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## The Viking Coast

In modern West Cumbria in particular, as well as areas like Heysham and Halton in neighbouring Lancashire, there is a great legacy of Viking and Anglian crosses and grave stones plus other evidence of substantial Norse settlement.

The Vikings first appeared in Cumbria's Eden valley in 876 AD when the Danish leader, Halfdan, and his troops destroyed much of Carlisle. However, many Norwegian Vikings, often coming from Ireland and the Isle of Man, settled along the west coast on Cumbria. It is possible that Seascale was their first settlement in the county,

Many of the Viking crosses and carvings are now inside churches and are well preserved. St John's church in Beckermet has a wonderful collection of carvings. Nearby, the lower ends of two 10th century crosses stand to the south of St Bridget's church. Between this church and the coast where the railway runs, there is a mound on which a small nunnery possibly stood. This dated back to 7th century.

Inland from Beckermet / Braystones and St Bees is the village of Haile and inside the church are four grave slabs dating from the late 10th / early 11th century. Part of a Viking cross shaft is built into the rendered church wall as is a Roman altar.

The church at St Bees is best known for its Norman architecture but this was the site of a Benedictine nunnery, founded in 650 AD and destroyed by the Danes in the 9th century. Only a little later, the Norse settled in the village they called Kirkeby Beghoc and this became the modern St Bees. There is a fragment of a cross shaft standing in a window in the south aisle of the church and another standing to the north of the church.

At St John's church at Waberthwaite, not too far from Ravenglass, there are the remains of two Anglo-Viking cross shafts, one dating from about 950 AD. The other is older and more worn, probably dating from about 900 AD. At nearby Muncaster, there is a cross shaft dating to the late 10th century and is typically Norse in character.

Also inland from the Cumbrian Coast line is Gosforth but it is worth the journey as some of the best Viking treasures are in this village. There is an ornate cross shaft in the churchyard dating back to the 10th century. This is the oldest and tallest Viking cross in England (as opposed to Anglian crosses). Inside St Mary's church, there are two "hogsback" tombs, dating to about the year 1000 AD, and these are in excellent condition. Another good example can be found inside St Peter's church in Heysham in North Lancashire.

There may have been four Viking crosses on the site of St Mary's church in Gosforth and remnants can be found built into walls and cut down as a sundial. At the north end of the aisle there is the Fishing Stone, probably once part of a much bigger frieze that helped to explain the christian message to the local people.



Gosforth Church with many Norse artefacts. Photo from Peter Mullins.



Irton Viking cross - accessible from the Cumbrian Coast Line and the Ravenglass & Eskdale Railway

There is a magnificent Anglian cross at St Paul's church at Ireton, just inland from Ravenglass, and this is England's only fully intact Anglian cross. This was erected during the time of Northumbrian rule, before the Viking settlers arrived.

A book called The Viking Trail was produced in 2002 and is available at some local shops including Spindle Crafts on Drigg station. This is a valuable guide to the Norse remains in west Cumbria.

Many place names, words and traditions date back to these Norse times. The Vikings introduced the practice of Haaf fishing (nets) and also the Herdwick sheep that are now a feature of Cumbria. Beck, fell, foss and tarn are all derived from Norse words. Cumbria retained its Norse identity well into the Middle Ages.

Further south, the Anglo-Saxon influence was greater, especially in what are now the Cartmel and Furness areas. This large area was held by the Northumbrian Earl Tostig in 1060 AD and covered 26 townships, extending north of Millom and east to the modern A6. However, some Anglo-Viking remains can be found including at Heysham and St Wilfrid's church at Halton, across Morecambe Bay from the Cartmel area.



Viking crosses at Beckermet, accessible from Braystones railway station (request stop).



Looking inland from the coast towards the village of Haile.  
(JT)

Cumbrian Coast Line

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