

BRYANT'S GILL, KENTMERE: ANOTHER 'VIKING-PERIOD' RIBBLEHEAD?

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The archaeology of Scandinavian Cumbria has a certain elusive quality. The obvious evidence sparkles, but behind the immediate attractions of the military equipment, brooches and sculpture, behind the evocative imagery of Viking incursions and place-names — where is the 'testimony of the spade'? Must the subject always consist of speculative discursions upon problems made intractable by the lack of systematic, intensive fieldwork?

The archaeologist's first response must be to define the key issue. Any attempt to explore Scandinavian settlement and land use in Cumbria must not ignore the total evaluation of human organisation and landscape change in the region, a chicken-and-egg paradox that is usually resolved by the categorisation of archaeological and environmental evidence diagnosed as characteristic of certain types, time zones or periods. Such a reductionist line of enquiry begs more questions. How reliable or valid is the evidence? How was it obtained? Into what kind of framework does it fit? Is it indeed *proper* to order the enquiry in this particular way? Dissatisfaction with frameworks, with patchy or incomplete evidence and with traditional classificatory systems may lead to the design of a fieldwork programme which can test archaeological data in a more rigorous way.¹ Such programmes require long-term commitment, however, and they are unfortunately not common given most present modes of archaeological funding and strategy orientation.

KENTMERE

Kentmere is a valley in South Cumbria which, from superficial ground indications, from documentary evidence and past discoveries, holds a wealth of archaeological evidence spanning four millenia [Figs.6.1; 6.2]. For example, there are well-preserved enclosed settlements, supposedly of a 'native' or 'Romano-British' type, at Millriggs² and Tongue House Barn.³ There are two 'Viking-type' spearheads from the valley.⁴ An 'extended' log boat, dated to 650 ± 120 BP, was found in 1955 in the peat-forming part of the bed of Kentmere Lake.⁵ Ancient micro-landscapes of house platforms, field systems and farm buildings at Kentmere Hall and Stile End offer inspiration to archaeologists used to decoding ploughed-out palimpsests from air photographs. Field- and

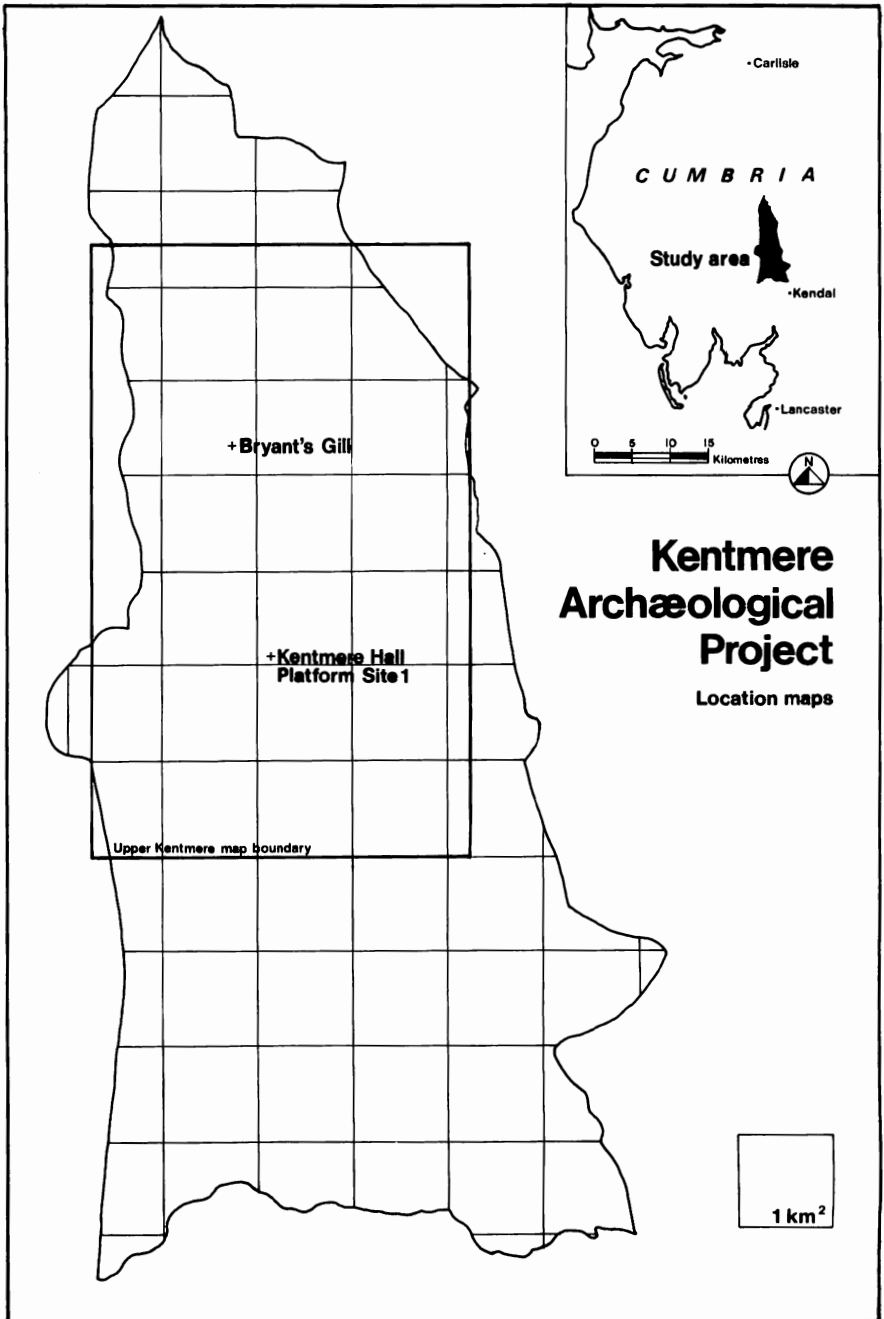


Fig. 6.1 Kentmere location maps.

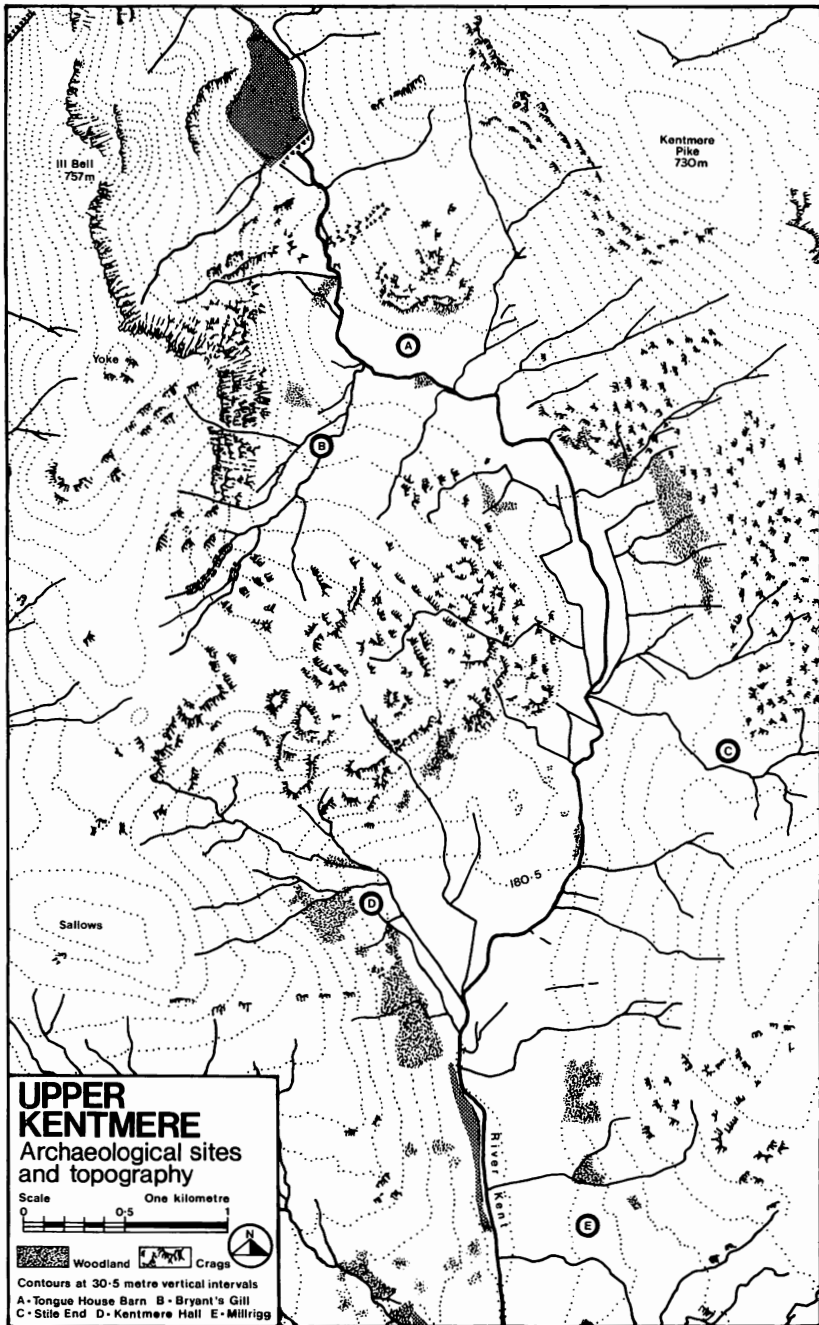


Fig. 6.2 Upper Kentmere archaeological sites.

place-names hint at a wide chronological span of occupation. The valley is geographically a self-contained unit, with both 'upland' and 'lowland' environments and farmed landscapes.

It is in Kentmere, therefore, that conditions seem appropriate for a rigorous study. The survival of evidence suggests an academically or scientifically profitable set of results. The problem-orientation and methodology of the enquiry are equally important — but the laboratory is ideal.

BRYANT'S GILL

In 1981 a pilot excavation was run at a site on the north bank of Bryant's Gill, 290 m up in the north-western fells of Kentmere. After two more largely voluntary seasons, this operation expanded into a fourteen month intensive fieldwork programme with fourteen staff funded by the Manpower Services Commission, managed by Cumbria County Council and sponsored by SEARCH, a South Lakeland voluntary archaeology group.

The Kentmere Archaeological Project (KAP) developed three main enquiries in its first funded year. First, a detailed study of settlement sites by survey and excavation. Second, a valley survey aimed at recording in minute detail all archaeological features in a sample of a 53 km² study area. Third, an oral history recording and documentary research study. As the project is still proceeding, this must be regarded as an interim statement and one restricted to its first enquiry theme. The overall aim, however, is to examine all aspects of human and landscape evolution in the valley in order to enable a holistic assessment to be made of Kentmere's archaeology.

The main excavation at Bryant's Gill is now near completion. The site is at the hub of a 20 ha field system⁶ located in a hanging valley above the main upper Kent valley. Stripping of 500 m² has revealed a host of structural remains including wall footings, paved areas and post-holes/trenches. The soils are shallow and acidic; nevertheless they retain a complexity of horizontal and vertical stratigraphy.

The most distinctive artificial feature on the site is the remains of a 10 m long building aligned NW-SE. This is 5 m wide at its south-east end, where there is an entrance facing the beck. Running along the spine of this building is a strip of paving approximately 1 m wide, of at least three types of construction [Plate VIII]. Two types of paving are associated with a series of post holes and a post trench on their north-east and south-west sides. Charcoal from a context within this structure containing iron slag, two shale spindle whorls [Plate IX] and a broken whetstone, has yielded a radiocarbon date of AD700 ± 80 (Harwell 5944, uncalibrated).⁷

The finds from Bryant's Gill include eight lathe-turned shale spindle whorls, over twenty whetstones/hones, various iron artefacts, (including horseshoe fragments, a knife and an auger), iron slag and a number of worked flints. Thousands of charcoal fragments from the 300-plus contexts on site have been collected and recorded to provide an adequate



Plate VIII Paving of at least three types at Bryant's Gill, Kentmere (1m. scale: from north-west).

Plate IX Shale, lathe-turned spindle whorl (SFA46) from Bryant's Gill, Kentmere.

selection for further radiocarbon dating; 33% of all soil removed from the site has been sieved to provide an adequate sample for find recovery; and pollen analysis is to be carried out on a peat core taken from a bog in a hollow 200 m east of the site, to give some indications of past flora in the vicinity.

From a preliminary assessment of its archaeology and location, Bryant's Gill seems to fall into the same class of early medieval upland settlements as those at Ribbleshead, North Yorkshire,⁸ and Simy Folds, Upper Teesdale.⁹ But does this actually help place Bryant's Gill in a legitimate social and economic context, or is it a reductionist red herring? As the archaeological evidence has not yet been fully analysed, it would be unwise to attempt an answer. Certainly the paucity of organic remains (as at the other two sites mentioned) leaves part of the picture incomplete. There is also the danger of an approach weighted in favour of one particular class of settlement data, leaving a biased conception of what in reality is a far more complex phenomenon. Complexity in archaeology is not a problem — rather the way that complexity is analysed. Ways to tackle this need to be devised before the archaeology of Scandinavian settlement in Cumbria can be defined and resolved.

Notes

¹ As suggested by C. D. Morris, *The Vikings in the British Isles: Some aspects of their settlement and economy*, in R. J. Farrell (ed.), *The Vikings* (1982) 89.

² R.C.H.M. *Westmorland* (1936) 129–31.

³ W. M. Inglesfield, A second settlement found at Kentmere, in *CWAAS Transactions* (1972) series 2, LXXII. 320–24.

⁴ One published by C. I. Fell, A Viking spearhead from Kentmere, in *CWAAS Transactions* (1957) series 2, LVI. 67–69.

⁵ D. M. Wilson, A Medieval Boat from Kentmere, Westmorland, in *Medieval Archaeology* (1966) 10. 81–88.

⁶ C. I. Fell, Bryant's Gill, Kentmere, in Council for British Archaeology Regional Group 3 *Newsbulletin* (1974) 8. p. 4.

⁷ Funded by the Lake District Special Planning Board.

⁸ A. King, Gauber high pasture, Ribbleshead — an interim report, in R. A. Hall (ed.) *Viking Age York and the north* (1978) 21–25.

⁹ D. Coggins, K. J. Fairless, and C. E. Batey, Simy Folds: An Early Medieval Settlement Site in Upper Teesdale, Co. Durham, in *Medieval Archaeology* (1983) 28. 1–26.