Death and Burial

The Romans lived closer to death than we do today - their lives were generally short, and disease was common. This was because of poor diet, a lack of medical care and hard living conditions. Only half of the population would live to be fifty, although a few lived into their eighties. Death was common in Roman communities, and there were many rites surrounding it. Funeral fashions changed from cremation (burning) to burying the body in later times. As in many cultures and religions, Roman religious law forbade the internment of bodies within cities and towns. Ashes of the dead were put into containers and deposited in cemeteries or family tombs outside of the city walls, for both sanitary and religious reasons. Subsequently the surrounding rural landscape of an urban centre was dominated by tombstones and other monuments to commemorate the dead. The most popular burial sites were those next to the road where a passer- by would see the graves and remember the people buried there. Remembering the dead, especially famous ancestors, was very important to the Romans.

1. Triple handled face jar

A so called 'face jar'; such pots are fairly common and the faces may have been whimsical caricatures of widely known political or social personalities, or they could be characters from literature and theatre.

Buff ware pottery	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.52

2. Cremation urn containing cremated remains

Grey ware pottery	UK	KMA 1979.111

3. Cremation urn containing remains of a middle aged female

Grey ware pottery	Borrans Road, Ambleside	KMA 1979.162

4. Cremation urn

Orange coarse ware pottery	Untraced	-

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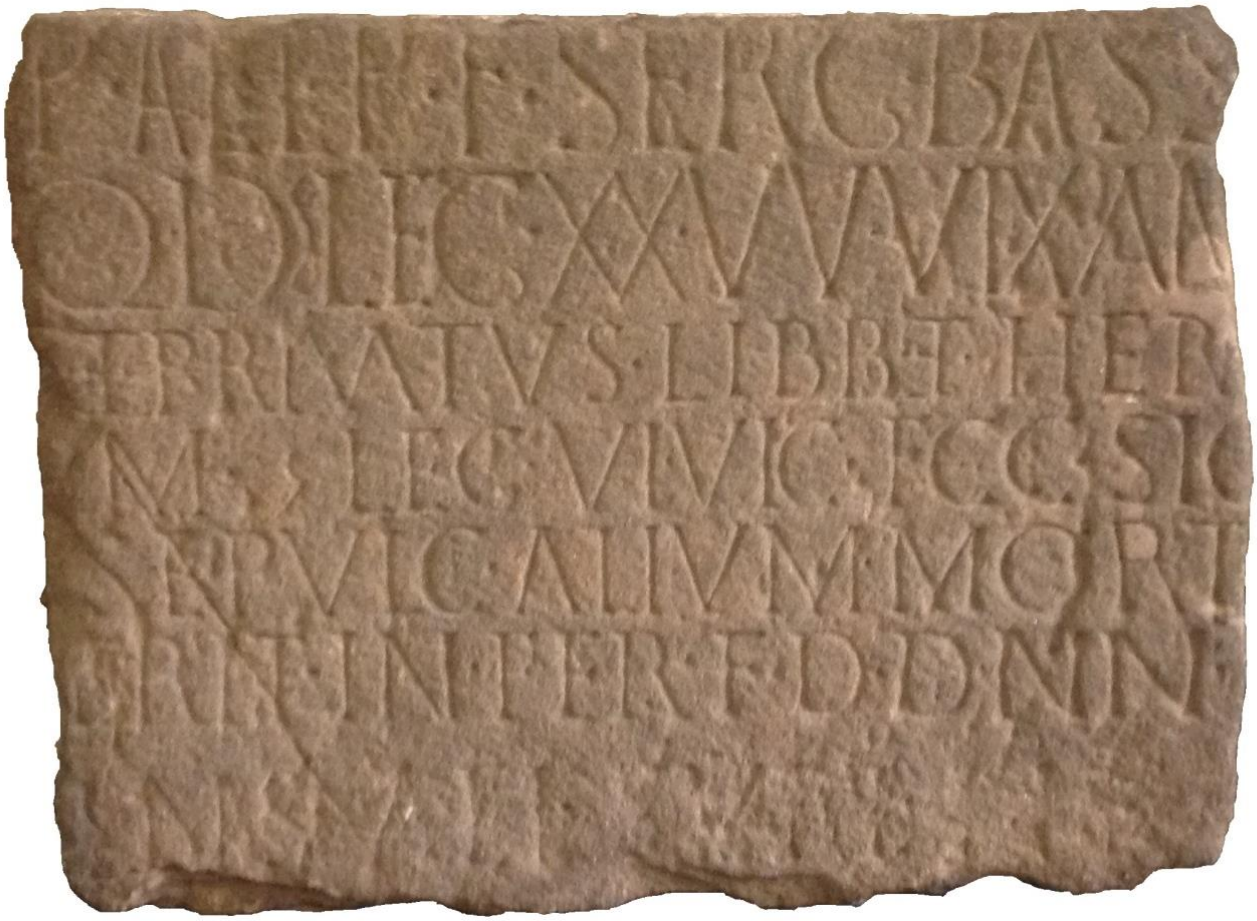
Monument

An inscribed block found at Watercrook in the 19th Century is all that remains of what must have been a most imposing funerary monument, probably set up in the early 3rd Century AD. It commemorates P. Aelius Bassus, an ex-centurion of the Twentieth Legion and was set up by Bassus' freed men and heirs through the good offices and Aelius Surinus, a centurion of the Sixth legion. We do not know precisely what these two men were doing at Watercrook but it was relatively common practice for these centurions to be put in temporary command of auxiliary units or to be on specialises duty with a detachment of legionaries away from their home base.



The inscribed tombstone was found in the wall of a barn near the site of the Roman Camp. The inscription (1) reads:-
'P(ublius) AEL (ius) P(ublii) F(ilius) SERG(ius) BASS(anianus)
(a long name lost on a segment broken off)
Q(uaestor)-DS(designates) LEG(ionnis) XX V(ictricis) V(alentis)
VIX(it) AN(nos-number of years los with proper name) ET
P(ublius) RIVATUS LIB (this freeman) ET HER (the R joined with
Another letter and a long name such as *Hermilianus)* MS (a soldier)
LEG(ionis) VI. VIC(tricis) FCC(fecerunt). SI Q(uis in hoc)
SEPULC(rum) ALIUM MORT (uum intul)
ERIT Infer(et) F(isco) DD. NN ("if anyone puts another corpse into this
Grave let him pay into the treasury of our lords"- the amount lost on a segment broken off)

The inscription then continues in poorly cut letters by another hand,
"L NAS AEL SVR I" (this refers to another interment despite the paid fine).

The inscription formed a part of a large funerary monument dated by R. Birley (2) to the early 3rd Century AD.

The memorial commemorates **P.Aelius Bassus**, an ex-centurion of **Legio XX.** It was erected by his successor **Aelius urinus**, a centurion and a freeman of **Legio VI**, who was possibly stationed at Watercrook as *Praepositus cohoris.*

It is not clear why a centurion of **Legio XX** was buried at Watercrook. By his successor of **Legio VI.** Discovery of a brick stamp marked **Legio XX** leads to the suggestion that the Legion, or a vexillatio of **Legio XX,** was stationed at Watercrook in early 30 AD to be later replaced by **Legio VI.**

References

(1) "Three more castles of Kendal" in Transactions of the C. & W. Antiquarian & Archaeological Society. Editor W.G Collingwood, 1909
(2) Birley, R. (1955) p. 51 in Shotter, D.C.A. "Epigraphs" (in Potter (1974) "Romans in North West England")

This information sheet was researched and compiled with the assistance of Nicholas Stainforth.

Belief and Worship

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Before Christianity became the state religion in the early 4th Century AD, complete religious tolerance existed within the Roman Empire. In Northern Britain an extraordinary number of local Celtic deities, and others imported by troops from abroad, became integrated with the official gods. The many declarations to Mars or his native equivalents reflect the importance of the military presence in the area. Devotes regardless of social standing could support or participate in any of the cults that gave them hope, courage and peace of mind.

People both feared and revered the Gods; they sought to win their favour, appease them and ask for their help. People would pray and make offerings at altars to ask for divine favours, or to give thanks afterwards. Altars were dedicated to a great variety of gods, and have been found on many sites in Britain. Every house had its own shrine where daily worship was made by the whole family. Altars were also placed in temples, barrack blocks, bath houses, roadside shrines and quiet solitary places.

Eating Habits

It used to be thought that soldiers in the Roman army ate little meat but recent excavated evidence from Britain tends to prove the opposite. Garrisons must have always been relatively well fed with rations for a year stowed in their granaries and their own livestock grazing outside the walls. Excavated animal skulls shattered or pierced at the front show how butchers went about their work, carcasses were then reduced to essentials by cleavers, saws, choppers and shinning knives (see the image below). Hides went to be tanned, sheepskins for parchment or coats, hooves for making glue, horns ended up as cups or scale armour, bone as carved objects, sinews as archery tackle or for sewing, guts as sausage skins, bladders as containers, lard for cooking or preserving, blood for puddings and brains as tanning agents.

It is possible that animal powdered stones were used to a limited degree in Roman Britain but sites of a few water mills are known; whatever the method of grinding the gritty flour wore human teeth down far more quickly than our foods do today.

Many of our modern vegetables were unknown but plants now disregarded by us were cultivated in small quantities. Both Roman and native must have loved hunting, birding and fishing both for the sport and the implementation of an occasionally monotonous diet. If edible they ate it. Favourites included rabbit and dormouse; both archaeological finds and texts, and even art help us uncover popular Roman dishes and sometimes even recipes.