

Bamburgh ossuary & the Anglo-Saxon context

Jessica Turner, Project Officer in the Northumberland Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty that stretches for 52km from Spittal to Amble, gave a fascinating talk. An ossuary is defined as a place for the storage of bones: it could be a room or just a box, and is also known as a charnel house. It is normally housed in a building close to but often set apart from a church. There are many such places throughout Europe but very few in the UK.

It was Catholic practice that a priest or monk would be called to pray for the safe passage of the soul to heaven once the flesh has left the bones. This would have been too expensive for most individuals' families, but when the bones of a number of people were collected together in an ossuary the cost could be shared. After Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries in 1537, this tradition ceased in the UK which is why ossuaries are so unusual here. There are two surviving major charnel houses in this country, one in St Leonard's, Kent and another in Northamptonshire.

Prior to c. 800 AD the dead were usually buried alongside roads outside the towns and villages, but then it was decreed that bodies should be buried on consecrated ground. Limiting the space available in this way meant that over time older bones would need to be disinterred to make way for new burials. The disinterred bones, or at least the femur and skull, would be stored in a charnel house or ossuary.

An old map of Bamburgh shows a 'Danish' graveyard and Bowl Hole amongst the dunes adjacent to Bamburgh Castle. In 1837 a massive storm exposed a number of bones, and later excavations revealed a number of skeletons buried on an east-west alignment with no grave goods – indicating classic Christian burials. Over a period of 8 years 110 identifiable skeletons were excavated and it was possible in some cases to determine the occupation and likely cause of death. The skeletons were radio-carbon dated to between 650 and 750 AD, when Bamburgh was the cosmopolitan, spiritual centre of the great Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria.

Isotope analysis revealed that the skeletons are those of men, women and children, of different ages and origins: some are Scandinavian, mainly males who may well have been Vikings; some grew up as far away as North Africa and the Mediterranean; some came from Ireland; and others came from Iona and may well have travelled with St Aidan who brought Christianity to Northumbria. Just a few came from the local area, showing that people travelled far and wide even in the 7th century. It seems most likely that these people served in the royal court at the castle, so many of them could have been part of Aidan's congregation and heard him preach. This period is often referred to as the Dark Ages, but in Northumbria it was an age of enlightenment, reflected in the production of the Lindisfarne Gospels.

St Aidan's church in Bamburgh is dedicated to Aidan, the founder of Lindisfarne Priory who also founded the first church on the site in the year 635. After the excavation, the bones were largely forgotten in a cupboard in Bamburgh Castle. They were rediscovered in 2016 and it was

decided to place them to St Aidan's church in the unused crypt, which had long since been closed to the public. With the help of a large National Lottery grant the crypt was restored, access made safe, and the skeletons packed into individual boxes on purpose-built shelves in a section of the crypt separated off by a wrought iron gate, designed and made by a local craftsman, and through which the boxes are visible.

An elaborate, very well-attended funeral ceremony took place when the boxes were brought from the castle and placed in part of the crypt.

The crypt is now open to the public and is easily accessible from outside the church. A short video presentation telling the story of the excavations can also be watched inside the crypt. Also, a wide range of interpretation and information boards are to be found at the back of the church for the enlightenment of visitors.

Further information is available free of charge on the website www.bamburghbones.org.