

Appleby Archaeology Group February 2007

Appleby Archaeology Group welcomed Rachel Newman, of Oxford Archaeology North, based at Lancaster University, to their February meeting when she spoke about an archaeological project to draw together information on early medieval life in the north west. Her talk concentrated on Early Medieval Cumbria.

The period extends from the fifth to the tenth century. Following the collapse of the Roman empire a number of small kingdoms emerged which were later incorporated into the kingdom of Northumbria. The decline of Northumbria in the late 8th century led to period of unrest before the two kingdoms of England and Scotland were established.

The evidence for this period is sparse, and until the 1970s, came from historical sources such as Bede and the Anglo Saxon Chronicles, antiquarians reports and a few scattered finds. Since then a number of sites, have been identified, often by chance, when excavations have been done to investigate another period. Much of the material found can now be dated using radio-carbon techniques and the archaeologist is no longer having to rely on the type of artefact found to date it. Two of the examples Rachel gave were of an excavation at Lancaster University, which was originally thought to be a Romano-British site of the 1st century which dating showed to have been re-occupied in the 8th-10th centuries and secondly at an Iron Age hill fort at Thirlmere where evidence from the peat indicates an early medieval date rather than one from the Iron Age (800BC-43AD).

Rachel briefly described two other sources of evidence place names and stone sculptures. Place names can indicate a particular type of settlement. Names, for example, with elements of the Old English and the Old Norse *cherch* and *kirk* point to the presence of a church and the Old English suffixes *ham* and *tun* are often found in the better agricultural land. However they are not a fully reliable guide since names with Old Norse components were still being given to places after the Norman Conquest.

There are many sculptured stones in Cumbria. A number, including the cross at Bewcastle, are in the Northumbrian tradition of the 8th century and indicate Christian communities. The later carvings, of the 9th-10th centuries, such as the cross at Gosforth, show a Scandinavian influence and may indicate the merging of cultures. It has been suggested that hog back tombs, as seen in Appleby, were the colonial monuments of the Vikings.

Rachel continued by describing three excavations in more detail

In 1991 a site, east of the Roman fort at Brougham, revealed part of a rectangular building and four

grubenhause. These are seen as hollows in the ground, measuring 4meters by 2.5metres, and which would, when occupied, have had a simple supra-structure and possibly a suspended floor. These are typically Anglo Saxon and are the only ones in the north west. Artefacts found nearby included some loom weights and a purse clasp of the 7th-8th centuries. There was also a kiln for the manufacture of crude pottery previously thought to be Bronze Age.

Bede mentions a monastery at Dacre but the location is not given. Excavations over the years have found evidence to suggest that Dacre, Cumbria, was an early medieval ecclesiastical site. A medieval church stands there today and there is evidence of a curved boundary indicative of an early, possibly Celtic, churchyard. A large Christian cemetery has been excavated and coffin nails from the 9th-10th centuries were found in the soil. Many of the artefacts, which included fragments of window glass from the 6th or 7th centuries, an 8th or 9th centuries gold ring and a copper escutcheon, suggest that Dacre was a high status site. Perhaps most significant was the finding of a stylus which would have been used for writing on wax at a time when literacy was the preserve of churchmen.

The most recent finds came in 2004 from Viking burials at Cumwnhitton. This site was discovered when two brooches were found by someone using a metal detector. The subsequent excavation revealed six burials, four men and two women. The graves were rich in grave goods. Evidence indicates that these were people of importance, possibly first generation settlers from Ireland who died as pagans but were aware of the Christian burial custom of an east west alignment. The grave goods included swords, spears, belt buckles, spurs, brooches and beads. These artefacts have all been X-rayed at the English Heritage Ancient Monuments Laboratory and are now being conserved before eventual display at the Tullie House Museum.

Rachel concluded by saying the last thirty years had increased our knowledge of the early medieval period, although much remains to be discovered and that each new find led to more questions. Where, for example, did those six Vikings live?

A number of questions were taken before Rachel was thanked for a comprehensive and very interesting talk.

The next meeting will be on the Tuesday 13th March at 7.30pm, in the Supper Room Market Hall Appleby, when Ted Davies will talk on *Tileries: A Forgotten Industry*/