



The Romano-British Memorial Stones of Church Brough

ABSTRACT

At Church Brough in Cumbria, near the Roman fort of Verterae, two inscribed memorial stones survive from the late second or early third century CE. They are modest in scale, easily overlooked beside the grandeur of Hadrian's Wall or York's legionary remains. Yet they speak with unusual clarity about the lives of ordinary people living at the edge of empire. These stones are not triumphal monuments. They do not record emperors or victories. They commemorate individuals — men remembered by their families. In doing so, they preserve the quiet negotiation of identity that defined Romano-British life. Stone I Stone II

Latin Epigraphy, Provincial Style, Linguistic Diversity, and the Human Story of Identity at Verterae

1. Introduction: Stones That Still Speak

At Church Brough in Cumbria, near the Roman fort of Verterae, two inscribed memorial stones survive from the late second or early third century CE. They are modest in scale, easily overlooked beside the grandeur of Hadrian's Wall or York's legionary remains. Yet they speak with unusual clarity about the lives of ordinary people living at the edge of empire. These stones are not triumphal monuments. They do not record emperors or victories. They commemorate individuals — men remembered by their families. In doing so, they preserve the quiet negotiation of identity that defined Romano-British life. Stone I Stone II

2. Archaeological Context: Verterae and the Frontier Corridor

Verterae guarded the Stainmore Pass, controlling movement between Eboracum (York) and Luguvalium (Carlisle). This was not a remote outpost but a connective artery of northern Britain. Soldiers, traders, families, and local Britons moved through this landscape. A civilian settlement (vicus) grew beside the fort. Excavation evidence confirms domestic structures, industrial activity including bronze-working, and a bath house dated to the second and third centuries CE. The stones likely originated from a cemetery associated with this community. Their later reuse within medieval fabric reflects continuity layered upon continuity.

3. Epigraphic Form and Provincial Latin Style

The inscriptions are carved in provincial Roman capitals. The letters are angular, slightly irregular, and uneven in depth. This is not metropolitan Italian craftsmanship, but the work of a trained local artisan. The formulae are recognisably Roman: 'filius' (F.) marks lineage; 'vixit annis' records age at death. The apparent absence of a clear 'D.M.' (Dis Manibus) formula suggests regional variation or evolving adoption of imperial conventions (Keppie 1991; RIB).

4. Reconstructed Latin Text (Stone I)



Latin

[---]MBAELIVS M[---] ANVETENICVS DIONIS F(ILIVS) ALBANI F(ILIVS) VIXIT ANNIS [---] AETATE
PRAE[---] [---] HOMINIBVS

5. Translation and the Human Figure Behind the Stone

Anveticus, son of Dionis, grandson of Albanus, lived [—] years. Distinguished among men. Behind these lines stood a real person. Anveticus was remembered not for rank but for relationship — as son, as grandson. The triple genealogy reflects both Roman legal identity and Celtic emphasis on ancestry. The names reveal transition across generations: Albanus bears a fully Latin name; Dionis appears hybrid; Anveticus retains a Celtic root with Latin suffix '-icus'. In three generations we see adaptation rather than replacement.

6. Decorative Programme: Indigenous Memory in Stone

The geometric triangular head panel and herringbone side borders are characteristic of northern provincial carving traditions. They are not standard metropolitan funerary forms. The visual language remains rooted in indigenous aesthetic traditions. Roman words are framed within Celtic geometry. This is cultural coexistence rendered in stone.

7. The Second Stone: Comparison and Community

The second Church Brough stone, though more fragmentary, shares the same vertical layout, genealogical emphasis, and geometric framing. The carving style suggests production within a shared workshop tradition. Together the stones imply a settled Roman-literate community that valued lineage, memory, and visual continuity. These were not isolated commissions; they represent a pattern.

8. Linguistic and Cultural Diversity at Verterae

In addition to the Latin memorial stones, the site has yielded a Greek verse epitaph (RIB 758), commemorating Hermes of Commagene. This inscription demonstrates that Verterae was not linguistically uniform. While Latin functioned as the administrative and commemorative language of Roman Britain, Greek remained a literary and cultural medium within parts of the empire. The presence of both Latin genealogical inscriptions and a Greek poetic epitaph reveal a socially diverse settlement connected to wider imperial networks. Individuals associated with Verterae could draw upon different linguistic traditions to express memory and identity.

Figure 4: RIB 758

9. Implications for Romano-British Identity

The Latin stones emphasise lineage and adaptation: Celtic-rooted names rendered in Roman epigraphic form. The Greek epitaph introduces participation in a broader imperial literary culture. Together, these inscriptions reveal that frontier identity in northern Britain was layered and situational. Cultural practices overlapped; language choices expressed affiliation, aspiration, memory, and belonging. This evidence complicates simplistic models of Romanisation. Rather than a binary opposition between 'Roman' and 'native', Verterae appears as a microcosm of imperial diversity.



10. Why These Stones Matter Today

For the modern visitor, these stones offer more than epigraphic data. They provide contact with individuals who lived between worlds. Empire shaped their environment, but family shaped their memory. In these stones we see adaptation rather than erasure, continuity rather than collapse. They stand as durable witnesses to the human desire to belong, to remember, and to endure.