

ART. IV – *A Lost Bronze Bucket from Westmorland*

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The archaeology of the first millennium B.C. in Cumbria is notoriously difficult to recognise: the almost total lack of culturally diagnostic material is generally ascribed to a regional tendency to isolation and stagnation.<sup>1</sup> To a lesser extent it might also be said that, apart from types of farmstead settlement, mostly known as cropmarks and generally considered to be of Iron age or Romano-British date, County Durham is similarly poor in evidence for the pre-Roman Iron Age.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore of particular interest that an object characteristic of the final stage of the Bronze Age should some two centuries ago have been discovered in Westmorland. Although the object itself cannot now be traced, a contemporary description allows a confident reconstruction of a piece which, although it has been noted as an important find in a survey of the Bronze Age in the region,<sup>3</sup> has not received detailed consideration and ought to be more widely known.

Our information comes from the great eighteenth-century standard work on the topography and antiquities of Cumbria.<sup>4</sup> The description given has been copied, more or less *verbatim* by subsequent sources. It is plain, however, that the original authors wrote earlier from personal knowledge of the find or closely following a correspondent who had himself seen it: the detail is precise and well-informed. We are told, in the section describing the township of Ravenstonedale, near Kirkby Stephen:

About half a mile from the town head, in the year 1774, was found in digging peats, two foot below the surface, a copper vessel, sound and entire, the diameter whereof at the bottom is 8 inches, at the top 14 inches, in the widest part just under the neck 16 inches, the depth 18 inches; it contains about 8 gallons and a half. It is made of three plates of copper, neatly joined together, and hath been pretty much used as a fire vessel. It is very slender, and therefore there are fixed six fillets of copper at equal distances, which reach up the sides two inches and a half, and are turned down about as much upon the bottom. That part of the fillets turned over the bottom, is a good deal thicker than the other extremities which go up the sides, and are ornamented with ridges, somewhat in the manner of fluting. The vessel, when set down, rests on the thicker part of these fillets, which keeps it steady, and the bottom from any wear or bulging. There is no iron in any part of it. Two ears or handles are fixed on the inside, the tops of which are on a level with the edge of the vessel; in each of which is a moveable ring. These ears or rings are pretty strong and massy, but of baser metal. The whole is of excellent workmanship, and very elegantly finished.

The description is clearly of a sheet-bronze vessel of the group classed as Irish-British Buckets and belonging to a Halstatt horizon at the end of the Bronze Age:<sup>5</sup> the proportions and dimensions are strikingly close to those of the well-known bucket from the Heathery Burn cave in Weardale.<sup>6</sup> It is, moreover, plain from the account of the handle-staples, which are of cast metal, that the bucket is not one of the supposedly continental *Kurd-Eimer*, the handles of which are attached by turned-over ribbons of sheet bronze riveted to the body of the vessel, but belongs to the

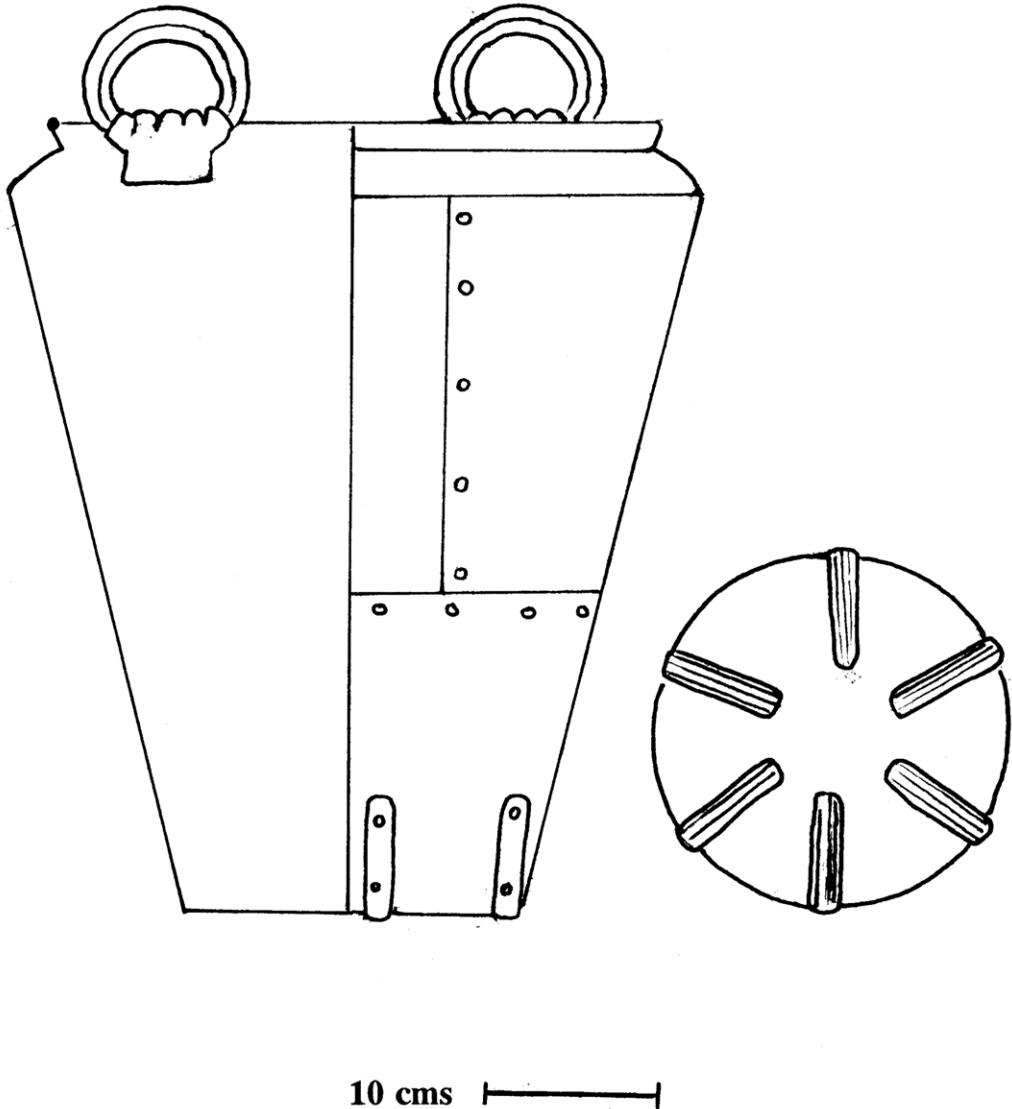


FIG. 1. Hypothetical reconstruction of the Ravenstonedale Bucket.

insular group of buckets which has been seen as deriving from the Kurdish series (as they are usually known) and which have cast handles on the inside of the bucket. The description is sufficiently detailed to allow a reconstructed drawing (Fig. 1) to be offered with confidence. Missing detail, such as the ribbed form of the handle-staples, the use of rivets to unite the three plates of metal which are characteristic of these buckets, and the inclusion within the rim of a stiff bronze wire to add rigidity, is all drawn from the Heathery Burn example.

The main point of divergence from the Heathery Burn model is in the treatment

of the base of the bucket. The need to provide stiffening and protection for the thin metal sheet at this point was met in the Heathery Burn piece by the addition of a substantial cast base-plate in the form of a four-spoked wheel. It seems reasonable to regard this as a late development of the arrangement seen on other buckets, including the Ravenstonedale piece as well as other British pieces and reputedly imported *Kurd-Eimer*, which uses individual strips of bronze, often with a slightly wider middle section to give added protection to the very edge of the bucket. It is not quite clear whether the 'fillets' mentioned in the account of the Ravenstonedale find were castings or pieces of bronze sheet. The 'fluting' on the underside may have been a way of rolling the strips of sheet metal into a sort of relief, and to give rigidity: on the other hand, a corrugated or fluted effect is very much the style of decoration of these buckets, and may be seen on the Heathery Burn base-plate as well as on the cast staples holding the handles, so it is at least possible that the 'fillets' were cast. Most of the buckets within the insular tradition have cast fillets on the bases.<sup>7</sup> A similar fluting may be seen on the undersides of the basal strips of the 'Dowris II' bucket from County Offaly, where it seems to be entirely ornamental.<sup>8</sup> The fact that the undersides of the base-pieces are described as being 'a good deal thicker' than the parts running up the sides seems to suggest that they were solid castings.

The Ravenstonedale bucket may now be seen as one of a small group of this relatively rare type of artefact, clustered in the northern Pennine area. Recent work has somewhat altered thought about these objects: current thinking emphasises local manufacture, even of examples previously thought to be of continental manufacture, and sees the Irish-British series as a coherent group on the grounds of size, style and technology. It has been said that 'there appears to be no direct connection between the British vessels and those of Middle Europe from which they are said to derive'.<sup>9</sup> This northern group, slight though it is, is the most obvious concentration outside Ireland, within what is admittedly a rather sparse distribution, although the known distribution- of 49 cauldrons and 21 buckets- seems to reflect no more than the chance of survival.<sup>10</sup> Chronology has also been refined: buckets seem to be preceded by Atlantic cauldrons, the earliest dates for which begin in the last quarter of the second millennium B.C., and Eogan has shown that most Irish buckets belong to the Dowris phase, in the 9th and 8th centuries B.C., and later.<sup>11</sup> Halstatt B-C connections seem appropriate. As well as the Heathery Burn find, we have also the handle-staple and ring of a similar bucket among the hoard of Late Bronze Age metalwork from Gilmonby, Teesdale.<sup>12</sup> To these must now be added two pieces of a cast base-plate of Heathery Burn type from the same hoard (and presumably from the same bucket), originally identified as fragments of shield-binding.<sup>13</sup> The technological and stylistic correlation between the Heathery Burn and Gilmonby buckets argues for manufacture in the same area, presumably in the Pennine region: the form of the base-plate is so particular that it might even suggest the hand of a single craftsman. It is possible that the Gilmonby bucket was the container for the rest of the hoard, a strikingly eclectic assemblage of socketed axes, spearheads, sword fragments and other metalwork, and that the thin sheet metal, of which only tiny vestiges remain, bore the brunt of the corrosion. That the find belongs to the very transition between bronze and iron technologies is emphasised by the fact that several of the socketed spearheads are secured by iron pegs, as well as by the presence of late pommel-tanged sword types.

The geographical locations of the Ravenstonedale and Gilmonby find-spots are of interest: both sit upon natural ways of communication between the Yorkshire Dales and the Stainmore corridor which links the north-east with Cumbria and the Irish Sea. This calls to mind Fell's remarks<sup>14</sup> about the importance of the Stainmore and Tyne routes in the reorientation of Cumbria away from Ireland and towards England, particularly Yorkshire, in the Late Bronze Age. The catholic nature of the metalwork associated with the Gilmonby bucket, resembling material assembled from a wide area, is also suggestive in this connection (the hoard has yet to be studied in detail). There is virtually no other metalwork of this period from Cumbria: a group of brooches of Italian type, supposedly from the Carlisle area, must be approached with great suspicion<sup>15</sup> and a bronze armlet, now lost, is provenanced to the furthest corner of Furness.<sup>16</sup>

There is no record of other material having been associated with the Ravenstonedale bucket, and it is unlikely that Nicholson and Burn, generally meticulous as well as well-informed, would have failed to mention it had anything else been found: the nature of the vessel's deposition cannot therefore be reconstructed other than tentatively. The Ravenstonedale bucket was found in a peat bog apparently around NY 7203: it shares a wet provenance with most of the bucket finds from Britain and Ireland.<sup>17</sup> The association of buckets and cauldrons with ritual or cult activities is well-established, and is touched upon by Hawkes and Smith<sup>18</sup> and considered by Eogan:<sup>19</sup> a repeated pattern of deposition in wet places tends to reinforce the impression of the buckets as ceremonial paraphernalia (evidence and arguments concerning the ritual nature of Late Bronze Age metalwork deposits have been cogently summarised by Bradley).<sup>20</sup> The Heathery Burn material also, with its gold ornaments and the nave-hoops of an elaborate vehicle, best makes sense as a ritual deposit.

The find recorded by Nicolson and Burn is of great importance to the later prehistory of the north, and of Cumbria in particular. It serves also to highlight a body of material, to which the recently-discovered Gilmonby hoard is central, which places the region in the mainstream of cultural innovation at the very threshold of the Iron Age.

### Acknowledgements

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### Notes and References

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- <sup>3</sup> Clough, T.H. McK., 'Bronze Age Metalwork from Cumbria', *CWZ*, lxix, 1–39.
- <sup>4</sup> Nicolson and Burn, I, 529.

- <sup>5</sup> Hawkes, C.F.C., and Smith, M.A., 'On some buckets and cauldrons of the Bronze and Early Iron Ages' *Antiquaries' Journal* (1957), xxxvii, 131–199.
- <sup>6</sup> Greenwell, W., 'Antiquities of the Bronze Age found near Heathery Burn Cave, near Stanhope, County Durham', *Archaeologia* (1894), 54, 87–114.
- <sup>7</sup> Eogan, G., *Hoards of the Irish Later Bronze Age* (Dublin: University College, 1983).
- <sup>8</sup> Hawkes and Smith, *op. cit.*, 141, fig. 3C.
- <sup>9</sup> Briggs, S., 'Buckets and cauldrons in the Late Bronze Age of North-Western Europe: a review', in: Blanchet, J.C. (ed.), *Les Relations entre la continent et les Iles Britanniques à l'Age du Bronze. Actes du Colloque de Lille* (Amiens: *Revue Archaeologique de Picardie* 1987), 161–189.
- <sup>10</sup> Briggs, *op. cit.*.
- <sup>11</sup> Eogan, *op. cit.*.
- <sup>12</sup> Coggins, D., 'A hoard of Late Bronze Age metalwork from Gilmonby', *Bowes Museum Archaeological Reports* (1981), 2., Cat. no. 61.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, Cat. no. 94.
- <sup>14</sup> Fell, C., 'Bronze Age connections between the Lake District and Ireland', *CW2*, xl, 118–130.
- <sup>15</sup> Ridgeway, W. and Smith, R.A., 'Early Italian brooches', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of London* (1907), xxi, 97–117.
- <sup>16</sup> Cowper, H.S., 'A bronze armlet said to have been found in Furness, Lancashire', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of London* (1905), xx, 335–6.
- <sup>17</sup> Eogan, G., *op. cit.*
- <sup>18</sup> Hawkes and Smith, *op. cit.*
- <sup>19</sup> Eogan, G., *op. cit.*
- <sup>20</sup> Bradley, R., *The social foundations of prehistoric Britain: themes and variations in the archaeology of power* (1985), ch. 4.

