

Burnswark Hill: the opening shot of the Antonine reconquest of Scotland?

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This paper represents an interim report of the Burnswark Project that has utilised the techniques of battlefield archaeology to locate and accurately identify missiles across a substantial field of conflict in SW Scotland. The distribution, characteristics, dating and proposed historical context of these missiles are argued to support their use in a dramatic episode of 'exemplary force' by the Roman army. The magnitude of the event might be seen to be compatible with an emperor establishing his legitimacy as a military leader.

The complex of earthworks at Burnswark Hill near Ecclefechan in E. Dumfriesshire has excited the curiosity of antiquarians for centuries¹ and provoked debate amongst historians and archaeologists for the last half-century.² The imposing flat-topped summit is completely enclosed by the denuded ramparts of an Iron Age fort which, at 7 ha, is the largest in Dumfriesshire. Almost 300 m above sea level, the fort commands outstanding views of the Solway Basin and Annandale. Besides being the largest hillfort in SW Scotland, it is exceptional because it is held in the grip of two Roman camps of unusual morphology that straddle it to the north and south. The massive nature of the upstanding Roman earthworks, their extraordinary 'artillery platforms', and their positioning in relation to the hillfort are a unique juxtaposition in Europe. Archaeological investigations were first carried out in the late 19th c.; smaller-scale excavations took place in the early to mid-20th c., followed by the wide-ranging investigation by G. Jobey in 1965-70.³

Early investigators saw the site as one of major conflict with the use of overwhelming force, apparently confirmed by an unparalleled (for Britain) quantity of Roman missiles including lead slingshot, stone ballista balls and iron arrowheads found on site, not only within the Roman camps but also on the summit of the hillfort (fig. 1).⁴ More recent authors have put forward a non-conflict explanation for the considerable Roman military investment at Burnswark, and others have followed this suggestion.⁵ A model of a Roman 'field training school' has been developed, as highlighted by the writings of Josephus (*BJ* 3.5.1).

1 E.g., A. Gordon, *Itinerarium septentrionale* (London 1726) 16; T. Pennant, *A tour in Scotland and voyage to the Hebrides* (Chester 1774) 91; W. Maitland, *The history and antiquities of Scotland*, vol. 1 (London 1757) 192; W. Roy, *The military antiquities of the Romans in Britain* (London 1793) 72 ff.; G. Chalmers, *Caledonia, or an account, historical and topographical, of North Britain*, vol. 1 (London 1807) 120.

2 E.g., K. A. Steer, "John Horsley and the Antonine Wall," *Arch. Ael.* 42 (1964) 24; R. W. Davies, "The Romans at Burnswark," *Historia* 21 (1972) 106.

3 G. Jobey, "Burnswark Hill, Dumfriesshire," *Trans. Dumfries Galloway Nat. Hist. Ant. Soc.* 53 (1978) 57-104.

4 E.g., D. Christison, J. Barbour and J. Anderson, "Account of the excavations of the camps and earthworks at Birrenswark Hill, in Annandale, undertaken by the Society in 1898," *Proc Soc Ant Scot* 33 (1899) 198-249; A. Schulten, "Birrenswark, ein britannisches Numantia," *Neue Jb. f. das klassische Altertum* 17 (1914) 607-17.

5 E.g., Davies (supra n.2) 105; Jobey (supra n.3); W. S. Hanson and G. S. Maxwell, *Rome's north west frontier, the Antonine Wall* (Edinburgh 1983) 26; W. S. Hanson, *Agricola and the conquest of the north* (London 1987) 168; RCAHMS, *Eastern Dumfriesshire, an archaeological landscape* (Edinburgh 1997) 179; G. S. Maxwell, *A gathering of eagles: scenes from Roman Scotland* (Edinburgh 1998) 48; R. J. A. Wilson, *A guide to the Roman remains in Britain* (4th edn.; London 2002) 562; D. J. Breeze, "Burnswark: Roman siege or army training ground?" *ArchJ* 168 (2011) 166-80; A. Wilkins, *Roman imperial artillery* (Dumfries 2017) 124-33.