

THE VIKINGS IN ORKNEY

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Introduction

In recent years, it has been suggested that the first permanent Scandinavian presence in Orkney was not the result of forcible land-taking by Vikings, but came about instead through gradual penetration — a period which has been described as one of ‘informal’ settlement (Morris 1985: 213; 1998: 83). Such would have involved a phase of co-existence, or even integration, between the native Picts and the earliest Norse settlers. This initial period, it is supposed, was then followed by ‘a second, formal, settlement associated with the establishment of an earldom’ (Morris 1998: 83), in the late 9th century. The archaeological evidence advanced in support of the first ‘period of overlap’ is, however, open to alternative interpretation and, indeed, Alfred Smyth has commented (1984: 145), in relation to the annalistic records of the earliest Viking attacks on Ireland, that these ‘strongly suggest that the Norwegians did not gradually infiltrate the Northern Isles as farmers and fisherman and then suddenly turn nasty against their neighbours’.

Others have supposed that the first phase of Norse settlement in Orkney would have involved, in the words of Buteux (1997: 263):

‘ness-taking’ (the fortifying of a headland by means of a cross-dyke) and the occupation of small off-shore islands. Crawford (1987: 46) argues that headland dykes on Orkney can be interpreted as indicating ness-taking. However many are equally likely to be prehistoric land boundaries, and no bases on either headlands or small islands have yet been positively identified.

Buteux continues his discussion by observing, most pertinently, that:

While this can not be taken as suggesting that such sites do not remain to be uncovered, the striking fact is that almost all identified Viking-period settlements in the Northern Isles are found overlying or immediately adjacent to sites which were occupied in the preceding Pictish period and which, furthermore, had frequently been settlements of some size and importance.

Buteux (1997: 262) has therefore advanced the hypothesis of a three-stage process for the Norse settlement of Orkney; one which has much to commend it in the present state of our knowledge. This comprises:

a ‘pioneer stage’ of contact, raiding and trade, with perhaps some settlement or establishment of winter bases, but still in a land otherwise Pictish; a ‘consolidation stage’, where more permanent settlements become established but much in the way of Pictish culture and institutions survive, and finally an ‘establishment stage’ during which virtually all Pictish culture and institutions are swept away and replaced by those of wholly Norse character.

The second or ‘consolidation’ stage, which was under way in the mid-9th century, marks the turning-point in this process, with the displacement by the Norse of the Pictish aristocracy and the take-over of their well-placed estates, together with their Pictish workforces. It must be remembered, however, that even if the final ‘establishment’ stage resulted in the Picts of Orkney being ‘overwhelmed politically, linguistically, culturally and socially’ (Wainwright 1962: 162), there is possible evidence for the limited survival of the Pictish Church in the Norse naming of Papa Stronsay and Papa Westray after ‘priests’ (*papar*) — islands on which no pagan Norse burials have yet been found (see also Hunter, below, pp. 162-173).

The archaeological evidence¹

Together, the archaeological and linguistic evidence demonstrates the overwhelming nature of the Scandinavian impact on Orkney during the Viking period (9th to 11th centuries AD). In fact, the quantity and quality of the former is such that it constitutes the greater part of all that is known of the Viking period archaeology in the whole of Scandinavian Scotland, but then the Norse earldom of Orkney enjoyed a particularly prominent position in its political and economic affairs. For instance, the Orkney archipelago boasts the largest concentration of pagan Norse graves in Scotland, including several cemeteries of varying sizes, the most notable of which was that situated beside the Bay of Pierowall on Westray.

The Pierowall cemetery, Westray

The Bay of Pierowall, at the northern end of Westray, is the best harbour in the north of Orkney, lying on the route to and from Shetland, and other points north. Pierowall is to be identified with the appropriately named *Höfn* or ‘Haven’, mentioned in *Orkneyinga saga*, where there was said to be a *þorp* in the 12th century, a settlement presumed to be akin to a village.

The earliest account of the Pierowall cemetery is that written by James Wallace (who died in 1688) for his *Description of the Isles of Orkney*, first published in 1693:

Likewise in the links of *Tranabie*, in *Westra*, have been found graves in the sand, (after the sand hath been blown away with the wind) in one of which was seen a man lying with his sword on the one hand, and a *Daneish* ax on the other, and others that have had dogs, and combs and knives buried with them, which seems to be an instance of the way how the *Danes* (when they were in this Country) buried their dead.

Here then is a clear description of the discovery of pagan Norse burials, even if

1. The archaeological evidence for the Viking period in Orkney is more fully surveyed in Graham-Campbell and Batey (1998), where detailed references may also be found.

Wallace mistakenly attributed them to a Danish presence in Scotland, but such was the prevailing view in his time.

The eroding dunes continued to bring burials to light and during the 19th century the local surgeon, William Rendall, investigated at least 15 graves, mostly in the 1840s. George Petrie, the distinguished Orkney antiquarian, investigated a burial, in 1841, in the sand at Gill (on the north side of the bay) and the English MP, James Farrer, discovered another two, in 1855 and 1863, on the latter occasion working together with Petrie. There appears to be no record of any subsequent find.

The pagan Norse graves from the Links of Pierowall form the largest such concentration to have been identified in Scandinavian Scotland, even though there is considerable uncertainty as to both their number and their contents. The cemetery, however, apparently covered a considerable area in which there would seem to have been several separate groupings of burials. This suggests that it was most probably in use by a number of different families, although burial location may of course have changed through time. There is evidence of both boat-burial and horse-burial, with a wide range of grave-goods, so that it is possible to derive some impression at least of the prosperity of the Norse population on Westray, which would have been based in part, at any rate, on the safe haven provided for sea traffic by its harbour.

Evidence for a second pagan Norse cemetery on Westray is contained in the *New Statistical Account* (1841), which refers to 'the number of graves found in two extensive fields, one in the north and the other in the south of Westray', both of which had produced 'swords' and 'articles of dress'. Circumstantial evidence suggests that this southern cemetery may have been on the Links of Tuquoy and thus not far distant from the eroding Late Norse and medieval farm/church site, with some indications of earlier features, which has been partially investigated by Olwyn Owen (see below, pp. 139-145).

The Westness cemetery, Rousay

The pagan Norse cemetery at Westness, on Rousay, shows continuity of use from its Pictish predecessor and includes two 9th-century boat-burials of well-equipped Vikings, as well as the richest grave of a Norse woman yet excavated in Scotland. This cemetery is situated on the headland of Moa Ness, beside the Bay of Swandro, where Sigrid Kaland has also excavated a Late Norse farmstead, as well as a noust on the opposite side of the headland to the cemetery. In addition, a sword is known from one or more graves which were found in the 19th century, in a field beside the Knowe of Swandro, near the excavated farm buildings.

The cemetery on Moa Ness was discovered by chance in 1963 when the burial of a dead cow disturbed a richly furnished female grave. On further investigation, this proved to have contained a woman who appears to have



Fig. 1. Ornaments and implements from the rich female burial found in 1963 in the pagan Norse cemetery at Westness, Rousay. Copyright: Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland.

died in childbirth, accompanied by a fine selection of ornaments and other objects from her daily life, such as a comb (Fig. 1). There is a pair of Scandinavian oval brooches of 9th-century date and a necklace of 40 assorted beads; an Irish brooch-pin of silver and gold dates back to the 8th century and a pair of Anglo-Saxon strap-ends presumably clasped the ends of her girdle. In addition, she was buried with various tools, including a sickle, heckles, shears and a weaving sword, with a bronze basin placed at her feet.

The remaining graves were excavated by the Norwegian archaeologist, Sigrid Kaland, who established by radiocarbon dating that the cemetery had been in use from the 7th to the 9th/10th century (Sellevold 1999: table 1), so that the earliest graves (which were unaccompanied) are those of the native Pictish population. It proved to have contained 32 graves in all, of which a further seven were pagan Norse burials, identifiable as such by their grave-goods. Two of these were boat-burials, each containing the remains of a small clinker-built vessel in which an armed man had been laid. In addition, there were some oval slab-lined graves which were used for both men and women, buried together with a variety of weapons, tools and ornaments.

There is thus ample burial evidence from beside the Bay of Swandro for there having been a Viking period settlement in the immediate vicinity, even if

only its Late Norse successor has been identified to date — in which context it is worth recalling that Westness features in *Orkneyinga saga* because Earl Paul was staying with Sigurd of Westness when he was kidnapped in 1136 while otter-hunting.

The Sanday burials

Several pagan Norse burials are known from the fertile island of Sanday, but with one exception these are old and poorly-recorded finds. The exception is of course the well-known boat-burial from Scar which contained three bodies: those of an elderly woman, a man and a child (Owen and Dalland 1999; see also below, pp. 145-157). Another boat-grave may have been found at South Mires, in the 1790s, containing a sword, spear and shield, but the weapons are lost and the find is known only from a single reference.

The small Viking-period cemetery on the Ness of Brough has recently been re-investigated by the BBC's 'Time Team', but amongst other burials recorded in the 19th century are two which were found at or near the 'Broch of Lamaness'. This is identified as the headland of Lamba Ness across the bay from the Norse settlement at Pool, excavated by John Hunter, where the incoming Vikings established themselves on the site of a Pictish farmstead. The first Lamba Ness burial was found in 1878 and is that of a man buried with sword, spear and axe, as well as 'the remnant of a helmet' which 'crumbled into dust', the latter presumably having been the iron boss from his shield. The other burial is of particular interest in being a cremation: a 'deposit of burnt bones was found about the centre of a mound', together with a pair of oval brooches, a bronze ringed-pin, a lignite arm-ring and an amber bead.

Orkney Mainland

In general, however, there is a lack of primary Norse burials associated with settlement-sites which would help to illuminate the initial stage of Scandinavian land-taking. Such, for instance, is a disappointing gap in our knowledge of Birsay Bay, despite all the archaeological activity which has taken place there since the 1930s. Pictish, Viking and Late Norse structures, middens and burials are strung out around this fine bay, focusing on the small tidal island known as the Brough of Birsay, which historical evidence implies was an earldom seat, although this seems to have subsequently been transferred to the mainland and the site of the modern village on Birsay Bay.

There are no pagan Norse graves known from the Brough of Birsay itself and thus no apparent continuity of burial there from the Pictish period. There are, however, a few mounds of uncertain date on the headland opposite and a single 10th-century inhumation has been excavated at the nearby site of Buckquoy, from the top of a settlement-mound. Some further burials have been excavated by Christopher Morris immediately to the south in the Red Craig area

(Brough Road site). Finally, in the village of Birsay, a cist-grave containing just a bronze ringed-pin eroded out on the shore in the 19th century, by St Magnus church; the pin belongs to a popular Hiberno-Norse type which was in use from the 10th to the mid-11th century, so that this was most probably a Christian burial. The first bishop's seat on Orkney was established at Birsay by Earl Thorfinn, in about 1050, and some excavated evidence from below the present church suggests that his seat may well have been here, on the site of the modern village, rather than on the Brough itself.

At Buckquoy, the grave was dug into the mound created by a build-up of settlement from the Pictish to Viking periods, the latter consisting of a two-phase Norse farmstead. It should, however, be noted that Graham-Campbell and Batey have recently suggested (1998: 161) that the primary phase of Norse settlement appears to involve the reconstruction of a hitherto unrecognised final phase of the Pictish farmstead. The plough-damaged burial was that of a man, aged 'in excess of 40 years', who had been placed in a crouched position, accompanied by a few grave-goods, including a bronze ringed-pin (of the same type as that from the grave in the village) and a cut silver half-penny of the Anglo-Saxon king, Eadmund (939-46).

The Brough of Birsay carries a palimpsest of structures, both secular and ecclesiastical, which together make the Brough a site of exceptional importance,



Fig. 2. A selection of rings and brooches from the Skaill hoard. Copyright: Trustees of the National Museum of Scotland.

however atypical, for our knowledge of Orkney's position in Scandinavian Scotland. The finds are rich and varied, including imports from Scandinavia, the Irish Sea region and Anglo-Saxon England.

The other major bay on the west coast is the Bay of Skail where a handful of ill-recorded Norse graves has been found, as well as a couple of fragmentary rune stones. One of the better documented burials, found in the 19th century, is that of a man in a cist-grave, covered with a simple cairn, which was located once again on the top of a settlement-mound, now eroding into the sea.

Two long-cist burials were encountered by Gordon Childe during his excavation of Skara Brae, both of which he described as 'intrusive'. Neither burial contained any grave-goods, but Childe (1931: 60) argued that the north-south orientation of the one intact skeleton was 'in favour of a pre-Christian date'. However, an apparently isolated long-cist burial, oriented NNW-SSE, at Sandside on Graemsay, has been radiocarbon dated to the calibrated range of AD 960-1300, so a Late Norse date for the Skara Brae graves is another possibility.

No farmstead has yet been discovered at Skail to match its primary Norse settlement name (*skáli*), although had it been situated by the shore it might well have been eroded by the sea in the manner of the settlement mound mentioned above. Skail is, however, the find-place of the largest silver hoard known from the Viking period in Scotland, containing over 8kg of brooches, rings, coins and hack-silver, which was buried about 950-70 (Fig. 2).

On the east coast the site of another Skail, in the parish of Deerness, was partially excavated by Peter Gelling who found that the Norse had settled on the site of a native Pictish farm, although Buteux (1997: 263) has re-appraised Gelling's belief that the Pictish-Norse transition at Skail represented a 'clean break' in favour of the 'take-over' model of an on-going farm, as described above.

Another site which had been in native occupation for many centuries by the period of Scandinavian settlement is that of the Brough of Gurness, at Aikerness, where a number of pagan Norse graves must have been located in and around the settlement-mound, although with one exception, that of a woman wearing oval brooches and an amuletic iron neck-ring of central Swedish type; these had been badly disturbed. Near to Gurness is Tingwall, one of Orkney's *bing*-names denoting a Norse assembly-place (Fellows-Jensen 1996).

It has been proposed that before Maes Howe was entered in the 12th century, by the runic graffiti-carving 'Jerusalem-farers', it had been re-used for the burial of a Viking warrior. There is, however, no direct evidence with which to support this suggestion, although burnt material from turf within a rebuild of its encircling bank has been radiocarbon dated to the Viking period. The reason for this rebuild is unknown (as is its actual date), but the possibility exists that the great mound was chosen for use either as a pagan cult-place or as a meeting-place for the general *bing*, given its central location.

Finally, from amongst the handful of other Viking period graves known from Orkney Mainland, it is worth mentioning two burials from individual mounds at Stenness and Sandwick, both of which contained only a ringed-pin. If not actually Christian, these graves presumably belong to the period when the use of grave-goods was in decline.

Conversion

None of the pagan Norse graves in Orkney appears to date any earlier than the mid-9th century and amongst the latest of these graves will be that at Buckquoy which contained a cut half-penny of Eadmund (939-46). It seems therefore that pagan burial, with grave-goods, lasted for a period of no more than about 100 years, but the practice was doubtless abandoned by people in different parts of the islands at different times. Indeed, there are good reasons to suppose that the tradition of Christianity continued unbroken in Orkney (see Hunter below, pp. 161-175) despite the paganism of the Norse ruling élite which supposedly lasted until the conversion of Earl Sigurd in 995.

Christian Norse burials are as difficult to recognize in Orkney as elsewhere, given the lack of grave-goods. At the broch-site of Saevar Howe, on the Bay of Birsay, there is a Christian long-cist cemetery thought to date to the later Viking period, as the graves are superimposed on some Viking period dwellings. Other broch-sites which were also used for unaccompanied burials, include the Broch of Burgar, Evie, which had also served as the hiding-place for a remarkable (lost) Pictish treasure of silver vessels, ornaments and amber beads, buried at about the time of the first Viking raids on Britain and Ireland (Graham-Campbell 1985).

Further evidence for Christian burial takes the form of runestone memorials from the Brough of Birsay and Tuquoy, as well as such grave-markers as the 11th/12th-century hogback stones of which four are known from Orkney Mainland: Kirkwall (2), Skaill in Deerness parish, and a lost stone from the parish of Rendall (likened to that from Skaill). A 12th-century hogback descendant, or 'kindred monument', is preserved in the graveyard of the church of St Boniface on Papa Westray.

Treasure

The splendid 10th-century treasure from Skaill Bay has been mentioned above as the largest on record from Viking period Scotland (Fig. 2), but Orkney also boasts the second heaviest such silver hoard, that found on Burray in 1889. This contained about 2kg of silver, which was buried c.997-1010, part in an alderwood vessel. The Burray hoard consists chiefly of plain penannular arm-rings and fragments of the standardised type known as 'ring-money'. Such rings form the normal contents, with or without coins, of the later 10th- and

11th-century hoards from Scandinavian Scotland, including two other Orkney treasures: the oldest such find on record, dug up before 1688 and long since lost, which consisted of nine rings from a mound beside the Ring of Brodgar; and that found at Caldale in 1774 which was deposited c. 1032-40.

Other Viking period finds of precious metal from Orkney include four gold finger-rings from Stenness and a couple of (lost) gold arm-rings from the Broch of Bugar.

The six Orkney hoards, together with the single-finds of coins (nine in all) and some other pieces of silver and gold (all of which are fully described in Graham-Campbell 1995), represent by far the largest concentration of such wealth in any part of Scandinavian Scotland. It is scarcely surprising therefore to find that the earldom had the resources in the Late Norse period to invest in stone architecture. Both major secular and ecclesiastical buildings were being erected in the 12th century, the most notable of course being the great Romanesque cathedral which was begun by Earl Rognvald in 1137, to house the relics of St Magnus and to provide a new seat for the Orkney bishopric in what was then the developing market-centre of Kirkwall.

Conclusion

The quantity of archaeological evidence for the Viking and Late Norse periods in Orkney, including that of the runic inscriptions (see Barnes above, pp. 4-17), dominates our knowledge of this material from Scandinavian Scotland. Yet, even so, it is lacking in numerous respects. For instance, it is clear that the Mainland is currently under-represented in the archaeological record in terms of pagan Norse burials.

Other problems encountered in the interpretation of the Orkney evidence include the high-status nature of the majority of excavated settlement sites, as well as the lack of an overall geographical coverage. In consequence, it must be emphasized that it is still not possible to present anything other than the most generalized picture of 'this formative and dynamic period in Orkney's history, when its strategic position on the northern sea-routes, combined with its natural resources, enabled it to develop into a centre of considerable political and economic standing' (Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998: 62).

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