

A Viking Burial at Balnakeil, Sutherland

Dorothy Low, Colleen E Batey and Robert Gourlay

Chance Discovery

The excavation of the Viking burial at Balnakeil was brought about by chance. Storms in May 1991 caused blowouts in the sand dunes which partially uncovered the remains of what appeared to be a human skeleton. These were noticed by Mr and Mrs Powell, who were holidaying in the area and they promptly informed the local police of their discovery, handing in a brooch which they had found lying on top of the skeleton. The police in turn alerted the Procurator Fiscal, and the site was visited with the local doctor who confirmed that the remains were human and of some antiquity. The police carefully covered the remains without further disturbance, and contacted the Archaeology staff of Highland Regional Council, requesting that the remains be professionally examined as soon as possible.

The Excavation

Excavation, undertaken by Dorothy Low and Robert Gourlay, commenced the following day. The remains were situated in the most northerly dune of the northern-most of the two bays (Fig 1). The bones protruded from the edge of the dune, approximately 4m above the high water mark, and some 5 to 6 m below the dune top.

The visible remains initially consisted of most of the vertebra, rib cage, pelvic bones and the left elbow joint. Some of the leg bones were found to be lying in loose and disturbed sand below the in-situ remains, and it is presumed that they had fallen from their original position as the sand had blown away. There was no visible evidence at this stage of the skull or bones of the right arm. Examination of the position and angle of the skeleton, led to the conclusion that the body had been placed on its right side, so that the rib cage and remaining sand overburden were obscuring the rest of the skeleton. The angle of the body in relation to the sand dune further indicated that the skull probably survived within the main dune, close to where a piece of corroded metal was protruding.

The wind erosion of the dunes had led to a highly unstable situation, with the strong possibility of an imminent collapse of the dune face. This would have led to the burial being covered with a large weight of sand which would have destroyed many of the more fragile remains. This threat also meant that working conditions were somewhat precarious, with small sand falls occurring regularly. For these reasons, the excavation was conducted with the utmost speed!

A number of objects were found lying in association with the skeleton, ,mainly concentrated around the pelvic area in a close group. The first stage of the excavation

involved careful excavation of the visible remains, and the making of a full record through photographs and drawings (Fig 2). The next stage involved clearance of the sand overburden before it collapsed and destroyed the burial. During this process, the corroded remains of an iron object were found projecting upwards from the skeleton. This was later identified as a spearhead with part of the shaft still attached. Once all of the overlying sand had been removed, the skull could be seen lying on its right side, with the corroded remains of a shield boss lying on the back of the skull. The position of this, in conjunction with the remains of the spear, gave rise to the conclusion that they had been so placed to rest against one another, forming a kind of canopy over the head. In the area of the neck, two amber and one blue and white glass bead were found, representing a small necklace.

The group of finds in the pelvic area was seen to be considerably larger, while the closeness of the finds suggested that all had been held together in one container - perhaps a leather bag. These finds are identified and located in Fig 3 and listed below as Appendix 1. Once all of these finds had been recovered, the bones were lifted and labelled with much assistance from the local doctor. One of the most interesting finds was left until last. Underlying the skeleton were the well - preserved remains of a sword, with wooden and other organic remains of the scabbard attached. The body

4

had obviously been placed overlying the sword, thus concealing it from view. The difficult problem of how to lift the sword and scabbard with the minimum of disturbance, was solved with a slat from a lone fish box from the beach! The remains of the sword, were isolated and slid onto the wooden slats, within a block of sand, and carefully secured prior to transportation.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is worth noting that the sand around the body was somewhat darker and more compact than the dune material itself. This would have been due to staining caused by the decomposition of the body. However, this staining had a clearly defined 'hard' edge which was both clearly visible and could be felt during excavation. It is therefore suggested that this might have been caused by the body having been placed in a shroud which had contained the seepage of body fluids thus creating the 'hard' edge to the body stain.

The Scale of the Problem: Post-Excavation

The remains were initially taken to the Archaeology Office of Highland Regional Council, Inverness, where they were re-examined. Many of them proved to be in a relatively poor and fragile state. Some basic conservation work was carried out on the advice of the National Museum, and the remains were removed the next day to their Conservation Laboratories in Edinburgh for

5

specialist work. All this material has now either been stabilised, or is still in the process of being conserved. The following discussion is based on information provided by the National Museum Conservation Section, and some detailed work remains to be undertaken. However, much of the identification work has been undertaken at this stage and it is possible to present here a brief interim report on the skeleton and the grave goods from the site. A full report is being prepared for the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

The Skeleton

A detailed report on the skeletal remains has been prepared by Yvonne Hallen and will appear in the final report on the burial. There are a number of interesting features about the remains which can be highlighted here. Although parts of the skeleton were missing at the time of excavation (such as the right fibula, sternum and pubis), and others had been damaged following burial (in particular the skull), the evidence is sufficient to suggest that the remains are those of a young person, probably male and aged between eight and thirteen years old. Although it is difficult to precisely sex a pre-pubescent skeleton, the balance of evidence suggests it is male, and this coincides with the nature of the burial assemblage. He was approximately 4' 9" to 5' tall, and the right clavicle, humerus and ulna ie right arm, seem

enlarged in comparison to those on the left side. This assymetrical development is also seen in the skull, where the left eye orbit is higher than the right one. In addition, there are traces on the skeleton of a non-specific infection which has caused pitting on both humeri and interior of the skull.

Additional bone fragments found nearby were also examined and were identifiable as animal remains - dog/wolf, sheep/goat and bovine. It is not known at this stage whether these had a direct association with the boy's burial, since they are bleached and had clearly been subjected to a different burial environment.

The Grave Goods

The burial was accompanied by a wide-range of objects (Figs 3 and 4); weapons including a sword, shield and spear; items related to his dress, including a ringed-pin or brooch, beads and possible strap end; and accompanying grave goods of 14 gaming pieces which were probably originally in a bag, and a possible gaming board. The distinctive, but badly preserved antler comb and needle case, may be classed as grave goods rather than items related to dress, particularly the suggested needle case in view of the fact that the burial is that of a young male. The shroud itself may be represented by a pin-like item at the head, although this is at present unclear, and may perhaps even be related to a head-dress.

The textile traces are still being examined, and the differences provisionally identified, could indicate remains of a cloak as well as a shroud. The evidence of feathers incorporated into the corrosion products of the sword hilt, seem to suggest the presence of a pillow placed beneath the body.

1. The Weaponry

The fragmentary spear and domical shield boss were both recovered from the head area; the sword was underlying the body itself. The positioning of the spear, pointing upwards in conjunction with the iron shield boss representing the remains of an organic shield, placed as if to protect the head area, can be paralleled from other Viking graves in the British Isles. At Westness in Orkney, a male burial within a boat was accompanied by several fine grave goods including a sword and a shield boss. In that case, the boss was located as if to suggest that the shield had been laid over the face, and was of specific interest because of the distinctive slash damage on the upper surface (Kaland 1993, 314). In the Balnakeil example, the corrosion on the shield boss has preserved textile traces which have yet to be identified, as distinguished at Ballateare (Bersu and Wilson 1966, 60). A further parallel for the positioning of the spear can be noted from the Isle of Man, where the graves at Ballateare and Cronk Moar both showed evidence of a spear which was placed awkwardly in the grave, probably because

8

the shaft was too long to fit within the coffin (op cit, 1966, Figs 32 and 40). In the Balnakeil example, it is possible that the spear, its shaft and the shield had formed a canopy over the dead boy's head. The domical shield boss is a type which is commonly recorded from Viking graves (Type Rygh 562; Rygh 1885), several examples were recorded from the graves at Birka in Sweden (Arbman 1940) and nearer examples can be cited from Reay on the north coast of Caithness (eg Batey 1993, fig 6.4, 154).

The sword itself is interesting, chiefly because of its condition. Although to the untrained eye, this fractured mass of rusting iron seems to be rather unprepossessing, in the hands of the conservators the story unfolds. The sword was badly cracked by the pressure of the sand on the top of the burial, so it broke during lifting. However, on x-ray, the sword is shown to have an intact hilt, with domical pommel, possibly decorated cross bar and the remains of the padding on the handle section, secured with wires. The blade is virtually complete and housed within the remains of its organic scabbard. There are several questions which can be asked, which include detail of the decorative elements of the hilt concealed within the corrosion, and the nature of the scabbard and its lining. Detailed study can reveal leather, wood and textile traces forming the scabbard (Bersu and Wilson 1966, fig 33 , 70-73, re Ballateare and Cronk Moar).

The sword itself is of further interest however. Firstly, its position within the grave suggests that it lay beneath the body. This is a little unusual because, where the evidence survives, the sword is usually sited to the side of the individual. It will be necessary to decide whether the sword was wrapped within the shroud and next to the cloak if one existed. Examination of the textile traces could help here. It is conceivable that the body had been slightly displaced after burial, with the body falling onto the sword, but the supporting evidence for this is not strong. Some of the grave goods do however, seem to suggest a slight post-burial disturbance, such as the brooch in the leg area.

Of further significance is the fact that the sword is clearly a full sized example, buried here with a young boy. Whether he himself used the sword, is a point to consider. The skeletal remains suggest a slight enlargement of the bones on the right side, supporting the idea that the young boy was forced to develop skills with full sized weapons. Attractive as this idea might be, parallels are difficult to find, and it is possible that the enlargement may be due to other causes. Certainly, if enhanced muscle development was present, it should be noticeable on the scapula and arm bones.

There are stories in the saga sources of young boys being taken into battle with their fathers, and

presumably fighting, with a weapon which was, after all, a major status symbol and potential heirloom. Orkneyinga Saga records the death in battle of Ivarr, son of Earl Rognvald, during a campaign in the North of Scotland and Western Isles (ironically to subdue the 'vikings' who were harrying others from the Scandinavian homelands!). As compensation for this death, Rognvald was given the lands of Orkney and Shetland (Palsson and Edwards 1978, chapter 4, 30). The same story is recalled in Heimskringla (Chapter 22. trans Smith 1932, 58-9) and clearly the Icelandic tradition of saga-telling accepted the role of young boys in battle, if not always as heroes. It is estimated that Ivarr can have been no older than 14 years at his death, possibly slightly younger. (We are grateful to Mrs Bridget MacKenzie for researching this information). The type of sword is commonly found in other Viking contexts dating to the late 9th - 10th centuries, such as Birka in Sweden (Arbman.1940, taf 4 and 5) and elsewhere, such as a fine example from Sanday, Orkney - an unstratified find which is currently on display at the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow.

2. Items Related to Dress

Although it is most likely that the body was buried fully clothes, the remains of items in this category are few. A possible strap end, found in the lower body area, could indicate the former presence of a belt. However, this cannot be corroborated on the available evidence.

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The three beads, two of amber and the third of glass with applied decoration probably formed part of a simple necklet. The bead types can be readily paralleled, particularly the 'eyed' example (cf Birka, Arbman 1940, taf 121, 122 and 123). The small assemblage may perhaps be mirrored in the single find from the burial of a young child discovered at Kneep (Cnip), Lewis (Cowie et al 1993, fig 6A.4, 169). Where bead necklaces have been identified to date, they are usually from female graves and most commonly there are many beads eg Kneep (Welander, Batey and Cowie 1987, illus 6, 156), presumably because the individual had been collecting rather longer! The token beads may perhaps be paralleled also at Birka (Arbman 1940, 40 grave 91).

The simple copper alloy ring pin or brooch, with circular terminals, is however, rather more diagnostic. Parallels can be cited from Lagore in Ireland (Hencken 1950,) of a pre-Viking date. The inclusion of an artefact of greater antiquity than the rest of the burial can be seen at several sites throughout the Viking World. In Orkney the situation is similar cf Westness (Stevenson 1989) and Pierowall (Grieg 1940, 93). The use of heirlooms in burials, pagan or Christian, is not so uncommon as one might think. In the case of a child, it is appropriate to think in terms of such a token link with the past, a cherished gift from a grieving parent? The location of the brooch, in the pelvic region seems to

suggest that it has become misplaced after burial. It should be a cloak fastening, but could be in this case, perhaps securing a shroud or similar item?

3. Grave Goods

This category includes the remaining items which do not fall into the above two categories, but which can be described as gifts to the dead for use in the afterlife. A bag of 14 antler conical gaming pieces, each with traces of a metal peg for affixing to a board, was located in the area of the legs. Some of the pieces may have had bone or antler 'pegs' which would have appeared different from the metal ones, and could suggest a distinction between two opposing sets, although this is not yet confirmed by the conservation analysis. There may also be traces of a gaming board, in the form of wooden fragments. Several graves have produced sets of simple gaming pieces, in carved horses teeth, glass or antler (eg Westness, Scar and two beautiful sets from Birka in Sweden, made of coloured glass (Arbman 1940, taf 148 1 and 2, from graves 523 and 644). Gaming boards are rather more difficult to identify because they are usually organic and have decayed beyond recognition in the grave. An exception to this is from Ireland, the site of Ballinderry produced a fine complete example of an incised board with decorative features (Graham-Campbell 1980, 23 no 92). Elsewhere in Scotland, examples of simple incised stones have been recorded, commonly in

Pre-Viking contexts but not exclusively (Ritchie 1977, 187, 198-9; Sterckx 1973; Batey 1989, 215 no 280). It has to be presumed that a board game such as hnefatafl or Nine Mens Morris was played. In the Balnakeil grave, a single piece of flint may have originally been in the same bag, but it is not known whether this was actually associated with the playing of the game itself.

Other grave goods include a fragmentary antler comb and a possible needle case (cf Birka , Arbman 1940, taf 167 no 7, grave 1081), which were both found in the mid-body area. It is conceivable that they were originally attached to the belt suggested above. The comb is a single sided composite example, and although fragmentary, it is likely that it would have originally had five iron rivets and 3 or 4 tooth plates in all. The presence of a comb is not surprising, male and female, young and old would have had one. However, if indeed the other item is a needle case, it certainly does suggest an enlightened approach to the education of a young Viking! The needle case is badly corroded, comprising thread preserved in the corrosion products, wound around possibly 3 iron needles. It is not of the type most commonly found, which is made of a bird bone tube, but metal examples are known from Scandinavia (Arbman 1940, taf 168).

Conclusion: The Local Situation

The evidence from Balnakeil at this stage suggests a single burial, that of a young boy buried with a wide range of accompanying items. It cannot be known how he died, because the surviving skeletal remains do not show any signs of fatal wounds. A working hypothesis might be a drowning accident, but this is difficult to prove. The circumstances of the excavation were not conducive to detailed study of the immediate area, which might hold additional burials. It is increasingly common to discover that an apparent single burial, is in fact part of a larger group or a cemetery, as at Scar in Orkney (pers comm O Owen and this volume), or as at Reay near Thurso in Caithness (Batey 1993, 152-154). There is a suggestion that at Keoldale on the Durness peninsula, remains of a grave were disturbed in the last century and recorded briefly by Lethbridge (1950, 96), but its Scandinavian character is fugitive, unlike the Balnakeil deposit.

The recovery of Norse remains on the North West coast is exciting but not unexpected: Cape Wrath was a crucial landmark for the Viking seafarers on their route towards the Western Isles and Ireland. The place names prove that the Norse were familiar with the coastline, if not the northern interior - Durness, Tongue etc (see this volume). It is even possible that the Balnakeil boy may have had links with Ireland himself, or through his parents, as suggested by the origins of the ringed brooch in the grave. There is however, one certainty, with the increase in coastal erosion more remains of the period

15

will be uncovered along exposed coastal stretches; with careful monitoring this can be used to greatly increase the amount of information available for the period in Northern Scotland.

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Illustrations

1. Location of Balnakeil and find spot
2. Excavation of the burial
3. Drawing of the burial deposit
4. Final excavation shot?

Appendix 1

List of Artefactual Material (provided by T Skinner,
National Museums Conservation Section). NMS Accession
Numbers IL 921-963

Sword and fragmentary scabbard
Shield boss
Spearhead and part of shaft
Ringed pin
Possible strap end
Small copper alloy ?pin
12 miscellaneous iron nails
2 indeterminate iron objects

Antler comb
14 complete and fragmentary gaming pieces of antler

Fragment of mineralised wood with finger bone attached
(?shield grip or spear shaft)
Fragment of mineralised wood ? possibly a fragment of
gaming board
2 amber beads, 1 blue and white glass bead
Needle case with possible needles inside
Small lump of pumice
Small flint flake

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