



ENGLISH
HERITAGE

THE VIKING-AGE CEMETERY AT CUMWHITTON, CUMBRIA

Excavation of the burial places of six early Viking settlers, with their grave goods intact, constitutes one of the most important such finds of recent times.



One of the oval brooches, after conservation (left); and the hilt of a sword found in the ploughsoil (right).

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Background

In March 2004, a Cumbrian metal detectorist, Peter Adams, was given permission by the farmer to examine farmland on the western edge of Cumwhitton, a small village in the Eden Valley south-east of Carlisle. There he found an object in the ploughsoil which was subsequently identified by the Portable Antiquities Scheme as a Viking oval brooch of 9th- or 10th-century date.

These are almost always found in pairs, and in a burial context. Peter Adams therefore returned to the site and did indeed find a second brooch. Given the rarity of such objects in England, the find was clearly of national importance, and the Portable Antiquities Scheme commissioned Oxford Archaeology North to undertake an evaluation of the findspot, to ascertain whether the brooches really did come from a burial. As a result a grave was located. This had clearly been disturbed by recent ploughing, though it was still richly furnished with grave goods. The presence of the oval brooches strongly implied that this was the burial place of a high-status woman.

Several more artefacts of early medieval date were found by metal detecting in the surrounding ploughsoil during the evaluation. These included fragments of another oval brooch, a key, and part of a sword, suggesting that the grave had been part of a cemetery. This important site was under immediate threat from ploughing, and in the summer of 2004 Oxford Archaeology North undertook a full excavation of the site, funded by a grant from English Heritage's National Heritage Protection Commissions Programme (Paterson *et al* 2014).

In total, six burials were found, all of which date to the early 10th century. Because of the acidic nature of the soil, almost no skeletal material survived though. Artefactual assemblages were preserved, however, and these suggested the graves were those of two women and four men. The first grave was separated from the rest by about 10m, the other five being clustered in a tight group, which had been carefully organised into two closely spaced rows, each aligned roughly east-west. The central grave of the eastern row was surrounded by a shallow ditch, and was probably once marked by a mound; the proximity of the others suggests that all had originally also been marked in some way, though no evidence of this survived.



The group of five graves.
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Burials and Grave Goods

All the burials appear to have been richly furnished, and a wide range of artefacts was recovered. Though the objects were poorly preserved, the careful process of excavation, conservation, and analysis has meant that a wealth of information has been recovered from them. There was some broad commonality in the contents of the burials, though there were also some marked differences between them. Most of the men were buried with swords, spears, knives, buckles, and beads.

One of the 'wealthiest' burials contained, in addition to these objects, a *seax* (sword or dagger typical of this period) with a silver-inlaid horn handle, a rare decorated drinking horn, a pair of spurs, a chain and hook from a cauldron, and a small pouch containing various disparate items. In contrast, the 'poorest' burial contained only a spear, knife and belt buckle, though analysis of the ploughing patterns affecting the cemetery suggested that many of the finds from the ploughsoil, including the sword, came from this grave. It thus seems that the graves in fact all contained individuals of relatively comparable status.

Differences that stood out between the female burials included that of the woman in the first grave, who had a key and a knife with a silver wire-bound handle hanging from one of her oval brooches. A maplewood box lay at her feet; it contained implements associated with textiles, such as a glass linen smoother, a lead spindle whorl, a comb, and a pair of shears. The other woman had no knife or key, nor oval brooches (though fragments of a third brooch in the ploughsoil might have come from this grave), but she did have a comb and shears, alongside a sickle, a drinking horn, a cluster of beads, and an oil-shale arm-ring.

The spatial distribution of the grave goods suggested that all the bodies had been laid with the head to the west, perhaps a gesture to Christianity, though this alignment is also found in pagan graves in Scandinavia. Indeed, it is clear this community was predominantly a pagan one. At least one man and one woman had been placed on biers, and most, if not all, appear to have been shrouded. One striking feature is a unique group of decorated copper-alloy buckles and strap ends, each of which had evidence of tinning. The presence of these in four of the six graves suggested they were quite closely linked. The best parallels for these come from nearby sites at Carlisle Cathedral, Workington, and Aspatria, suggesting these were objects of local origin, perhaps the work of an individual craftsman or workshop.

The *seax*, spurs, and textiles (impressions of which survived), are also probably of Insular manufacture. The oval brooches, however, were probably made in Scandinavia, and other objects that could be linked to that part of the world included an axehead, some of the spearheads, and a Borre-style buckle. A sword pommel inlaid with silver wire was of a Carolingian type found mostly on the Continent, yet the design of the inlay was most similar to motifs found in the British Isles, particularly on contemporary Anglo-Saxon strap ends. This suggests the inlay was perhaps made in an Insular context, though the blade and hilt possibly came from the Continent.



The drinking-horn mount, showing its incised decoration.

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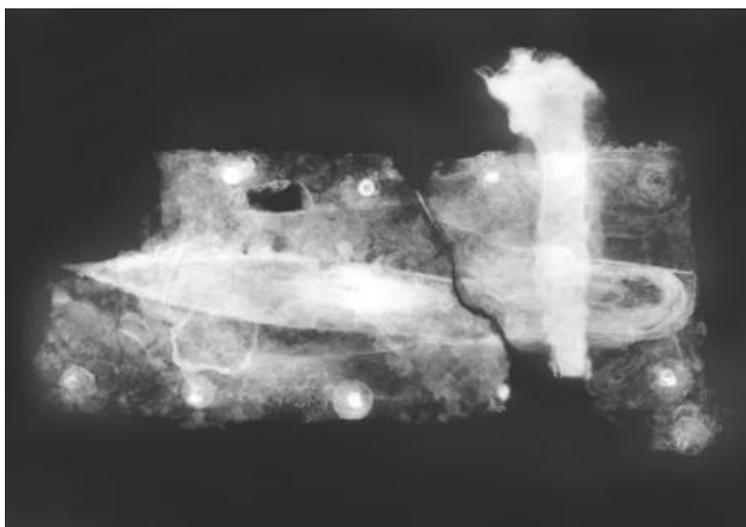
Rare Opportunity

The discovery of even a single grave with demonstrably Viking attributes in England is an important event, and the excavation of this small cemetery is almost unique. Cemeteries of the period are very rare, with only the burials found in association with the church at Repton in the Trent Valley, and the unusual cremation cemetery at Heath Wood, Ingleby providing any comparanda, although graves in Christian contexts at St Michael's Church, Workington, Cumbria and to the west of Carlisle Cathedral seem to be of a similar period. Indeed these were the first pagan Viking graves in the North West, where the majority of graves have been found, to be excavated using modern methods.

The assemblage from Cumwhitton has provided a rare opportunity to research a pagan cemetery arguably created by the first generation of settlers. Whilst the artefacts are of considerable importance in their own right, it is the fact that they were excavated and recorded to modern professional standards in the contexts in which they were originally deposited that elevates them to national significance.

In particular, analysis of the spatial distribution of the assemblage from each grave has addressed questions relating to the selection and deposition of artefacts for burial, and the significance of the positioning of each object within the grave. This has provided a new insight into cultural and ethnic preferences evidenced in the funerary practices of this period. The burials were clearly made following a particular and distinct rite, made all the more prominent because of its rarity. Equally, the location of the graves within the landscape is likely to be laden with social and political significance.

Most importantly, this site has afforded a tantalising glimpse into the cultural origins, beliefs and status of these people. Whilst the lack of skeletal material has limited scientific analysis of precisely when they died or what their geographical place of origin was, the wealth and variety of the goods buried with them has created a sense of the complex nature of their lives and the way in which they may have fitted into the volatile political landscape of 10th-century Cumbria.



An X-ray of the locking mechanism from the maplewood box.

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Adam Parsons, is a lead author and illustrator for the Cumwhitton volume. He has a special interest in the Viking Age, particularly its material culture, and in understanding and reconstructing early medieval technology. He has worked for Oxford Archaeology North for over ten years on a number of publications and post-excavation projects.

Further Reading

Paterson, C Parsons, A Newman, R M Johnson, N and Howard-Davis, C 2014 *Shadows in the Sand: Excavation of a Viking-age Cemetery at Cumwhitton, Cumbria*. Lancaster: Lancaster Imprints, 22

Watson, J Graham, K Karsten, A Skinner, L Schaefer, U Penton, S Gao, J Fell, V Jones, J 2011 *Townfoot Farm, Cumwhitton, Cumbria: Investigative Conservation of Material from the Viking Cemetery*; Archaeological Conservation Report; Portsmouth: English Heritage Research Department Report Series 72-2011, available at: http://services.english-heritage.org.uk/ResearchReportsPdfs/072_2011WEB.pdf (http://services.english-heritage.org.uk/ResearchReportsPdfs/072_2011WEB.pdf)

Penton, S 2008 *Cumwhitton, Cumbria: Analytical Investigation of Jet-Like Objects from a Viking Cemetery*; Archaeological Conservation Report; Portsmouth: English Heritage Research Department Report Series 18-2008, available at: http://services.english-heritage.org.uk/ResearchReportsPdfs/018_2008WEB.pdf (http://services.english-heritage.org.uk/ResearchReportsPdfs/018_2008WEB.pdf)



Rachel Newman and Adam Parsons.
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(<http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/content/galleries/viking-age-cemetery/001-viking-oval-brooch-cumwhitton>)



(<http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/content/galleries/viking-age-cemetery/002-metal-detecting>)



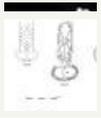
(<http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/content/galleries/viking-age-cemetery/003-viking-sword-hilt>)



(<http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/content/galleries/viking-age-cemetery/004-viking-graves-cumwhitton>)



(<http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/content/galleries/viking-age-cemetery/005-viking-drinking-horn-cumwhitton>)



(<http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/content/galleries/viking-age-cemetery/006-viking-lock-xray-cumwhitton>)
(<http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/content/galleries/viking-age-cemetery/007-viking-buckles-cumwhitton>)



(<http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/content/galleries/viking-age-cemetery/008-viking-sword-pommel-cumwhitton>)