

The excavation of furnished burials at Carlisle, Workington and Cumwhitton and its contribution to our understanding of Viking-age Cumbria

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Recent excavations at the above sites in Cumbria have revealed a number of inhumation burials with grave goods of Scandinavian or Hiberno-Scandinavian origin. On a rural hillside location the six Cumwhitton burials, including that of two women, were each accompanied with a comprehensive array of grave goods including weaponry and jewellery. By way of contrast, a few individuals stand out in the ecclesiastical graveyards at the settlements of Carlisle and Workington for having been accompanied by a smaller selection of grave goods, largely restricted to dress accessories, yet still cosmopolitan and indicative of relatively high status. The inclusion and nature of the furnishings and accessories at all three sites hints at a Scandinavian presence, with some of the artefacts having been manufactured within the Scandinavian homelands, whilst others are Hiberno-Scandinavian or local in origin.

The contrasting burial locations and customs, with regard to the quantity and selection of furnishings, raise important questions regarding identity, systems of belief and custom and political relations with the local communities. Despite the presence of some finds manufactured within Scandinavia, Hiberno-Scandinavian finds dominate the Cumwhitton burial assemblages illustrating close cultural interaction on a material level, despite an alien or at least outmoded form of burial. By way of contrast, the restriction of grave goods to personal accessories at Carlisle and Workington, together with their burial in consecrated ground shows these burials, despite being near contemporary to those from Cumwhitton, to be one step closer in transitioning towards contemporary Christian burial.

These recent discoveries will be set within the context of earlier excavations and antiquarian accounts of Cumbria's rich burial evidence, ranging from an elite group of mounted warriors buried in impressive mounds along prominent routeways, to armed men interred within pre-existing ecclesiastical cemeteries and finally individuals buried with non combative furnishings also within churchyards. The latter shed an intriguing light on relations between the incoming settlers and the Church, and provide early evidence for some level of integration, the nature of which we can at best speculate on.

Within a couple of generations the Gosforth Cross with its juxtaposed pagan and Christian iconography was raised with its very public statement of religious syncretism. Scandinavian styles and iconography now became commonplace in Christian funerary monuments in the county, with many of the recently excavated sculptural finds from Workington displaying clear Borre- and Jellinge-style attributes. Christianity appears to have provided a way for the Scandinavian settlers in Cumbria to integrate and establish themselves, certainly in death, but no doubt also in the political life of the county too.