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Scar Viking boat burial - Sanday, Orkney



Discovery and excavation

On a recent trip to Orkney I stood leaning into a storm at Skail Bay, thunderous clouds above, sea thrashing the coast and such strong winds that I was literally blown off my feet. It was after just such a storm in 1985 that a farmer on the Orcadian island of Sanday discovered what he thought was the burial of a foreign sailor, a relatively common feature on Orkney's coastline. Along with protruding bones the farmer noticed a small object which, some six years later (archaeological stories travel slowly), found its way into the hands of archaeologist Julie Gibson. During a visit to the site with Raymond Lamb she found a couple of rusted rivets, and the clues began to fall into place.

The combination of rivets, human remains and the object – which turned out to be a small Viking lead weight used for measuring payments in precious metals – raised the possibility that the discovery was the burial place of a pagan Viking that had been laid to rest in a boat, a relatively common rite in Norway. With the winter of 1991 coming all too soon, Historic Scotland agreed to organise a rescue excavation and the team, led by Magnar Dalland, reached Sanday during fierce October gales. A few days after the excavation finished, another violent storm removed the final traces.

Three skeletons were recovered, apparently buried at the same time: a woman in her 70s, a man in his 30s and a child of about 10. Now housed in Orkney Museum, the wealth of finds which accompanied them to the afterlife included a magnificent whalebone plaque, perhaps devoted to the goddess Freyja, an unusual gilded bronze brooch, a sword, eight arrows in a quiver, and a set of gaming pieces for the board game hnefatafl. Everyday items included spindle whorls, a sickle, and even two needles with thread still wrapped around them. The timbers of the boat itself were poorly preserved, but its form could be reconstructed from over 300 iron rivets and nails that had held it together. Certainly a boat rather than a ship, it measured some 7.1m in length and was fashioned from oak and pine





Preservation and interpretation

Although some 50% of the boat and contents had been washed away, the preservation of many of the surviving items was exceptional. Unusually there was a conservator on site during the whole excavation and great efforts were made to lift each artefact without damage, thus ensuring that scientific analyses could be realised. Even textiles survived, and five or more different weaves were found on fragments of clothing and furnishings. Careful conservation and reconstruction of the brooch revealed it to be one of the finest and most complete examples from anywhere in the Viking world.

The date of this rich and diagnostically Viking burial has proved difficult to pin down. On the one hand, many of the well-preserved finds have close artistic parallels in Norway, and the excavators were convinced that on balance they pointed to a relatively early date (about 900 AD). On the other hand, a small suite of radiocarbon dates suggested a date as much as 130 years later. The excavators favoured a date of AD c875 to 950 arguing that some of the artefacts included as grave goods may have been quite old at the time. Since the woman died in her 70s, it was perfectly possible that heirlooms had been handed down from her mother or grandmother, and made in Norway many years before. The brooch itself may have been of some antiquity before it was buried.

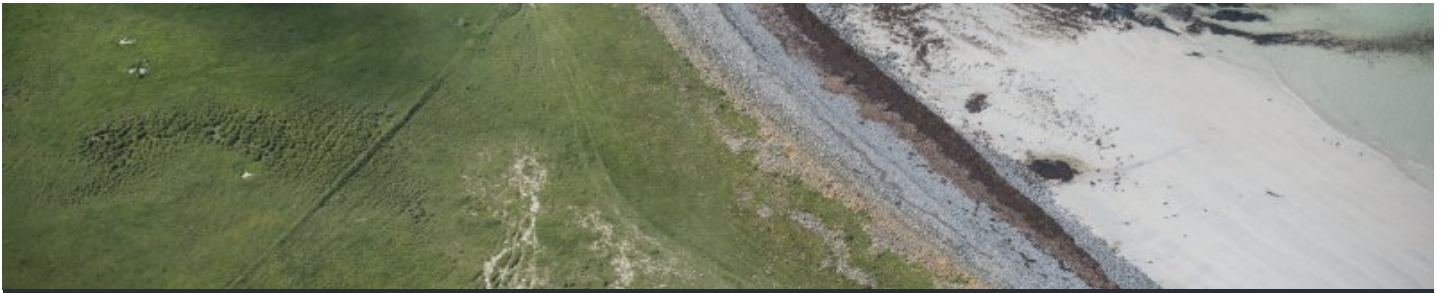
It was never established why the three individuals died but the lack of any positive evidence led the excavators to propose that they succumbed to drowning or disease, dying together or just a few days apart. Had it not been for the action of John Deerness, the farmer at Scar who discovered the site in 1985, their bodies and the beautiful belongings that they were buried with would have been washed into the sea. John wasn't far from the truth when he thought the site may be the grave of a foreign sailor, but he could not have guessed at the richness and variety within this small pagan burial of 1000 years ago. Next time you're in Orkney, and one of those inevitable storms rolls in, just think about the rich discoveries still to be made, and those archaeologists that will rush to rescue them.

Sources:

Owen, O and Dalland, M 1999 *Scar – a Viking boat burial on Sanday, Orkney*. Tuckwell Press

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<https://canmore.org.uk/site/3494/sanday-quoy-banks>



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