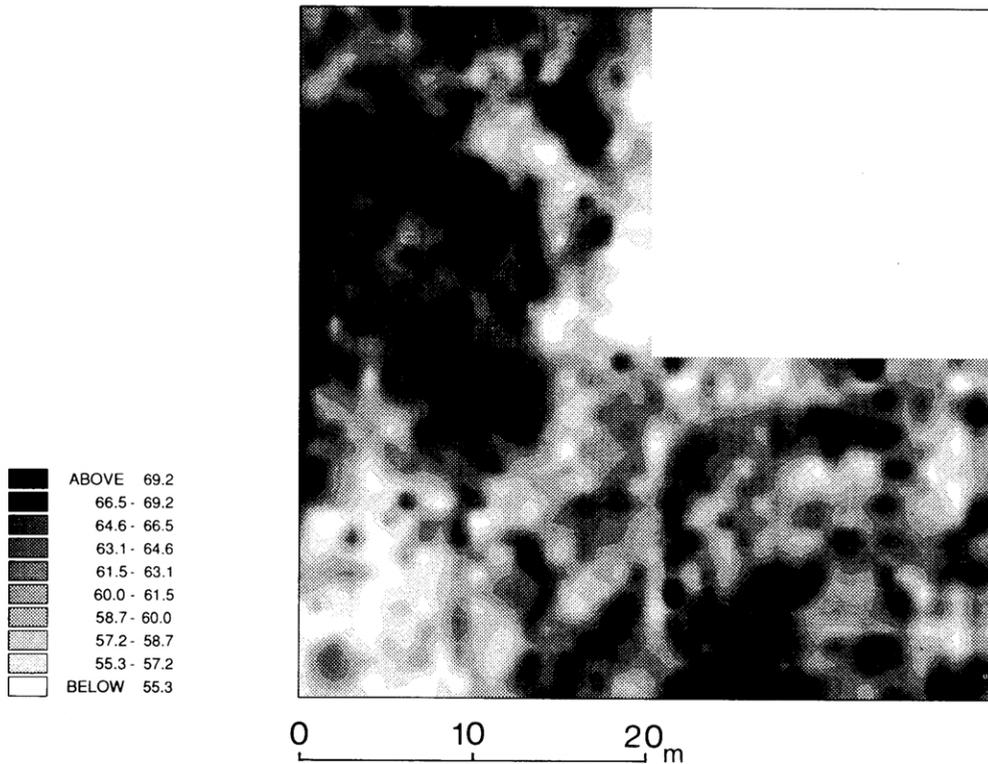


FIG. 3. – Grey-scale plot of the results of resistivity survey at Blennerhasset.

Fabric 8

Fairly soft buff orange fabric, occasional moderate sand temper *c.* 0.3mm and occasional red ?ironstone inclusions *c.* 0.5mm.

Fabric 10

Soft orange fabric, abundant white and coloured quartzite inclusions *c.* 0.5-1mm and occasional brown grog inclusions *c.* 2-3mm.

Fabric 11

Hard orange fabric, abundant brown ?ironstone inclusions *c.* 2-3mm.

Fabric 12

Softish orange fabric, common moderate sand temper *c.* 0.3mm and some white limestone and brown ?ironstone inclusions *c.* 0.3-2mm.

Fabric 13

Softish orange-grey fabric, common orange-brown grog inclusions *c.* 1-4mm.

Fabric 14

Hard orange fabric with grey core, some moderate sand temper *c.* 0.3mm and common

orange-brown grog inclusions *c.* 0.3-1.5mm and occasional white limestone inclusions *c.* 0.3-1mm.

Fabric 15

Hard brick-orange fabric, some moderate black sand temper *c.* 0.3mm and occasional limestone sand inclusions *c.* 0.3mm.

Fabric 16

Very hard pale orange fabric, occasional moderate sand temper.

Fabric 17

Softish orange fabric, some fine sand temper *c.* 0.1mm and some large red-brown ?ironstone inclusions *c.* 2-4mm.

Vessel Forms

Fabric 1

1. Beaded jar or flagon base.

Fabric 2

2. Cordoned flagon handle.

3,4. Footring bases from flagons or bowls.

5. Beaded jar or flagon base (two examples).

Fabric 3

6-8. Footring bases from flagons or bowls.

9. Base, perhaps from a beaker.

10. Simple rimmed dish.

11. A bowl rim, possibly related to reeded-rimmed types, some similarity to Watercrock, Fig. 97, no. 24 (Lockwood 1979).

Fabric 4

12. A double cordoned flagon handle.

Also a footring base, not illustrated.

Fabric 5

13. A mortarium rim of unusual form with rising flange, internally scored below bead. Trituration grits of a laminar, black angular material which will break under pressure from a finger nail. Mrs K. Hartley kindly comments that "it looks like a local product" and that whilst not closely datable "it could fit a Flavian date".

14. An unusual bowl-rim of triangular section with bead.

15. A reeded-rimmed bowl, cf. Watercrock, Fig. 97, no. 19, Flavian-Trajanic (Lockwood 1979).

16. Beaded lid rim.

17. Double cordoned flagon handle.

18. Simple jar base.
19. Beaded bowl/jar base.
20. Footring base from a flagon (and two others, not illustrated, from flagons or bowls).

Fabric 6

21. A flange-rim bowl (?).

Fabric 8

22. Flagon rim fragment, probably from a ring-necked flagon.

Fabric 10

23. Beaded jar or bowl rim.

Also a simple jar base, not illustrated.

Fabric 11

24. A bowl rim, similar to the reeded-rimmed bowl series, there is an example of a very similar form from Old Penrith (personal examination).

Fabric 12

A simple jar base, not illustrated.

Fabric 16

A body sherd with barbotine dots, perhaps arranged in a circle, oxidized as the body. There are too few to be certain of the motif type but the oxidized fabric clearly suggests that the sherd is from a ring and dot beaker rather than a poppyhead one, in which case it is unlikely to date from later than the end of the 1st century (Evans forthcoming).

Fabric 17

25. A reeded-rimmed bowl.

All of the vessels are consistent with a Flavian-Trajanic date for the group.

The Samian Ware (Fig. 5)

By Martin Millett.

1. ? Central Gaulish, 1 sherd, undiagnostic (wt. 1g). Identified by A. C. King.
- 2-12. South Gaulish, 10 sherds, undiagnostic (wt. 22g).
13. South Gaulish, Dr 18, small with bright glaze, 1 sherd (wt. 1g).
14. South Gaulish, Dr 18, 1 sherd (wt. 5g).
15. South Gaulish, Dr 15/17 or 18, 1 sherd (wt. 38g).
16. South Gaulish, Dr 27, good glaze, 1 sherd (wt. 3g).
17. South Gaulish, Dr 27, small, 1 sherd (wt. 2g).
18. South Gaulish, probably Dr 37 footring, bright glaze, 1 sherd (wt. 16g).
19. South Gaulish, Dr 37, ovolo, very worn, small vessel, probably Flavian, 1 sherd (wt. 2g).

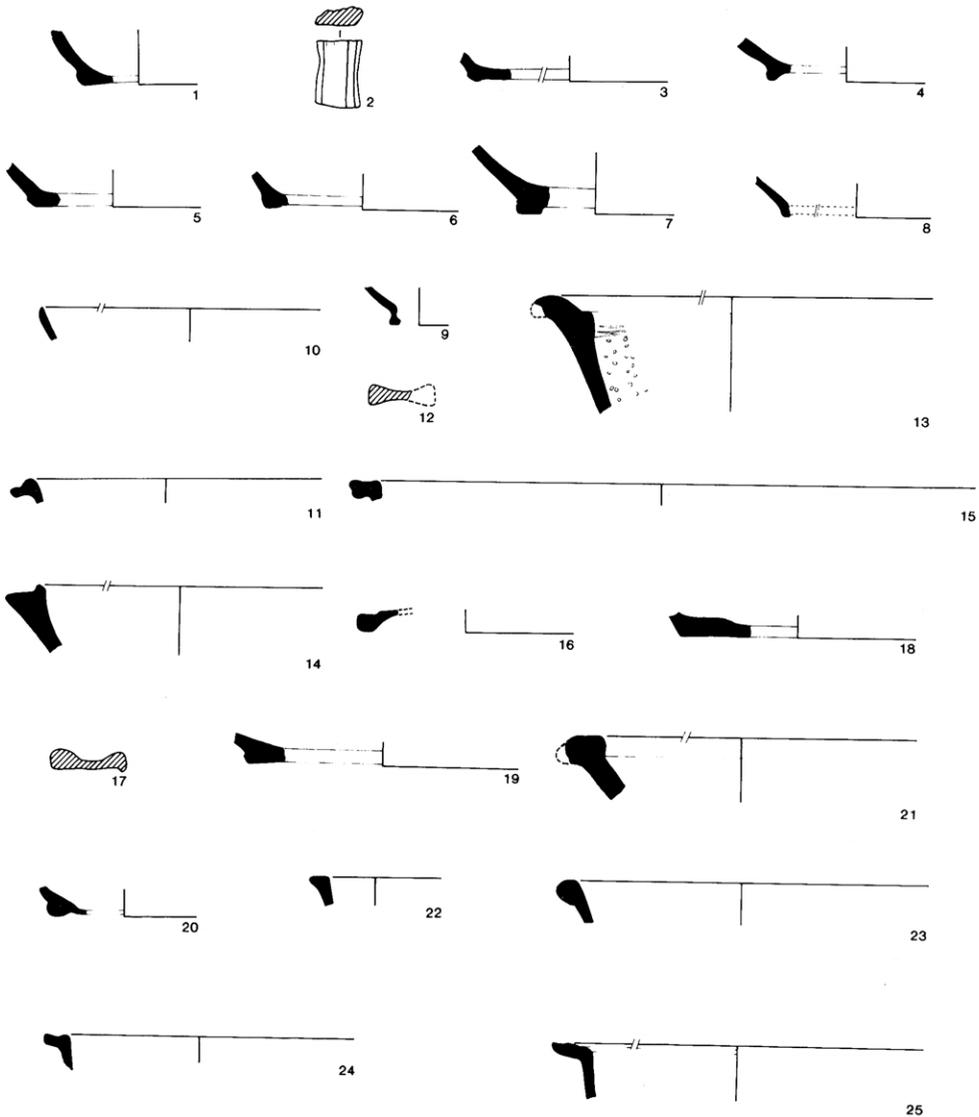


FIG. 4. - Coarse pottery from surface collection at Blennerhasset. Scale 1:4.

20. South Gaulish, Dr 37, metope with hound running to right, very worn, small vessel, probably early Flavian, 1 sherd (wt. 4g).

21. South Gaulish, Dr 29?, basal sherd, bright glaze, 1 sherd (wt. 11g).

22. South Gaulish, Dr 29, basal zone. Fine wreath medallion (or festoon) with figure (?animal) within, bright glaze, Neronian-early Flavian, 1 sherd (wt. 5g).

23. South Gaulish, Dr 29, upper zone, coarse wreath festoons with stars within, separated by a vertical stalk and bud. Spandrel contains dot, coarse bead borders, bright glaze, late Neronian-early Flavian, 1 sherd (wt. 6g).

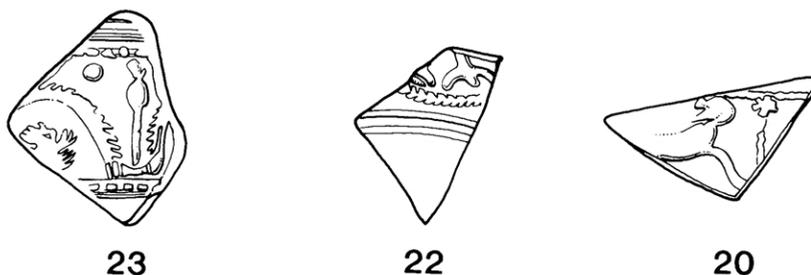


FIG. 5. – Samian from surface collection at Blennerhasset. Scale 1:2.

The assemblage taken as a whole would appear to be very late Neronian to early Flavian. The only piece which ought to be later, No. 1, is uncertain and does not detract from an otherwise consistent assemblage; characteristic later Flavian/Domitianic material is absent.

Discussion

The most notable feature of the pottery assemblage is that all the coarse pottery is in oxidized fabrics, a Flavian-Trajanic feature, and further evidence that the collection does not extend into the late Trajanic period comes from the absence of BB1 (Simpson 1975) which might well be expected, given its western location, if BB1 had been on the market before the fort was abandoned. This is consistent with the evidence from the samian ware that the assemblage dates to the late Neronian-early Flavian period.

TABLE I. – The proportions of fabric types in the assemblage.

Fabric	% by sherd count	Fabric	% by sherd count
1	11.4	10	1.0
2	10.3	11	0.5
3	17.3	12	0.5
4	5.9	13	1.0
5	31.4	14	0.5
6	0.5	15	0.5
7	3.2	16	0.5
8	2.7	17	0.5
		Samian	12.4

n = 186

The commonest fabric, fabric 5, seems likely to be a local product, quite possibly manufactured at the fort itself as forts often had their own kilns in this period (Swan 1984, Map 4), and the other common fabrics, fabrics 1, 2 and 3, might also possibly be local. The proportion of samian ware, at 12.4%, is fairly high, comparable with around 10% for the Flavian-Trajanic period at Segontium (King and Millett forthcoming). This and the oxidized nature of the coarse pottery assemblage are typical features of military assemblages of this period, suggesting favourable access to long distance supplies in an “under-developed” region and a desire by the army, in the absence of local civilian suppliers, to produce as much of its own requirements as possible.

TABLE 2. – Functional analysis of the group by minimum number of rims.

Dishes	Bowls	Jars	Mortaria	Lids	Flagons
8%	58%	8%	8%	8%	8%

n=12

The function figures (Table 2), although rather too low to produce reliable percentages, show a very clear trend, with a wide functional range typical of military sites (Evans 1985) but with a distinct emphasis on bowls. This dominance of tablewares in the assemblage is emphasized by the base types, with half of the coarse pottery bases having footrings and therefore presumably having come from flagons and bowls. The preponderance of tablewares would seem to be a fairly typical feature of Flavian-Trajanic military assemblages, and may be accounted for by the use of metal cooking vessels or by a preference for pottery tablewares by those of higher rank.

Significance of the Blennerhasset Fort

The Blennerhasset fort, at 3.4 ha, is larger than any other known Cumbrian fort (Potter 1979, 147), suggesting that it was intended for a larger garrison than the standard quingenary unit. The pottery discussed above is clearly late Neronian-early Flavian, and, although more dating evidence would be desirable, it indicates that the Blennerhasset fort was broadly contemporary with the earliest north-western forts at Ribchester, Lancaster, Burrow-in-Lonsdale, Bowes, Brough under Stainmore and Carlisle (Hanson 1987, fig. 8).

It is notoriously difficult to correlate archaeological dating with the historically-known governorships of Britannia, but the evidence from Blennerhasset would be consistent with occupation under Cerialis, Frontinus or Agricola, and a pre-Agricolan foundation should not be ruled out. The fort's function would seem from its location to be both to control the Cumbrian plain and, with the chain of forts from Ribchester to Carlisle, to shut in the inhabitants of the Cumbrian massif. Its existence undermines Higham's suggestion (1986, 173-4) that the Lake District was by-passed by the Roman army during its advance under Agricola, to be conquered and occupied later; a hypothesis which has already been contested by Breeze (1988, 14-15).

Acknowledgements

Our thanks are due to Mr and Mrs R. Tinniswood for kind permission to work on their land, and for their hospitality, and to those who helped with the fieldwork: Peter Tinniswood, Claire Bland, Mike King, Dave Webster and Alison Tinniswood, who brought the 1987-8 finds to our attention and so prompted the exercise. Pl. 1 is reproduced by permission of R.C.H.M.E., who also made available the plot reproduced in Fig. 2. The maps and illustrations are the work of Yvonne Beadnell.

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PLATE I. – Cropmarks of the Roman fort at Blennerhasset, photographed from the south-west (Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England).

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