ART. V – *A re-examination of a Viking Age burial at Beacon Hill, Aspatria*

By PHILIP ABRAMSON

THIS report presents the results of an archaeological excavation on the site of a former barrow on Beacon Hill at West Farm, Aspatria, Cumbria (grid reference NY 14130 41850) (Fig. 1). The investigation was undertaken by Northern Archaeological Associates on behalf of Hutchison Telecommunications (Orange) in advance of the construction of an antenna platform on the summit of the hill. The investigation was commissioned by Orange at the request of Cumbria County Council Archaeology Service, to gain further information on whether the development would have an impact on the site of the former barrow.

The investigation consisted of a contour survey, trial trenching, and examination of the stripped area of the antenna platform undertaken in October 1997.

Archaeological background

In 1789, Mr Rigg, Aspatria surgeon and antiquarian, excavated a barrow on the summit of Beacon Hill (Rooke, 1792). His account of the excavation reveals that the barrow was 90 feet in circumference and six feet high. Below the mound was a stone-lined grave, within which a poorly-preserved human skeleton was accompanied by an assortment of grave goods, including . . .

> . . . a broad sword near five feet in length; the guard was elegantly ornamented with inlaid silver flowers . . . On the right side lay a dirk or dagger, one foot six inches and a quarter in length, the handle appeared to be studded with silver . . . Near the dagger was found part of a gold fibula or buckle, and an ornament for the end of a belt, a piece of which adhered to it when first taken up . . . Several pieces of shield were picked up but I did not see parts sufficient to make out the shape. There were also part of a battle axe . . . a bit shaped like a modern snaffle . . . part of a spur. These were very much covered with rust . . . two large cobble stones which inclosed the west side of the kistvaen . . . On these stones are various emblematical figures in rude sculpture, though some of the circles are exactly formed, and the rims and crosses within them are cut in relief (*Archaeologia,* 1792).

The objects were sent to the British Museum but are now lost. Illustrations of the assemblage survive (see Fig. 2) and although generally considered to be of Viking date the carved stones have been included within a corpus of megalithic carvings found in Cumbria (Frodsham, 1989).

The site of the tumulus, as recorded on the 1923 O.S. map, appears to coincide with the summit of Beacon Hill. However, the barrow is now no longer visible and no evidence for the mound was located by a contour survey.

Excavation (Fig. 3).

Two trenches, each 10 m long and 1.6 m wide, were laid out in a T-shape within the proposed platform area. Trench 1 was aligned north-east to south-west and trench 2 north-west to south-east. Topsoil within the trenches was removed by machine and

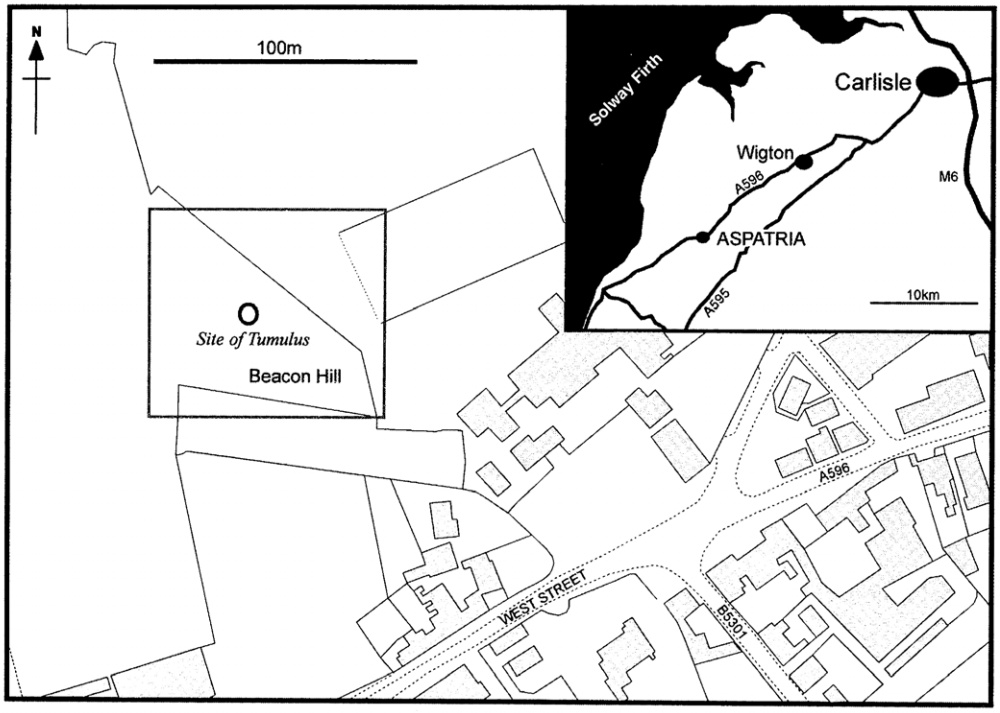

FIG. 1. Site location.

the underlying surface was hand cleaned. Part of a pit was identified at the south-western end of trench 1. An extension of the trench, to enable a more thorough examination of the feature, revealed an elliptical pit [003] orientated north-east to south-west along its long axis. The pit was 1.8 m long by 1.05 m wide with a maximum depth of 0.8 m. The fill [004] consisted of a loose mid-brown sand with a humic component, possibly derived from topsoil. Several fragments of poorly-preserved human bone, representing the left and right tibia of an adult, were recovered from the pit together with 30 fragments of iron and a large copper-alloy pin. These were distributed throughout the fill of the grave and were clearly not *in situ*. A small area of the pit remained unexcavated where it continued beyond the edge of the trench.

The remaining area of the platform was stripped by machine and the underlying surface was hand cleaned. Pit 006, aligned in an east to west direction along its long axis, was recorded *c.*4 m to the north of pit 003. The pit was 1.9 m long by *c.*0.8 m wide and 0.4 m deep. Several stones were situated within the pit and the irregular southern edge of the pit was suggestive of a larger stone having once been present.

A small area of charcoal [010] situated *c.*1 m to the east of pit 006 was likely to have been associated with recent straw burning on the hill.

Human bone by Dr Joy Langston

The diameters of the tibial bone fragments from two contexts (004/AD and 004/AC)

are very similar, and this, together with the surface appearance (indicating similar burial conditions), would strongly suggest that they are from the same individual, and most probably remains of the left and right tibiae. It is unlikely that the fragments form part of the same bone as this would indicate a shaft length of >36 cm. Given the narrow diameters (maximum anterior-posterior breadth) 2.4 cm allowing for cortical loss), this would form an extremely long thin bone which although possible is not probable. The thickness of cortical development is indicative of an adult individual and the small size *may* suggest a female, but with so few bones remaining this is supposition.

Metal objects by Dr. Patrick Ottaway

Copper Alloy

1. Ringed pin 004AB (Fig. 4/1)
The pin shank has a T-shaped head and is flattened and splayed towards the base; tip missing. The head has four vertical grooves on the cross-piece and four horizontal grooves at the top of the shank. The ring has a rounded cross-section, and is recessed to accommodate the head of the shank. L. 99; shank: T. 4; ring: D. 22, T. 3 mm.

Iron

2. Buckle, buckle-plate and strap-guide 004AA (Fig. 4/2)
The buckle has a D-shaped frame which thickens on the convex side. Sub-rounded cross-section. Buckle-plate folded over buckle, one half incomplete; was attached to strap by two rivets. Strap-guide held by buckle-plate just behind buckle; head a D-shaped cross-section. Object tin plated. A little mineralised leather detected.
Buckle: L. 21; W. 42; buckle-plate: L. 24; W. 31; strap-guide: W. 38 mm.

3. Folding knife (Fig. 4/3)
Iron case with convex sides, blade hinged at wider end, narrows towards other end where it may have developed into a short projection. Blade in the case has an "angle-back". L. 76; W. 23; T. 11 mm.

4. ?Spur (Fig. 4/4)
The probable incomplete arm of a spur survives as a strip, broken at both ends, which is slightly curved and tapered. Triangular D-shaped cross-section. Incised grooves run across the convex face. Mineralised thread and leather detected at thicker end. Tin plated. L. 69; W. 11; T. 7 mm.

5. Axe head (Fig. 4/5)
The upper part of an axe head. Wood remains in the shaft hole.

Fragments of iron plate (not illustrated)

Fragments A and B were so designated by the excavator. Other pieces have been numbered by the author.

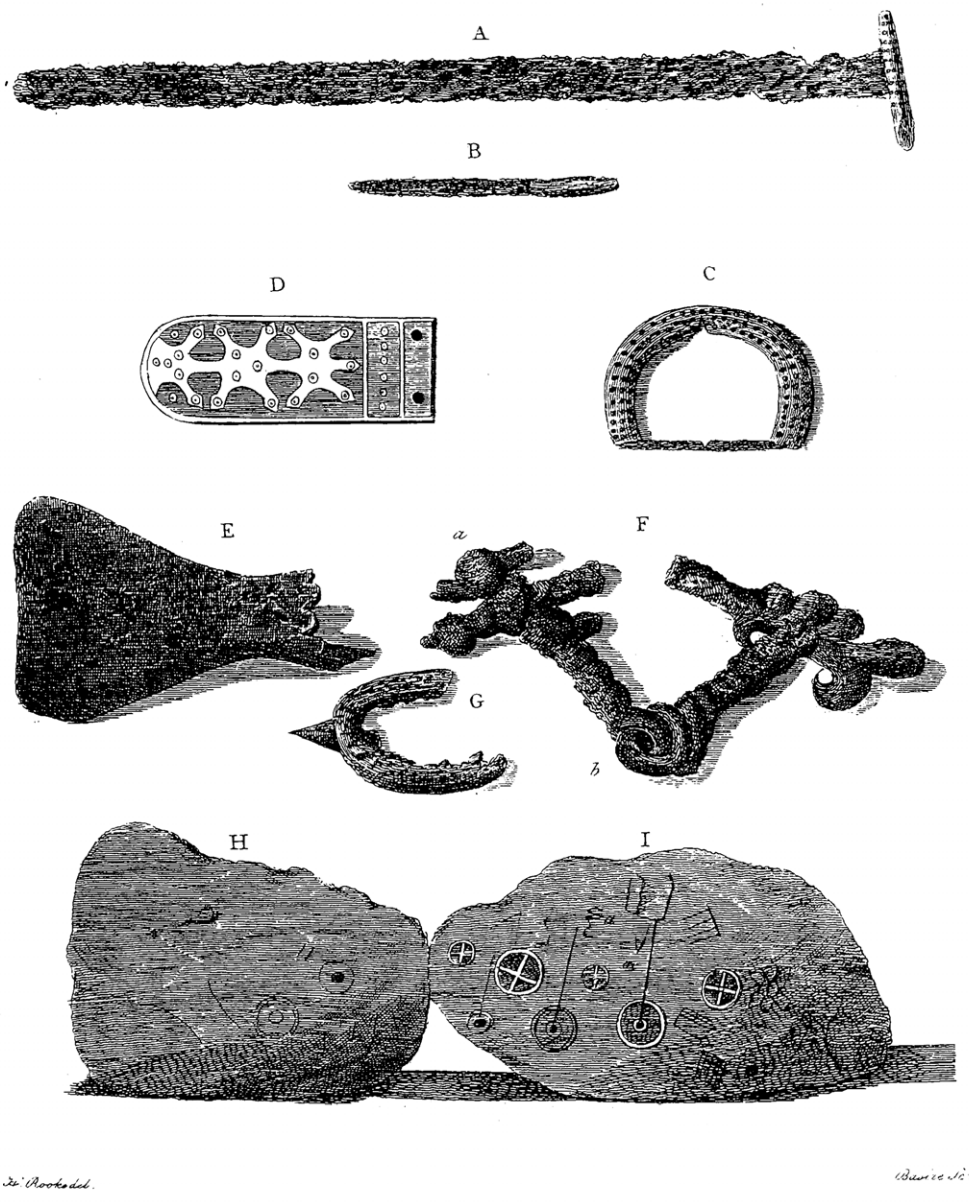

FIG. 2. Original illustration of finds from 1789 excavation.

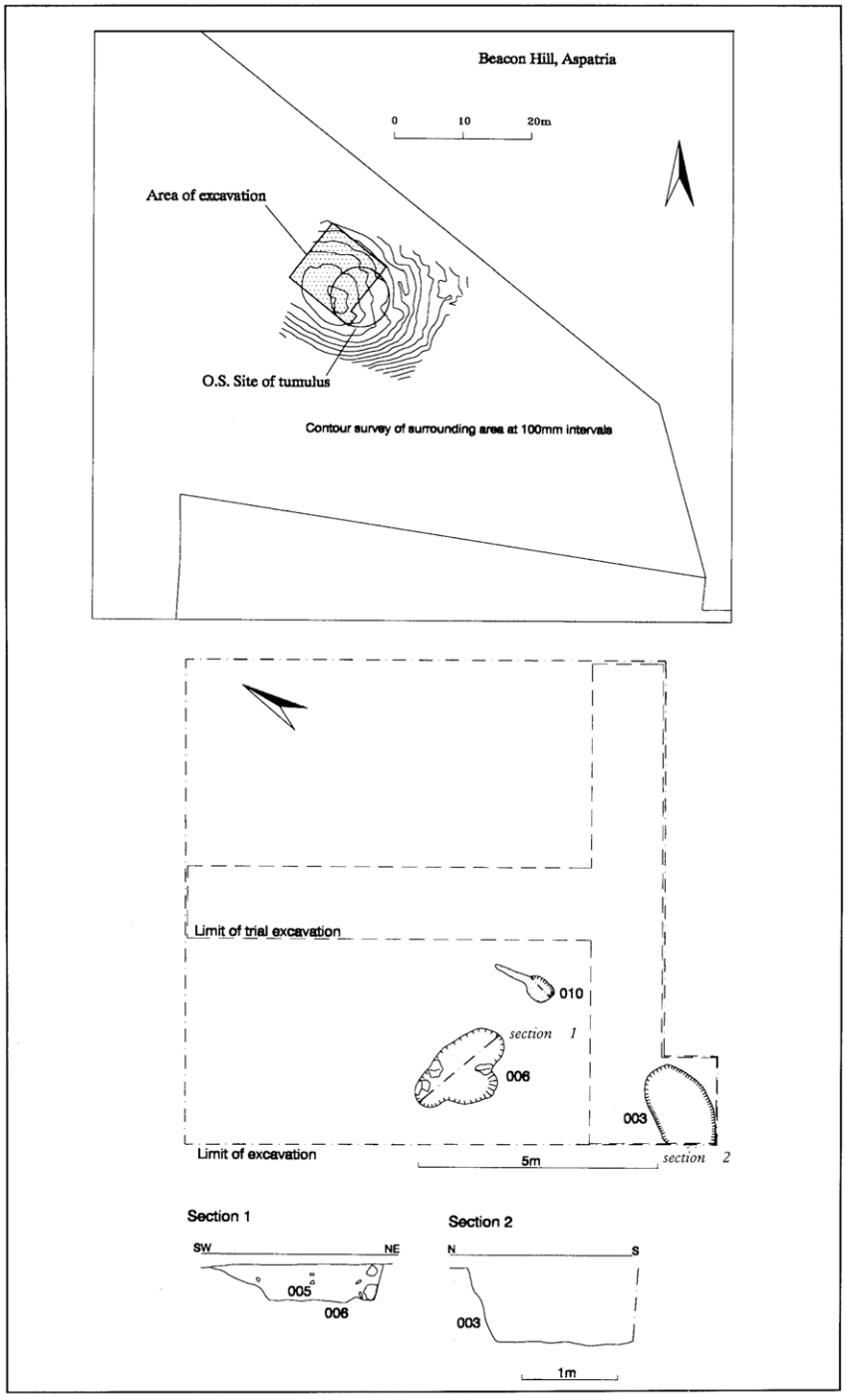

FIG. 3. Area of excavation with plan and sections.

Fragment A. Rectangular. L. 31; W. 25 mm.

Fragment B. Probable vessel rim fragment. Edge of one side curved over, other sides irregular. Pierced twice with small rectangular holes. L. 68; W. 64 mm.

6. Elongated with a curved cross-section, three nails *in situ.* L. 104; W. 25 mm.

7. Two fragments fused together. A) a plate with two straight sides, edges curved over, which meet at 90° with a rounded corner; the rest irregular. Pierced five times, four nail heads *in situ.* L. 83; W. 51 mm. B) broken at each end, one side convex, slightly curved in cross-section. Pierced twice, nail heads *in situ,* set on the concave face. L. 104; W. 53; T. 10 mm.

8. Probable vessel rim fragment. Edge of one side curved over, other sides irregular. L. 54; W. 46 mm.
Note: other fragments on X-radiograph 3716, not numbered.

9. Irregular shape. Curved in cross-section of the longer axis. Pierced three times. L. 125; W. 110 mm.

10. Roughly C-shaped. Pierced twice, nails *in situ.* L. 130; W. 90 mm.

11. L-shaped fragment. X-radiograph suggests possibly copper-plated.

12. Irregular fragment. Curved in cross-section, pierced twice, nail heads *in situ.* L. 70; W. 64 mm.

13. Two fragments held together by a nail. L. 57; W. 50 mm.

14. Two fragments held together by two nails. Curved in cross-section. L. 79; W. 64 mm.

15. Flat plate, irregular shape. L. 81; W. 53 mm.

16. Two fragments held together by a nail. L. 53; W. 43 mm.

17. Irregular shape. Pierced three times, one nail *in situ.* L. 64; W. 43 mm.

18. Fragment. L. 53; W. 30 mm.

19. Irregular shape. Curves sharply towards one end, also curved in the cross-section of axis at 90° to this. Pierced 6-7 times, nail heads *in situ.* L. 120; W. 90 mm.

20. (missing) Irregular shape. Pierced once (possibly twice), nail head *in situ.* L. 80; W. 60 mm.

Discussion

The copper-alloy ringed pin (Fig. 4/1) has a shank which has a loop at the head and a plain ring, to use the recognised terminology developed by Fanning (1994). The ringed pin is thought to have been developed in Ireland in pre-Viking times and adopted by Norse invaders in the 9th century. It then spread to areas which the Vikings colonised in Britain, and to the Scandinavian homelands. The plain-ringed, loop-headed pin is the commonest type; at Dublin, where a large assemblage of well-dated examples has been found, it appears to have been particularly popular

*c.*A.D. 920-975 (*ibid.*, 18-9). Examples of ringed pins from England are few, but at the south-eastern limit of their distribution York has produced four plain-ringed, loop-headed pins in late 9th-10th century A.D. contexts, two in copper alloy (16-22 Coppergate, sfs. 4399, 7872) and two in iron (Ottaway, 1992, *3802;* Tweddle, 1986, *1233),* as well as a number in other forms.

Tin-plated dress fittings are often part of riding gear or horse equipment in the 9th-10th centuries A.D. The objects from Aspatria may have been used to attach spurs to a rider's boot or formed part of a bridle. The buckle and buckle-plate (Fig. 4.2) are not typologically distinctive. The strap-guide is simple in form but is very similar to an Anglo-Scandinavian example from York (Ottaway 1992, *3782).*

The folding knife (Fig. 4/3) was probably similar to examples known from contexts of 9th-10th century A.D. date at Carlisle Cathedral (excavation by Carlisle Archaeological Unit, sf *218),* Thwing, East Yorkshire (excavated by T. G. Manby, *177)* and York (Ottaway, 1992, *2979-81).* All of these knives have cases which develop into a short prong at the end opposite the hinge. The Aspatria object probably had this feature, although it has been broken off. A small folding knife without the prong was found in a 9th century Viking grave at Repton, Derbyshire (Biddle and B. Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, fig. 6, no. 10).

Fig. 4/4 is probably a spur arm fragment with a near triangular cross-section, an unusual form but one which can also be seen on an Anglo-Scandinavian spur from York (Ottaway, 1992, *3826).* Incised grooves and tin plating are common on spurs of the period. The spur discovered at Aspatria in 1789 was incomplete, but it is not possible to say if this object is part of it or of the second spur in what was presumably a pair. It may be noted that the illustration published in 1792 shows a prick spur with a short pointed goad which suggests a 9th rather than a 10th century date (Ottaway, 1992, 699-701).

The upper part of an axe head (Fig. 4/5) is not diagnostic typologically, but it would not be out of place in a 9th-10th century A.D. context. Remarkably, the axe illustrated as part of the finds from the 1789 excavation appears to lack the upper part of its head.

Other iron objects

There are some 20 fragments of iron plate which must represent the remains of more than one object. There are two rim fragments which may come from the same or two different vessels, perhaps a pan or a small cauldron. Most of the other fragments (e.g. nos 9, 12-14, 16, 17) could have been part of a vessel or vessels made from sheets of iron nailed together, a recognised mode of construction in Viking Age Scandinavia (Petersen, 1951, 526). Item no. 6 was probably a binding strip for a wooden object. Item no. 7 appears to be two fragments fused together, both of which are pierced for attachment with nails to wood, but for purposes which are uncertain. No. 19 is a large piece of iron which could have been part of a vessel, but is pierced seven times. It may be better seen as a casing or binding for some large wooden object, although iron vessels were often repaired by having patches nailed on to them as in the case of a large pan from York (Ottaway, 1992, *3005).* No. 10 is another large piece of iron, pierced for attachment, but no obvious function suggests itself. It may be noted that iron vessels are very uncommon in

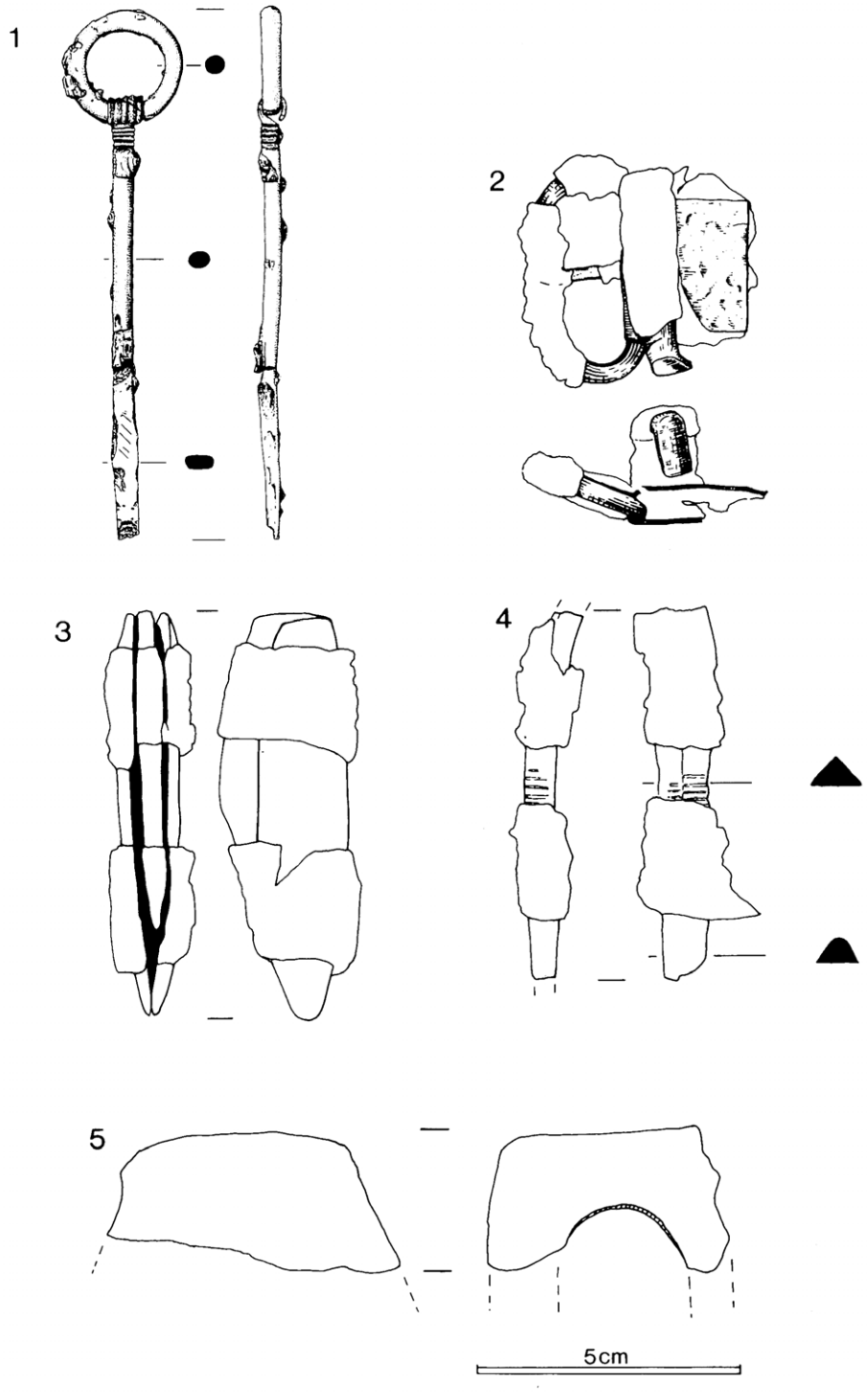

FIG. 4. Illustrated finds from 1997 excavation.

Anglo-Scandinavian period contexts in Britain and there are no examples of cauldrons, although they do occur in graves and other contexts of the Viking period in Scandinavia (Petersen, 1951).

General Discussion

Standing six feet high, 90 feet in circumference and situated on Beacon Hill, the barrow, as described by Mr Rigg, was undoubtedly a prominent feature in the late 18th century landscape. By the time of the present-day excavation however, the barrow was no longer visible, a detailed earthwork survey failed to pinpoint its position and there was no evidence of the mound deposits in the trench sections. To say that Rigg and his labourers were thorough is perhaps an understatement and rarely can the maxim *excavation is destruction . . . total excavation is total destruction* have been more assiduously applied. It is understandable therefore that there has been some confusion over the precise location of the barrow – confusion that has hopefully been largely resolved by the (re) discovery of the grave described in this report. In the absence of further barrows being present it may be assumed that the present-day antenna platform on the summit of Beacon Hill corresponds, at least in part, with the position of Rigg's barrow.

Whether the burial identified in this report is the same as the richly-furnished burial recorded by Rigg is open to discussion, but on balance the evidence suggests that the two graves are one and the same. The fragmentary and disarticulated condition of the recently-excavated human remains clearly points to post-depositional disturbance of the burial. In addition there are a number of similarities between the two artefact assemblages to suggest that they were recovered from the same grave. Five objects were present in the recently-excavated grave, all of which, with the exception of the copper-alloy pin, were heavily corroded. This material could be the residue or "scraps" that were left behind after the removal of a more spectacular collection of material. Included within this small assemblage are fragments of an iron spur and an axe head. Remarkably, as Ottaway observes, the axe illustrated as part of the finds from the 1789 excavation appears to lack the upper part of its head.

The one piece of evidence, which might suggest that the present-day burial is not Rigg's richly-furnished grave, is his mention of a kist formed by large cobbles. Whilst there was no evidence of stones lining the sides of pit 003, a second, nearby pit [006], contained several stones in its fill, and the irregular nature of its southern edge is suggestive of a large stone having once been embedded in the side. If this indeed is Rigg's burial, its excavation was as thorough as the removal of the barrow mound, as neither a fragment of bone nor a single artefact was recovered from its fill.

In summary, the 1789 excavation of a barrow on Beacon Hill, Aspatria, produced a rich burial assemblage, which, on the basis of a contemporary illustration, is likely to be of Viking Age date. No physical evidence for the barrow mound survives but the recently-recorded grave containing a disturbed burial with 10th century artefacts is likely to have been associated with the tumulus levelled by Rigg. Whilst it cannot be established with certainty that this is the same grave described by Rigg, the disturbed nature of the burial and aspects of the assemblage make such an assertion plausible.

Acknowledgements

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