

# Reconstruction and interpretation of the objects found in the Viking Cemetery at Cumwhitton

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Adam Parsons

Why was an axe thrust into the grave? This was just one of the many questions posed by Adam Parsons when he gave his second talk on the Cumwhitton Viking burials to the Appleby Archaeology Group.

In this talk Adam described the reconstruction of many of the artefacts and how the site might be interpreted.

He began by recapping on his first talk “The Excavation of the Site”. The acidic Cumbrian soil had destroyed bones, flesh and cloth leaving only minimal traces but the many grave goods were carefully excavated and their distribution within the graves recorded. The custom of burying people with valuable possessions is pagan. The Vikings were converting to Christianity by the second half of the tenth century which indicates that this cemetery was earlier.

In four of the graves a number buckles and strap ends were found. These fittings had been made of copper alloy and decorated with rings, dots and boss capped rivets. Adam started to experiment and found that he could reproduce all the decorative schemes on the belt fittings with only a few tools. He then went on to reconstruct many of the objects including the sewing box from Grave 1, a sword with an intricate wire design on each side of the pommel from Grave 3, a shield boss from grave 4 and a drinking horn from grave 5.



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He described in detail how he achieved the reconstructions using the tools, techniques and materials, where possible, that would have been used at the time. His excellent slides enabled the audience to see how he achieved the amazing results. The reconstructions demonstrated how the object would have looked at the time, either in use or as they were

placed in the graves. He spoke of how patterns on the metal work, had in some cases, a two tone effect which would have glittered in the candle light of the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

Interpretation is challenging. Cemeteries of this period are very rare but comparisons with other burials provide some clues to the culture of these early settlers. The similarities found in objects in single burials, many within the Eden Valley, and in particular the belt fittings found in the graves at Workington and Carlisle suggest the people were interacting with one another.

At Cumwhitton the distribution of the grave goods indicated that all the bodies had been laid with their heads to the west, a possible gesture towards Christianity but similar orientation are seen in many pagan graves in Scandinavia.

The plans of the graves at Cumwhitton show spaces and comparisons with graves from Viking burials from Ireland, Orkney and Denmark show that similar spaces contained dead animals. Were the same practices being followed here?

The objects found came from a variety of cultures for example the hilt of sword from grave 3 was continental in type and of type that died out in mid-10<sup>th</sup> century. Some of the textiles found came from other parts of Britain and a number of the military artefacts were probably manufactured in Scandinavia.

The burials appear to have been carried out with care and ritual. Objects placed in sequence, for example spears placed last to ensure they were balanced and shields placed to cover parts of the body. Most of the bodies were shrouded. Impressions of textiles in the graves and the position of ringed pins, buried with the men, suggest that cloaks were wrapped around the body and pinned as

shrouds.

Larvae of insects were found on the brooches of the woman in grave 1 and tell us that her death took place sometime before burial. Was she someone of importance who lay in state for some time before burial?

Further evidence of care comes from at least two burials, a man and a woman who had been placed on fleece laid over oak boards. Traces of fleece were found on the axe head thrust into grave 4. Was this a ceremonial act?

There is no way of knowing the answers to these questions. However Adam was able to draw some conclusions. The cemetery was used for perhaps two generations in the early 10<sup>th</sup> century. We do not know where the people lived but they did interact with others. The objects found suggest that they were established farmers and that in death there was care and possible ceremony.

A small exhibition of some of the objects, some for sale, was enjoyed by members who had enthusiastically thanked Adam for his talks.

*Phyl Rouston*