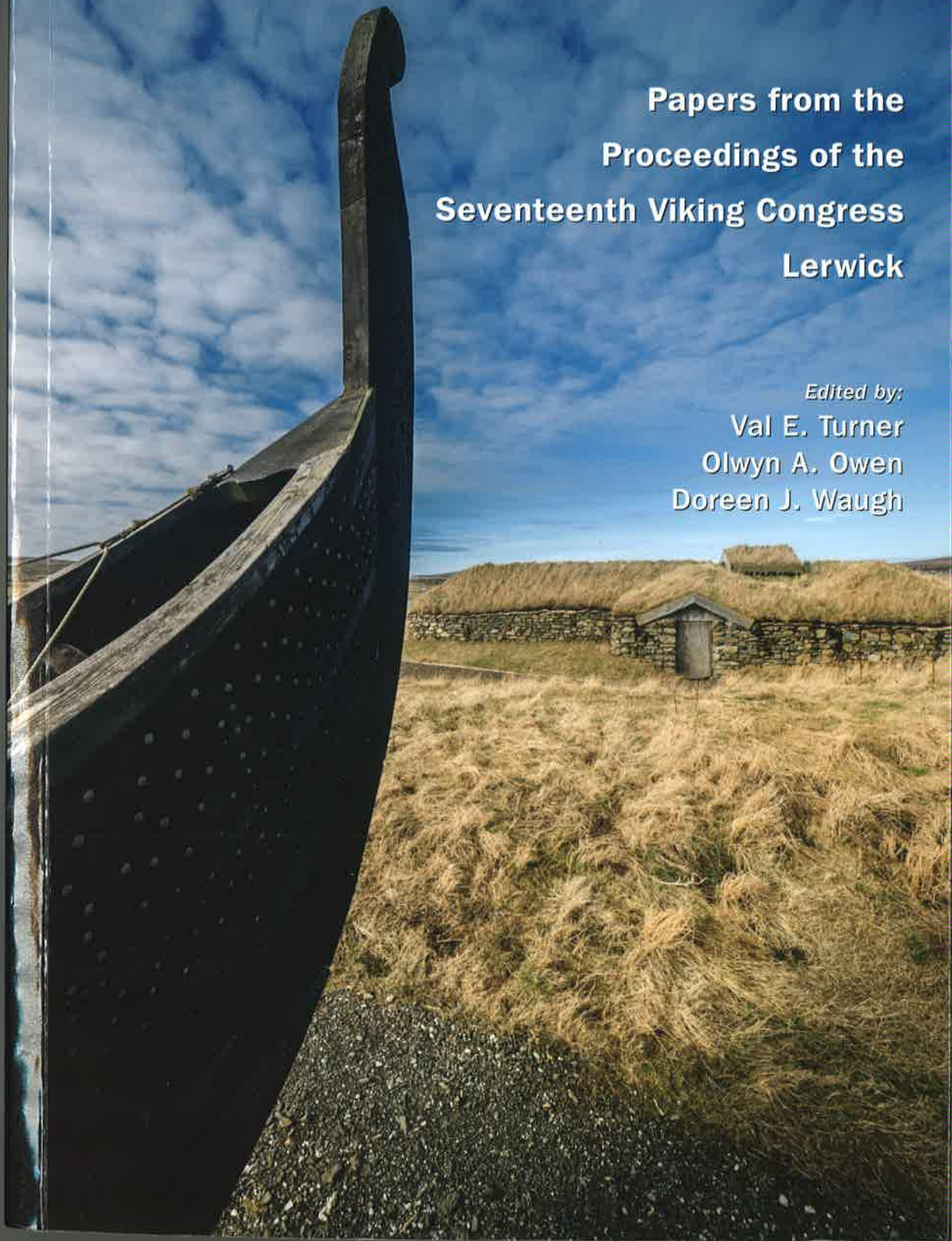


Shetland and the Viking World

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Viking Burials in Scotland: Two 'New' Boat Burial Finds

Colleen E Batey

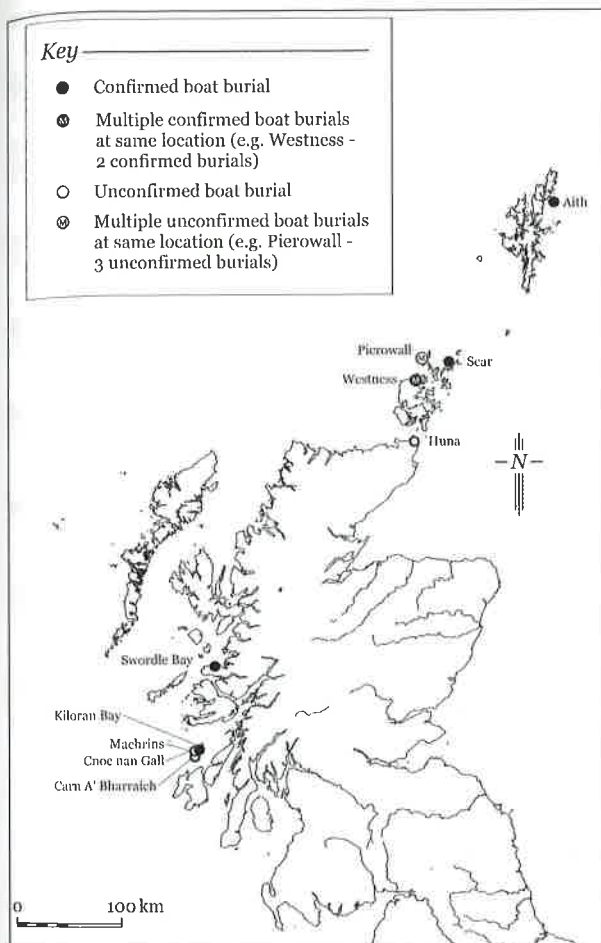


Fig. 1. Boat grave finds in Scandinavian Scotland. (Terence Christian) Aith, Fetlar and Swordle Bay, Ardnamurchan. (Also shown : Scar, Sanday; Westness, Rousay x 2, Kiloran Bay, Colonsay, Cnoc nan Gall, Colonsay?, Huna? Caithness, Pierowall x 3)

The discovery of a Viking burial is always noteworthy, perhaps more so if the burial includes the use of a small boat. Notable Scottish examples have been excavated with spectacular results e.g. Westness, Rousay (Kaland 1993) and Scar, Sanday (Owen and Dalland 1999). Others have fared less well, and the antiquarian records have needed re-assessment, e.g. Kiloran Bay, Colonsay (Bill 2005); possibly Huna in Caithness (Batey 1993, 152); Pierowall, Westray (two potential boat graves, nos. 6 and 16; more convincingly, no. 17) (Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998, 133-4); and Cnoc nan Gall, Colonsay (Batey and Dalgligh forthcoming). The very nature of the identification and recovery of a boat whose timbers have decayed beyond recognition, dependent on the early recognition of corroded iron rivets outlining the vessel, means that it commonly takes place all too late. The two examples presented here, although identified in different circumstances, were recognised early enough in the excavation to allow full recording of both the surviving burial assemblage and of the clinker-built boats themselves. The sites vary geographically: the northern Shetland island of Fetlar, where a boat grave was excavated in 2002, and Ardnamurchan, the most westerly

outreach of mainland Scotland, where news of a spectacular boat grave hit the world press in November 2011 (Fig. 1).

Fetlar: Giant's Grave, Wick of Aith

Background

Initial observations in 1878 recorded a roughly boat-shaped stony mound, approximately 10.7 x 5.50m, aligned NE-SW. Known locally as the Giant's Grave, it acquired the mythology of being a Viking warrior burial. It is unclear when the mound was first disturbed, but by 1932 a few iron rivets and a 'stout bronze plate of pointed oval shape and a stud in the centre' were donated to the National Museum

in Edinburgh (RCAHMS 1946, no. 1217; Donations 1932, 18 no.25), although the published reference neither assigns the plate to Aith, nor mentions the rivets. The plate is however an intrusive piece of modern metal (James Graham-Campbell pers comm). In the 1960s, the owner of nearby Aithbank, J. J. Laurenson, investigated the mound and recovered 40 iron rivets with wood attached. Goodburn notes that fragments of tarred hair were also recovered; he identified this as probably luting (waterproofing material) for the clinker-built vessel (Goodburn 2003, 2). The site was revisited in 1989 by Turner, who noted that the mound included a defined, curved, seaward-facing edge (Shetland Sites and Monuments Record, SMR 0036).

In August 2002 a team of Channel 4 'Time Team' archaeologists arrived in Fetlar, invited by local school children (Channel 4 2003; Edwards and Ely 2004). The programme format enabled the three-day excavation and characterisation of this site, and of a nearby suspected Norse settlement at Gorn (Houbie); a further two days were subsequently added. The primary aim was to confirm whether Aith's stony mound was a boat-shaped Viking grave. Geophysical survey did not indicate any other potential burials within the immediate vicinity (Edwards and Ely, 2004, 10).

The Excavation of a boat

The Fetlar excavation was directed by Magnar Dalland, the excavator of Scar, Orkney (Owen and Dalland 1999). Careful removal of the mound of water-rounded stones showed traces of a defined keel at the seaward edge; this was less clear on the landward side. Pieces of prehistoric pottery and quartz chips were incorporated into the cairn, as was a cobble, apparently used as a smoothing stone. These probably result from activity near the stone quarry rather than from Aith (Edwards and Ely 2004, 5.68).

Some 250 boat rivets and nails were recovered, many not *in situ* due to previous disturbance. Only a selection of the nails retrieved were studied; these included rove nails with round shanks, small hooked nails and plain (dead) nails. Of the rove nails, those with the longest shanks had a gap of c 26mm between the head and rove, the thickness of a plank (Goodburn 2003, 4). A substantial amorphous concretion in the keel area caused much excitement during excavation, the mass being rushed for X

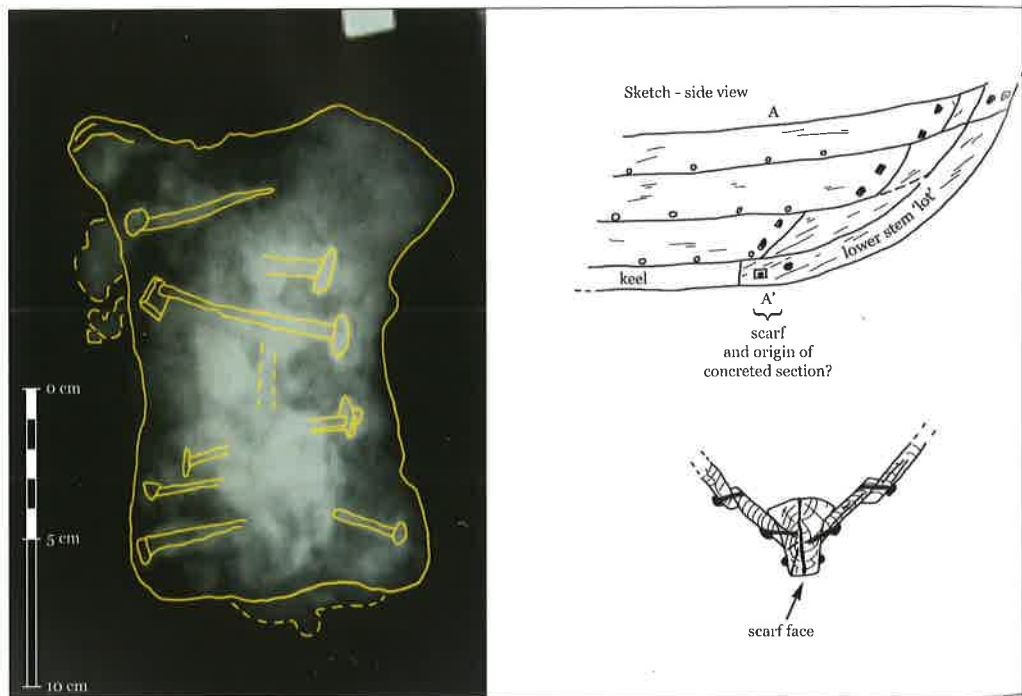
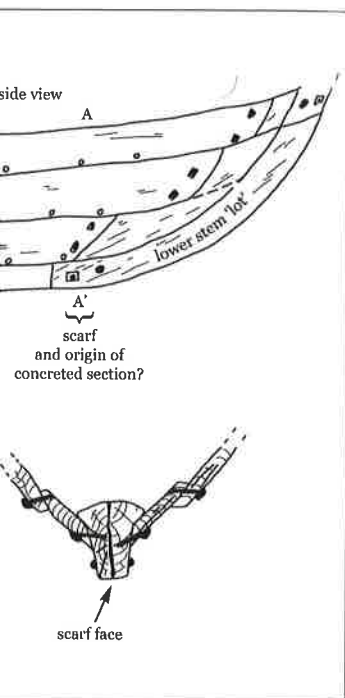


Fig. 2. Aith: Section of Keel. (X-Ray Sonia O'Connor; line drawing Damian Goodburn; composite illustration Terence Christian)

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ray at the hospital in Lerwick. Goodburn identified 6 plain nails, set at sloping angles, with two long rove nail sets (Fig. 2). This is interpreted as two keel sections, joined with a vertical scarf. The piece is approximately 160mm long x 95mm wide x 80mm deep (*ibid.* 5).

The irregular rows of rivets revealed lines of wooden strakes, although severely distorted by both the rocky cairn material and later interventions. Goodburn suggested that this was a clinker-built vessel with maximum beam width of 2.5-2.6m. The length is difficult to judge because the 6m scatter of nails may represent a lower part of the vessel; the maximum possible length is 8m. By comparison, the Scar vessel was c. 7.15m long, the Westness vessels were c. 5.5m and 6.5m long, and the Gokstad *faering* (four oared boat) was 6.5m x 1.38m in the beam (Allen 1999). Known as a 'fourareen', *faerings* are still found in Shetland (and understood to have Norse antecedents); the Aith boat probably had lower sides and more upswept ends. The small size of the vessel is confirmed by the nail and board sizes, commonly 15-18mm thick where they overlapped (Goodburn 2003, 5-6).

Within the vessel outline, the only surviving artefact was a single displaced oval brooch, wedged between stones. The heavy stone cairn material created serious problems during excavation, as it also did at Ardnamurchan (below), and it is not clear if there was a defined chamber within the boat, as at Scar and Westness, both Orkney (Owen and Dalland 1999, 27; Kaland 1993, 314-316). No human remains were recovered from Aith but it is assumed to have been a female burial.

The Oval Brooch

The detailed conservation of the oval brooch was undertaken by Sonia O'Connor, Bradford University (O'Connor 2003) who also lifted the brooch. The fragile edges of the single piece, cast copper alloy, brooch were damaged during discovery, but the body was intact (Fig. 3). The iron pin was largely missing, preserved only at the point of the catch plate. Seatings for nine surface bosses were clearly visible; two



Fig. 3. Aith: Oval Brooch (A. Jenny Murray, Shetland Museum and Archives; B. Detail Sonia O'Connor, University of Bradford)

include traces of a more lead-rich disk. The bosses on a brooch from Kneep/Cnip, Lewis, Hebrides, were made of a lead / tin alloy, similar to a soft solder (Welander *et al* 1987, 160), equivalent analysis was not undertaken for the Aith brooch. The decorative schema includes silver-rich strips between parallel lines, dividing the surface into segments, with gripping beast animalistic motifs. The form, P37, sits readily within the small Shetland grave assemblages (Graham-Campbell this volume), dating to AD 800-850, the Early Viking Period.

Although small textile fragments were preserved on the upper face of the brooch, more significantly, an organic mass filled the cavity which included both silk fragments, similar to the find associated with Cnip brooch 1 (Bender Jørgensen 1987, 166), and a thin sheet of wood, preserved by the corrosion products (O'Connor 2003, 5). Amongst the organic mass was the rare survival of slightly folded skin (O'Connor 2003, 5 and fig. 14). The identification of skin during investigative conservation is exciting, although becoming more common (O'Connor pers comm; Hett 1980).

The significance of the Fetlar boat grave lies less in the quality of the remains, but rather in it still being the only conclusively identified boat

grave from Shetland and one of only a handful of pagan graves known from the islands (Graham-Campbell this volume). This is in stark contrast with Orkney, the Western Isles and, increasingly, the Scottish mainland. The identification of a female within a boat burial is rare throughout Scotland pagan Viking graves; the elderly female from the multiple burial at Scar, Orkney, is the only other one identified to date. As a secondary occupant, the female suttee victim from the mound burial at Ballateare, Isle of Man remains a remarkable discovery (Bersu and Wilson 1966, Plate XA). The presence of the oval brooch at Aith, presumed originally to have been one of a pair in line with common (although not universal) practice, indicates a higher status for this lady who was buried in her boat, probably during the mid 9th century or later. Given the total lack of surviving weaponry or male grave goods, she was apparently alone.

Ardnamurchan: Swordle Bay

Background

The most recently discovered Scottish boat grave is from the most westerly reaches of the mainland, the Ardnamurchan peninsula. Initially identified in 2006, and fully excavated in 2011, investigation formed part of the multi-period Ardnamurchan Transitions Project (ATP) (Harris *et al.* 2012).

The discovery of a small, rather indistinct, turf-covered, boat-shaped, cairn covering a Viking boat burial in this part of mainland Scotland was not anticipated. The archaeological focus for the ATP in this area had been on a substantial Neolithic burial cairn nearby, although in retrospect, previous work on the Norse place-names of Ardnamurchan provided tantalising insights of Norse occupation or presence in the region (Bankier forthcoming). The burial cairn provided physical confirmation, being located in a bay with a Norse derived name (Swordle Bay: ON *svör r* (m), gen *svar ar* 'sward, turf' + *dair*, valley. Simon Taylor pers comm).

The Boat-Shaped Cairn

The low lying cairn was disturbed by agricultural activity, but earth-fast stones delimited the oval-

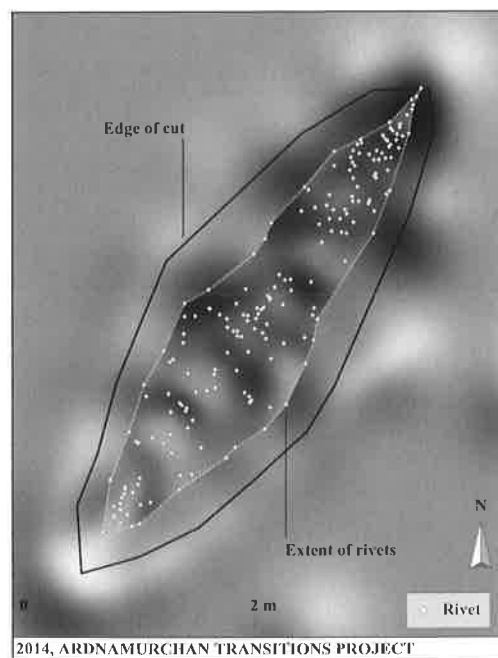


Fig. 4, Ardnamurchan boat burial rivets distribution (copyright ATP)

shaped kerbed cairn, measuring 5.1 x 1.6m at its widest, orientated approximately WSW-ENE. The cairn comprised water-worn boulders mixed with flat slabs which had fallen within the perimeter of the kerbing (Harris *et al.* 2012, 334 and fig. 7). The excavators noted two clearly defined outer kerbs, outlining a boat-shape, with an enclosed space in the centre. The widespread disposition of the finds does not suggest a defined central burial "chamber", unlike Westness, Orkney (Kaland 1993, fig. 17.7). Meticulous recording during the removal of cairn material suggested some attempt to define a burial area in the western and central part of the vessel, dominated by the later additions of spear and shield. The eastern end of the boat was apparently free of non-organic materials, with the exception of a possible bag containing a small cache of nails and rivets (Oliver Harris pers. comm.). This is reminiscent of the layout at Scar, where the deliberate positioning of a large stone slab created an almost central partition within the boat, resulting in three bodies being crushed into one half of the interior space (Owen and Dalland 1999, 27 and fig. 23). Some of the larger items at the Swordle Bay burial, including the shield and

graves known from the islands (Graham, the Western Isles and, increasingly, the burial is rare throughout Scotland pagan ar, Orkney, is the only other one identified from the mound burial at Ballateare, Isle 066, Plate XA). The presence of the oval pair in line with common (although not was buried in her boat, probably during weaponry or male grave goods, she was

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out earth-fast stones delimited the oval berbed cairn, measuring 5.1 x 1.6m at its orientated approximately WSW-ENE. The comprised water-worn boulders mixed with which had fallen within the perimeter of (Harris *et al.* 2012, 334 and fig. 7). Investigators noted two clearly defined outer outlining a boat-shape, with an enclosed the centre. The widespread disposition of does not suggest a defined central burial "r", unlike Westness, Orkney (Kaland g. 17.7). Meticulous recording during the of cairn material suggested some attempt a burial area in the western and central e vessel, dominated by the later additions and shield. The eastern end of the boat arently free of non-organic materials, with tion of a possible bag containing a small f nails and rivets (Oliver Harris pers. This is reminiscent of the layout at Scar, e deliberate positioning of a large stone ted an almost central partition within the ulting in three bodies being crushed into of the interior space (Owen and Dalland 7 and fig. 23). Some of the larger items ordle Bay burial, including the shield and

the spear, the latter deliberately broken, were placed higher within the burial cairn.

The vessel survived as an impression delimited by 284 *in situ* rivets, with no surviving organic traces (Fig. 4). The length of the cairn closely matched that of the excavated boat (5.1m), a rather small rowing boat, apparently shorter than the smallest from Westness.

A spectacular range of objects were recovered, although two teeth fragments and tiny bone fragments were all that remained of the occupant, due to the harsh free-draining soil conditions. Recent isotopic analysis indicates that the occupant was not local and may have originated from coastal Norway (Janet Montgomery, pers. comm.). This picture is echoed in Lewis where isotopic study implies a similar origin for a richly accompanied female Viking amongst the group buried at Cnip (Welanders *et al.* 1987; Montgomery and Evans 2006, 137).

The Grave Goods

The grave goods assemblage can be subdivided into weaponry and domestic categories. The stratigraphically later deposition of the shield and broken spear separates them from the rest of the finds in the lower reaches of the boat. Perhaps the weaponry can be viewed as closing the deposit, the spear head, dating to circa the early AD 900s (Petersen Type E, Petersen 1919, 26-8), being ceremoniously broken and the tip thrown in with the spear because they were too large to fit into the burial cavity. The large shield, with traces of the 5mm thick board surviving within the rivets securing the domed boss (now distorted and very damaged), probably type R563 (Rygh 1885, fig. 563), covered the central burial area prior to being incorporated into the cairn. The very poor organic preservation and the bioturbation of the human remains, makes it unclear whether the shield was originally positioned to cover the head, as is common in pagan Viking burials. Examples from the Isle of Man indicate the secondary positioning of weapons when spear and shield were too large to be placed within the burial cavity, (eg Ballateare; Bersu and Wilson 1966, 49, fig. 32).

The broad-bladed axe, similar to Petersen's type M (Petersen 1919, 46), has traces of the wooden handle preserved in the corrosion products. The

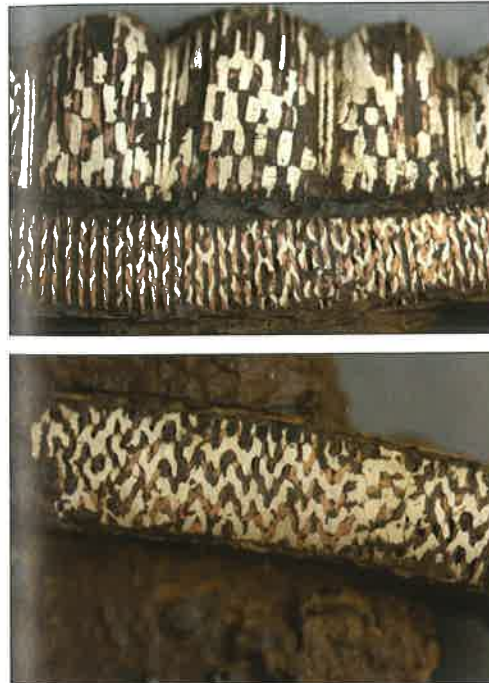


Fig. 5. Ardnamurchan sword hilt and pommel detail (copyright ATP, Pieta Greaves/AOC)

closest parallels, although probably 11th century and therefore later, seem to be in the Dublin assemblage (Halpin 2008, 164). The Ardnamurchan sword lay lower down in the boat, at the west end. It lacks its tip and is bent into a shallow S-shape, presumed to be deliberate pre-depositional damage, indicating the ritual destruction of the most significant weapon in the group. Traces of textiles and other organic debris along the length of the blade (probably the scabbard) and around the hilt, suggest that the sword may have been wrapped at its deposition. Alternatively it may have been placed adjacent to a shroud or clothing, the textiles being preserved in the corrosion products. Between the five-lobed pommel and guard, both finely decorated in silver and copper-wire, there appears to be an organic (bone / horn) sleeve with pronounced squared edge (Pieta Greaves pers. comm.) (Fig. 5). The form would indicate a Petersen Type K perhaps trending to Type P, although Type O is a possibility (Gareth Williams pers. comm.). This would suggest a date of late 9th to early 10th century.

A substantial iron cooking ladle or pan was recovered close to the sword. The ladle pan is

approximately 270mm in diameter and the handle some 555mm, with a narrow hooked terminal. The type is known from a number of sites in Scandinavia (eg Levke, Ulvik in Hordaland and Kvåle, Sogndal; Petersen 1951, 375, figs. 200 and 201). In a Scottish context they are slightly less common, but there is an example from Kiloran Bay (Trevor Cowie pers. comm., National Museum of Scotland Acc. nos. IL763, IL759/2 and IL 765/2. Graham-Campbell 1998, 119, 122). Various organic materials (still to be examined) were recovered from within the ladle together with a pair of tongs and a small hammer head (with remains of the wooden handle preserved in the corrosion products). Both these finds have similarities with examples in the Mästermyr hoard from Gotland (Graham-Campbell 1980, 415). A cache of hammer, adze and tongs was noted within the Ballinaby, Islay, male grave group, found in 1877 (Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998, 123, fig. 7.5). In both Scottish examples, these may indicate the expedient repair of the vessel while on the move; this is supported by the cache of rivets from the east end of the boat. A virtually complete sickle lacking its tang and, presumably organic, handle is more suited to a farmer than a traveller, but a close parallel was noted from Scar (Owen and Dalland 1999, 89-91), where the sickle was associated with the woman. Sickles are known from both male and female graves but, in Scotland, the majority seem to be from female burials, unlike the apparent situation in coastal Norway (*ibid.* 90). At Swordle Bay the addition of a fine-grained, dark grey, schist whetstone, probably from South Norway (Alsvik with Batey 2009, 294-5) and a handful of flints for creating a flame, completed the tool kit element of the assemblage. The lack of a knife, or indeed a comb, is curious but these may yet be found amongst the unexamined corroded iron.

The assemblage includes very limited numbers of personal items. A complete single copper alloy knob-ringed pin had traces of textiles at the ring juncture. It has two distinct knobs and a damaged third and, in common with many other ring-pin variants, the shank is bent to facilitate use. This knobbed 10th-century type is considered to be native Irish (*cf.* Carn a'Bharraich, Oronsay, Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998, 116 and fig. 7.2; Fanning 1994, 46-9) and probably fastened either a shroud or cloak. The rim from a drinking horn, decorated simply by two incised parallel lines, suggests feasting in the next life - a true Viking! Four examples of drinking horn terminals are known from Scotland: Ardvonrig, Barra; Ballinaby, Islay; Pierowall, Westray; and 'Orkney mainland' (Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998, 61, 122-3, figs. 7.5 and 7.10). Such mounts might be Insular rather than Scandinavian in origin (Paterson *et al.* 2014, 149-151), but the simplicity of this piece is not necessarily indicative of an Insular origin.

The single Ardnamurchan grave, positioned on the great western seaway between Norway and the Irish Sea, today appears remote. In the era of Viking explorations Ardnamurchan was arguably in the middle of the sea-road. Positioned on a grassy sward, as the place name indicates, with views of distant islands, this would be a good place to rest.

The boat burial at Ardnamurchan raises several issues: was the occupant a traveller or a settler? The Irish pin, and possibly the drinking horn mount, could suggest Insular purchases from Irish markets to the south. The occupant's teeth suggest a Norwegian upbringing (Janet Montgomery, pers. comm.). The size of the boat suggests that he travelled to the area either as part of a flotilla or, more probably, in a larger vessel of which this was the inshore fishing boat or transfer craft. He was buried with suitable ceremony, his weapons were ritually "killed" and the grave closed sometime in the AD 900s. These are tantalising glimpses of notions of transferring identity to a new land: the migrant, temporary or otherwise, distinguished by the actions of his associates from the homelands. A Viking traveller, perhaps en route to new lands, or possibly in familiar territory (in view of the place name records), was in a landscape already strewn with visible burial memorials. This concept of a 'memorial landscape' - a landscape used for burial over many centuries or millennia - is gaining wider consideration and may also have pertained in the Viking period (for the Scottish evidence, Davis 2014). It is possible that prehistoric monuments in the vicinity were re-used for Viking burials. A single glass bead has been recorded from a secondary trench cut into a prehistoric cairn nearby, the bead probably originating from Viking Ireland (Ewan Campbell pers. comm.). This may suggest that the occupant of the Ardnamurchan boat burial had a near-contemporary Scandinavian neighbour in life, as well as in death, potentially with tales to tell of travels further west.

These recently discovered Viking boat burials, at the extremities of northern and western Scotland,

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offer the tantalising prospect that a common Norwegian burial rite (using a small boat) was more usual in Scotland than previously thought. They also demonstrate that the discovery of further pagan Viking burials in Scotland is an ever-present possibility – and not only in areas of known intensive colonisation.

Acknowledgements

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