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# SHADOWS IN THE SAND EXCAVATION OF A VIKING-AGE CEMETERY AT CUMWHITTON

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In 2004, a Cumbrian metal detectorist found a brooch in the ploughsoil, near Cumwhitton in the Eden Valley. This was identified as a rare Viking oval brooch of ninth- or tenth-century date. These are almost always found in pairs, and in a burial context, and a second brooch was subsequently found. This was clearly of national importance, so an evaluation was undertaken and a furnished grave was located. Several more artefacts of the same date were found in the surrounding ploughsoil by metal detecting, suggesting that there was a cemetery. A major excavation was then funded by English Heritage, as the site was under immediate threat.

Six burials were found, dating to the early tenth century, but almost no skeletal material. They were richly furnished, with a wide range of artefacts: swords, spearheads, spurs, knives, and many other objects. These were poorly preserved, but their careful excavation, conservation, and analysis has produced a wealth of information about their original appearance, manufacture, and use. A rare decorated drinking horn, *seax* with a silver-inlaid horn handle, a locking wooden box, and a unique group of copper-alloy buckles and strap ends were especially notable.

This rare opportunity has allowed the study of a closely linked group of Viking burials, probably of a single family and seemingly of not more than two generations. It has highlighted both the similarities and differences between the graves, which might point to individuality in the burial rites, and the diversity of the cultural origins of the objects that furnished them. Most importantly, this site has provided a tantalising glimpse of the cultural origins, beliefs, and status of these people and how they may have fitted in the volatile political landscape of tenth-century Cumbria.

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