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Cover Image: The entrance to the Broch of Gurness, Mainland.. Photograph © Shane McLeod.

Legitimation through Association? Scandinavian Accompanied Burials and Pre-historic Monuments in Orkney

Shane McLeod*

Abstract - In Orkney, most Scandinavian accompanied burials are close to the sea, settlements, and, to a lesser extent, pre-Viking Age monuments. The first two were largely prosaic choices, but the latter may indicate an aspect of the mindset of the incoming elite. Based on studies of the re-use of pre-Viking Age monuments in Viking Age Scandinavia, I propose that this association was deliberate and related to a desire to legitimize the occupation of the land and signal the control of the seaways. I also suggest that burial re-use was common before prominent settlement mounds began to perform these functions.

Introduction

An association between Scandinavian burials and earlier monuments is known from elsewhere in Scotland (e.g., Castletown in Caithness, “Ardvonrig” on Barra, and Tote on Skye; see Anderson 1874, Edge and Williams 1863, Lethbridge 1920), but the high number of Scandinavian burials in Orkney makes it a useful test case in advance of a wider analysis of the Scottish corpus. Furthermore, the chronology of Scandinavian activity in Orkney has been studied at length by Barrett et al. (2000), and settlement mounds in Orkney have been well contextualized by Jane Harrison (2013a, b), allowing the relationship between burials and settlement mounds to be explored herein. This paper also benefits from Alison Leonard’s (2011) consideration of the cultural colonization of Orkney by Scandinavians. The present study is concerned with culturally Scandinavian burials, by which I mean cremations, as well as inhumations accompanied by artifacts not consistent with contemporary indigenous burial practices. The use of mounds and boats in 9th- and 10th-century Orkney was also a Scandinavian burial tradition. Consequently, this study is concerned with the period AD ca. 850–950, when it is thought that most “pagan” burials occurred, although radiocarbon results from Scar suggest that the burial there may be later (Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998:154, Owen and Dalland 1999:157–165).¹ Although I will hereafter use the term “Scandinavian”, it is meant in the sense of “culturally Scandinavian” as there is a strong possibility that not all of those buried in a Scandinavian manner in Orkney had emigrated from Scandinavia. This scenario has been demonstrated by isotope analysis in the case of one individual from the cemetery at Westness, Rousay, and all 7 of the individuals buried at Cnip on the Isle of Lewis, Outer Hebrides (Montgomery and Evans 2006, Montgomery et al. 2014).

Corpus

We are fortunate in having a relatively large corpus of Scandinavian burials in Orkney for which the location is known at least approximately, although there are some for which our information is too slight to be included in this study. The burials listed below are those for which the original find report mentions the existence or likely existence of pre-Viking Age monuments in the vicinity, or, preferably, where the exact location of the burial is known so that the site could be checked for earlier monuments. All of the sites were visited in June 2014. It should be remembered that in some cases pre-Viking Age structures may have been present in the Viking Age but are no longer visible (or do not survive) today, so it should not be assumed that this paper overestimates the association, in terms of geographical proximity, between them and Scandinavian burials. The information provided includes the number of burials at each site, the osteologically determined sex and age where known, the main artifacts, and the location. The latter can be viewed on the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland’s website “Canmore”, and at McLeod (2015), which also includes location maps for all sites and viewshed maps for sites whose location is known to within 100 m. The site identification number as used on Canmore is provided in each entry. All of the burials are inhumations unless noted otherwise.

Mainland

Buckquoy, Birsay (2) – (1) male over 40: spear, knife, ring-headed pin, coin of Edmund of England (940–946). The burial was inserted into a mound created by a ruined late 9th-century Scandinavian house, which itself was built on a Pictish figure-of-eight-shaped building. (2) newborn baby under a flagstone in the late 9th century Scandinavian house. The site is close to the Knowe of Buckquoy (Fig. 1)

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and other potential pre-Viking Age monuments, with views over Birsay Bay and to the Brough of Birsay (Canmore:1802; Morris 1989:28–36; Ritchie 1977:182, 188, 190–192).

Brough Rd, Birsay (3) – (1) male 50–60: antler comb, knife. (2) female in her 50s: knife. Both found in cist graves in a midden, or possibly two middens, still in use. The male burial was above a Roman Iron Age or Pictish cairn, and another was close by. (3) unsexed, 30–35: a Viking Age burial without grave-goods was placed on the stones of the other Roman Iron Age or Pictish cairn (Morris 1989:114–115, 123, 127, 137, 273, 288–289). Due to the association between the burials, and the use of the cairn, I interpret this burial as “Scandinavian” (cf. Ashmore 2003:41, Thäte 2007:124). The site is 300 m south of the Buckquoy site with a similar outlook but further from the possible pre-Viking Age monuments (Canmore:1804, 73552).

Broch of Gurness (2) – (1) unsexed: oval brooches, sickle, knife, necklace of amulets including a Thor’s hammer. (2) unsexed: amber bead and a ringed pin in association with fragments of a skull. Burial 1 was in the wall of the former defenses, at the outer entrance (Fig. 2). Burial 2 was in the ditch between two defensive ramparts. The broch overlooks Eynhallow Sound with views to Rousay (Canmore:2201; Hedges 1987:73).

Bay of Skaill, Sandwick – unsexed: spear, knife, arrow-head, comb in case. Found under a cairn, probably in a multi-period settlement mound that included pre-Viking Age structures (Fig. 3). The site is on high ground overlooking the Bay of Skaill,

~150 m from the pre-historic village of Skara Brae (Canmore:1665; Morris 1985: 89, Watt 1888:283–285).

Knowe of Moan – unsexed cremation: amber and glass beads, brooch. In a field overlooking the Loch of Bosquoy and Loch of Harray, and close to Harray church which has a man-made mound in its cemetery (Fig. 4) (Canmore:2027; Cursiter 1887).²

Stenness – unsexed: skull fragment and a ring-headed pin. Found above a ruined building on the banks of Housequoy Burn (Canmore:2127; Charleson 1904–1905: 95).

Howe, Stromness – unsexed: Viking Age glass linen smoother. Found in an Iron Age broch mound on the slope of a hill overlooking the Bay of Ireland and the Loch of Stenness. Howe comes from Old Norse *haugr*, meaning mound/burial mound. Complete excavation of the broch found a concentration of bones in a 1.5 m x 2 m area on the outer broch tower wall (Canmore:1731; Ballin Smith 1994:120). The excavator considers that this is the burial site, hence its inclusion here (B. Ballin Smith, Archaeological Consultant and Researcher, Denny UK, pers. comm.).

Rousay

Westness (10) – male and female adults, one infant: numerous grave-goods including two boats, weapons, oval and other brooches, gaming pieces, and combs. These burials were added to a pre-Norse cemetery in use since the 7th century. The Knowe of Swandro broch was visible, as was, possibly, the Knowe of Rowiegar chambered cairn



Figure 1. The Knowe of Buckquoy from the Buckquoy, Mainland, burial site.



Figure 2. Reconstruction of the grave containing a Viking Age burial at the entrance to the Broch of Gurness, Mainland.



Figure 3. Remains of the settlement mound at the Bay of Skaill, Mainland, on top of which a Viking Age burial was probably found.

(Canmore:2204; Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998:135–137, Kaland 1993, Wilson and Moore 1997:60).³

Sanday

Scar (3) – boat burial with an adult male, elderly female, and a child: numerous grave-goods including weapons, combs, a brooch, gaming pieces, textile equipment, and a whalebone plaque. Found on the coast in a sand mound on top of an earlier stone wall (Canmore:3494; Owen and Dalland 1999).

Styes of Brough – unsexed: sword. Found in one of four widely spaced mounds, the most prominent of which is a broch mound. The sword was presumably from a burial, possibly the one with a boat-shaped stone setting excavated in 1998 in which a fragment of human bone was found (Canmore:3509; Owen and Dalland 1999:14, Time Team 1998).

Lamba Ness (2) – (1) unsexed: sword, shield, spear. (2) unsexed cremation: oval brooches, lignite arm-ring, amber bead, ring-headed pin. In a ruined building, possibly the Broch of Lamba Ness, and a mound near the Broch, respectively (Canmore:3424, 3426; Catalogue 1892:236–237, Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998:56–57).⁴

Westray

Sand of Gill (4) – unsexed: numerous grave goods including weapons and horses and riding equipment. These burials were on or just off the

Sand of Gill, a beach in the sheltered Pierowall Bay, with a letter by the excavator about the burials specifically saying that they were “near the shore”. Not near known earlier monuments (Canmore:2768; Grieg 1940:97, Thorsteinsson 1968:166–168).

Pierowall Links (12) – unsexed: numerous grave-goods including weapons, oval brooches, horse and riding equipment, combs, beads. This cemetery was apparently situated on high ground overlooking the Sand of Gill and Pierowall Bay. A group of four and five burials, respectively, were arranged around two mounds, another was under a mound (possibly natural), and two were from the general vicinity (Canmore:2768; Thorsteinsson 1968:164–166, 168–171).

The corpus comprises 13 burial sites with a minimum of 43 burials, across 4 of the Orkney Islands. This is likely to be a small percentage of the Viking Age accompanied burials that once existed in Orkney, especially considering that a number of islands with other evidence for a Scandinavian presence have no certain burials on record.

It is pertinent to briefly review the corpus to ascertain if any of the burials may not have been knowingly associated with an earlier monument. The burials at the Broch of Gurness and Howe (if the burial itself is accepted) were inserted into earlier monuments so their association is certain, as are the two burial clusters around two mounds in the cemetery at Pierowall Links. The exact location



Figure 4. The mound in the churchyard at Harray, Mainland.

of these mounds is not known, and it is uncertain if these mounds were natural or man-made. In his re-evaluation of the site, however, Arne Thorsteinsson considered that at least one of the mounds may have been pre-Viking Age, and the other (composed of sand and small stones) may have been natural but was not necessarily recognized as such by the Scandinavians, as sometimes also happened in Scandinavia (Harrison 2007:178; Thäte 2007:37, 139; Thorsteinsson 1968:163–164, 166). The burial at the Bay of Skaill can possibly also be added as the find site appears to be the same as that occupied by a large multi-period (two or three phases) settlement mound (Morris 1985:89). As the burial came from the top of the mound, it is likely that the structures below it were pre-Viking Age; however, it is not certain that it was used for settlement in the Viking Age, although it may have been (Morris 1985:89). The boat burial at Scar was alongside a substantial wall dated to ca. 450–650 which “might already have been partly buried by windblown sand”, implying that part of the wall *may* have been clearly visible (Owen and Dalland 1999:25). Although the site was probably selected because of the presence of a convenient sand mound building up around the wall, a desire to associate the burial with the wall may have been a factor. There are precedents in Scandinavia for Viking Age burials being placed on earlier house walls (Thäte 2007:111). However, as discussed below, the deliberate association between the wall and the burial at Scar is too uncertain to be included. The burial found in an “ancient structure” at Lamba Ness in 1878 is likely to be from the Broch

of Lamba Ness itself or in its near vicinity since objects specifically from the broch were recorded as being found in the same year by the same person (Catalogue 1892:275, Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998:56–57). Preliminary investigation of the so-called broch suggests that it is Iron Age, possibly a roundhouse (Hunter et al. 2007:13). Unfortunately, the exact location of the Stenness burial is not known, so the age of the “ruined building” above which the mound containing the burial was discovered in 1902 cannot be determined, so it must be excluded from consideration (Charleson 1905–1906:95).

A number of the burials in the corpus are close to earlier monuments. In particular, the likely site of the Styes of Brough burial is one of four visible mounds in close proximity to each other and which are inter-visible (Time Team 1998). The broch mound in particular is clearly visible from a distance today and was probably more obvious ca. 1000 years ago (Fig. 5). The Knowe of Buckquoy mound is clearly visible less than 100 m from the site of the Buckquoy burials, but unfortunately the dating of the mound is uncertain (Fig. 1). However, there were also various other pre-Viking Age monuments in the vicinity that are no longer visible (Morris 1989:28–36). The Knowe is also visible from the Brough Road burial site, but it is over 200 m away and not immediately apparent. However, as discussed in greater detail below, these three burials were associated with two earlier cairns, one of which was re-used for a Viking Age burial (Morris 1989:114–115, 288–289). The Knowe of Moan cremation is in a field without other known archaeo-



Figure 5. Mounds at the Styes of Brough, Sanday. The broch mound is on the left.

logical features, but approximately 150 m away is a prominent man-made mound, possibly a broch, now in the cemetery behind the church at Harray (Canmore:2028). Unfortunately, the mound is not dated and its function not positively identified, so it might not have existed at the time of the burial (Fig. 4). Another cremation was found under a mound near the so-called Broch of Lamba Ness sometime before 1915 (Anonymous 1915:15, Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998:56–57). The cemetery at Westness is associated with the Knowe of Swandro broch and the Knowe of Rowiegar chambered cairn, but at over 300 and 500 m distant, respectively, it is uncertain how visible these sites would have been. Yet in this instance the burials were added to an existing pre-Scandinavian Christian cemetery where the earlier burials had been marked on the ground with headstones (Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998:136). Consequently, the cemetery itself was to some degree an existing monument, albeit one not as visible as, for example, a broch mound.

This review of the corpus returns 4 sites (Brough Road, Broch of Gurness, Scar, and Westness) out of the 13 (31%) where the burial is directly associated with an earlier monument by being placed in/on one, even if the exact nature of the “ancient structure” of the last is unknown. The cemetery at Pierowall Links

appears to have been focused on 2 mounds, and consequently it should be added to the above group, bringing the total to 5, or 38%. Another 3 sites (Styes of Broch, Buckquoy, and the burials near the cairn at Brough Road), or 23%, were situated close to visible earlier monuments. Including these, the combined total is 8 out of 13 sites, or 61%, being associated with earlier monuments.⁵ There is 1 site (Sand of Gill), or 8%, with no known association to an earlier monument. Of the remainder, Howe is excluded as it cannot be certain that the linen smoother belonged to a burial, whilst Knowe of Moan, Bay of Skaill, the burials in and near the Broch of Lamba Ness, and Stenness may be associated with pre-Viking Age structures but must be excluded due to a lack of dating of the structures, i.e., they may not be pre-Viking Age. Even if those sites whose association with an earlier monument must remain uncertain are also removed, namely Buckquoy, Scar, and Pierowall Links, there are still 5 sites (38%) with a clear and seemingly deliberate association with pre-Viking Age structures.

Discussion

Three obvious conclusions can be drawn from examination of the above corpus of accompanied



Figure 6. The beach at Westness, Rousay, directly above which lay the cemetery that included 10 Viking Age accompanied burials.

Scandinavian burials in Orkney: there is a close association between the burial sites and views of water (Fig. 6), quite a close association between burial sites and earlier monuments, and an almost endless array of site-types that were considered suitable for burial. The first comes as no surprise as it is a standard feature of the majority of Scandinavian burials in Britain and Ireland (Harrison 2007). Indeed, it has been noted that almost all of the burials in Scotland are within 2 km of the coast (Harrison 2007:175). For Orkney this would include all of the burials in the corpus as even those that appear to be in central Mainland (Stenness, Knowe of Moan) lie within 2 km of the two large lochs, Loch of Stenness and Loch of Harray (Fig. 7). The Loch of Stenness is accessible to the Bay of Ireland and the North Atlantic through a narrow channel that was within view of the Iron Age broch and Viking Age burial at Howe. Before the road bridge was added, this would have made the loch a very attractive sheltered bay with easy access to the fertile lands of the interior. The Loch of Harray is currently separated from the Loch of Stenness by a narrow causeway and the Bridge of Brodgar, effectively making Harray an extension of the Loch of Stenness via, at worst, a very short portage. Arguably, it is difficult to avoid water in Orkney, and yet the choice of coastal sites for burials is still striking, with the reservation that it may be in part due to the number of excavations resulting from coastal erosion (Leonard 2011:45). Decisions made initially for practical purposes, such as placing burials at a good location to beach a ship and being close to a settlement, can gain religious significance over time. It has been suggested that Scandinavian burials were often placed near water as it was a liminal space—on the threshold between two places, including between the worlds of the living and the dead—and may symbolize a journey from this world to the next (Brink 2013:41, 45; Heide 2011; Thäte 2007:141). Having a wide variety of burial site-types is not unexpected and is paralleled (in variety rather than site specifics) by the corpus of Scandinavian burials in England (McLeod 2013).

The association of up to 62% of the burial sites with earlier monuments is striking, far exceeding the percentages for Viking Age Scandinavia recorded by Eva Thäte (2007:165–166; southern Sweden 5.2%, Rogaland [SW Norway] 12%, Denmark 23%), as well as the 18% for Britain and Ireland overall noted by Harrison (2007:178).⁶ Even if a more conservative approach is taken, we still have a figure of 38%, representing a greater occurrence of re-use in Orkney than in Scandinavia. This high level of association is not necessarily surprising as every Viking-

late Norse coastal settlement is located either near or on an earlier mound, and of course burials are usually located near settlements (Harrison 2013b:49). Orkney is rich in pre-Viking Age archaeological features, but this does not mean that the proximity of so many Scandinavian burials to earlier features is mere coincidence. Although a degree of convenience in having a suitable mound available may have been a factor in site selection, it has been demonstrated by Thäte in her important study of the Scandinavian corpus that earlier monuments were deliberately selected, often in conjunction with other landscape features (Thäte 2007:156, 278; Thäte 2009:118; Pedersen 2006:346). It is evident in Orkney that the Scandinavians were deliberately choosing to associate some of their dead with earlier monuments, particularly mounds, remembering that sites like the Broch of Gurness would have appeared as large man-made mounds in the Viking Age, as when it was re-discovered in 1929 (Fojut 2008:5, Leonard 2011:59–61). For example, there are no Viking Age burials associated with the numerous standing stones in Orkney, and in this respect the Orkney corpus is similar to that from Scandinavia (Thäte 2007:183). Indeed, in all 8 sites associated with pre-Viking Age structures, the earlier feature is a mound, except in the case of Brough Road where two Roman Iron Age or Pictish period cairns were the focus.

Other reasons for burial location

It is not my intention to argue that the existence of earlier monuments was the only, or even the primary, reason for choice of burial location in Viking Age Orkney. It is important to bear in mind Thäte's finding that locations with a number of potentially liminal landscape features were highly desirable in Viking Age Scandinavia (Thäte 2009:108, 117–118). The same was clearly the case in Orkney, with at least two liminal landscape locations, the coast and an earlier monument, present at many of the sites. Being located close to/within sight of a settlement is another obvious factor, with the burials at Buckquoy, Brough Road, Westness, Lamba Ness, Styes of Brough, and Bay of Skail, and potentially all of the other burials too, in this category. As noted at Scar, a degree of convenience in using an existing mound can also not be excluded.

In terms of burial choices, the Buckquoy and Brough Road, Birsay, burials are particularly interesting, in part because they were both modern excavations that have been fully published (although Buckquoy could have originally been published in more detail, see Brundle et al. 2003), allowing for a more detailed analysis. Although the infant buried

under a flagstone in the house at Buckquoy was interpreted as a foundation ritual, Thäte has suggested that there may have been a more emotional

reason: namely, keeping the infant close to the family (Ritchie 1977:188, Thäte 2007:120). The infant was buried in line with the door (Ritchie 1977:fig. 3)



Figure 7. Map of the burial sites, excluding Howe.

and Thäte has also noted that doorways were liminal places in Scandinavian mentality in the Viking Age, as demonstrated by Ibn Fadlan's description of a woman being raised above an artificial door-frame to see into another world during a Rus funeral on the Volga in 922, and by the doorway shape of the picture stones on Gotland (Andrén 1993, Montgomery 2000:17–18, Thäte 2007:113–114). Mention could also be made of *Volsa þáttur*, a chapter in *St Olaf's saga* in *Heimskringla* (Snorri Sturluson, ca. 1230), where a woman asks to be lifted above the door-frame in order to see into another world (Steinsland and Vogt 1981). These two written sources indicate that the doorway allowed people to look into another world, and it is interpreted as a portal to another world in the shape of the picture stones. Consequently, the Buckquoy infant may have been deliberately sited in a liminal place for their journey to the otherworld. Approximately 40 years after the house had been abandoned, the body of a male aged over 45 was placed in the mound that had formed over the house (Lorimer 2003:102, Ritchie 1977:192). In this instance, the motive for re-use is clearly different from that at sites such as the Broch of Gurness and Styes of Brough, as it represents the (presumably) deliberate re-use of a known Norse structure for a burial. Given that the man was thought to have been over 45 years old and the house is estimated to have been abandoned for 40 years before he was buried to allow time for the mound to form, it suggests that the man was alive when the house was first abandoned. Thäte suggests that the man was a new owner of the land with his descendants establishing their continued rights by burying him in the ruined house, but I wonder if there was an association between the man and the infant buried under the flagstone (Thäte 2007:124)? While the various pre-Viking Age features in the vicinity should not be ignored as contributory factors in the burial location, they were apparently not the primary reason for the location of the Buckquoy burials.

At Brough Road, Birsay, the three burials appear to have been close to a settlement and centered on two Roman Iron Age or Pictish cairns. The grave of one of the Viking Age burials, in a possible long cist, was placed on top of the stones of one of the cairns (Morris 1989:114, 116). The two other burials were close by but were inserted in a mound created by a kitchen midden, or perhaps two middens, which was still in use (Morris 1989:127). This placement means that, although they were provided with defined graves, they effectively became part of the discarded waste. The midden in which the male was buried had accumulated on top of the other cairn (Morris 1989:127). It has been suggested that

the use of a midden for these burials was a variation on the re-use theme: that it was convenient, or that middens were a symbol of wealth (Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998:58, Leonard 2011:60, Thäte 2007:124–125). Additionally, human bones found in the midden show that earlier burials had been disturbed (Morris 1989:289). Consequently, the re-use of a disturbed cemetery may have been a reason for adding new burials to the midden. However this unusual location is interpreted, its use for two accompanied burials contrasts with the nearby unaccompanied burial in what would appear to have been a more prestigious burial location, directly on top of the pre-Viking Age cairn. This scenario brings to mind Pedersen's (2006:352) suggestion that "The ancient monument, its location in the landscape and the link it held to the past may have been equally or even more important than the artifacts or the construction of the grave set into it".

The more detailed analysis possible for the Buckquoy and Brough Road burial sites clearly demonstrates the myriad of choices available regarding burial location, and that in each instance there may have been a particular reason for the choice of burial site specific to the deceased and/or their family and local community. These sites suggest that some landscape features other than pre-Viking Age structures may have influenced burial location—not only proximity to the coast and settlements, but also, potentially, emotional attachments to a dead child and an old house at Buckquoy, and literally returning the dead to organic matter in the midden at Brough Road. However, the presence of visible structures should not be ignored, especially the re-use of a cairn at Brough Road, and one should consider Thäte's (2009:118) finding that a combination of potentially liminal landscape features for burials appears to have been preferred.

Reasons for the association with pre-Viking Age structures

With quite a high incidence of an association with earlier structures in Orkney, it is worth considering the possible reasons for the phenomenon. This analysis may provide an insight into the mind-set of the early Scandinavian settlers in the period ca. AD 850–950 (cf. Leonard 2011). Practical reasons for the association include convenience, proximity to the main mode of transport (water), and proximity to a settlement. Another reason for choosing a prominent landmark may have been to help people find and attend the funeral. The only contemporary detailed account of a culturally Scandinavian funeral was made by Ibn Fadlan who witnessed a Rus' funeral on the River Volga in 922. He recorded that the

funeral commenced ten days after the death of the chieftain, to allow time for the preparations for the funeral (Montgomery 2000:13). This interval would also have allowed time for people to be invited and travel to the funeral, while the use of a prominent coastal landmark would have made the funeral site easier to locate. With their coastal locations, the Orkney sites are easily approached by sea and are often more visible from an approaching boat than by land, particularly the Styes of Broch, Broch of Gurness, and, prior to levelling, Howe (Figs. 8 and 9; McLeod 2015).

However, it is believed that there may also have been other reasons for an association with earlier monuments (Harrison 2007:178). Thäte (2007:220, 277; 2009:105) has suggested that the main reason for the re-use of earlier monuments in Viking Age Scandinavia was the notion of linking the Viking Age dead with the ancestors, including associated claims to legitimacy and land ownership. Given the evidence for ancestor worship in Scandinavia (Sanmark 2010), it seems likely that in Orkney re-used

monuments became part of a sacred Scandinavian cultural landscape in the new homeland where none had existed before (cf. Sanmark, in press). In this sense, the immigrants created a sacred landscape for themselves by creating a ritual past “in which particular groups establish their own position and put it beyond challenge” (Bradley 1987:3).

The notion of land ownership is certainly relevant to Orkney burials, where the migrant elite, or at least their culture, displaced the existing aristocracy (Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998:39, 54). Thäte (2007:126) notes that, in Scotland, re-use was more often associated with earlier houses than with earlier burials, which suggests that “when the Scandinavians settled in the Scottish Isles, the aspect of ‘legitimation’ may have been irrelevant for them since their status as ‘occupants’ was probably ‘legitimation’ enough at the beginning”. However, the higher incidence of re-use of pre-Viking Age monuments in Orkney than in Scandinavia suggests that legitimation was still a factor, even if it was expressed differently from Scandinavia and included

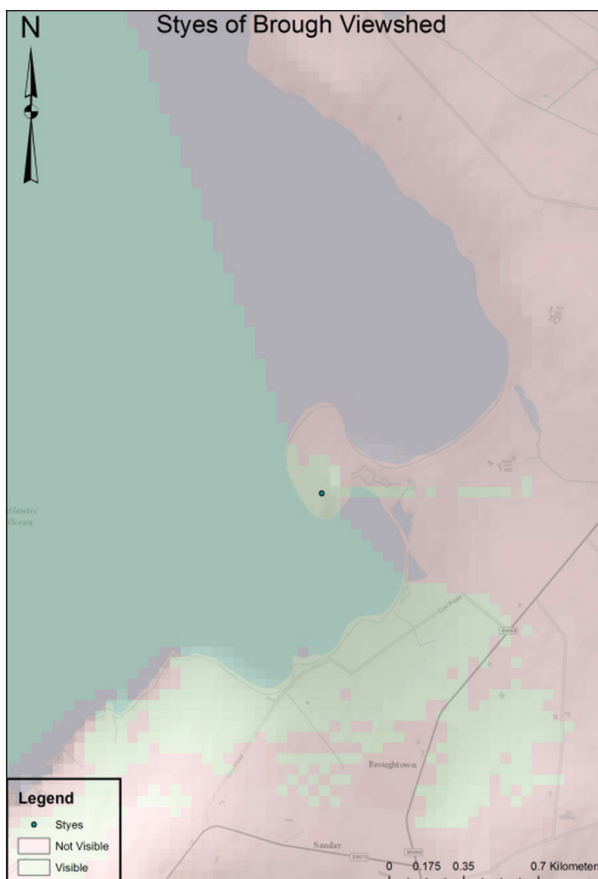


Figure 8. Viewshed map of the Styes of Brough, Sanday, burial site, with the green areas showing where the site is visible from. Based upon Ordnance Survey data. Crown copyright 2013.

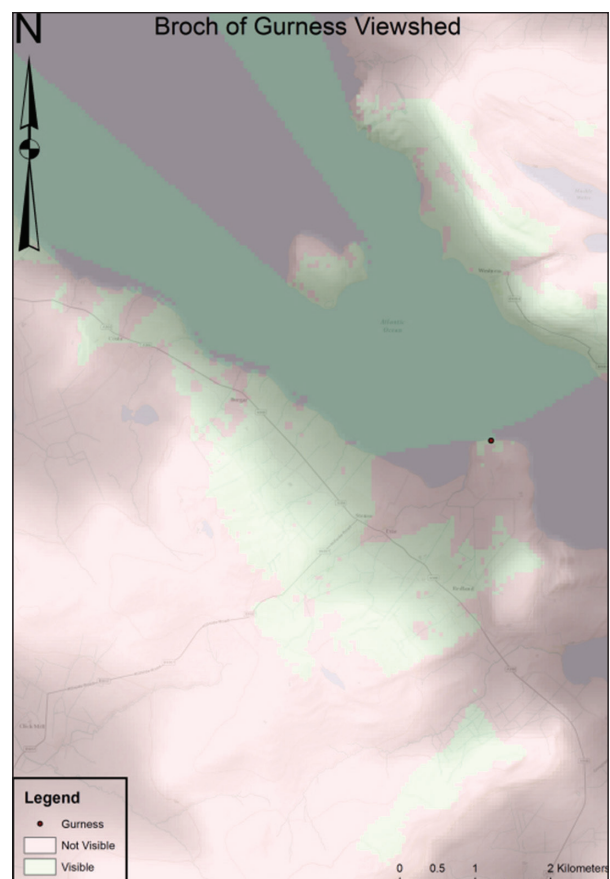


Figure 9. Viewshed map of the Broch of Gurness, Mainland, burial site, with the green areas showing where the site is visible from. Based upon Ordnance Survey data. Crown copyright 2013.

an overt display of occupation and control, as Thäte suggests. The association of the Scandinavian dead with pre-Viking Age monuments suggests that the immigrants were happy to associate themselves with ancestors who were not biologically their own, and that burying their dead in or near a structure created by the former rulers of the area helped to legitimize their claim to those lands. Indeed, Thäte (2007:34) notes that in Scandinavia “the ‘ancestor idea’ in prehistory is not literally meant in terms of real genetic ancestors, but in terms of people who have lived in a given area as the predecessors of later cultures”; while Hållans Stenholm (2006:343) mentions that ancient burials in Scandinavia were often reused, possibly for the “creation of a mythic past” (see also Pedersen 2006:351–352). This notion appears to have been transferred to Orkney. Pedersen (2006:351) also raises the possibility that, in an oral society, “ceremony and visual expression were essential means of communication and in a sense documentation, memory of an event or site also creating a form of record which could be recalled and transferred orally”. This function could have been enhanced by the placing of the dead in existing mounds, thereby communicating “the status of an individual and family, possibly legitimizing their control and claims over land, resources and people in relation to, for instance, inheritance or even take-over of land” (Pedersen 2006:351). It seems that the same mind-set applied to the emigrants from Scandinavia who legitimized their control of Orkney by associating their dead with the rulers of the past and by adding some of their dead to the monumental landscape created by earlier peoples. It may even be that the actual take-over of the land was being advertised through the symbolic take-over of earlier monuments, some of which were significant landscape markers.

There remains the question of why the association between Scandinavian burials and early monuments in Orkney is so strong. It could signal domination of the local population who were not in a position to prevent the monuments of their ancestors being re-used. It could also show an effort on the part of the Scandinavians to merge their traditions with the local landscape and, possibly, with those of the local population. In either case, the local population, which was Christian, may not have been particularly upset by the re-use of pre-Christian monuments. The one certain exception is the Christian cemetery at Westness, which had been in use since the 7th century.⁷ As this cemetery has produced evidence of both “pagan” and Christian burials during the Viking Age, it supports the notion of some level

of co-existence between incomer and native, at least in Rousay (Kaland 1993:314, Sellevold 1999:fig. 3, table 1). Without the ability to justify land-claims through association with biological ancestors, the greater incidence of burials associated with existing monuments in Orkney than in Scandinavia may have been due to a lack of other easily available methods to visually demonstrate land ownership and authority in the landscape. However, another method soon developed and appears to have replaced the need for burials in visible landscape markers: namely, settlement mounds.

Burials and settlement mounds

In two important recent articles, Jane Harrison (2013a, b) has argued that highly visible settlement mounds in Orkney on the arms of bays that were suitable for beaching ships were a way of demonstrating and monumentalizing power and that, unlike in Norway, they served this purpose more clearly than burials in mounds. Harrison’s argument is convincing, and yet the time and materials invested in most of the burials in the present corpus—perhaps best exemplified in the boat burials at Westness and Scar, and in the burials accompanied by horses at Pierowall Links and Sand of Gill—clearly demonstrate that the act of burial was still considered to be important. Despite the prominence of the settlement mounds, there are four burials in or near existing monumental mounds, the Broch of Gurness, Styes of Brough, and probably the Broch of Lamba Ness plus Howe if the site is accepted, and these may have been special in some way. These mounds were clearly visible in the landscape, including by people approaching by boat. Unless they were marked in some way in the Viking Age (and there is no evidence for this at these sites, although there is at Westness) the implication is that the audience for the re-use was primarily local, i.e., people who would know that the pre-Viking Age monument had been re-used for a burial. Not all of these mounds are near known Viking Age settlements, perhaps suggesting that the location was considered important even if it wasn’t particularly convenient for those participating in the funeral. Of the mound burials listed above, no certain evidence for Scandinavian settlement has been discovered at or near the Broch of Gurness or Howe despite extensive excavation of the latter. The mounds at the Styes of Brough are visible from the probable Scandinavian settlement mound behind the nearby farm-house, which is similar to those in Norway where burial mounds were often visible from the settlement (Gjerland and Keller 2010:163, Time Team 1998). Unfortunately, the nature of the

Broch of Lamba Ness itself has not been established, but, as noted above it may be Iron Age (Hunter et al 2007:13). The nearest certain Scandinavian settlement is the multi-period settlement mound at Pool approximately 550 m away across Pool Bay, and the sites are inter-visible (Hunter et al. 2007). At the Bay of Skaill, an accompanied burial appears to have been inserted into a settlement mound, but it is not known if the settlement mound was occupied during the Viking Age (Morris 1985:89). The nearest confirmed Scandinavian settlement lies approximately 1 km away at the opposite side of the bay where there are two settlement mounds (Harrison 2013a:135). Again, the sites are inter-visible.

The dating of the settlement mounds may be crucial in understanding the relationship between them and accompanied burials in re-used mounds. The beginning of the Scandinavian phase of the earliest excavated mound at the Bay of Skaill, known as the Castle of Snusgar, has been dated to the 10th century, as “radiocarbon dating of carbonised grain by SU-ERC shows these [midden and ash] layers [of the mound] were created relatively rapidly in the period AD 900 to 1050” (Griffiths and Harrison 2011:15). The earliest Scandinavian evidence in the mound at Pool, Sanday, began in the late 8th or 9th century, but the early phase included a mixture of Pictish and Scandinavian artifacts, and the immigrants modified existing buildings before the extra layering and re-organization of the settlement in the mid-10th century, which included the building of a long-house (Hunter et al 2007:table 5.1, 162, 520). Indeed, this phenomenon—of the earliest migrants from Scandinavia using existing Pictish buildings, referred to by Morris (Morris 1998:85) as “informal settlement,” for a period before settlement remodelling with characteristically Scandinavian buildings—also occurred at Old Scatness, Shetland, among other places (Dockrill et al 2010:361–362). Harrison (2013a:144) suggests that settlement mounds “reflected and reinforced the social organization of the Earldom during the period from perhaps the early 10th century into the 12th century”. As Scandinavian settlement, and therefore burial, in Orkney is usually thought to have begun ca. AD 850 (Barrett 2008:419), this timeframe suggests that settlement mounds were used as claims to legitimacy and demonstrations of land ownership a generation or two *after* Scandinavian settlement began, although additional securely dated settlement mounds are needed to be certain. Consequently, the initial settlers, those who arrived before the Earldom was established, may have used monumental burial for these purposes, as they had in Scandinavia. This practice may have been con-

sidered particularly important during the “informal settlement” phase when the status of the immigrants was being established. Dating burials even to within a century without (and even sometimes with) radiocarbon dating is notoriously difficult, but if it is accepted that accompanied burials started in ca. 850 as argued by Graham-Campbell and Batey (1998:154) and Barrett (2008:419), then the earliest burials may have taken place before the settlement mounds were particularly substantial, in part due to the lengthy process necessary to build them up (Harrison 2013b:50–53). Of the burial sites, Knowe of Moan, Pierowall, and Sand of Gill may date to the 9th century, with the Pierowall burials associated with mounds of unknown size or function. In addition, the Scandinavian burials at Westness are dated to the 9th century (Sellevold 1999:table 1). Although these burials do not appear to have been marked by mounds or cairns, they may have been marked by upstanding stones and were on a different alignment to the earlier and roughly contemporary unaccompanied graves in the same cemetery, clearly demonstrating their difference above ground (Kaland 1993:312–314, Sellevold 1999:fig. 2). The burial on the cairn at Brough Road has been radiocarbon dated to 880–1140, while the two in the midden were dated by a combination of radiocarbon dating and artifact typology to the late 9th/early 10th century; however, a mixed atmospheric/marine calibration date of 650–863 in the 2 sigma range for the male suggests an earlier date for that burial, although it was disturbed and other human bones were found in the vicinity (Barrett et al 2000:table 1, Morris 1989:290–291).⁸ At Buckquoy, the infant under a flagstone is thought to date to the late 9th century, and the male in the subsequent mound is dated by a slightly worn coin to ca. 950, despite a radiocarbon date of AD 232–418 at the 2 sigma level of an associated rib, thought to derive “from another disturbed and unrecorded Iron Age grave” (Barrett 2003a:103; Ritchie 1977:190, 192). As noted above, the Brough Road and Buckquoy burials are somewhat unusual in their locations and may coincide with the beginnings of the era of monumental settlement mounds. Indeed, it may be that the increased use of settlement mounds as monumental landscape markers associated with legitimacy and prestige, at roughly the same time as a perceived growth in Christian influence in the 10th century (Barrett 2003b), worked in conjunction to hasten the end of accompanied burials. During the 10th century, settlement mounds appear to have supplanted burials, often also in mounds created by earlier settlements, as symbolic evidence for Scandinavian control and legitimacy.

Conclusion

The association between Scandinavian burials and earlier structures in Orkney suggests that such locations were deliberately chosen by the incoming elite, who recognized the human-made aspects of the landscape in which they settled and treated them as they were accustomed to doing in the Scandinavian homelands. The greater incidence of Viking Age burials associated with early structures in Orkney than in Scandinavia may reflect the need of incoming Scandinavians to stamp their authority on the history of the landscape. Although the immigrants could not (presumably) claim to be re-using the monuments of their ancestors, by associating their dead with them they could assert their claim to the land which they now occupied, with their recent dead added to or placed close to monuments associated with the long-dead rulers of the same land. Over time it appears that settlement mounds filled the role of visible landscape markers asserting the control of the Scandinavian elite, and the settlement mounds continued to be used after the age of non-Christian burial practices had ended.

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- ⁸The mixed atmospheric/marine calibration dates for the burial of the female in the midden (DT) were AD 890–1026 (Barrett et al. 2000:table 1).

Endnotes

- ¹Despite appearing to be a single-event burial, radiocarbon dates from the three individuals at Scar all gave different assays (AD 693–1016, 889–1157, 978–1260), suggesting to Barrett et al. (2000:table 1) that the samples may have been contaminated.
- ²Although this burial is the only cremation in the corpus, there was a certain cremation at Lyking, Orkney Mainland, however it is excluded from this study as its exact location is not known and the find report does not indicate any landscape features other than that it was found under a mound.
- ³Of the accompanied burials, one burial of two people (mother and full-term infant) were found in 1963, seven in excavations between 1968 and 1984 (Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998:136), and one in 1997 (Wilson and Moore 1997:60). There are also two 19th-century finds that may belong to the same cemetery (Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998:136).
- ⁴It should be noted that the uncertainty surrounding the finds at Braeswick has led to its omission here, but they are thought to have come from a narrow subterranean passage, which could have been a souterrain (Canmore:3421; Anonymous 1915:14).
- ⁵The percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.
- ⁶Thäte and Harrison's figures include burials both in and near earlier monuments, as do mine. However, it is possible that their figures may be conservative as they were both largely desk-based studies.
- ⁷It is possible that the Late Iron Age burials at Brough Road may have also been Christian.