

CUMBRIA BEFORE THE VIKINGS: A REVIEW OF SOME 'DARK-AGE' PROBLEMS IN NORTH-WEST ENGLAND

Deirdre O'Sullivan

We might have hoped that the use of the term 'Dark-Age' had a rather antiquarian feel nowadays, and for other parts of Britain it is becoming not merely unfashionable but increasingly inappropriate to describe the post-Roman centuries in this way. It would be pleasant to think that this could also apply to Cumbria, but though it may be possible to dispel the sensation of total eclipse, we still remain well within a penumbra of legend and supposition. Nonetheless, and perhaps simply to strike a more optimistic note, the term 'Early Christian' will be used to denote the period between A.D. 410, the date of Britain's official administrative break with the Roman world, and the Viking settlement in Cumbria in the tenth century.

We are not exactly embarrassed by a wealth of data for Early Christian Cumbria. Place-names have been well studied¹ and most of our general inferences about settlement must be based on these. Contemporary documentary evidence is in very short supply. Apart from Bede, who says very little about the north-west, we have odd scraps of information in such sources as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Welsh material, and Nennius's *Historia Brittonum*, but we have nothing which derives directly from a Cumbrian source itself, and none of the more routine information from documents such as writs or charters which is so useful for settlement studies elsewhere.

Archaeological material which can be dated to this period with certainty is especially thin on the ground. There is only one excavated site; or rather only one site of the period has ever been recognized as such and subsequently excavated, a subtle distinction. There are of course 'all those crosses',² which must denote ecclesiastical sites of one kind or another, and we have a small quantity of stray finds. This material can be dated to the Early Christian period, but does not tell us much about Cumbria. We also have the occasional cemetery usually of fairly doubtful attribution.

Then there is folklore — traditions, customs, superstitions and suchlike which archaeologists, but by no means only archaeologists, tend to fall back on when all else fails. In this category we might consider holy wells, church dedications and obscure folk practices. Unfortunately this material has rarely been properly studied in Cumbria except by those already

convinced of its merits, and it is difficult to be sure what value to place on the results. One may suspect that it is frequently endowed with an antiquity which it does not deserve, at least without supportive evidence, but it is by no means easy to separate the legendary past from the legendary present. In what follows no use will be made of this kind of material although it is not devoid of potential.³

THE FATE OF ROMAN MILITARY SITES IN CUMBRIA

It is not possible to fix the date of the withdrawal of troops from Hadrian's Wall with great precision, but it seems likely that the Wall itself continued to be garrisoned in some fashion until A.D. 410.⁴ This is presumably true of most of the forts in the southern hinterland, although it is clear that the outpost forts to the north were abandoned by the time of the Picts' War in the 360s, if not, indeed, before.⁵ Excavation at Roman forts has thrown relatively little light on the immediate results of the break with Rome. It seems very likely that the events of the late fourth century had resulted in a considerable reduction in the strength of the garrison to the north-west. At one time it was thought that the *vici* were also generally abandoned as a result of the Picts' War,⁶ but this view is no longer current although it may hold true of one or two individual sites.⁷ By the end of the fourth century the garrison itself would have been largely recruited from the locality.⁸

The most important point about the events of A.D. 410, however, is that it seems reasonably certain that after that date, even if there were forces still prepared to hold the north against the *Picti* and *Scotti*, there was no longer any money with which to pay them. We might see the *vici* in this context as serving the function of market centres where the salaries of the Roman soldiery, the products of a central treasury, were spent. With the withdrawal of external funding these civilian settlements lost their market function and presumably their whole reason for existence. We might thus expect the rapid erosion of the artificial economy of the northern frontier zone.

The nature of the relationship between the military in Cumbria and the rural population has been under discussion for some years, and the writer is not wholly in agreement with the current trend which argues for a close relationship. It was once thought that the pattern of settlement was directly affected by the distribution of forts and that the centuries of Roman Britain saw a great expansion in numbers of so-called 'native settlements' and population. Blake for instance,⁹ observing that known rural settlement sites were frequently to be found in proximity to forts and were absent from other areas, suggested that the presence of the Roman army was the determining factor in the spatial distribution of rural settlement. His judgement was based largely on the then-known distribution of upstanding sites, but also on a small number of cropmark sites identified by St Joseph.

More recent aerial survey, notably by Higham and Jones,¹⁰ has shown that this apparent distribution was entirely artificial. It can be extended

considerably outside the immediate vicinity of the forts, and Blake's interpretation no longer stands. Nonetheless, the mutual interdependence of the army and the rural population is still emphasized in most recent writings on the topic. Manning, for instance,¹¹ proposed that the grain supply for the army at Hadrian's Wall may have been close to hand, whilst study of the field systems apparently connected with some sites has suggested to others that arable may have played a considerable part in the economy of Roman Cumbria, and that this may have been wholly geared towards feeding the Wall garrison.¹²

This 'expansion' of production has been connected with what is known as the 'Brigantian' clearance set by some in the early part of the Roman period.¹³ There are real difficulties in this interpretation, however, which must be faced without a preference for 'Romano-centric' explanations. First, the dating evidence from pollen diagrams, such as it is, clearly indicates that the 'Brigantian' clearance spans the late Roman and post-Roman centuries rather than the earlier Roman period. It is true that we have as yet few Carbon 14 determinations [Fig. 2.1], and the dates that we do have are not as precise as we would wish, but if we are required to see the 'Brigantian' clearances as representing a unitary phase, we cannot place this in the first and second centuries A.D. Thus, we cannot see it as a direct consequence of the Roman soldier's need for grain.

Another obstacle is the absence of coinage from 'native' sites. If a close economic relationship existed we might hope for some form of currency exchange; yet to date no coin find has, to my knowledge, been published from any 'native' site excavation. Most important of all, however, and worthy of emphasis, is that if these sites were occupied in post-Roman times, we would have great difficulty in proving it.

PROBLEMS OF POST-ROMAN DATING

The most immediate and striking break with the Roman world is the loss of Roman material culture. Datable types of pots, pins and brooches disappear and this is undoubtedly the key problem in studying the immediate post-Roman centuries in Cumbria. Elsewhere in England the problem is to a certain extent solved by the appearance of recognizable, datable, Anglo-Saxon artefacts, but we cannot hope for this in the north-west. There is as yet no evidence that any of these artefacts were traded outside the area of Anglo-Saxon settlement.

Elsewhere in western Britain imported pottery from the eastern Mediterranean and Gaul is the essential basis of archaeological dating for the period. Perhaps surprisingly, none of this has yet been identified in Cumbria.¹⁴ Two factors may be relevant here. First, Cumbria might not have had direct contact with these areas; secondly, the kind of sites likely to produce this material may not yet have been excavated.

The distribution of this material within western Britain and Ireland strongly suggests use of the western seaways.¹⁵ Clearly some form of redistributive network also existed, however, as some sites are quite far

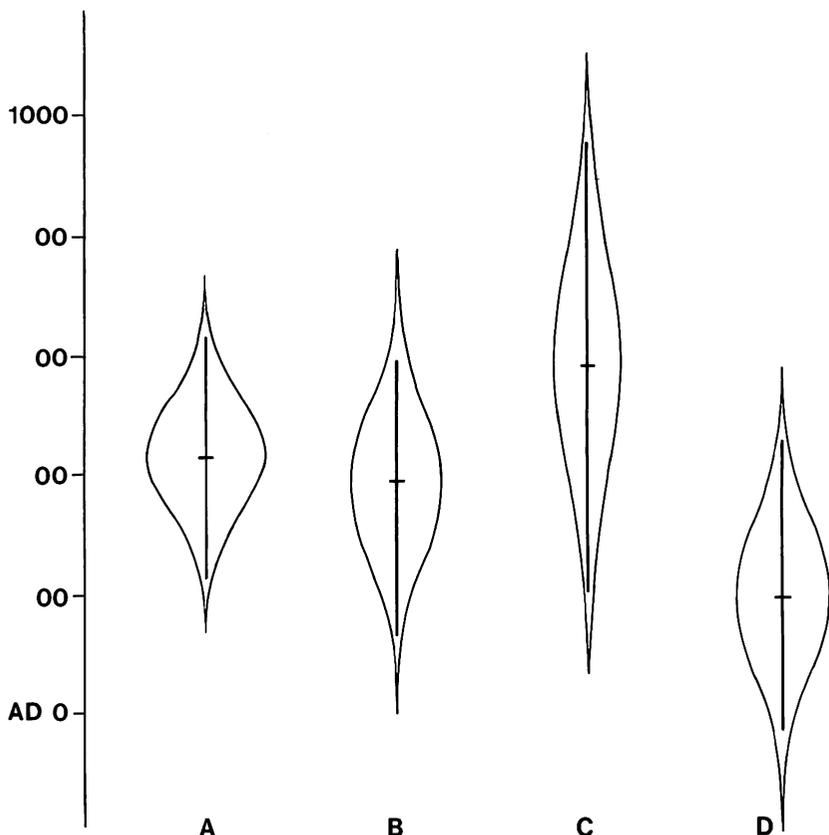


Fig. 2.1 Carbon 14 dates for the 'Brigantian' clearance — (a) Helsington Moss; (b) Burnmoor Tarn; (c) (d) Devoke Water. The dates are plotted using bisymmetrical curves.

inland. In economic terms the importance of this trade may have been over-emphasized,¹⁶ for it is doubtful if a minimum vessel count of all the B-type amphorae in Britain and Ireland would yet amount to a full shipload; but there can be no doubt that there was significant contact between Wales and Gaul in the fifth and sixth centuries because it is evidenced in other ways: for example the use of Gaulish types of inscription and Christian symbols on Welsh Early Christian memorials. Cumbria is, significantly, without memorial stones of this type. There is one sub-Roman cross-slab, but it is of undiagnostic form and has no inscription. All of this might be taken as an indication that Cumbria was for some reason outside the network of contacts along the western seaways; but it would be unwise, at this stage, to stake a great deal on this.

Early studies of this kind of pottery¹⁷ suggested that its distribution was largely confined to royal sites such as Dunadd, or major monastic sites like

Tintagel. Many excavations in the 1960s on the hill forts and hilltop sites in the south-west produced small quantities of sherds and strengthened the impression that it was basically a luxury commodity which one might reasonably expect to find only on princely, aristocratic or ecclesiastical sites, although it has turned up on one or two sites which would not otherwise have been interpreted as high status settlements.

In any event, the fact that it has not yet been found on sites in Cumbria is hardly surprising. There has been virtually no excavation of potentially high-status settlements. Excavation on hilltop sites and hillforts, assuming that one must expect these to have been important centres in the post-Roman period, has been on an extremely small scale. Efforts were usually confined to the small-scale sectioning of ramparts,¹⁸ and we cannot reasonably expect this kind of work to produce archaeological material in any quantity. There are very few of these sites in Cumbria in any case and it would seem probable that we would have to look at a much wider range of settlement forms, including apparently undefended sites, before we could come to any conclusions about what high-status post-Roman sites in this area should look like.

To date there are no published Carbon 14 dates from any settlement site in Cumbria, perhaps a consequence of the strong Roman bias in Cumbrian archaeology. Many 'native' settlements have produced some Roman material, although usually in small quantities, but questions about site dating have sometimes been deemed answered as soon as the first — not infrequently the only — sherd of abraded Samian ware turned up in the topsoil. Carbon 14 dating is expensive and, as many of these excavations have been funded on goodwill and hard work rather than money, it has perhaps been seen as an unnecessary luxury. The rule of thumb followed for dating was fairly simple. If a site produced nothing at all it was prehistoric; if the excavator found anything Roman then the site was Roman; if there were medieval finds these were intrusive. The Early Christian period unfortunately has no place at all in this scheme of things!

It seems ludicrous nowadays to have to plead the case for absolute dating methods rather than subjective interpretations of small, possibly totally unrepresentative collections of pottery. All that one can say is that where Carbon 14 dating has been undertaken on rural settlement sites elsewhere, it has not infrequently given a post-Roman date, even from sites producing Roman material or no material at all. For example, we have Simy Folds in Teesdale, dated to A.D. 780 ± 70;¹⁹ Fortress Dyke in Yorkshire, dated to A.D. 630 ± 90;²⁰ and Gayle Lane, North Yorkshire, dated to c. A.D. 850 ± 100.²¹ All of these sites had been provisionally classed as Iron Age/Romano-British.

The last, and perhaps the first words on the problems of post-Roman dating in Cumbria belong to R. G. Collingwood. Speaking of Ewe Close, he said:

We do not know what furniture the pre-Roman and post-Roman Britons of our District possessed; but there is reason to believe that they had very little

of such a nature as to leave clues to the archaeologist. If a village like this had a long life before, during, and after the Roman period, it is probable that excavation would yield, as at Ewe Close it did, finds of Roman date and no others.²²

CHRISTIANITY AND POST-ROMAN CUMBRIA

In the fifth and sixth centuries Cumbria may have formed part of the Kingdom of Urien of Rheged.²³ In any event it clearly belonged to the world of the Men of the North. We know almost nothing of this period in northern England apart from some very debatable ‘facts’ of political history, all of which are capable of rearrangement and reinterpretation depending on a particular point of view. Discussion will be restricted here to one particular problem — the survival of Christian practice and institutions during this period. At the moment this is perhaps the only area where we have enough material to initiate meaningful discussion.

There is of course some evidence for Christian practice in Roman Cumbria, although the distribution of material in Britain as a whole no longer suggests that the north-west was particularly important in this respect.²⁴ Christianity was obviously gaining ground in fourth century Britain but it is still unclear to what extent it was the norm rather than the exception. It does seem very likely that Carlisle, as a regional centre of some importance, would have had its own bishop.²⁵ Unfortunately, in spite of Professor Thomas’s optimistic map of post-Roman bishoprics,²⁶ we really have no evidence that this diocese survived into the fifth and sixth centuries. We have evidence for continuing Christian practice, but this is not the same thing as evidence for a structured and well-organized church.

It is clear that the Men of the North regarded themselves as Christian — Aneirin prays for the hero Ceredig:

May he be welcome among the host [of heaven]
in perfect union with the Trinity²⁷

while his enemies are pagan:

The heathen, the crafty men of Deira.²⁸

Nonetheless, Cumbria is singularly lacking in the sort of Christian evidence characteristic of post-Roman Britain as a whole. As we have seen, there are no Christian inscriptions and only one cross-slab; and there are only a few cemetery sites which can lay any claim to a post-Roman, Early Christian origin. The writer feels that it is possible to say this with some certainty as she has spent a great deal of time looking for them. Figure 2.2 represents a very optimistic view of the number of sites; few of these would survive a totally sceptical analysis. Whilst this is not the place for a detailed critique, a brief summary illustrates the point. Backfoot and Ravenglass are isolated cists without bodies in what may be post-Roman contexts. Kirkby Stephen is a single long-cist from the nave of the parish church. The cemetery at Moresby may have been a short-cist cemetery, and those at

CUMBRIA

EARLY CHRISTIAN BURIALS

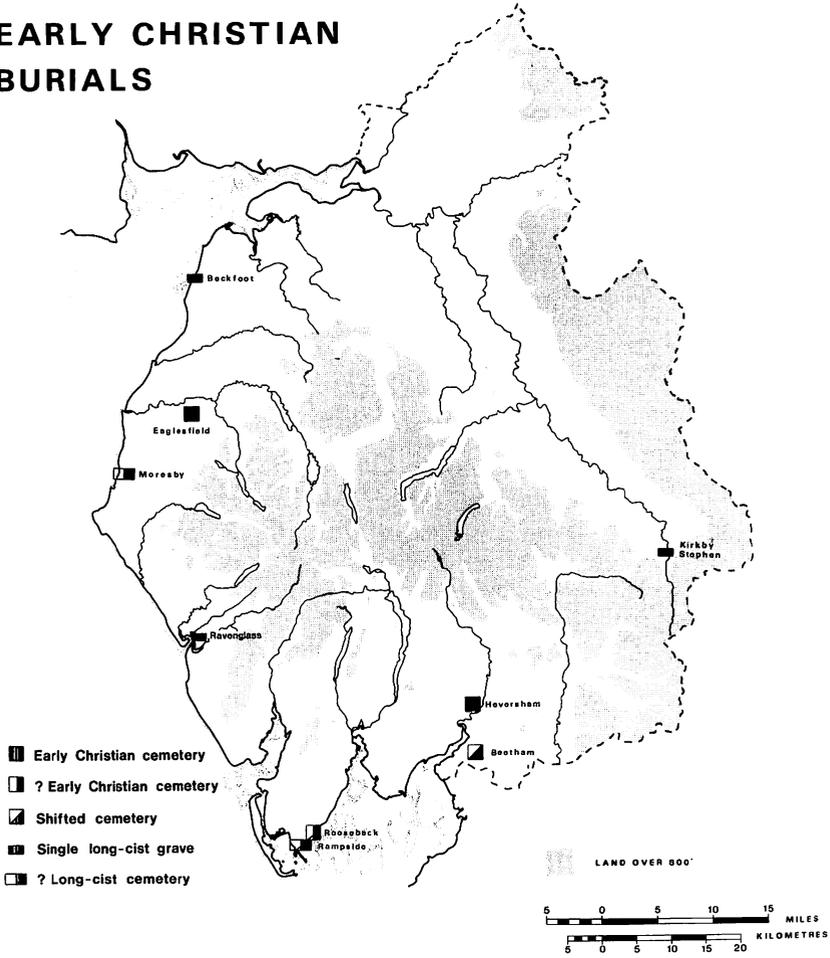


Fig. 2.2 Cumbria: Early Christian burials.

Roosebeck and Heversham are simply rows of east/west bodies found in the course of agricultural operations.

This view of post-Roman Christianity may seem unduly pessimistic. As archaeologists have often observed, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, and one of the problems always faced in studying such a meagre quantity of data is that it can often be interpreted in at least two different ways with equal justification. It is possible that later events may have removed or obscured the evidence for a thriving Early Christian church; it is to these later events that we must now turn.

THE DATE OF THE ANGLO-SAXON SETTLEMENT IN CUMBRIA

The date at which Cumbria came under the control of the kings of Northumbria is by no means fixed. We can set outer limits but unfortunately these are widely separated. At the latest, we know that the Northumbrians controlled Cumbria in the time of Cuthbert or, more precisely, by A.D. 685.²⁹ At the earliest, it seems reasonable to suppose that they had not made any moves into the north-west at the time of the battle of Lindisfarne in c.A.D. 590.³⁰ It may be possible to extend this *terminus post quem* forward to the battle of Catterick in c.A.D. 600,³¹ when Mynyddog Mynfawr's troops appear to have encountered a very marked shortage of Anglo-Saxons in Bernicia, only encountering their English enemies at the northern boundary of Deira.

At least one view³² holds that Cumbria was conquered at the very beginning of the seventh century, during the reign of Aethelfrith of Bernicia who united the two kingdoms of Deira and Bernicia in the course of his rule. Bede says of Aethelfrith that 'he ravaged the Britons more cruelly than any other English leader'.³³ He certainly extended English political control northwards and it is possible that he moved westwards as well. The Tyne Gap is the most accessible of the natural routes into Cumbria, and the line of Hadrian's Wall would have been a conspicuous pointer to the western seaboard. It is not unreasonable to suppose that this was the way chosen by the Northumbrians, and if this were so then the strength of the English hold on Bernicia is a key factor. On the other hand, we cannot simply assume that there was no measure of settlement from Deira, or even Mercia, although there is no direct evidence of this. It is true that the archaeological evidence for the Anglo-Saxon presence in Deira is much more marked than in Bernicia. Whereas from the latter there is a relatively small quantity of pagan Anglo-Saxon material, there is abundant evidence for extensive and reasonably early settlement in Deira, especially in the East Riding.³⁴ However, the British kingdom of Elmet in the southern foothills of the Pennines would have presented some kind of an obstacle to expansion from this direction and this did not fall into Northumbrian hands until the reign of Edwin. The case for an early date for the Anglo-Saxon settlement of Cumbria cannot be convincingly based on invasion from Deira.

Kenneth Jackson is the originator of the rival viewpoint,³⁵ which would set the Northumbrian takeover in the middle years of the seventh century or even later, although he would allow for raids across the Pennines before then. One feature which Jackson interprets as indicating this later date is the absence of any evidence for pagan burial in Cumbria. This claim can now be challenged, although the small number of potential pagan Anglo-Saxon burials³⁶ does not necessarily affect the validity of his argument as a whole.

None of the material in these burials is diagnostically Anglo-Saxon and some of it could well be of Viking date.³⁷ On the other hand, it would all fit

perfectly well in an Anglo-Saxon context elsewhere. The group of finds from Crosby Garrett, for instance, can be easily paralleled in the great Anglo-Saxon cemeteries of East Yorkshire³⁸ and it is perhaps here, rather than in Bernicia, that a relationship should be sought.

We cannot claim a well-defined group of Anglo-Saxon interments but we must admit the strong possibility that at least one or two of the sites are Anglo-Saxon, and once the possibility is admitted, so must the consequences. The sites form quite a tight-knit group in the Upper Eden Valley; do we have evidence here for a raid across the Pennines? Where bones or grave-goods indicate sex, this is, with one very doubtful exception, male. On the other hand, a warrior band returning from a quick foray is unlikely to have had the opportunity to arrange for cremation. The grave-goods themselves are not closely datable types, but would fit equally well within the latter part of the sixth century or the seventh century.

ROMANO-BRITISH SURVIVAL IN CUMBRIA

Whatever the date of the settlement the notion that it made very little impact is widely held. Northern and western England are increasingly seen as areas where there was a high rate of Romano-British 'survival'. We could fruitfully compare the current trend with theories of the origin of the Universe: the propounders of what might be termed the 'Steady-State' theory would argue for a large measure of 'continuity' between Roman and Early Medieval Britain. This view finds perhaps its strongest expression in the work of Glanville Jones³⁹ but it has recently received considerable support from archaeologists, notably Faull⁴⁰ and Higham.⁴¹ Exponents of the 'Big Bang' theory, who would oppose this continuity, are becoming rather rare.

The present writer would not agree with such a minimal view of the Anglo-Saxon settlement in the north-west, and would like to examine the nature of the Anglo-Saxon contribution more positively. It seems best, however, to preface this examination with some consideration of what we mean by the term 'survival'.

In the most basic, anthropological sense we presumably mean that Romano-British individuals survived in large numbers. It is very difficult to prove physical survival of this sort, but some initiative in this direction has been taken by Potts.⁴² His work is based on the relative frequency of certain blood groups in different parts of Britain, and he concludes that the relatively high frequency of genotype *r* in the Lake District indicates that 'about three-quarters of the ancestors of the present population must have been here in Roman times'. His methodology has met with some criticism, however,⁴³ and even to the layman there are obvious difficulties in establishing the pattern of blood groups in Cumbria in Roman times, which is the only direct comparison which would prove the point irrefutably. In any event we are clearly not entitled to think that Potts' work is a final solution.

Perhaps it is this basic survival which lies behind most discussions, but other forms of survival are not necessarily dependent on this. The term is used in a variety of ways by a variety of specialists — archaeologists, linguists and historians — and this means that discussions of the issue can be at cross purposes. The survival of social and economic institutions such as patterns of lordship, estate boundaries and tenorial obligations, have received a great deal of attention in recent years, and there has been a tendency among some writers to make a straight equation between this kind of survival and the survival of human populations — although any reading of comparative history would show this equation to be a fallacy. Archaeologists are usually reasonably critical of the mechanisms of cultural change and have generally abandoned the practice of evolving artefacts *sui-generis*, divorced from the realities of human behaviour. Nowadays they tend simply to look to a more generalized theme of continuity in the landscape or continuity of local custom, such as burial practice, which presumably incorporates an element of surviving social and economic institutions.

If it is not always possible to identify the ethnic identity of individuals from their language, it is surely even more difficult to present a rational case for a field boundary. Distinctions between different kinds of survival and continuity are important and it is even more important to realize that although we may often use archaeological material or place-names to infer ethnic survival, it is impossible to claim any kind of absolute value for the exercise.

THE ANGLO-SAXON SETTLEMENT

It has already been noted that the only abundant class of data for the period is place-names. It is certainly true that habitative place-names of sixth and seventh century date, the ever debatable *-hām* and *-inga(-)* names, are extremely scarce in Cumbria, although those which exist are found throughout the county [Fig. 2.3]. This could be interpreted as indicating the low density of Anglo-Saxon settlements as well as their late date. However, on its own, this is a rather circular argument. The process of conversion to Christianity was set in motion in Northumbria during the reign of Edwin, long before the reign of Oswiu, and there is a general consensus that although there is some overlap between the use of *-hām* and *-inga* names and the Christian period, this is probably not very extensive. Now we will not get numerous early place-names or abundant pagan cemeteries if, at the time Cumbria was settled, the English were in any case using different words to describe their settlements and burying their dead in anonymous Christian graves. There are certainly plenty of English place-names which could belong to the period from the seventh century onwards [Fig. 2.4].

The situation in Cumbria can be closely paralleled in Devon,⁴⁴ another part of England which came under the control of the Anglo-Saxons in the course of the seventh century. Here, as in Cumbria, there are no examples

CUMBRIA

ENGLISH HABITATIONAL NAMES 1

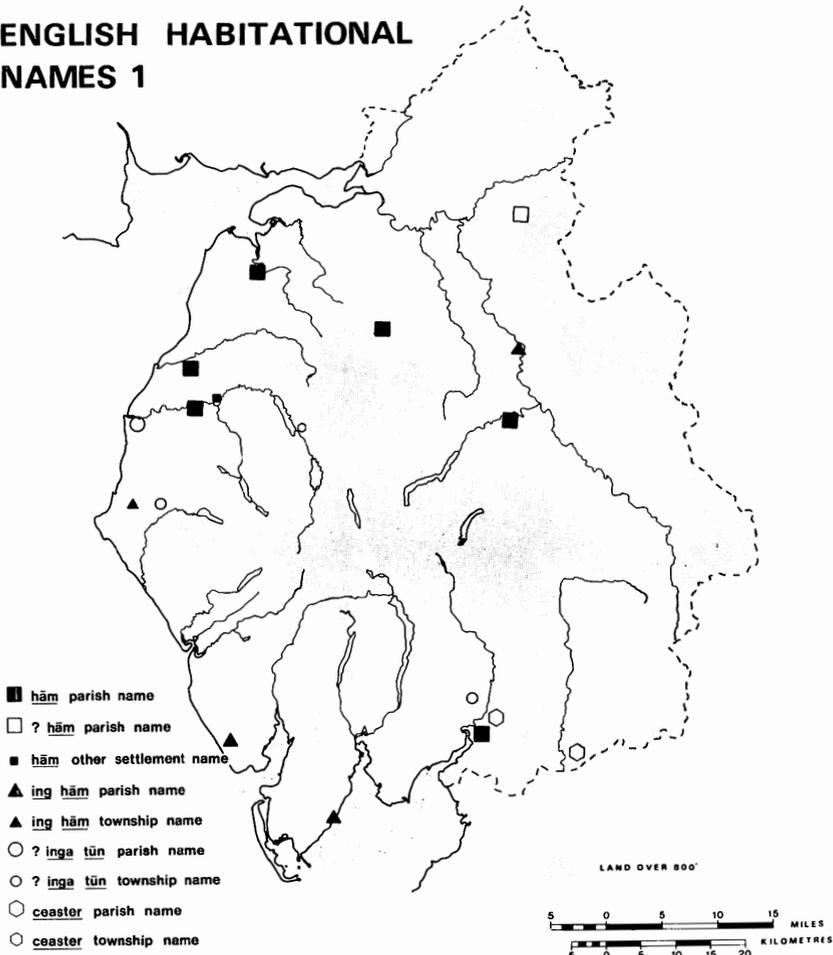


Fig. 2.3 Cumbria: English habitational names, 1.

of final *-ing* or *-ingas*, and there is only one instance of *-inga+hām*. *Hām* itself is reasonably common⁴⁵ and *-tūn* extremely so, although many examples are probably post-Conquest. On the whole the English element in Devon place-names is very pronounced, names of Celtic origin forming less than one per cent of those studied.⁴⁶

In Cumbria, British names are rather more numerous than this and have a very pronounced distribution. As Figure 2.5 demonstrates, the vast majority of these names are in the northern half of the county. However, as Professor Jackson demonstrated some years ago,⁴⁷ most of these names are almost certainly late and connected with the tenth-century occupation

CUMBRIA

ENGLISH HABITATIONAL NAMES 2

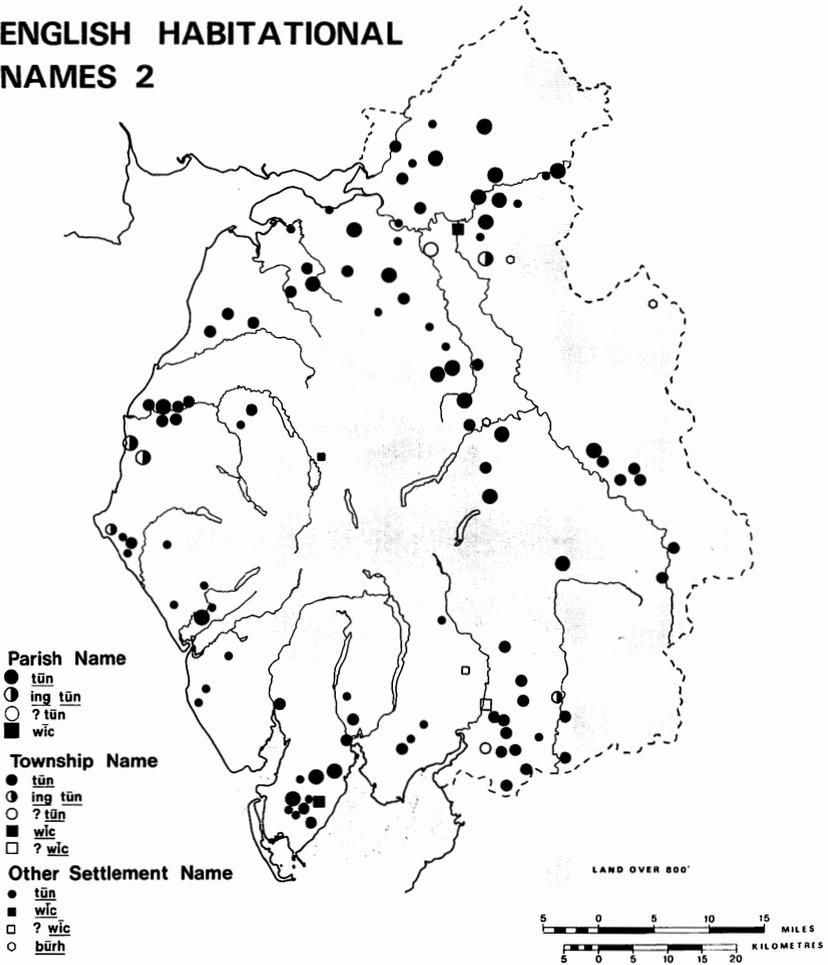


Fig. 2.4 Cumbria: English habitational names, 2.

of northern Cumbria by Strathclyde Britons. Some of them are compounded with Scandinavian or even Anglo-Norman personal names, for instance, and the distribution is more or less contained within the probable southern boundary of Strathclyde at this time.⁴⁸ By contrast, British names are very scarce within southern Cumbria and we must suspect that the number surviving from before the seventh century is very small indeed, probably no greater than in Devon.

Whilst this echoes the situation in England as a whole, it may seem surprising that it should hold as true of areas like Cumbria as elsewhere. English place-names denoting British settlements are likewise scarce.

CUMBRIA

BRITISH NON-HABITATIONAL NAMES

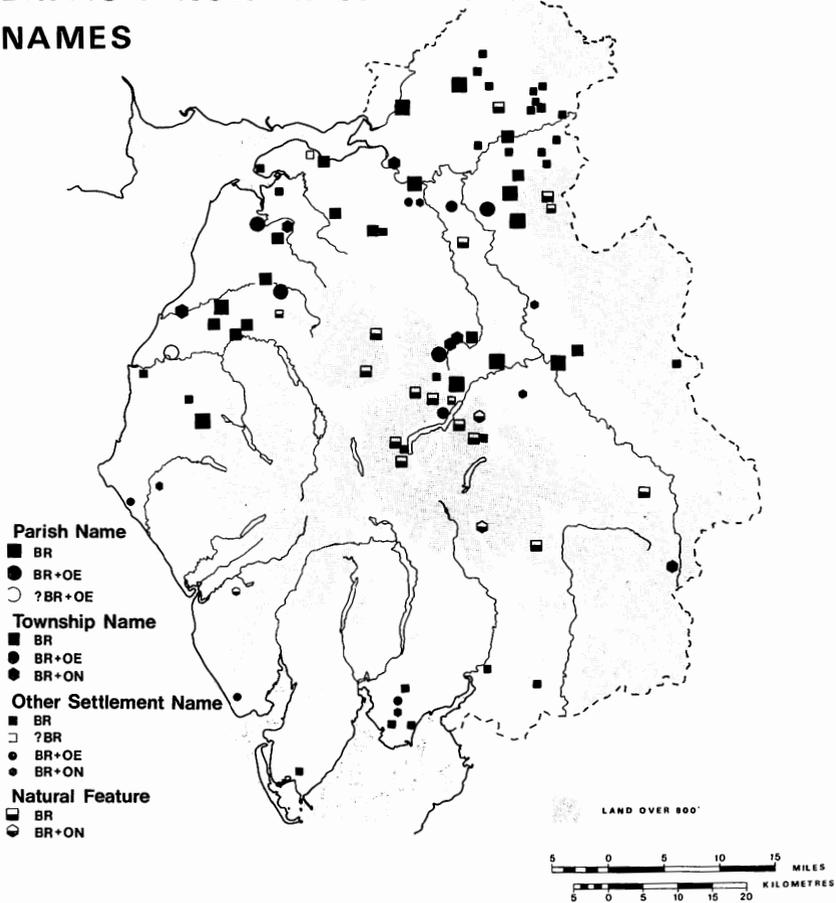


Fig. 2.5 Cumbria: British non-habitational names.

There are no certain examples of *wala+tūn*,⁴⁹ although there are a couple of other names — Cummersdale (*Cumbras+dael*) and three Birkbys which do denote specifically British settlements or areas. The latter are Scandinavian compounds and may show that distinctively British settlements thrived into the tenth century, even though in documentary records Britons are only directly referred to on one occasion after the seventh century. In a land grant recorded in the tenth century *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*,⁵⁰ Ecgfrith gives to the see of St Cuthbert *terram quae vocatur Cartmel et omnes Britannos cum eo*. After this they disappear from the record as anonymously as any in Berkshire or East Anglia, and any study

of indigenous survivals through place-names is thwarted by later events.

We know very little of Cumbria in the eighth and ninth centuries. Our sole contemporary source is Bede, although later sources do contain some relevant material. The area appears to have been fully absorbed by Northumbria by the late seventh century, and communications between the eastern and western sides of the Pennines were clearly reasonably good. Cuthbert had no visible fear of an alien population: he made several visits to Cumbria,⁵¹ and the monks of Lindisfarne travelled westwards to the mouth of the Derwent with his body in the latter part of the ninth century.⁵² In so far as we have a picture at all it is a wholly English one, although it would not do to weight this too heavily as our source material is so limited. In the few instances where land-holders' names are known these are English. The See of Lindisfarne seems to have held property in several parts of Cumbria (although the evidence for this is admittedly late) and it is claimed that some land-holdings date from the time of Cuthbert himself — Cartmel, already noted, and Carlisle, where the Community claimed an area of fifteen miles around the city.⁵³ There are also references to landholdings at Yealand Conyers or Yealand Redmayne, and at Holm Cultram.⁵⁴

It is usually assumed that Cumbria, or at least most of Cumbria, formed part of the Diocese of Lindisfarne largely because of St Cuthbert's connection with Carlisle, but this is simply reasonable conjecture. It is not conclusive since Lindisfarne is merely the best documented in this respect, and we do not know of the landholdings of other sees or monasteries in the region. It is perhaps worth noting that the Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastical sculpture from some sites shows strong links with Hexham,⁵⁵ which might conceivably reflect a form of control. We have certainly no indication that the Northumbrian church was in any sense absorbing a pre-existing ecclesiastical structure in Cumbria, although Professor Thomas has argued vigorously for its survival.⁵⁶

We have already looked briefly at the evidence for pre-Northumbrian Christian practice and noted its rather surprising scantiness. It provides a classic case of data which can reasonably be interpreted in two very different ways. On the one hand we could propose that this is a true mirror of the unimportance of earlier Christianity; on the other we might suggest that lack of evidence is best explained by 'continuity'. In other words, the reason why our Early Christian sites were so very thin on the ground is because they have never gone out of use. They were incorporated directly into the Northumbrian church and are still in use today as parish churchyards. It is difficult to test this idea in a meaningful way but there are one or two points which have some bearing on it.

If we turn to the maps of English place-names we can see that almost all of our earliest names [Fig. 2.3] now possess the status of a parish or a township. Fourteen names are parish names and three are township names; only two do not have this status. Of later names about 25% are parish names and 50% are township names; the rest denote other

settlements [Fig. 2.4]. Thus we have a very marked connection between early place-names and settlement *loci* which achieved the status of parishes and townships. This would not occasion any surprise in Hampshire or Kent but it must be remembered that the character of place-names in Cumbria is overwhelmingly Norse; in some areas these outnumber names of English or Cumbric origin by a factor of seven or more.

Parishes are essentially ecclesiastical divisions and what distinguishes parish churches and parochial chapels from other sorts of church is their possession of a cemetery. As Professor Thomas has so clearly demonstrated,⁵⁷ it is the graveyard rather than the actual church fabric which must be regarded as the 'primary field-monument' of insular Christianity. It may be that the status of early English place-names indicates some kind of 'proto-parochial' structure introduced by the English in the seventh century, or at least some time before the tenth century, which was to survive the Viking settlement and many subsequent upheavals.

The idea that many of our Cumbrian churchyards were in use in the Anglo-Saxon period is, of course, beyond dispute. The antiquity of individual sites is accepted but there is a tendency to view those for which we have documentary evidence, for example, or pre-Conquest sculpture, as islands in a sea, and usually as exclusively monastic centres. Rather should we suggest that the whole system be regarded as Anglo-Saxon. This implies that parish churchyards in Cumbria assumed their primary function of disposal of the dead, and were organized in some overall territorial scheme, between the seventh and the ninth centuries.

Inferences about land ownership or the system of lordship do not automatically follow, nor should we attempt to draw conclusions about eighth-century estates from boundaries mapped a thousand years later. There may never have been a direct relationship between title to land and parish structure. The key to the latter is the organization of Christian burial; the key to the former must lie with the organization of large estates⁵⁸ and properly forms a separate study of its own.

There is a further feature of Cumbrian churchyards which merits discussion — their shape. Largely due to the work of Professor Thomas, there is a widespread belief that churchyards with curvilinear boundaries are of early date. Perhaps because his work has concentrated so much on western Britain it is occasionally, and in the writer's view erroneously, assumed (although not by Professor Thomas⁵⁹) that curvilinear churchyards are 'Celtic' and indicate cemeteries of the British Church.

This view will not stand close examination. Within Northumbria at least, some curvilinear churchyards appear to have Anglo-Saxon origins. Perhaps the best-known of all is Gilling West in North Yorkshire, founded as a monastery by Oswiu in expiation of his murder of Oswine in A.D. 642.⁶⁰ There is also Escomb, in Co. Durham, where the famous and partly excavated seventh-century church is surrounded by the remains of a curvilinear boundary.⁶¹ And in Cumbria itself we have Dacre, an Anglo-Saxon monastery described by Bede as being under construction.⁶²

Cumbria is well endowed with curvilinear churchyards [Fig. 2.6].⁶³ Thirteen sites preserved a curved boundary intact into the nineteenth century, and a further seventeen or so have boundaries which were clearly once curvilinear although the cemetery has subsequently been altered or extended. This amounts to something of the order of 10% of Cumbria's churchyards. No doubt some resolute Britophile will claim that these are simply sites which have been 'taken over' by the Anglo-Saxons. All we can say is that there is no firm evidence for this, of any kind.

CUMBRIA

CURVILINEAR CHURCHYARDS

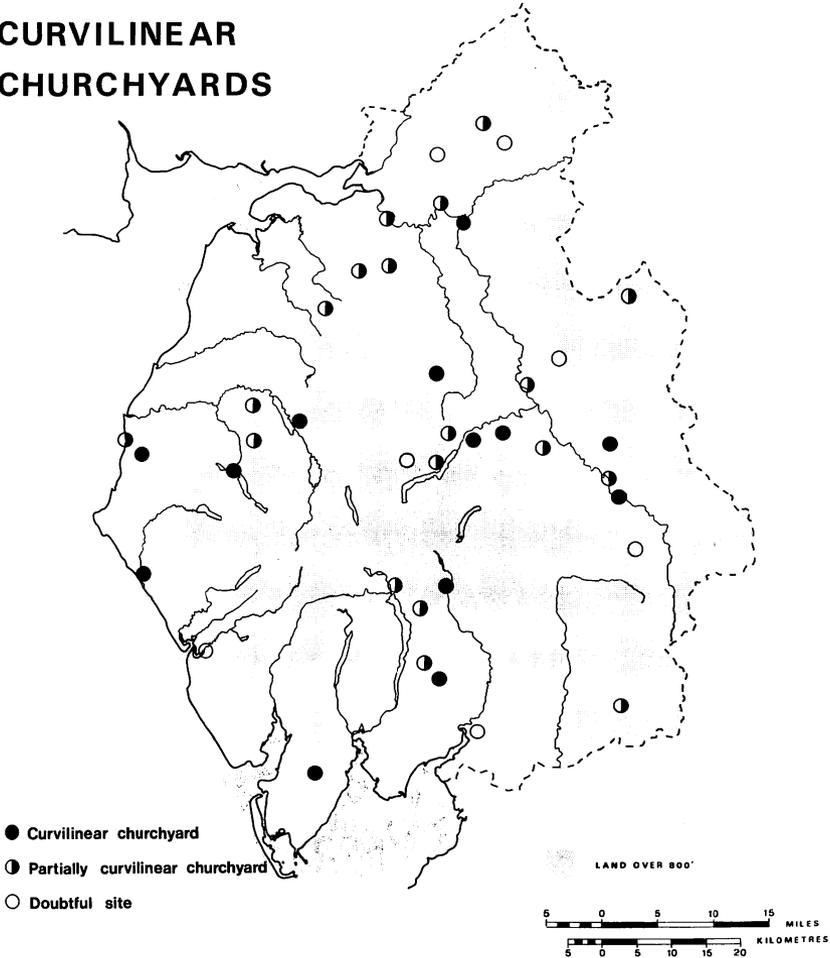


Fig. 2.6 Cumbria: curvilinear churchyards.

CONCLUSION

We do not have to believe in a 'Big Bang' theory to suspect that there is an ever-growing tendency to over-redress the balance in favour of the Romano-British *a priori*. Each area and each aspect of 'survival' must be examined in detail before any kind of assessment is possible. It is far too soon to make generalizations about England as a whole, and inferences based on what are deemed to be parallel situations elsewhere are seriously open to challenge since we have no measure of the fitness of the comparison. There has always been a tendency for Anglo-Saxon scholars to regard the so-called Highland Zone as more or less uninhabitable and therefore unalterable. It does not follow, however, that simply because Cumbria has been an area of peripheral interest in Anglo-Saxon studies it was really some kind of wilderness where semi-naked, skin-clad Britons survived in the hills until almost the day before yesterday.

The main point is that we really know very little about Early Christian Cumbria. It is legitimate to see the region in the ninth century as fully a part of the kingdom of Northumbria whatever the ethnic origin of its inhabitants. The latter will probably remain an unknowable factor but we should not regard the region's incorporation within the Anglo-Saxon world as essentially unimportant. At a minimum, it gave the area its language and its religion.

We must look to future excavations to provide us with data on which to base meaningful discussions of economy, settlement size and cultural contacts. At present we simply do not have enough evidence. If this seems unduly pessimistic, it may be remembered that it is only within archaeology and palaeoenvironmental studies that we may reasonably expect any quantity of new data, and that the scale of work in these fields has increased considerably of recent years. It is hoped that a more positive approach will be possible in the not-too-distant future.

Notes

¹ Complete surveys are available for the former counties of Cumberland: A. M. Armstrong, A. Mawer, F. M. Stenton and B. Dickins, *The Place-Names of Cumberland* 3 Vols. (1950-52); and Westmorland: A. H. Smith, *The Place-Names of Westmorland* 2 Vols. (1967).

² P. A. Rahtz, Monasteries as settlements, in *Scottish Archaeological Forum* (1974), v, 130.

³ See the writer's thesis, *A Reassessment of the Early Christian Archaeology of Cumbria* (M.Phil. Durham, 1980), 196-214, 253-72, for discussion.

⁴ D. Breeze and B. Dobson, *Hadrian's Wall* (1976), 230.

⁵ J. C. Mann, The Northern Frontier after A.D. 369, in *Glasgow Archaeological Journal* (1974), III, 35.

⁶ I. A. Richmond, Roman and Native in the fourth century and after, in I. A. Richmond (ed.), *Roman and Native in North Britain* (1958), 124.

⁷ D. Breeze and B. Dobson (1976), op. cit. 226-27.

⁸ D. Breeze and B. Dobson (1976), op. cit. 170.

⁹ B. Blake, Excavations of Native (Iron Age) sites in Cumberland, 1956-58, in *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society* (1959), LIX, 11-14.

- ¹⁰ N. J. Higham and G. D. B. Jones, Frontiers, Forts and Farmers, in *Archaeological Journal* (1975), CXXXII, 16–53.
- ¹¹ W. H. Manning, Economic influences on land use in the military areas of the Highland Zone during the Roman period, in the J. G. Evans, S. Limbrey and H. Cleere (eds.), *The Effect of Man on the Landscape: the Highland Zone* (1975), 112–16.
- ¹² N. J. Higham, Continuity studies in the First Millennium A.D. in North Cumbria, in *Northern History* (1978), XIV, 6–7.
- ¹³ N. Higham, op. cit. 5, 16.
- ¹⁴ See A. C. Thomas, *A Provisional List of Imported Pottery in Post-Roman Western Britain and Ireland* (1981).
- ¹⁵ A. C. Thomas (1981), op. cit.
- ¹⁶ For example, F. Henry, *The Book of Kells* (1974), 213.
- ¹⁷ C. A. R. Radford, Imported pottery found at Tintagel, Cornwall, in D. B. Harden (ed.), *Dark-Age Britain* (1956), 59–70. A. C. Thomas, Imported pottery in Dark-Age western Britain, in *Medieval Archaeology* (1959), III, 89–111.
- ¹⁸ For example, R. A. C. Lowndes, Allen Knott earthwork, in *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society* (1964), LXIV, 94–97.
- ¹⁹ D. Coggins, K. J. Fairless and C. E. Batey, Simy Folds: An Early Medieval Settlement Site in Upper Teesdale, in *Medieval Archaeology* (1983), XXVII, 1–26.
- ²⁰ H. M. Tinsley and R. T. Smith, Ecological Investigations at a Romano-British earthwork in the Yorkshire Pennines, in *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* (1974), XLIV, 28.
- ²¹ Pers. comm. P. Turnbull, North Yorkshire County Council.
- ²² R. G. Collingwood, Prehistoric settlements near Crosby Ravensworth, in *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society* (1933), XXXIII, 202.
- ²³ See discussion in the writer's thesis, 44–48.
- ²⁴ For the most recent appraisal see A. C. Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to A.D. 500* (1981).
- ²⁵ The writer is grateful to Professor John Mann for discussion on this point.
- ²⁶ A. C. Thomas, The evidence from North Britain, in M. W. Barley and R. P. C. Hanson (eds.), *Christianity in Britain, 300–700* (1968), 115.
- ²⁷ K. H. Jackson, *The Gododdin: the oldest Scottish poem* (1969), 129.
- ²⁸ K. H. Jackson (1969), op. cit. 123.
- ²⁹ Bede, *Vita Sancto Cuthberto*. Ch. xxvii,
- ³⁰ For discussion of date see I. Lovecy, The end of Celtic Britain: a sixth-century battle near Lindisfarne, in *Archaeologia Aeliana*. 5th Series (1976), IV, 31–45.
- ³¹ For discussion of date see K. H. Jackson (1969), op. cit. 11–13.
- ³² F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (3rd edition, 1971), 78; D. P. Kirby, Strathclyde and Cumbria: a survey of historical development to 1092, in *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society*. 2nd series (1962), LXII, 77–92.
- ³³ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*. I:34.
- ³⁴ B. Eagles, *The Anglo-Saxon Settlement of Humberside*. British Archaeological Reports (1979), LXVIII.
- ³⁵ K. H. Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain* (1953), 215–17.
- ³⁶ The writer is currently preparing a study of this material.
- ³⁷ J. Graham-Campbell, The Scandinavian Viking-Age burials of England—some problems of interpretation, in P. Rahtz, T. Dickinson and L. Watts (eds), *Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries 1979*. British Archaeological Reports (1980), LXXXII, 381, draws attention to this point.
- ³⁸ See J. R. Mortimer, *Forty Years Researches in British and Saxon Burial Mounds of East Yorkshire* (1905), 271–97, for close parallels from the cemeteries at Driffield.
- ³⁹ *Inter alia*, G. R. J. Jones, Early territorial organization in England and Wales, in *Geografiska Annaler* (1961), XIII, 174–81; *idem*, Multiple estates and early settlement, in P. H. Sawyer (ed.), *Medieval Settlement: Continuity and Change* (1976), 15–40.
- ⁴⁰ M. Faull, British survival in Anglo-Saxon Northumbria, in *Studies in Celtic Survival*. British Archaeological Reports (1977), XXXVII, 1–56.
- ⁴¹ N. Higham (1979), op. cit.

⁴² W. T. W. Potts, History and blood-groups in the British Isles in P. H. Sawyer (ed.), *Medieval Settlement: Continuity and Change* (1976), 249.

⁴³ E. Sunderland, Comment on 'History and blood-groups in the British Isles' by W. T. W. Potts, loc. cit. 254-61.

⁴⁴ J. E. B. Gover, A. Mawer, and F. M. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Devon*. 2 Vols. (1931-32).

⁴⁵ But there are problems with distinguishing it from *hamm* here: see J. M. Dodgson, Place-names from *hām*, distinguished from *hamm* names, in relation to the settlement of Kent, Surrey and Sussex, in *Anglo-Saxon England* (1973), II, 1-50.

⁴⁶ J. E. B. Gover *et al.* (1931-37), op. cit.

⁴⁷ K. H. Jackson, Angles and Britons in Northumbria and Cumbria, in *Angles and Britons* (O'Donnell lectures, Cardiff, 1963).

⁴⁸ F. Stenton (1971), op. cit. 332.

⁴⁹ A. M. Armstrong *et al.* (1950-52), op. cit. xvii,

⁵⁰ I. H. Hinde (ed.) *Symeonis Dunelmensis Opera et Collectanea*. Vol. I (1868), 141.

⁵¹ Bede, *Vita Sancto Cuthberto*. Ch. xxvii; *Historia Ecclesiastica*. IV:29.

⁵² I. H. Hinde (1868), op. cit. 146.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 141.

⁵⁴ C. D. Morris, Northumbria and the Viking settlement: the evidence for land-holding, in *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 5th Series (1977), v, 91.

⁵⁵ The writer is grateful to Dr R. Bailey for drawing her attention to this point.

⁵⁶ A. C. Thomas (1968), op. cit.

⁵⁷ A. C. Thomas, *The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain* (1971).

⁵⁸ G. R. J. Jones, The multiple estate as a model framework for tracing early stages in the evolution of rural settlement, in *L'habitat et les paysages ruraux d'Europe* (1971), 251-67.

⁵⁹ A. C. Thomas (1971), op. cit.

⁶⁰ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*. III: 14; III: 24.

⁶¹ M. Pocock and H. Wheeler, Excavations at Escomb church, County Durham, in *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*. 3rd Series (1971), xxxiv, 11-19; B. H. Gill, Excavations at St John, Escomb, Co. Durham, in *Universities of Durham and Newcastle-upon-Tyne Archaeological Reports* (1979), III, 15-16.

⁶² Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*. IV: 32.

⁶³ See D. M. O'Sullivan, Curvilinear churchyards in Cumbria, in *Bulletin of the C.B.A. Churches Committee*. No. 13 (December 1980), 3-5, for summary discussion.



Plate III The 10th-century tower of Morland Church, in the Eden valley south of Penrith, is the most complete example of Anglo-Saxon church architecture in north-west England.

Plate IV Fell Foot, Little Langdale. The earthwork in the foreground, adjoining the farm, has not been excavated; its terraced shape has led some, however, to suggest a 'thingmount' site from the period of Norse settlement.

