

CUMBRIA TO CAMBRIA – Comparisons between Cumbria and North Wales in the Prehistoric period.

There was a “full house” when Appleby Archaeology Group’s autumn/winter programme got off to a good start on Tuesday 8th Oct with an enthralling illustrated talk by Jamie Quartermaine, Senior Project Manager of Oxford Archaeology North and an expert in upland prehistoric landscapes.

He has studied several thousand square kilometres of upland areas and his talk about the similarities and differences between the two upland areas of Cumbria and Snowdonia was an informative insight into how a close and detailed study can reveal differences between two seemingly similar geographical locations and archaeological landscapes.

He began by giving a brief outline of how investigative techniques have changed since the 1980’s when surveys “on the ground” were very intensive, localised and tied into earth survey. The dawn of GPS and its wider availability and use brought about so-called “identification surveys” where larger areas of land could be examined. Some loss of detail was inevitable but the identification surveys proved well up to the task of providing fascinating evidence of how landscapes have developed over thousands of years.

In broad terms the mountain areas of Cumbria and North Wales are similar with rough, craggy terrain. The archaeological features found in both areas also have many similarities of structure, style and type such as stone circles, burnt mounds, round houses, standing stones, axe “factories”, round, ring and long cairns and cairnfields. Mr Quartermaine explained how the character of these ancient monuments is very much alike in both regions having been produced by people with likely similar aims in terms of the development and exploitation of the location in which they lived. He went on to show, however, that close inspection revealed important differences in the ways in which the two upland regions had been occupied, worked and modified in prehistory and discussed how some of those differences might be explained.

Mr Quartermaine described the development of “cairnfields”. Over many years trees were felled and stones piled into the depression or round the tree stump – early land clearance in fact.

The trees decayed and the rings of stones remained – as more stones were added over the centuries a cairn developed to become what we understand it to mean today. He showed images of cairnfields in Bedgellert and Pentrefoelas in Wales – fine examples with over 100 cairns. The outstanding example, however, was Burnscar in Cumbria with over 700 cairns – indicating land clearance and use by a sizeable population. Research has revealed that under these cairns woodland pollens were found at the base, a large crater was filled with material from the surrounding area and then an upper layer of grass pollens was noted. And why is this significant? Because the absence of cereal pollens indicates that prehistoric people here were clearing, rationalizing and defining certain areas of a land for a specific function – to graze animals.

In many Cumbrian sites this initial treatment of the land was, over time, further refined with increasingly more formalized field patterns, simple enclosures, lynchets and cultivation terraces.

The Cumbrian Mesolithic site at Eskmeals, with nearby Neolithic cereal cultivation, shows evidence of intensive farming later in the Bronze Age with a growing population clearing woodlands up into the hills, expanding from coastal to more

marginal land. A similar pattern of development and expansion does not appear to be evident at the same periods in Wales.

By way of a possible explanation Mr Quartermaine suggested that the presence of the Mesolithic culture at Eskmeals might in part be explained by the broader area of relatively fertile lower-lying land there between the sea and the uplands. In North Wales an equivalent landscape is much narrower with mountains, often at the very edge of the sea, being surrounded by unviable land.

Consequently the population density in North Wales was less, grew more slowly and did not expand until the Iron Age. Mr Quartermaine suggested that in Cumbria in the Bronze Age use of the uplands occurred when population pressure increased and during episodes of population decline people retreated to the lower land again.

With further examples from Simonside in Northumberland, Skipwith Common near York and Burnmoor in Cumbria Mr Quartermaine speculated that agricultural landscapes and burials in sacred or “ritual” landscapes were cheek-by-jowl with the latter located in less productive or “waste” land.

The burial sites seem to have been positioned in locations which were visible from settlements – rather than the burial site itself having a panoramic view for the occupant!

The needs for survival of the living may have outweighed the needs for reverence of the dead and, while there may have been 1000 years between the first burial and the farming community at the time, the closeness of the two activities indicated a pragmatic approach to land use by our ancestors.

An appreciative audience thanked Mr Quartermaine for his absorbing talk before he went on to answer several questions.

At the next Appleby Archaeology Group meeting on 12th Nov Peter Style of UCLAN will speak about “Mountains of Meaning” – Biographies of Mountains in the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age.

7.30pm in the Market Hall. Visitors very welcome.