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## Shadows in the Sand: Excavation of a Viking-age Cemetery at Cumwhitton, Cumbria



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In March 2004, a Cumbrian metal detectorist, Peter Adams, working, with consent, on farmland belonging to Townfoot Farm, on the western edge of Cumwhitton, a small village in the Eden Valley, south-east of Carlisle, found a brooch in the ploughsoil. This was subsequently identified as a rare Viking oval brooch of ninth- or tenth-century date. These are almost always found in pairs, and in a burial context. Peter Adams therefore returned to the site and subsequently found a second brooch. Given the rarity of these brooches in England, the find was clearly of national importance, so funding was secured for an evaluation of the findspot, to ascertain whether they did indeed come from a grave. This was located and found to be furnished, the grave goods including the remains of a wooden box, laid at the feet of the deceased. Several more artefacts of the same date, including part of a sword, were found in the surrounding ploughsoil by metal detecting during the evaluation, suggesting that the grave had formed part of a cemetery. A major excavation to record this important site was then funded by English Heritage, as it was under immediate threat from plough damage.



In total, six burials were found, dating to the early tenth century, though almost no skeletal material survived as a result of the acidic nature of the soil. The cemetery comprised the graves of two women and four men, the first grave being separated from the rest by about 10 m. The group of five was carefully organised into two closely spaced rows, the central grave of the eastern row being surrounded by a shallow ditch, which suggests that it was once marked by a mound. All the graves were orientated broadly east-west, although how significant this was remains unclear, as all the burials were richly furnished, and contained a wide range of artefacts, including swords, spearheads, spurs, knives, and numerous beads and other objects. Though the objects were poorly preserved, the careful and detailed process of excavation, conservation, and analysis has meant that a wealth of information has been recovered from these objects concerning their original appearance, manufacture, and use. Of particular note were a rare decorated drinking horn, a seax with a silver-inlaid horn handle, a locking wooden box containing implements associated with textiles, and a unique group of decorated, tinned copper-alloy buckles and strap ends.

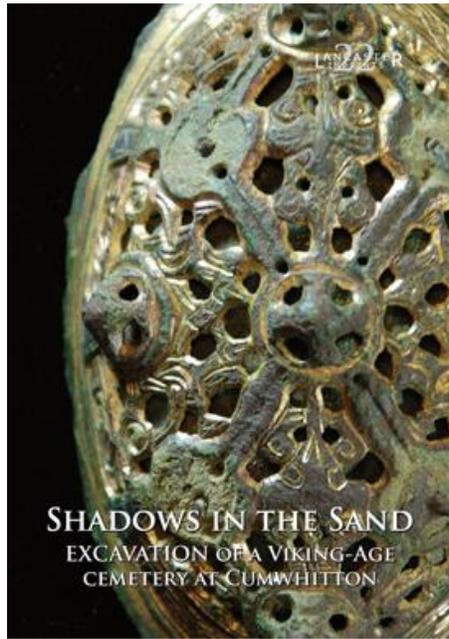


This rare opportunity has allowed the examination of a closely linked group of Viking burials, presumably of a single family, and seemingly of not more than two generations. For the first time, it has allowed both the similarities and differences between the graves to be studied, which might point to some individuality in the burial rites, as well as the diversity of the cultural origins of the objects that furnished them. While some of the metalwork is clearly linked to Scandinavia, and in particular cases, such as that of the oval brooches, is highly likely to have been made there, other artefacts, such as some of the textiles, seax, folding blades, and spurs, are of probable Insular manufacture. Many of the objects suggest a complexity in their manufacture, with elements derived from a multiplicity of sources. However, other items, such as the buckle sets, suggest regional manufacture and provide the first evidence for either an individual craftsman or workshop in the local area.



Most importantly, this site has afforded a tantalising glimpse of the cultural origins, beliefs, and status of these people. Whilst the lack of skeletal material has limited the scientific analysis of the date and geographical origins of this community, the wealth and variety of their grave goods has created a sense of the complex nature of these individuals' lives and the way in which they may have fitted into the volatile political landscape of tenth-century Cumbria.

The story of the discovery and the results of the subsequent analysis have been published in a book by OA North with support from English Heritage. [The contents list can be downloaded here.](#) *Shadows in the Sand: Excavation of a Viking-age cemetery at Cumwhitton, Cumbria*, by Caroline Paterson, Adam J Parsons, Rachel M Newman, Nick Johnson, and Christine Howard Davis, is available to purchase from [Oxbow Books](#). Alternatively [click here to download an order form](#).



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