

Fig. 1. The location of the site at Tuquoy.

## CURIOUSER AND CURIOUSER: MYSTERIES OF TUQUOY AND SCAR

Olwyn Owen

It has become something of a cliché that being an archaeologist is like being a detective — except that there is no possibility of a signed confession. Archaeology is an inexact science which provides only tantalising glimpses into the lives of our ancestors, and sometimes keeps us guessing despite the most advanced scientific techniques. This paper takes the example of two recent projects in Orkney — Tuquoy, Westray, and Scar, Sanday — both of which offered a plethora of new information and finds, new insights and more than a few surprises; but both of which have continued to challenge our deductive powers.

### **Tuquoy**

*(Or the case of the nameless site with the jumbled walls, the upside-down runic inscription and the waterlogged pit on the beach)*

It was in 1982 that we first began to investigate a jumble of walls erupting from the sandy sea-eroded section at Tuquoy, Westray (Fig. 1). At first, they made little sense at all. Standing on the beach, it was not even clear whether they were internal or external wall faces and, therefore, whether most of the buildings they represented had already been lost to the sea — or not (Fig. 2). The 1982/3 excavations comprised a large trial trench located immediately behind the main walls visible in section (Owen 1982; 1983; 1993: 326-9). Removal of the turf



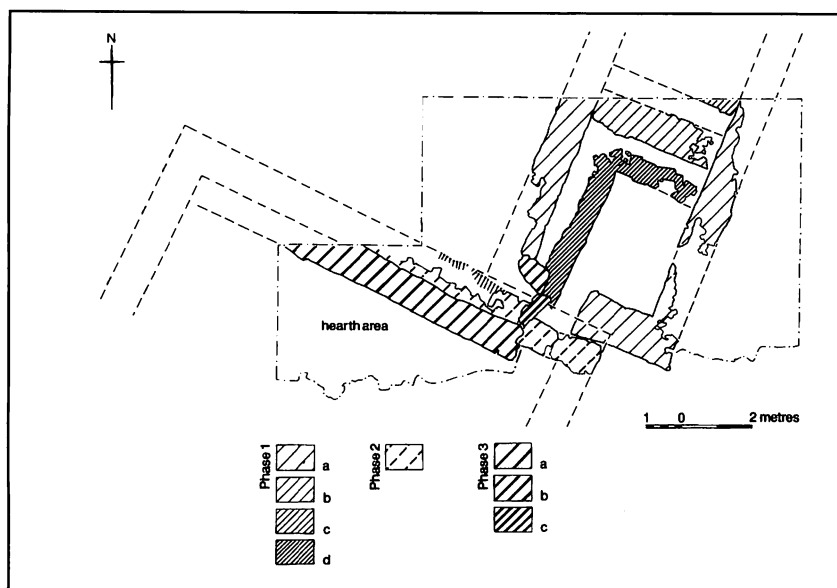
Fig. 2. The jumble of walls erupting from the sea-eroded section, viewed from the beach.



**Fig. 3. The Tuquoy hall.**

revealed a mass of masonry, even more puzzling than that along the cliff edge; but eventually, various discrete structures and phases were disentangled. The most significant building was a probably 12<sup>th</sup>-century, rectangular stone-built hall, its exterior lime plastered (Fig. 3). Its full length was not revealed, but it was a large building with minimum internal dimensions of 6.65 x 3.75m, within walls 1m thick, broadening to 1.42m at the seaward-facing entrance, and was clearly intended as a statement of power and wealth. It would bear comparison with Kolbein Hruga's Castle on Wyre (Marwick 1928; RCAHMS 1946: ii, no. 619, 235-9), except that the once-splendid hall at Tuquoy, despite its obvious high status, was literally built on sand. This fatally flawed building cannot have fulfilled its original purpose for long and was partitioned on at least three different occasions, becoming progressively smaller as parts of the hall were abandoned (Fig. 4).

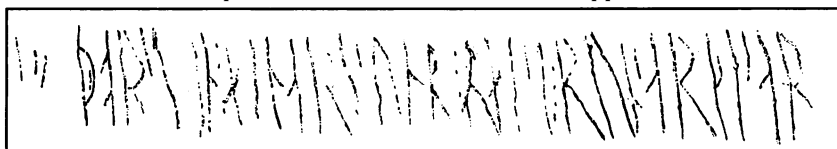
The aspirational patron and builders of the hall were evidently unfamiliar with basic principles of monumental architecture, although these skills were available in abundance in 12<sup>th</sup>-century Orkney: St Magnus Cathedral, as well as Kolbein Hruga's Castle and, probably, The Wirk at Westness, Rousay (Clouston 1931: 27-33; RCAHMS 1946: ii, 550, 191-2), were being erected at about the same time. At Tuquoy itself, the elegant Cross Kirk (Owen 1993: 321-4, Fig. 18.2) was built immediately adjacent to the settlement at around the same time and still stands today; some structural weaknesses are evident here too, but it was clearly much better built than the hall. It is not known why the hall was not fully dismantled and re-built once its structural inadequacy had become clear, but was allowed to stand as a monument to architectural failure. Neither is there any



**Fig. 4. The late Norse hall and other buildings.**

evidence that another hall or potentially defensive structure was erected in its stead, although much of the site remains unexcavated. Perhaps the contemporary inhabitants found they had less use for a grandiose building, in which a wealthy and powerful family might have expected to entertain important guests, than they at first envisaged — or hoped. Another large rectangular building was erected immediately adjacent, also on sand, but was used for entirely different purposes, notably smithing. Its walls, too, had to be re-built; but this time, at last, the new walls were built on the old wall bases which proved a more durable foundation (see Fig. 4, Phases 2-3).

By the time of the final use of the original hall, perhaps for informal storage, it must have been very dilapidated and had probably partly collapsed. Built into the latest partition wall was a distinctive triangular slab, laid flat; and along its exposed narrow edge was a series of finely incised lines, only visible on close inspection, which proved to be a rare discovery of a complete runic inscription (Fig. 5). As found, the inscription was upside-down showing that the stone had been re-used in this position, and it is reasonable to suppose that the slab was



**Fig. 5. A drawing of the runic inscription.**

originally built into the hall. Perhaps this message from the past might hold the answer as to who was the owner and builder of the hall?

Amidst great excitement, we began to read the runes and were able to recognise the last two words as *runar þesar*, meaning ‘these runes’, and, from that, the word before them as *ræist*, or ‘carved’; so, ‘[somebody] carved these runes’, a typical formulaic ending to many inscriptions in Scandinavia. All that was needed now was the name. The stone was carefully loaded into a land rover and driven from Orkney to a laboratory in Durham University, where, with the help of a fabulous array of differential lighting, magnifying lenses and the expertise of John McKinnell, finally we had our answer. The stone says: *þorsteinn æinarssunr ræist runar þesar*, ‘Thorsteinn Einarsson carved these runes’.

Analysis of the inscription has yielded much of interest (Owen and McKinnell 1989). It is written in the usual Norwegian variant of the *fupork*, but some individual rune forms suggest that it was carved by an inexperienced runesmith. The formula and spelling are exactly paralleled in inscription XXII in Maes Howe, dating probably from the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century, which may have been carved by one of the men who set out on crusade from Orkney in 1151 and returned in 1153-4. Unfortunately, however, it has not proved possible to identify this Thorsteinn Einarsson anywhere else — we have no idea who he was. A Thorsteinn Einarsson, who was a north-Icelandic chieftain nicknamed ‘the unjust’, is mentioned in two Icelandic sagas, but there is no reason to connect him with Tuquoy. The Tuquoy inscription seems to be no more than a casual graffito — a Viking version of ‘Kilroy was here’.

It is not only the owner of the hall that remains anonymous: the name of the site itself is also something of a mystery. ‘Tuquoy’ is of course a secondary Norse name (from *kví*: a sheepfold), now belonging to a modern farm some 800 metres north of the site. The name of the excavated settlement has been lost in the mists of time, although it was undoubtedly the centre of a large private estate by at least the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Thomson 1990).

The main source of information about 12<sup>th</sup>-century Orkney is *Orkneyinga saga* (Taylor 1938), which gives an insight into the tangled politics of Westray because of that island’s strategic importance: this was after all the momentous period when the great Rognvald came from Norway via Shetland, in 1136, to challenge Paul for the earldom (*OS*: ch. 65-73). The saga tells of three powerful chieftains in Westray at that time: Helgi, who was based at Pierowall; Kugi, at Rapness; and then there was the overbearing Thorkel Flettir (‘the Flayer’) and his son, the unpopular Haflidi — but the saga does not say where they lived. One possibility must be that the site at Tuquoy, obviously a centre of wealth with its elegant church and hall, was Thorkel and Haflidi’s home, although the danger of over-reliance on saga evidence scarcely needs repetition here.

At Tuquoy, archaeological remains literally pour out of the cliff west of the churchyard wall, over a length of more than 100 metres (Owen 1993: 324-6, Fig.



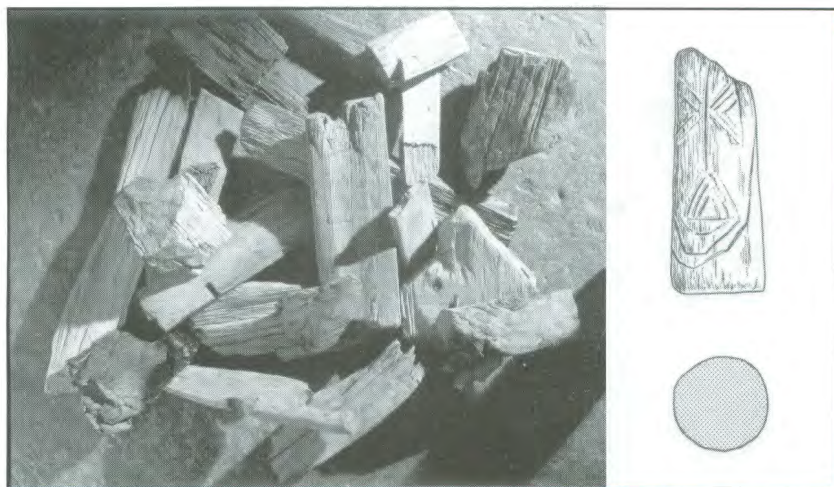


**Fig. 6. Digging the pit on the beach.**

18.3). In a further field season in 1988, therefore, the archaeological aims were to determine the full extent of the surviving site by a systematic programme of coring inland; and to clean, record and sample the section vertically along its whole length, to provide a two-dimensional view right through this important site (Owen 1988; 1993). Along most of the section, undisturbed beach sand was encountered towards the base of the cliff. In one place, however, the archaeological deposits continued to the base of the section and beyond, until we found ourselves excavating an extraordinary, large and waterlogged pit, dated to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, actually on the beach (Fig. 6).

Sites in the Orkney earldom tend to produce plenty of evidence for fishing and farming, with sometimes huge quantities of bone preserved (the limited excavations at Tuquoy, for example, have produced 150,000 fishbones alone), and carbonised seeds are common. On the other hand, it is very rare for organic materials to survive — wood, leather, unburnt plants and seeds — all of which were undoubtedly important in the settlers' daily life. At the base of the Tuquoy pit, though, was a sequence of black and wet, nasty-smelling deposits, some 60cm deep, which contained animal dung, straw and ash, unburnt wood, peat, twigs, grasses, leather scraps, shells, insects, pollen and other microscopic remains (Owen 1993: 329-35). This type of rare discovery has the capacity to revolutionise our understanding of the environmental basis of Norse Orkney.

Here, for the first time, in the sheer quantity of pine off-cuts from the trimming of planks, there is evidence for the large-scale importation of wood into



**Fig. 7. A selection of wooden artefacts from the Tuquoy pit and the carved birch handle.**

Viking Orkney. The trunks had been cut to squared cross-sections at source, probably in Norway, for ease of transportation. Ready-made objects were also imported: there was a fine handle of maple; and small quantities of oak used for carpentry, and ash for handles, hafts and shafts (Fig. 7). Off-cuts of larch and spruce demonstrate that driftwood was used in buildings as well as for fuel. The wood assemblage also furnishes evidence for a wide range of wood-working tools: knives, spoon-bits, axes, adzes and, probably, a plane with a 1.8cm wide blade; while the presence of rough-outs and unfinished objects also testifies to an active, domestic, wood-working industry. Neither was Norse-period Orkney entirely treeless, with sparse patches of willow scrub and, perhaps, birch and hazel. From the Tuquoy pit came a carved birch handle (Fig. 7), and willow twigs and branches fashioned into small domestic articles and used as twine, perhaps to hold down roofs, all made possibly from local raw materials.

The basal deposits also contained well-preserved insects, including indoor and outdoor species, insects associated with decomposing material, and human and animal parasites. It is only in the insect assemblage that we see evidence for wool-processing at Tuquoy, while the insects also confirm that peat, hay and seaweed were all being brought into the buildings for a variety of purposes. The inhabitants of Tuquoy were apparently infested with lice and fleas indicating low levels of hygiene — a suspicion reinforced by the numbers of species associated with rotting organic matter. To be fair to the Vikings, they were almost certainly the norm in much of the past (Buckland *et al.* 1993). Similar conditions occurred in near contemporary deposits from Iceland, Greenland, Oslo, Dublin and York.

This successful Viking-Age farm clearly relied on a mix of arable and pasture. The deposit was extraordinarily rich in cereal pollen, primarily oats and barley, together with arable weeds and herbs indicating pasture nearby. Interestingly, the cereals and weeds were all mixed together, suggesting perhaps that the cereal stalks had been reaped for straw, which indicates that bedding material for stalled animals is represented here.

The inference is that the 'pit' may in fact have been a sunken byre floor, with an intact accumulation of byre-manure (a sophisticated 'sandwich mixture' of mown grass and heath, mould, dung and ashes: Fenton 1978: 281), whose constituents included household refuse incorporated into the animal bedding. In the normal course of events, this material would have been destined for the fields, but herein lies the mystery: none of it had ever been removed from the pit. The stratigraphic sequence was completely undisturbed. The basal deposits of the pit, as well as being water-retentive in character, may even lie below the water table: no Orkney farmer, either 1,000 years ago or today, would stall animals in a byre where water seeped through the floor.

Faced with this (and other) somewhat contradictory environmental evidence, the purpose and history of the Tuquoy pit remains unclear. Much of it still survives, immediately behind the eroded section, and it may be that fuller excavation will one day yield the answers; or it might yield still more questions. The motives of past peoples sometimes remain elusive no matter what, and no amount of archaeological enquiry will give them up.

## Scar

*(The strange case of the bizarre pagan grave, too many bodies in a boat, and a connection with a Viking goddess)*

Pagan Viking graves each represent a discrete episode, a one-off event — the burial of a dead person or persons — and ought to be much more straightforward to interpret than complex and long-lived settlement sites such as Tuquoy. According to some scholars (eg Eldjárn 1984: 7), the pagan graves ought also to represent the first generation of Norse settlers in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, with few of the complications that come from a mix of cultures and the often ambiguous dating evidence which tend to occur on settlement sites.

In 1991, the now-famous Scar Viking boat burial began to erode from a low sandy cliff in Sanday, and was rescued from the teeth of the winter storms in a great drama covered even in the pages of *The Sun*. Its discovery alone is the stuff of stories, with the late John Deerness finding a small lead object on the beach in the 1980s, next to some bones coming out of the cliff, which he kept even though his neighbour said it was the top of a car battery. Later, his widow Caroline Deerness showed it to Julie Gibson, then Historic Scotland's monument warden in Orkney, and Raymond Lamb, then Orkney Archaeologist, who together identified it as a Viking lead weight for weighing out silver on portable



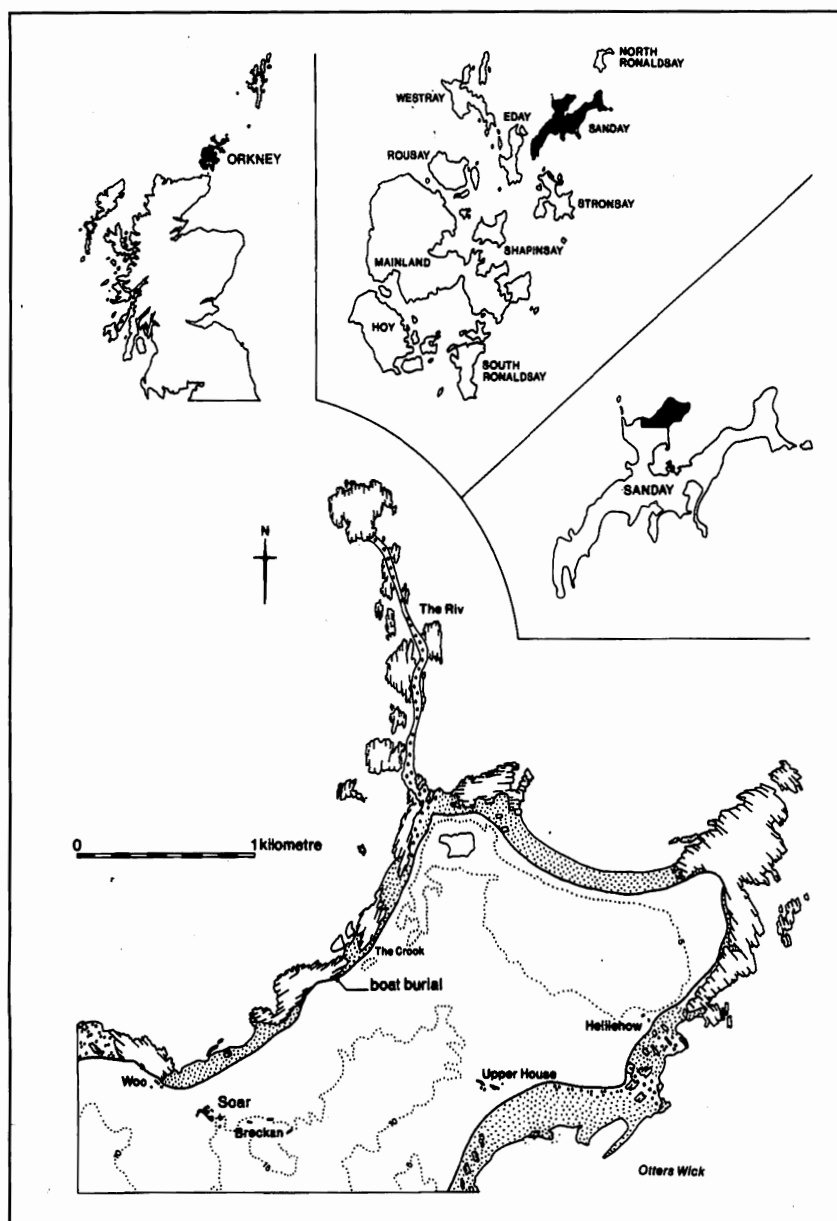


Fig. 8. The location of the Scar boat burial.

scales. This led to the rescue of one of the richest Viking-Age burials ever found in Britain, directed, appropriately enough, by a Norwegian, Magnar Dalland, in November and December 1991 (Owen and Dalland 1994; 1999).

Scar, at the northern end of one of the northernmost islands of Orkney, is one of the most exposed spots in Orkney: there is almost nothing between it and America (Fig. 8). Nevertheless, some time in the later 9<sup>th</sup> or first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, it was here that not one, but three, Viking Age people were buried, in a makeshift stone chamber within a 7-metre long wooden rowing boat, richly accompanied by a panoply of grave goods (Figs. 9 and 10). This is highly unusual. Almost all Viking graves contain only one body; very few contain two; and hardly any others containing three are known to this author: for example, three male warriors buried in a boat chamber-grave at Hedeby, in northern Germany (Müller-Wille 1976; Wamers 1994).

The three people at Scar form a tantalising group which defies easy explanation. When first found, we naturally assumed that this must be a family group of husband, wife and child, but were almost certainly wrong. For although the man was in his late twenties or thirties when he died, and the child was about ten, the woman was astonishingly old by the standards of her time, perhaps in her seventies.

There are many fascinating aspects to this wealthy grave. It is at once both a classic of its type — a pagan Viking boat burial — and yet, almost everything about it is distinctly odd. The burial chamber was constructed by the simple expedient of inserting a single makeshift wall across the width of the boat. Normally, a Viking burial chamber would be a discrete entity, perhaps formed by two walls across the boat, as in one of the boat graves in the cemetery at Westness, Rousay (Kaland 1993: 314, Fig. 17.7). In the great Oseberg ship burial in Norway, the burial chamber was a separate wooden structure erected behind the mast (Brøgger, Falk & Shetelig 1917-18; Christensen, Ingstad & Myhre 1992). The presence of even this makeshift chamber at Scar demonstrates that the boat was not just a convenient container, but an important symbolic component of the burial.

Once this wall was in place, only some two-thirds of the boat's total length was available to hold the three bodies, which was barely sufficient. This could imply that the family or community responsible for the burial had not intended to bury three people when the grave was first planned. The elderly woman and child seem to have occupied pride of place, as they were laid out next to each other, both fully extended on their backs, in the centre of the boat. It may be that the grave was originally meant only to take the woman and child, and that, had the man not been buried with them, a corresponding chamber wall might have been inserted at their head end to match that at their feet. On a somewhat macabre note, the man's lower leg had been twisted round into an unnatural position and his foot was actually broken off, with all the bones still articulated. This may have occurred when he was forced into the space left in the stern of

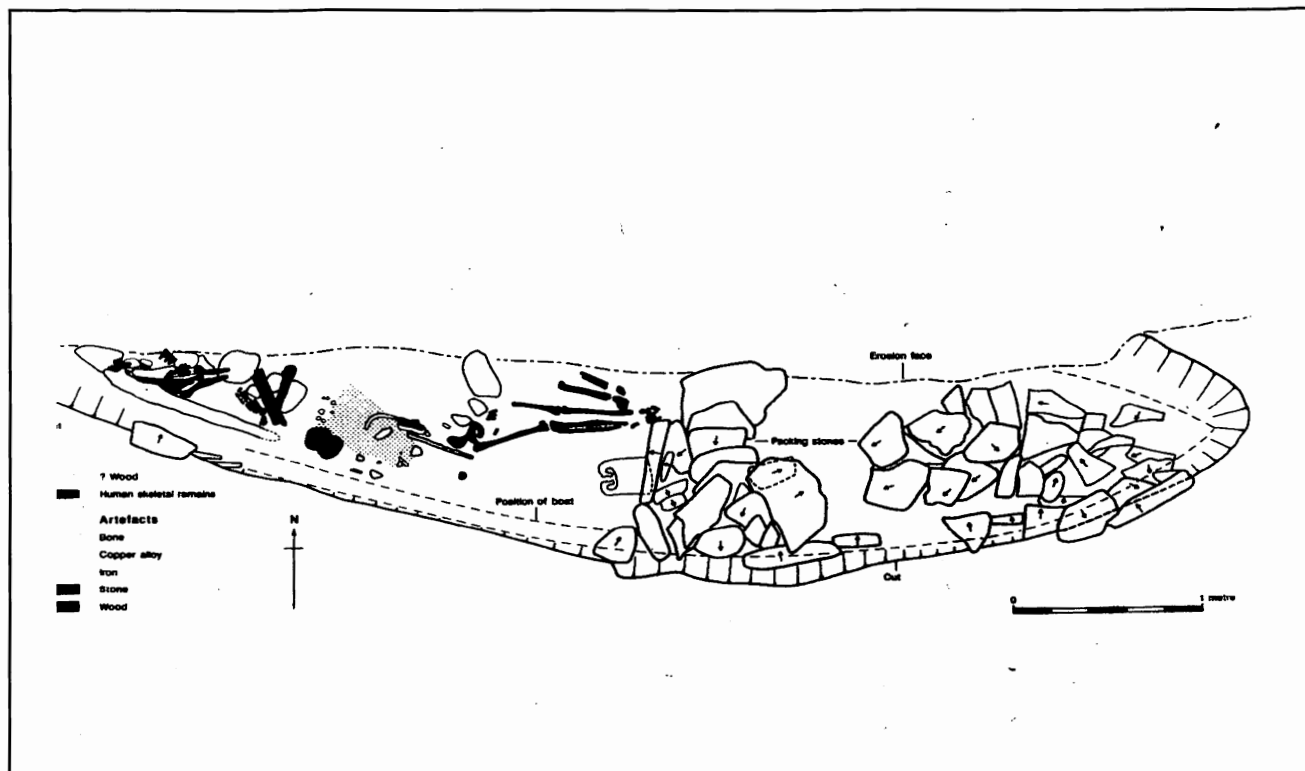


Fig. 9. A plan of the Scar boat burial.



Fig. 10. The Scar boat. The wood had rotted away in the ground leaving a ghost impression in the sand. The markers show the location of the boat rivets.



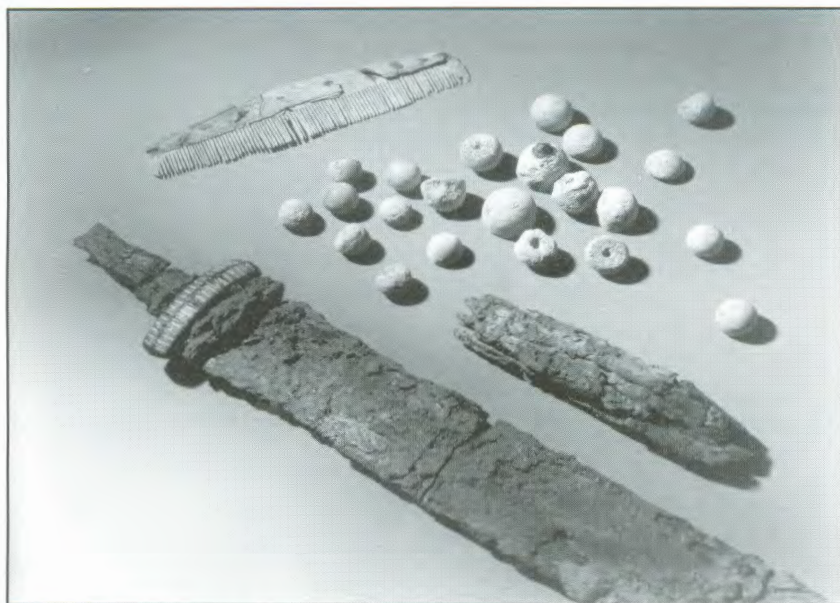


Fig. 11. A selection of the artefacts from Scar: male (above) and female (below)



the boat, which suggests that *rigor mortis* had set in by the time he was buried. It follows that he may have lain unburied for some time after his death, but this begs the question of why he was evidently buried last. Did the whole grave lie open for some time after the woman and child were placed in it, perhaps as part of an extended ceremony; or perhaps there was a lengthy dispute about whether to bury the man with the woman and child, which delayed completion of the burial?

There is no evidence at all that the grave was re-opened once it had been sealed, or that the three bodies were interred at different times, which would in any case be highly unusual for a Viking grave. These three people, therefore, must have died at around the same time. It is rare to be able to discover the cause of death from analysis of archaeological skeletons, and Scar is no exception. All that is left is surmise and speculation. Did they die together, through some dreadful accident such as drowning; or within a few days of each other from an infectious disease; or, more unpalatably, might the man and child have been sacrificed to accompany the woman to the afterworld when she died of natural causes in old age?

There are some precedents for human sacrifice in Viking times. At Ballateare on the Isle of Man, for example, when a young man was buried with all the symbols of his power and wealth, the body of a slave-girl with her arms raised upwards was placed over the top of the grave (Bersu & Wilson 1966: 45-62). The skull of the young woman has a large hole in it, made by the slashing blow of a heavy implement (Owen and Dalland 1999: 156-7, Fig. 106). At Scar, though, this seems unlikely. The man was clearly no thrall; on the contrary, the man and woman would seem to have had equal status to judge from their grave goods. A boat burial would have been especially appropriate for the man: analysis of the skeleton showed that he was about 5' 10" tall with a well-developed physique, honed quite probably by years of rowing. There is a question mark over the status of the child, however. It is not known whether the child was buried with grave goods because the sea had washed away most of that part of the boat in which the child's body was lying. Neither is it known whether this was a boy or girl, because of the incompleteness of the skeleton. Indeed, almost half of the boat had already been lost to the sea before excavation, together, almost certainly, with some of the grave goods. Any objects placed along the man's left side, for instance, on or near the upper part of his body and head, or in the east end of the boat, had almost certainly already been washed away by the sea.

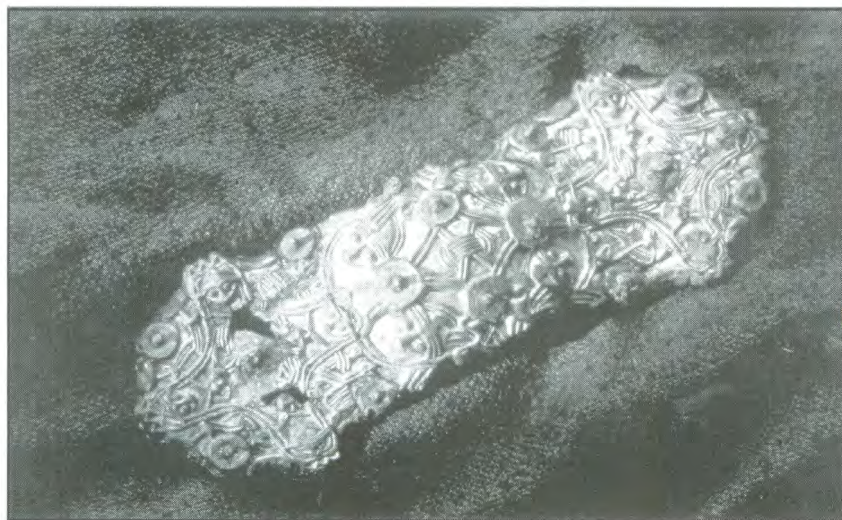
Turning to the surviving artefacts (Fig. 11), at first sight Scar seems to have all the typical components of a wealthy Viking grave: a mixture of everyday implements, weapons for the man, and personal items for both the man and woman; and yet a second look also gives pause for thought. Despite the incompleteness of the male assemblage, the man was still richly equipped with: a magnificent sword in its scabbard; a quiver of eight arrows; a fine bone comb; a

set of 22 whalebone gaming pieces, originally in some kind of container; possibly, two lead bullion weights; and, tentatively, a shield. On the surviving evidence then, this was no slave and no simple farmer either, for he had none of the common domestic and agricultural tools.

The man's sword was broken before burial. The ritual 'killing' of weapons is well attested in the archaeological record, with many examples elsewhere for the symbolic breaking of weapons before their burial in Viking graves. At Hesket in the Forest, Cumbria, for instance, the weapons had all been deliberately damaged: the sword and spears were bent and the shield was broken in two (Edwards 1992: 45-6, Fig. 5.2). At Scar, however, the broken sword blade had been placed, very carefully, in a flimsy scabbard made of two laths of wood, bound together by textile and lined with a layer of fleece. This would not have been a usable scabbard, and can only have been for storage and holding the broken sword together, which seems to imply that the break in the sword was not publicly displayed; on the contrary, it may have been deliberately hidden.

The woman's grave assemblage had survived more completely than the other two, although this burial, too, had been disturbed, this time by otters intruding into the sealed grave. The woman was accompanied by: a magnificent carved whalebone plaque; a gilded bronze equal-armed brooch; a comb; a pair of shears; a needle tidy containing two iron needles; an iron weaving batten; a small sickle; a small maplewood box with iron fittings; and two spindle whorls, one of steatite and the other of sandstone (Fig. 11).

The most surprising thing about the woman was her age at death, perhaps in her seventies. She must have been an object of curiosity and some reverence



**Fig. 12. The equal-armed brooch.**



to her contemporaries, perhaps magnified into awe, in an age when living to 40 was quite a feat. This probably accounts, at least in part, for the respect obviously accorded to her in death, although how she herself viewed or used her biological rarity in her later years we shall never know. It seems a little unlikely that this elderly woman had newly arrived in Orkney to start a new life, and yet there is little sign among her plentiful grave goods of any assimilation of native culture. Of what survived, with the sole exception of a spindle whorl made probably of Orkney sandstone, every item in the Scar grave was almost certainly made in Scandinavia. Even the boat was an import; sand grains trapped in the caulking between the planks contained an exotic suite of minerals not known in the British Isles, and almost certainly Scandinavian. We can only speculate on what she was doing in Orkney, and how long she had been there: a few weeks, a year, a decade, 20, 30 or even 50 years? The relationship between the woman, man and child remains equally enigmatic. Were they mother, son and grandchild; or mistress, warrior kinsman and young servant; or some other unfathomable combination? The Scar grave is a salutary lesson for archaeological science, for there are no answers to these questions. All we have are the twin temptations of hypothesis and speculation, which are strong indeed.

The two most diagnostic artefacts — the carved whalebone plaque and the equal-armed brooch — seemed both, at first glance, to be north Norwegian objects, which suggested that the origins of the people probably lay in northern Norway, perhaps north of the Arctic Circle; but even this initial conjecture proved to be premature.

The richly ornate brooch (Fig. 12) is one of the finest pieces of Scandinavian metalwork to have been found in a Scottish grave. Its mercury-gilded surface gives it a glittering gold appearance and, originally, fourteen silver-capped bosses were positioned symmetrically over the surface, which is highly decorated with typical early Viking gripping beast ornament in relief. This is a highly unusual type of Viking brooch to find in Britain, and fairly rare in Scandinavia. Most Viking women were buried wearing two oval brooches, ubiquitous dress fasteners across the Viking world; one of the many puzzling things about the Scar female burial is the apparent absence of oval brooches. The Scar equal-armed brooch should have been the 'third' brooch, worn singly to fasten a shawl or cloak over the woman's dress.

The Scar brooch is of a type known as 'Troms type', because when it was first identified (Petersen 1928: 81-2), most of the then known examples came from the far north of Norway, half of them from Troms district. However, two other fragmentary Troms-type brooches are now known from sites in Småland, southern Sweden; and in 1993, by a strange twist of fate, a clay mould for a Troms-type equal-armed brooch was found at the early Viking Age town of Birka, in central Sweden, in the later levels of a bronze-casting workshop perhaps dating to the first half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century. At least eight Troms-type brooch mould fragments are



now known from Birka (Björn Ambrosiani pers. comm.). These so-called Troms-type brooches were clearly being manufactured, together with oval brooches, in Viking workshops at Birka, in the early 9<sup>th</sup> century. This is the only evidence to date of a production centre for these brooches.

The Scar brooch was worn by the woman when she was buried, but may no longer have been capable of being properly secured and some of the gilding had also worn off in antiquity. In short, the brooch was probably old and no longer very useful when it was buried. It is tempting to deduce that it might have been in the Scar woman's possession throughout much of her long life; indeed, its very opulence and rarity may indicate that it was already an heirloom when she acquired it.

On close examination, there is an unnerving impression that many of the items in the Scar grave may have been of limited use by the time they were buried. The sword was broken; the lead weights may have had no place in the economy of Viking Age Orkney; the sickle was small; the weaving batten was short and broken; the gaming pieces were probably an incomplete set; even the whalebone plaque had been rarely used and may have been out of fashion. There are *caveats* to all these observations and it might be misleading to take this argument much further; but the impression is that the assemblage overall reflects the pinnacle of paganism in Viking Orkney, whilst not being actually contemporary with it. It is almost as if the Scar burial reflects the type of accompanied burial the woman might have wished for, had she died when might have been expected by the standards of the Viking Age — 20, 30, 40 or more years earlier. If this burial can be interpreted as a late gesture to the old gods and customs of the Scandinavian homeland, perhaps because the woman still adhered to the old faith, this might go some way to explaining why aspects of the assemblage seem 'odd'. Lamb (1993: 269) has suggested that extravagant Norse funerals in Orkney might represent 'a self-conscious pagan revival at the time of the establishment of the earldom' in the later 9<sup>th</sup> century. Another possibility could be that they represent a self-conscious flourishing of pagan belief and ritual in the face of encroaching acceptance of Christianity after about 900 — and what better way to symbolise the vitality of pagan beliefs than by an elaborate boat burial? Pagan Viking graves in Scotland all seem to date to between about AD 850 and 950 (James Graham-Campbell and Caroline Paterson pers. comm.). Scar also falls into this general dating bracket, but more likely the second half of it than the first, probably later than 900.

The beautiful carved whalebone plaque (Fig. 13) was originally placed in the grave in a prominent position, propped up against the upright slab marking the east end of the chamber, with its decorated side facing the elderly woman. Probably quite soon after the burial chamber was sealed, before it became filled with sand, the plaque tipped over into its final position, overlying the bottom of the boat. It was evidently a highly valued and probably symbolic artefact.



Fig. 13. The carved whalebone plaque.

About 65 carved whalebone plaques are known from the Viking world, the vast majority of them from coastal areas in the northern half of Norway, especially Nord-Trøndelag, Nordland and Troms. Perhaps the finest known example of a carved whalebone plaque, prior to that discovered at Scar, comes from Grytøy, Troms (Petersen 1951: 334-5; Owen and Dalland 1999: 82, Fig. 53a); but very few of these similarly ornamented plaques were executed to such a high standard. This suggests that plaques were being carved and copied by more than one craftsman, probably in several, perhaps many, locations along the long north Norwegian coastline. A small and elegant plaque, found in 1970 at Kvæfjord, Troms (Owen and Dalland 1999: 82, Fig. 53b), is perhaps the closest parallel for that from Scar, but is also a less accomplished piece. The two plaques may derive from a common prototype, but are most unlikely to be by the same hand. Nonetheless, the Scar plaque probably came from the far north of Norway, in the Troms area.

At the prosaic level, the plaque functioned as a smoothing board for small linen garments. As late as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women in southern Sweden were using similar objects for ironing linen caps, with stone or glass smoothers. Glass linen smoothers also occur frequently in wealthy female Viking graves, but only one glass linen smoother has actually been found in the same grave as a carved plaque, in Grave 854, Birka (Arbman 1943: 329, Fig. 275, 8.14), and even here the two items were not placed together (Owen and Dalland 1999: 144, Fig. 98). If the plaques functioned primarily as smoothing boards, then the apparent separation in death of the board from the smoother, two apparently complementary pieces of equipment, is difficult to explain.

Recent research by Britt-Mari Näsström (1995) on the Viking fertility goddess, Freyja, may have supplied the answer. It seems likely that carved plaques like that from Scar had a religious significance and were used primarily on ceremonial occasions. Näsström's work has highlighted the symbolic value of flax — a connection which may also link the carved plaques to Freyja. Indeed, one of the names given to Freyja derives from the Old Norse word for flax. Näsström (1995: 85-6) says that flax was 'surrounded by many magical perceptions'. It protected against evil and gave fertility to humankind. Flax was connected with women; it was even called the 'seed of woman' and had to be sown on a Friday (Freyja's day) by women dressed in their best clothes. The spinning of flax was also connected with Freyja, and the product, linen, was highly prized by well-placed Viking women and an important part of bridal dress. It is a reasonable supposition, then, that the finest carved whalebone plaques were used for pressing precious linens for ceremonial occasions, perhaps especially the linen elements of the 'best clothes' worn to sow the flax seed or get married in. This might well explain why highly carved plaques were valued as grave goods by wealthy women, and, because they were primarily symbolic artefacts, why they are so rarely found with smoothers — without which they would have been, quite literally, no earthly use at all.

In a recent re-analysis of the Scandinavian boat grave custom, Crumlin-Pedersen (1995: 94, following Müller-Wille 1970), has argued persuasively that a boat was present in a grave as an attribute of one of the heathen gods. Since only a small fraction of the population received a boat burial, he suggests that:

the best explanation for this fact is to consider those buried with boats as persons involved directly in the fertility cult as priests or their helpers and therefore so closely connected to the god — or even to be looked on as part of the family of the gods — that they are ‘authorised’ to be marked out with the attribute as an offering in their graves.

If so, might not this be the real significance of the plaque, displayed so prominently within the Scar boat grave? Could it be that the plaque marked out the Scar woman not only as a worshipper of Freyja, but as one of Freyja’s servants in the Viking world? This is highly speculative of course, and casts no light on the roles of the man and child, but it might help to explain some of the stranger aspects of this burial.

The Viking Age was an era of high mobility and of a high level of interaction between peoples. The extraordinary boat burial from Scar, Orkney, with its wealthy cargo of three pagan individuals, found far from their origins in Scandinavia, is at once a potent emblem of the Viking Age, and a salutary reminder of how difficult it is to penetrate the complexities of human relations and interactions, especially at a distance of over 1,000 years. Sometimes, for all our science, we can but marvel at the wealth and variety of the Viking graves, and the strength and strangeness — at least to us — of the pagan beliefs which underpinned them. At both Tuquoy and Scar — and I would venture to suggest on most archaeological sites — not all, perhaps not that much, of past human behaviour is susceptible to archaeological science.

A few lines from George Mackay Brown’s poem *Dead Fires* seem a particularly apt epitaph for this enigmatic Orcadian burial:

Stars shine through the roofbeams of Scar  
No flame is needed  
To warm ghost and nettle and rat.



## Acknowledgements

Neither project would have been possible without the enthusiastic cooperation of the site owners, Mr Tom Pottinger and his family at Tuquoy, and Mrs Caroline Deerness and her family at Scar. I am also most grateful to Dr Raymond Lamb and Julie Gibson for their help and advice and, most especially, their friendship over many years.

The success of both projects has relied on the hard work and skills of many people, excavators, colleagues and specialists, to all of whom I extend my thanks. My debt to the many specialists who have contributed reports on materials from both Tuquoy and Scar must already be obvious. This paper, in particular, has benefited from the contributions, at Tuquoy, of Mr John McKinnell (the inscription), Dr Anne Crone (wood), Dr Jon Sadler (insects), Dr Christopher Lowe (Cross Kirk) and Dr Richard Tipping (pollen); and at Scar, of Daphne Home Lorimer (human remains), Kim Nissan (the sword), Anne Allen (the boat), Andrea Smith (the iron and stone objects) and Dianne Dixon (sand grains trapped in the boat caulking). Scar was excavated under the expert direction of Magnar Dalland, without whose efforts very little of this research would have been possible; and the artefacts were conserved in the field by Richard Welander of Historic Scotland, and in the laboratory under the supervision of Amanda Clydesdale of AOC Archaeology Group. I am grateful to the many scholars, too many to mention, both in Scotland and Scandinavia, who have so generously offered advice and information on comparanda for the Scar artefacts. I am also grateful to Dr Barbara Crawford who first alerted me to the possible connection between whalebone plaques and the Viking goddess, Freyja.

The illustrations for this paper were drawn by Christina Unwin and artefact photography was by Michael Brooks. Both archaeological projects were funded by Historic Scotland.

Post-excavation on the Tuquoy project is continuing. A full account of the Scar boat burial was published in 1999. The site archive has been deposited in the National Monuments Record of Scotland, Edinburgh, and the artefacts are on display in Tankerness House Museum, Kirkwall.

## Bibliography

- Arbman, H., 1940 & 1943: *Birka I. Die Gräber*. Tafeln (1940). Text (1943). Kunglige Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien. Stockholm.
- Batey, C., Jesch, J. and Morris, C. D. (eds), 1993: *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic*. Edinburgh.
- Brøgger, A. W., Falk, H. and Shetelig, H. (eds), 1917-18: *Osebergfundet* I. Kristiania.
- Buckland, P. C., Sadler, J. P. and Smith, D. N., 1993: 'An insect's eye-view of the Norse farm'. In: Batey, Jesch and Morris, 1993: 506-27.
- Christensen, A. E., Ingstad, A. S. and Myhre, B., 1992: *Oseberg Dronningens grav: vår arkeologiske nasjonalskatt i nytt lys*. Oslo.
- Clouston, J. S., 1931: *Early Norse Castles*. Kirkwall.
- Crumlin-Pedersen, O., 1995: 'Boat-burials at Slusegaard and the interpretation of the boat-grave custom'. In: O. Crumlin-Pedersen and B. Munch Thye (eds.), *The ship as symbol in prehistoric and medieval Scandinavia*, Copenhagen, 87-99.
- Edwards, B. J. N., 1992: 'The Vikings in north-west England: the archaeological evidence'. In: J. Graham-Campbell (ed.), *Viking Treasure from the North West: the Cuerdale Hoard in its Context* (= Liverpool Museum Occasional Paper No. 5), Liverpool, 43-62.
- Eldjárn, K., 1984: 'Graves and grave goods: survey and evaluation'. In: A. Fenton and H. Pálsson (eds), *The Northern and Western Isles in the Viking World: survival, continuity and change*, Edinburgh, 2-11.
- Fenton, A., 1978: *The Northern Isles: Orkney and Shetland*. Edinburgh.
- Kaland, S. H. H., 1993: 'The settlement at Westness, Rousay'. In: Batey, Jesch and Morris, 1993: 308-17.
- Marwick, H., 1928: 'Kolbein Hruga's Castle, Wyre'. *Proceedings of the Orkney Antiquarian Society* 6, 9-11.
- Müller-Wille, M., 1970: 'Bestattung im Boot. Studien zu einer nordeuropäischen Grabsitte'. *Offa* 25/26 (1968-9).
- Müller-Wille, M., 1976: *Das Bootkammergrab von Haithabu*. Berichte über die Ausgrabungen in Haithabu, 8.
- Näsström, B.-M., 1995: *Freyja—the Great Goddess of the North* (= Lund Studies in History of Religions, No. 5). Lund.
- Owen, O., 1982: 'The rescue project at Tuquoy, Westray, Orkney Islands, 1982'. *Universities of Durham and Newcastle Archaeological Reports for 1982*, 45-50.
- Owen, O., 1983: 'The archaeological rescue project at Tuquoy, Westray, Orkney Islands, 1983'. *Universities of Durham and Newcastle Archaeological Reports for 1983*, 49-54.
- Owen, O., 1988: 'Tuquoy, Orkney 1988: Further assessment and tapestry excavation of the Norse and medieval site'. *Central Excavation Unit and Ancient Monuments Laboratory Annual Report 1988* (Historic Buildings and Monuments), 4-8.
- Owen, O., 1993: 'Tuquoy, Westray, Orkney: A challenge for the future?' In: Batey, Jesch and Morris, 1993: 318-339.
- Owen, O. and Dalland, M. 1994: 'Scar, Sanday, Orkney: the rescue of a Viking boat burial'. In: B. Ambrosiani and H. Clark (eds.), *The twelfth Viking Congress* (= Birka Studies 3), Stockholm, 159-172.

- Owen, O. and Dalland, M., 1999: *Scar: a Viking boat burial on Sanday, Orkney*. East Linton.
- Owen, O. and McKinnell, J., 1989: 'A runic inscription from Tuquoy, Westray, Orkney'. *Medieval Archaeology* 33, 53-9.
- Petersen, J., 1928: *Vikingetidens smykker i Norge*. Stavanger.
- Petersen, J., 1951: *Vikingetidens Redskaper*. Skrifter utgitt av Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo, 2, Hist-filos Kl, 1951, No. 4. Oslo.
- RCAHMS, Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, 1946: *Inventory of the Ancient Monuments of Orkney and Shetland* (3 vols.). Edinburgh.
- Taylor, A. B., 1938: *The Orkneyinga Saga: a new translation with introduction and notes*. London.
- Thomson, W. P. L., 1990: 'Settlement patterns at Tuquoy, Westray, Orkney'. *Northern Studies* 27, 35-49.
- Wamers, E., 1994: 'König im Grenzland. Neue Analysen des Bootkammergrabes von Haidaby'. *Acta Archaeologica* 65, 1-56.