

ART. IV.—*Viking burials in Cumbria : a Supplement.*  
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THE following notes are submitted by way of supplement to *Viking Burials in Cumbria*, published in CW2 xlviii 73-76.

(1). **Hesket-in-the-Forest.** In the *Catalogue of Objects of the Viking Period in the Tullie House Museum* it is stated that the sword from the Hesket burial has suffered from exposure to fire, as evidenced by the manner in which the silver plating on the guard has in places fused and run into pellets. Similar observations were made on the two spears, the shield-boss, and the bit; though it was also pointed out that the condition of the bone comb proved that it, at least, could not have been exposed to the same conditions.<sup>1</sup>

The account of the Hesket burial at large, as given in the Catalogue, was quoted with evident approval, and welcomed as "the best illustrated example of a Viking cremation burial in the British Isles", by the late Prof. Haakon Shetelig in a study, published in 1945, entitled "The Viking Graves in Great Britain and Ireland".<sup>2</sup> He further observed "the find from Hesket-in-the-Forest, near Carlisle, where the arrangement of the grave is exceptionally well elucidated, displays a perfect example of a Norwegian cremation burial". And again "the whole arrangement of the grave is in complete accordance with the prevailing Norwegian custom".<sup>3</sup>

But after his excavation of three Viking graves in the

<sup>1</sup> CW2 xxxiv 174-180.

<sup>2</sup> *Acta Archaeologica* xvi (Copenhagen, 1945) 25-26. The whole article reprinted (with a few additions, but less fully illustrated) in *Viking Antiquities in Great Britain and Ireland*, pt. vi (1954), 67-111.

<sup>3</sup> *Loc. cit.*, 13, 26.

Isle of Man, in 1944-46, the late Prof. Gerhard Bersu began to contest the existence of *any* Viking cremation burials in Britain, and turned the full force of his critical mind upon the evidence for the admittedly few cases in this country.

On present evidence it seems that in Norway, whence came the main body of Viking raiders and immigrants around the North of Scotland to the Western Isles, and ultimately to Ireland, the rite of cremation was at least as frequent as inhumation. It is equally clear that burials by cremation are exceedingly rare in the British Isles. Shetelig listed only four possible cases. Among these the apparent completeness of the evidence for cremation at Hesket makes of it a test case.

On a careful re-examination of the material from Hesket-in-the-Forest, Bersu concluded that all the appearances of burning to be found on a number of the metallic objects could be explained as the result of corrosion. In particular the complex chemical reactions of silver under varying conditions could readily account for the present condition of the silver overlay on the sword-hilt.

Evidence of cremation — layers of ash with burnt bones — here and elsewhere, he attributed to an accompanying cremation of *animals*. Such burials were certainly attested in Bersu's own excavations at Balladoole, where the bones of horse, ox, pig, sheep/goat, dog, and cat were identified; and at Ballateare, where bones of horse, ox, sheep, and dog were present. In neither case were fragments of human bone recovered.<sup>4</sup> These were significant discoveries; and it is clear that, in the absence of advanced excavation techniques, the circumstances established in these two burials could easily have given rise to false conclusions. Bersu also drew attention to the weakness of the record in the other cases,

<sup>4</sup> Bersu and Wilson, *Three Viking Graves in the Isle of Man* (1966), 9-10, 50-51.

and thus eliminated all the previously accepted evidence for human cremation. He concluded that this rite was never employed by the Vikings in Britain.

That made a neat picture of uniform custom, and is not in itself necessarily objectionable. But Bersu was in danger of putting himself into the theoretically weak position of setting out to prove a negative — that human cremation *never* took place. On the grounds of general probability one would naturally expect, given the mixed origins of the Vikings, to find not uniformity, but *diversity* of custom in the Viking areas of Britain. For although the Norse preponderated in the areas in which burials are most frequently found, there is plenty of evidence that the rest of the invaders and immigrants came in from every part of the Viking homelands. And in the meantime Posnansky has, in fact, now proved human cremation in the Danish Viking cemetery at Heath Wood, Ingleby; though, here again, there was “no direct evidence” that any of the *grave-goods* throughout the cemetery had been burnt.<sup>5</sup>

There, for the time being, the matter must rest. A final solution will involve the maintenance of the highest technical standards in future excavation, and the co-operation of natural scientists working in more than one discipline.

(4). **Tendley Hill, Eaglesfield, 1814.** A contemporary account of the discovery of this burial (previously listed under “*Eaglesfield*”) has come to light in *The Cumberland Pacquet* of 18 October 1814, supplementing the few facts available in *Arch. Ael.*, 4, xxvi (1948), 55-61. This shows that, besides the skeleton and the sword already known, the grave contained also “a halberd eleven inches in length” of iron (either a spear-head, or, less probably, a battle-axe), and a penannular brooch or ring-headed pin, with zoomorphic terminals, of bronze. When found

<sup>5</sup> *Derbyshire Arch. Journ.*, lxxvi (1956) 40-56; mound 11, 44-47, and Appendix III.

the sword was in better condition than it is now, being 28 inches long; and the guard showed silver inlay. The precise place and date of discovery are also established as shown above.

The Mr Benson who was believed to have given the sword to John Adamson of Newcastle is identified as "old Mr Robert Benson of Papcastle", who died in 1843.

Endlaw, Tendlay and Tendley of the topographers are now known to be, as formerly surmised, one and the same place; and an account has come to light of the subsequent discovery of other burials on the hill by Henry Dalton of Eaglesfield, who actually excavated them. There is nothing Viking about these, which seem to be altogether later. All the evidence points to only a single Viking grave having been found at this place, and the notion of an unrecognized Viking cemetery must be abandoned.<sup>6</sup>

It is remarkable, considering the very limited number of Viking graves known from Cumbria, that this is the third of which the contents (in whole or in part) have been brought to light after being overlooked, or lost sight of, for many years. It does not appear that the ring-brooch was ever sent to Adamson. And it is just possible that it may still remain unrecognized in private hands "somewhere in Cumberland". Should it ever turn up the description in the *Pacquet* should enable it to be identified.

After (6). *Whitbarrow Scar, Witherslack*. This sword was long preserved at Witherslack Hall. Though it cannot at present be traced, it should not have moved far.

<sup>6</sup> Full account in *Arch. Ael.*, 4, xlv (forthcoming).