

ART. VI – *Romans in South Cumbria*

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To many, the place of Furness and Cartmel on the map of Roman Britain has long seemed anomalous: no forts, no *vici*, few farmsteads, and a 'road-system' virtually dismissed as a short-cut from Lancaster to Ravenglass. Speculation has been kept alive by the occasional discovery of Roman material through from Levens to Barrow. Explanations advanced to address the problem vary: some have suggested that such was the disposition of the people of south Cumbria that a blanket of military occupation was regarded as unnecessary and irrelevant; the fortified line from Ambleside (Waterhead), through Hardknott, to Ravenglass was sufficiently close to keep the peace between it and the coast of southern Cumbria. An alternative suggestion is that forts still await discovery, or – more romantically – that they have slipped into the waters of Morecambe Bay, as victims of a changing coastline.

It seems appropriate, therefore, to review the existing evidence of Roman activity in south Cumbria, and to base suggestions upon it.

Obviously, the initial Roman attitude to this area, as to any other, will have depended upon the pre-existing political geography. In this, it is clearly relevant that one recent writer¹ has, on the evidence of hill-forts, including major sites at Warton Crag and Skelmore Heads, suggested that, far from being a backwater, prehistoric south Cumbria may have been one of the more significant areas of the county. Hill-forts imply the existence of a warrior-elite and a stratification of society based presumably upon agricultural and industrial wealth: in other words, a degree of social, economic and political sophistication.

For this reason, it was suggested that in this area may have lain the tribal lands of the elusive Setantii. This group is known to us through the reference of Ptolemy of Alexandria, writing in the second century A.D., to a site named *Portus Setantiorum*, or 'Harbour of the Setantii'.² Although this site is usually placed at the mouth of the river Wyre in the Fylde of Lancashire, there seems no pressing reason to accept this, although it has to be said that there is no *obvious* alternative site for it presently known in south Cumbria.

It is usually argued that initially not only south Cumbria but the whole of the Lake District were by-passed by the army of Agricola when in A.D. 78 it thrust northwards along the line of the Lune and Eden valleys to Carlisle. However, an increasing body of evidence is pointing to a more complex picture of early conquest in the north-west; dates in the early 70s have been proposed for Ribchester and Carlisle (at least), whilst a newly-discovered fort at Blennerhasset in north Cumbria³ has also yielded pottery of the early 70s.

More germane still to the present question, as I have argued elsewhere,⁴ are finds of pre-Neronian *aes* coins, which probably offer the best indication so far available of areas where the Roman army found it necessary to intervene in the 50s and 60s to keep factional squabbling amongst the Brigantes under control prior to a more thorough-going annexation policy. It is clear that this activity, based upon Chester

and the Dee estuary, embraced the coast of Cumbria as well as places further to the south. Not only has such evidence been recorded in north Cumbria – in the Papcastle and Carlisle area – but finds have been made in the south also at Barrow and Cartmel. The activity indicated by such finds may well point to the significance of southern Cumbria in the late prehistoric period, and lend weight to the theory that the tribesmen settled there enjoyed the potential for trouble-making.

It is less clear how Furness and Cartmel were handled when, in the later first and early second centuries A.D., the permanent Roman policing-network was laid out. However, the nature of the fort and *vicus* at Ambleside (Waterhead) may offer a clue. It is evident that the fort was established there late in the first century A.D., and was occupied without any *obvious* break until late in the fourth century. Recent excavations⁵ have indicated that the *vicus* outside the fort was far more extensive and significant than was once thought; structures, evidently defended (or defined) by ditches, were found on an east-west alignment at a distance of 350 metres to the north of the fort. The presence of ditches related to a *vicus* may mark a continuing military sensitivity in the area; we should not forget the tombstone, (probably of the early third century), recording the killing by the enemy *inside the fort* of one, Flavius Romanus.⁶ Further, parallels for defended *vici* are not easy to find, though that at Ribchester may be explained by the presence of a settlement of veterans which is implicit in the name of the site as given in the *Ravenna Cosmography*.⁷ Combined with this evidence is an oral tradition of heavy stonework under the water at the north end of Lake Windermere, which carries a possible implication of a jetty-structure.

These factors together are sufficient to suggest that Ambleside was a centre to which men, supplies and commercial cargoes were ferried by lake-transport; this will have facilitated the penetration into the heart of the Lake District of materials which otherwise would have had to rely solely on land-transport which may have been both difficult and dangerous. In its turn, this points to the existence of a site at the southern end of Windermere, equivalent to Ambleside. No unequivocal evidence exists for such a site, although there are reports of Roman material having been found in the area of Newby Bridge in the 19th century.⁸ In particular, such a site may have had an important role in the transportation of iron-ore, which will have been worked in the *vici* of most Roman sites in north-west England.

In view of the wide variety of iron-objects found on Romano-British sites, it is evident that many sources of ore will have been employed.⁹ Although no excavations have produced slags for which the ore-sources have been positively identified, it remains a strong likelihood that deposits in Furness will have been utilised, particularly with the availability of land- and water-transport to convey the raw material to its destination. It is in this connection worth mentioning the recorded presence in the Lancaster area of a unit of lightermen (*Numerus Barcariorum*),¹⁰ who were presumably responsible for the loading and unloading out at sea of a variety of cargoes and for negotiating their passage through the shallows of Morecambe Bay and navigable rivers.

Although some of the Romano-British inhabitants of south Cumbria were undoubtedly involved in industrial activity, the majority will have relied upon land or sea to make their living. Romano-British farm-sites are often visually difficult to distinguish from their pre-Roman predecessors, and thus require a body of

excavated evidence to facilitate chronological analysis. Whilst such sites at higher levels, where their inhabitants were presumably dependent upon pastoralism, tend to survive better, those at lower altitudes, constructed as they were of more ephemeral materials, are notoriously vulnerable to plough-damage.

An example of a site with prehistoric and Romano-British associations is provided by 'Urswick Stone Walls';¹¹ others undoubtedly existed, but may have left little structural or artefactual evidence.¹² It is here worth bearing in mind the considerable number of Roman coins that have been recorded from Furness and Cartmel.¹³ Significant amongst these are two large collections from Castlehead (Allithwaite) and from Upper Holker; the relevance of the former is not unequivocal, since the Roman coins were mixed with other contemporary and later material, and may therefore represent a more recent – possibly a collector's – deposit. The coins from Upper Holker, however, of which a few issues of second- and third-century date were recorded,¹⁴ clearly represent a saver's hoard to which the last coins were added in the mid-third century. Although the reports of this hoard are too meagre to permit detailed analysis of its significance, its size alone – in excess of 500 coins – certainly points to its owner as a person of some substance.

There are numerous records of finds of single coins, and it is always difficult to attach a particular significance to such finds, although their findspots may point to the existence of farmsteads or roadways. The Barrow-area has produced the greatest density of Roman coins, and a number of them – mostly second or third century in date – have come from the vicinity of Furness Abbey. Although these may point to the presence of a nearby Romano-British site, it should be remembered that monks did on occasion themselves collect antiquities. Again, some finds may not represent ancient losses – for example, a *denarius* of Septimius Severus found in the gutter in Hartington Street in Barrow!

The coins recorded from Barrow include at least three Alexandrian tetradrachms of the third century A.D; such finds are usually taken as indicative of commercial activity, and it may not be accidental that the area around the Dee and the Mersey has also produced a considerable number of them – thus possibly including Furness in a network of trade that had connections further south in the region.

The coins from south Cumbria as a whole provide the following chronological spread:

Period	No.	%
I (– A.D. 41)	1	2.70
II (41–54)	2	5.41
III (54–68)	2	5.41
IV (68–96)	3	8.11
V (96–117)	1	2.70
VI (117–138)	2	5.41
VII (138–161)	4	10.81
VIII (161–180)	–	–
IX (180–192)	1	2.70
X (192–222)	1	2.70
XI (222–235)	–	–
XII (235–259)	2	5.41

XIII (259–275)	7	18.92
XIV (275–294)	1	2.70
XV (294–324)	2	5.41
XVI (324–330)	–	–
XVII (330–346)	5	13.51
XVIII (346–364)	1	2.70
XIX (364–378)	1	2.70
XX (378–388)	1	2.70
XXI (388–)	–	–

Although it is only a small sample, it contains some points of interest; as already noted, the early *aes* coins carry a possible implication of military activity in the area prior to the full annexation of the Brigantes in the late-first and early-second centuries A.D. There is, however, little sign of the kind of evidence that would normally be thought consistent with military activity in the Flavian period itself. The sample appears to ‘take off’ in the second century, and it may well be that this should be seen as a consequence of the opening up of the Lake District in the 90s and beyond, and of the new significance that attached to the north from Hadrian’s time. Both of these developments will have signalled the need for building materials and supplies, and the nature of the coin sample may point to southern Cumbria as a source for some of these.

Beyond the Hadrianic period, the picture provided by coin-loss statistics for south Cumbria has much in common with other areas of the north-west, with similar strengths and weaknesses. Of particular interest, however, is the evidence for the fourth century, which includes some issues which belong to the second half of the century – one each of Magnentius (from Foulney Island), of Valentinian I (from Cartmel), and of Magnus Maximus (from Broughton-in-Cartmel). Such finds prompt a question concerning the possible relationship between the coastal areas of south Cumbria and those of the rest of the north-west in the second half of the fourth century.

The coastal areas appear to have become increasingly vulnerable to attacks from across the Irish Sea, and there is, in various parts of the north-west, strong evidence of the preparations to meet these attacks. Most of the known forts of the north-west appear to have retained garrisons until late in the fourth century, and many may, as elsewhere, have finally become centres of quasi-independent Romano-British communities, fending for and defending themselves. Especial evidence for the emphasis on coastal defence is provided by the construction of the new, ‘castle-like’, forts at *Caer Gybi* (Holyhead) and Lancaster, and by the substantial rebuilding after A.D. 370 of the conventional forts at Ravenglass and Maryport.¹⁵

In southern Cumbria, therefore, coins of the fourth century may point to the contemporary importance of the coast, and links with other Roman centres in the north-west. Indeed, it is not impossible that the small concentration of them in the Barrow area may indicate some more ‘official’, even structural, presence at this stage. Similarly, locations such as Urswick and Aldingham, rather like Heversham and Heysham further south, which have produced evidence of pre-Conquest christian sculpture, may themselves offer clues to the whereabouts of communities in the late Romano-British period.

Whilst, therefore, firm evidence of a Roman military presence in south Cumbria remains elusive, sufficient survives both to suggest that a military site (or sites) may be forthcoming in the future. In any case, there is little reason to suggest that the area had, since the late first century A.D., been isolated from its neighbours, and much that points to the likelihood that Furness and Cartmel were as closely integrated into the 'supply-and-demand' economics of the Roman north-west as any other part of Cumbria or Lancashire.

Notes and References

- ¹ N.J. Higham, *The Northern Counties to A.D. 1000* (London, 1986), 130, 147.
- ² *Geographia* 11.3.
- ³ J. Evans and C. Scull, 'Fieldwork on the Roman Fort-Site at Blennerhasset, Cumbria', *CW2*, xc, 127–37.
- ⁴ *CW2*, xciv, 21–34.
- ⁵ For a summary of the work see *Britannia* XIV (1983), 292.
- ⁶ *Journal of Roman Studies* LIII (1963), 160.
- ⁷ D.C.A. Shotter, *Britons and Romans in North-west England* (Lancaster, 1993).
- ⁸ A.L. Evans, *Lost Lancashire* (Milnthorpe, 1991), 7, 10.
- ⁹ G.D.B. Jones, *Roman Manchester* (Manchester, 1974), 153; S.H. Penny, 'Romano-British Iron Extraction in North Lancashire', *CW2*, lxxxiii, 59–61.
- ¹⁰ *RIB* 601; D.C.A. Shotter, 'Numeri Barcariorum: A Note on *RIB* 601', *Britannia* IV, 206–9.
- ¹¹ J. Dobson, 'Urswick Stone Walls', *CW2*, vii, 72–94.
- ¹² N.J. Higham, *op. cit.*, 131, 187.
- ¹³ D.C.A. Shotter, *Roman Coins from North-west England* (Lancaster, 1990), 234ff. and supplement (forthcoming); D.C.A. Shotter, 'Roman Coin-finds in Cumbria', *CW2*, lxxxix, 41–50.
- ¹⁴ J. Stockdale, *Annales Caermoelesenses* (Ulverston, 1872), 244ff; D.C.A. Shotter, *Roman Coins from North-west England* (Lancaster, 1990), 199f., 207.
- ¹⁵ For Lancaster, see G.D.B. Jones and D.C.A. Shotter, *Roman Lancaster* (Manchester, 1988), 80ff; D.C.A. Shotter, 'Numeri Barcariorum: A Note on *RIB* 601', *Britannia* IV, 206–9. For Ravenglass see T.W. Potter, *Romans in North-west England* (Kendal, 1979), 12. For Maryport see M.G. Jarrett, *Maryport, Cumbria: A Roman Fort and its Garrison* (Kendal, 1976), 47.

