THE VIKINGS IN EAST SUTHERLAND

Bridget MacKenzie B.A.(Oxon), M.Litt..

NOTE TO READERS

This booklet tells how the Vikings came to Sutherland, and how their leader Sigurth met his death in 895 and was buried at Cyderhall, near Dornoch. It tells you how we know these things, and how the Norsemen lived when they were here.

If you are interested in place names, or in the Vikings, or in Scottish history, or in knowing more about the area you are in, this is the book for you.

The names of the Norsemen have been spelled in the English fashion. They are pronounced with the stress on the first syllable. Skibo has a long *i* as if it was Skeebo; Sigurth has a short *i* as in "big".

This booklet is based on a talk given to Dornoch Heritage Society on 8th October 1985.

Bridget Mackenzie
Dornoch

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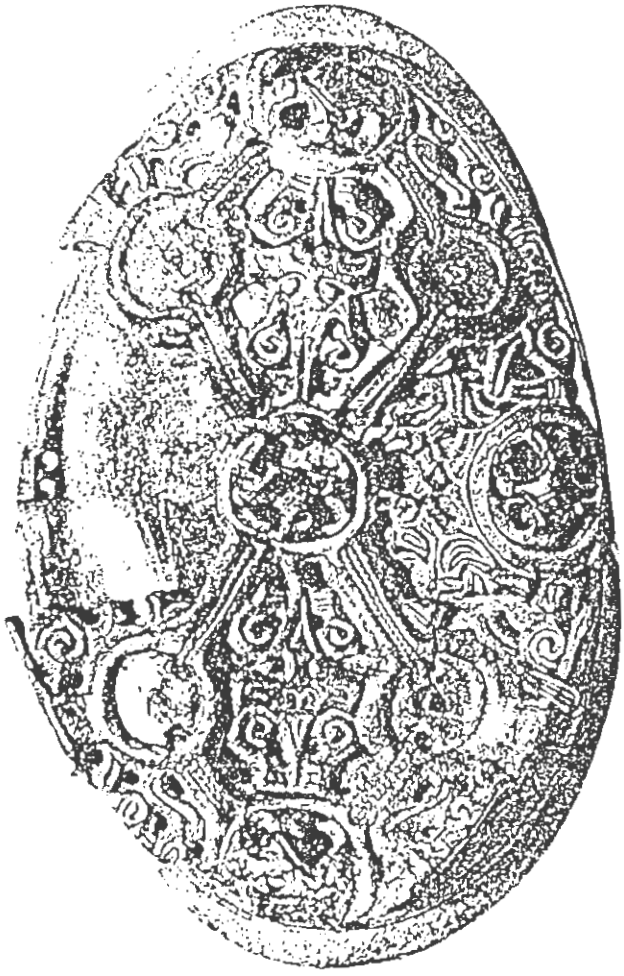
Front Cover:
10th Century Viking brooch found at Ospisdale in 1830

THE VIKINGS IN EAST SUTHERLAND



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THE VIKINGS IN SOUTH-EAST SUTHERLAND

by Bridget Mackenzie

The Vikings who came to east Sutherland were mainly from western Norway, probably by way of Orkney or Shetland. In the first half of the 9th century they were making sporadic raids on the Scottish mainland, but it was around 850 that the Norsemen came to settle, when they had already begun to colonize the Northern Isles and parts of Caithness.

Much of the evidence about the Vikings in South-East Sutherland is in the *Orkneyinga saga* "the story of the men of Orkney", a history of the Earls of Orkney compiled in Iceland. This should be approached with caution, as it was compiled as late as 1220, using older material, but even that was considerably later than the age of Viking settlement in the mid-9th century.

There are no contemporary records other than the place-names left by the Norsemen, and a few archaeological remains, such as the "Viking's Grave" at Cyderhall, near Dornoch.

THE EARLIEST SETTLEMENT : *-BY* AND *-BOL* FARMS

By 850 the Norwegians were colonizing Shetland and Orkney, and were moving to the Hebrides and Iceland, and south to the mainland of Scotland, which was held by the Picts. Sporadic raids gave way to peaceful settlement - peaceful, that is, after the Norsemen had forcibly ousted the Picts from the best land. Placenames ending in *-by* and *-bol*, both meaning a "a biggish farm on a prime site", belong to this early settlement period: Golspie is a *-by* name, probably Norse *Kolls-by*, "the big farm belonging to Koll", (Koll was an Irish-Hebridean name); *Torboll*, in Strath Fleet, was Norse *torf-bol* "big farm made of turf blocks"; *Skelbo* was Norse *skel-bol* "shell-sand farm" (shell-sand was highly valued as fertilizer and for use in mortar); *Embo* was Norse *Eyvinder-bol* "the big farm belonging to Eyvind" (Eyvind was a very common Norse name); *Skibo* was Norse *Skitha-bol* "the big farm belonging to Skithi" (Skithi was also a very common Norse name). Nothing more is known of either Skithi or Eyvind.

A *bol* or big farm, built by the first settler on the best land available, would later be surrounded by smaller farms built by secondary settlers, under the authority of the *-bol* farmer, and owing allegiance and support to him. The earliest settlements must have been exposed to attack from the Picts, and must have been forced to defend themselves without help from outside, since the area of East Sutherland had no Norse overlord at this time.

THE FIRST EARL OF ORKNEY

Around 870 (the dates are somewhat flexible, because the different sources disagree) the situation changed. King Harald Finehair was uniting Norway under himself and becoming a formidable power in the country. He was strong enough to appoint Earls to govern the different districts that belonged to Norway, and around 870 he created the title of Earl of Orkney, and gave it to his trusted follower, Rognvald Eysteinsson. Rognvald, however, transferred the title and the lands of Orkney and Shetland to his younger brother, Sigurth Eysteinsson - he was the Viking who was buried in the "Viking's Grave" at Cyderhall.

SIGURTH EYSTEINSSON

As far as we can judge from various sources, Sigurth was physically a tall, strong man, an exceptionally brave and experienced fighter, a good, intelligent leader - but he lacked warmth. He was known all his life as Sigurth the Mighty, and was widely respected, but not loved. He went his own way, regardless of everyone else including the King, ignoring the King's instructions if they did not suit him, and befriending the King's enemies if they could serve his purpose. He was a cold, ruthless man; his wife feared him, and she would not entrust her child by a previous marriage to him. A careful and self-seeking man, he lasted more than twenty-five years as Earl of Orkney, and eventually he died as a result of his own treachery. Not a likeable man, Sigurth was the man needed for the defence of the earldom; his first act as earl was to form an alliance with a blustering braggart of a viking pirate, a man called Thorsteinn the Red, grandson of one of the King's bitterest enemies.

SIGURTH AND THORSTEINN THE RED

Together Sigurth and Thorsteinn set about enlarging their territory. Joining forces, they swept south pushing the Picts before them. They conquered Caithness, Sutherland, Ross and Moray. They killed Meldun, the ruler of Moray, and made his wife and son personal slaves to their own families. They forced the Picts to surrender and submit to a peace treaty, under whose terms Sigurth retained Caithness and Sutherland, as far south as the Dornoch Firth, as part of the earldom of Orkney, and Thorsteinn styled himself "King of Northern Scotland". This was the time when Sutherland got its name: it was the "Southern land" of the Earldom of Orkney. The peace treaty did not hold, however, because Thorsteinn antagonized the defeated Picts by his boasting ways. He was living in Caithness with his mother and a large household when he was ambushed by the Picts, and murdered. This was around 875. His mother and the rest of the household escaped to Orkney. Sigurth was not involved in this skirmish, and he sought no revenge. He remained as earl of Orkney for a further twenty years, successfully holding off all his enemies, defending the Northern Isles from attack, and fending off the Picts in the south. The Dornoch area was frontier territory throughout his lifetime : the Picts were seething across the Firth in Ross, constantly attacking the edges of the earldom, and when Sigurth was absent in the north, life here must have been tense, insecure and uncomfortable.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SKIBO

There can be little doubt that Skibo was the main headquarters for the Norse defence of the district. Its position was commanding, overlooking the firth and the hills of Ross, with more extensive views to the east, to the open sea, than it has today, for there were fewer and smaller trees. It has its own anchorage, too, shallow but suitable for the Viking ships which drew little water and could easily be beached. On its escarpment above the firth, Skibo was safe from sudden attack - the weapon the Norsemen feared most was fire, and Skibo could easily be defended against that. Sigurth doubtless used Skibo as his home and his military base when he was in the Dornoch area.

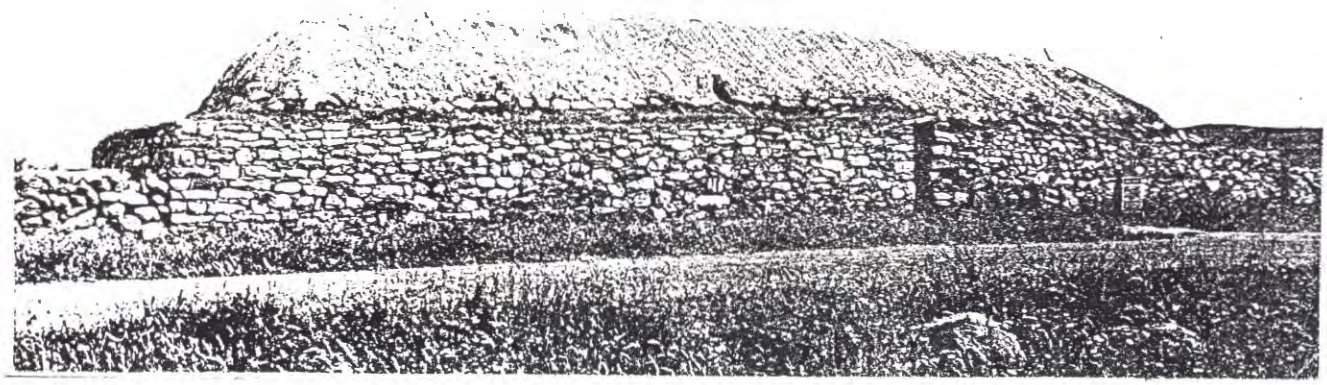
The Norsemen who lived here at that time, in Skibo and in the other early *-bol* farms, as well as those in the smaller farms dependant on the big houses, all of these people looked to Sigurth for protection, and as their overlord, he looked to them to provide men and supplies, to maintain garrisons in defence of the frontier. He must have brought some semblance of stability to them, as is evidenced by the fact that he lasted in command for more than twenty-five years.

SKIBO IN SIGURTH'S TIME

Skibo in Sigurth's time would have been a typical Norse longhouse of the early Viking period, as would the houses at Torboll, Skelbo and Embo. The smaller houses would have been similar, on a smaller scale. These longhouses followed a pattern common to all the Norse areas from Ireland to Norway, from Greenland and Iceland to Brittany, used for all Norse houses, large and small, rich and poor, so that we know with some certainty what Skibo was like.

THE HOUSE : EXTERIOR

It was a long, low, single-storey building, its dimensions in the proportion 5:1, that is, if it was sixty feet long, it was twelve feet wide, and so on. It had to be big enough to house a garrison of fighting men and those who nourished them. It was probably built of stone, with walls three feet thick, since at Skibo, stone was available on the escarpment; but it could have been of wood, or of turf-blocks.



Picture 1: A long house in Lewis

The roof was thatch, of heather, turf, straw, bracken - whatever was most plentiful - laid on a wooden framework. It had no chimney, but a hole in the centre of the roof let smoke escape and some light enter. There were no windows at all, and the only door was at one end of the long front wall, or in the gable-end.

Later, perhaps a century after the time when Skibo was built, rooms would be added at the back, at right-angles to the original house, rooms such as a bathroom, a dairy or a larder. In very windswept places like Shetland and the Hebrides, a byre was added as a continuation of the main hall, with a connecting internal door. The Viking longhouse was a forerunner of the Hebridean blackhouse - and doubtless Viking building was influenced by Hebridean practice, too.

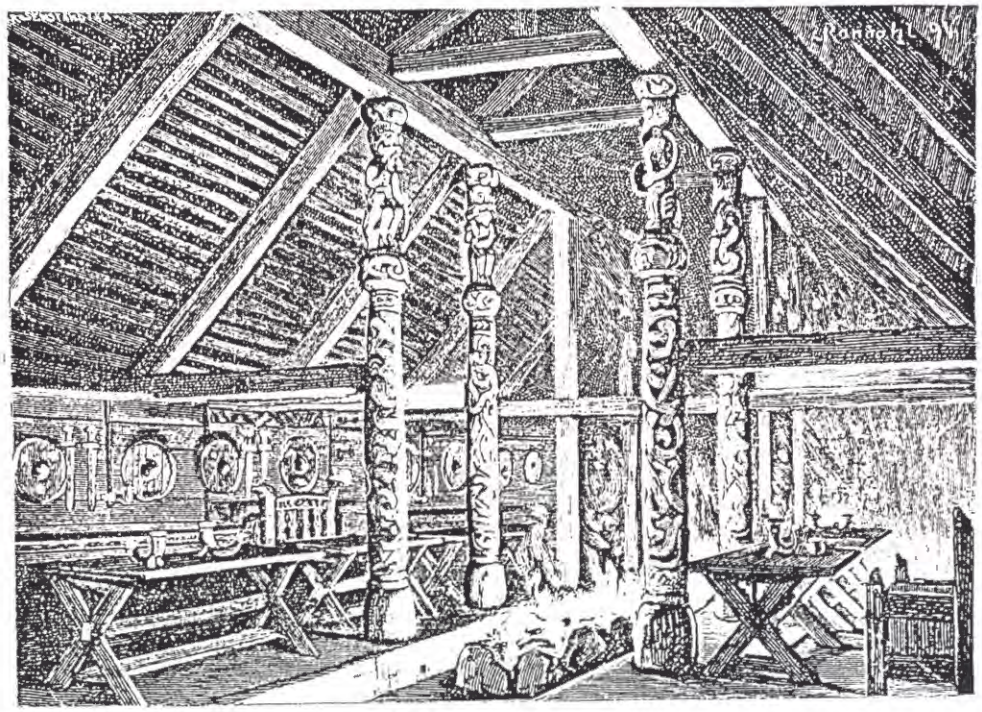
Picture 2: Norse Houses, Orkney; in the distance is Marwick Head

The position most favoured by the Norsemen was looking out to sea, and while they used any shelter available, they gave preference to open access to the sea, and would build sideways to the slope of a hill if necessary.

Picture 3. House sites at Jarlshof in Shetland.

THE HOUSE : INTERIOR

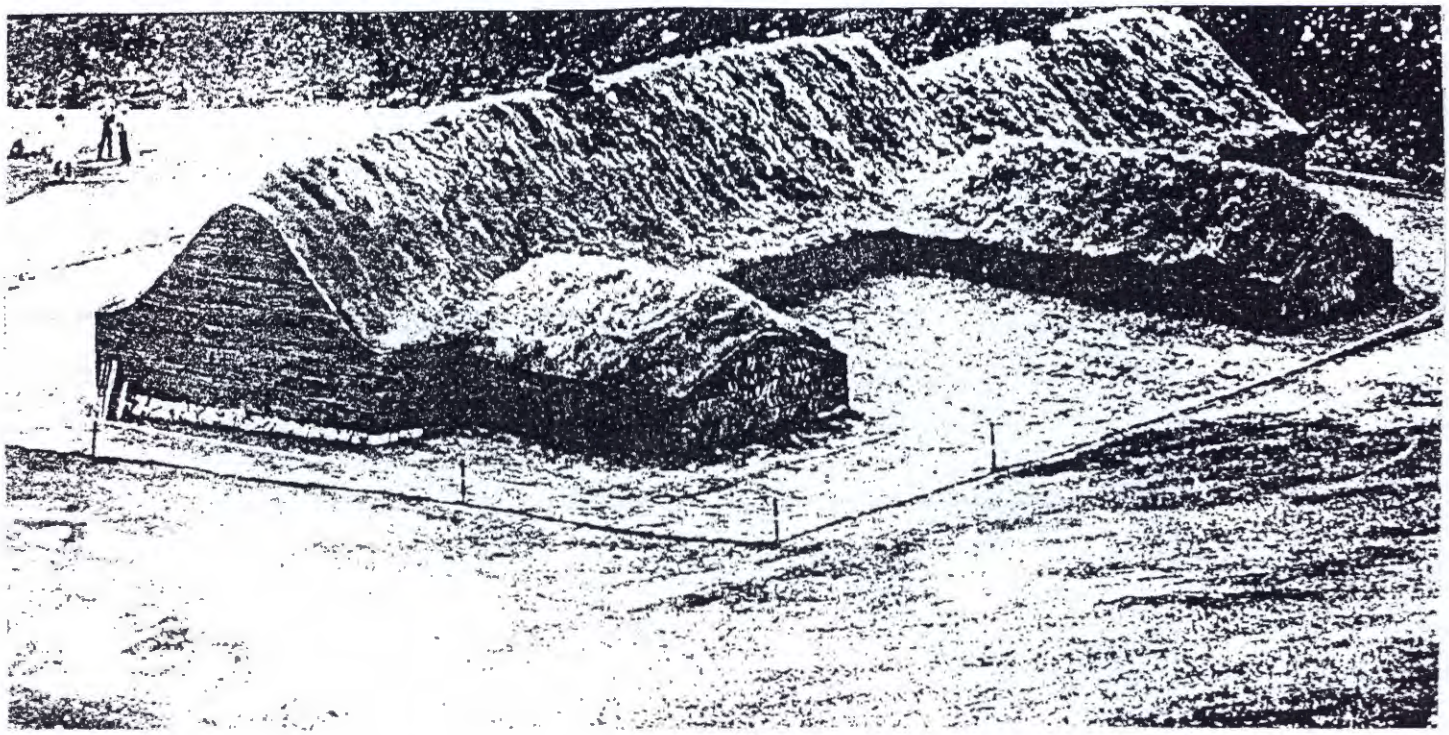
Inside, Skibo would have had one long room, with a trench lengthways down the centre. The trench was kept full of fire, day and night, and this was the heart of the household. On each side of the fire were benches where the men sat, took their meals, drank, talked tactics, and so on. For important feasts, trestle-tables might be brought in, but mostly the men would eat from their fingers or from wooden bowls, with spoons of wood or horn.



Picture 4: Reconstruction of interior of a Viking hall

Behind the benches, against the walls, were sleeping platforms where everyone slept on heaps of straw, heather, or bracken, covered with hides. Living was communal, with no personal privacy, but it was not dirty by the standards of those times: the Norsemen were enthusiastic about washing and enjoyed long sociable sessions in the bath. Their name for Saturday was "bath-day". They were early to develop the bathroom, far ahead of the Anglo-Saxons in the south; the Norsemen liked to have indoor toilets, in a room added to the back of the house, with indoor access. The toilets, too, were communal and sociable, with a row of seat-holes in a plank, over a steeply sloping trench, which was flushed out with buckets of water, to run into a burn or river nearby.

The atmosphere indoors must always have been smoky, dark and smelly - with evil smells from the hides used for bedding, from the open toilets, from the cooking and the fire, and from big tubs of sour milk kept indoors for three months before being made into cheese. Although the houses were dark and smelly, they were warm and cosy, and the people lived in relative comfort for their times.



Picture 5: A turf-block farmhouse in Iceland, 11th century

SECONDARY SETTLEMENT : *STATHIR* AND OTHER FARM NAMES

At the time when the *-bol* and *-by* farms were built in this area, around 850, Dornoch as we know it today did not exist, even as a small village. There may have been a community of Irish monks or culdees here, and some date this community under St Barr back to the 6th century. In my opinion this is unlikely, because the Norsemen were fascinated by such communities, and had they found one here when they came to settle, it would have been mentioned in their writings, such as the source-material for the Orkneyinga saga. Irish annals, too, would have mentioned it. I believe that there was no such community of monks here before the 12th century, later on in the Norse period, long after the time of Viking settlement. This means that the big early farms of Torboll, Skelbo, Embo, Skibo, and Golspie, were the main settlements of the area in the 9th century ; and that the Norsemen did not come here to attack the poor helpless monks, driven on by a burning hatred of Christianity. Many of the Viking settlers were themselves Christian, and where they did attack Christian churches, as in Iona, their motive was material gain, not religious belief.

In Skye and in Orkney, the *-bol* names of the first farms are surrounded by names of secondary farms with names ending in *-bolstath* or *-stathir*, both indicating a smaller farm than *-bol*, and usually a farm dependant on a *-bol*; but in Caithness and in Sutherland there are hardly any *-stathir* names, although Caithness has far more *-bolstath* and very few *-bol* names. In South-East Sutherland there is one possible *-stathir* name, now no longer used but appearing in old documents as *Ullest*(1557) or *Allistie*(1745), on the lands of Skibo, between Cyderhall and the Meikle Ferry. It is not certain but it may be Norse *Ullastathir* "Ulli's steading", with the same personal name as in *Ullapool* "Ulli's farm" - though probably not the same person (Ulli was a common Norse name). And beside the Kyle of Sutherland there is a possible *-bolstath* name, *Carbisdale*, which may be Norse *Kjarr-bolstath-dal* "valley of the farm by the copse" - but some say this name was introduced from Northern Ireland, so it may not be part of a local pattern in Sutherland. However, *Corbost*, in Strath Carron is probably the same name "Copse-farm".

Most of the surviving names of secondary farms in South-East Sutherland end in *-voll* "field", a word which came to mean a farm smaller than a *stathir*, and dependant on a *-bol*. *Land* was another word originally meaning "cultivated land" or even "enclosed land", which could also be called *garth*. (e.g. *Rogart, Gruinards*). Uncultivated land was *heith*, "heath, moor", or *mor*, both of which appear in local names here.(e.g. *Eiden, Mornes*)

Below Skibo, on the flat land beside the lower Evelix river, we find a cluster of secondary Norse farms, all built on Skibo land, all owing allegiance, men and supplies to Skibo, all expecting protection from Skibo : *Ullest, Cuthill, Eaglefield, Rosebank, Cyderhall, Steanford* are names we still know, and probably there were others whose names have been lost. We would also expect some secondary names around the other *-bol* farms, but they have been lost, leaving no trace.

OTHER NORSE NAMES IN THE AREA

When the farms were built and the invaders settled down, they gave placenames to local features and to minor agricultural arrangements like shielings (summer pastures), which give us a glimpse of the life they led in those times.

Rossal, above Rogart in Strath Fleet, and also *Rosehall*, more properly *Rossal*, are both Norse *hrossa - voll* "field where horses are kept"; *Eiden* in Strathfleet is probably *heith - endi* "the edge of the moorland". *Fleet* itself is Norse *fljot* "river, tidal river" - the river was tidal right up to Pittentrail before the Mound was built in the early 19th century. The Norse word *nes* "headland, point, promontory" is found in *Mornes* "promontory of the moor or hill", and in an old name for the southern point at the entrance to Loch Fleet, *Owenes*, probably Norse *uvanes* "point of widgeon" (birds for which Loch Fleet is famous).

Linside, on the river Oykell above Invershin, is Norse *lin-setr* "flax (or linen) shieling". Normally a setr was a place remote from the main farm with its crops and arable land, a place to which the cattle were taken for the summer, with an attendant group of young people to herd them, milk them, make butter and cheese, and so on. However, a linen-shieling was probably where flax was grown and bleached before being processed by women who went up to live at the shieling in the summer for that purpose. This is the only known Norse shieling name in South-East Sutherland.

THE *-DALE* FARMS ON THE DORNOCH FIRTH

Along the north shore of the Dornoch Firth are the *-dale* names, all Norse, which are probably a little later than the *-bol* names of the earliest settlement. There is evidence that they were built as garrison-farms in the early 10th century, when Torf-Einar, Sigurth's nephew, was Earl of Orkney. Westward from Skibo we have *Ospisdale*, Norse *Ospaksdal* "Ospak's valley" - Ospak is not a common Norse name, but an uncommon Irish/Hebridean name, that of the earl of Caithness, a cousin of the Earl of the Hebrides, both of whom would be subordinate to the Earl of Orkney. We know that Ospak was Earl of Caithness around 910, and that before 930 he was killed by being split in half by a battle-axe, in a fight against Irish-based Norsemen in the Hebrides. *Spinningdale* was formerly *Spangadale*, and early spellings have it *Spainzedell*, but this "z" is a special Scottish script symbol for the *ng* sound (as in *Menzies*, pronounced *Mingies*). Spang may be a Norse word for a "single-plank footbridge", to indicate the nature of the river-crossing there. Norse names often contained helpful information for those coming later - in an age when detailed maps were unknown, such names were useful to travellers. *Fload*, near Ospisdale was probably one of these: Norse *floth* "flood tide" would have been the name of the narrows of the firth near to the present-day farm of Fload, and floth would say to mariners "come through here on the flood tide, as it is shallow and full of shifting sandbanks". *Gizzen Briggs*, the name of the sand banks at the mouth of the firth, off Dornoch Point, is another notice to mariners: *Gizzen* is a Norse word *gisnar*, meaning "full of holes, leaky, letting the water in", and *Brigg* is Norse *bryggia* "landing-place, landing stage" - the whole name, "leaky landing-place", really is saying "Don't land here or you will get your feet wet", or in other words "this is a sandbank that covers at hightide, not dry land". Such pithy names are typically

Norse and widely understood in the Norse world. *Brora* is another informative name for travellers - Norse *bruar-a* "bridges-river" tells the world that here the river may be crossed without looking for a ford.

Migdale probably is Norse *mjuk-dal* "soft valley, glen of soft fertile soil, arable glen", as opposed to the nearby *Swordale*, Norse *svarth-dal* "green grass valley, pasture-valley". *Breakwell*, on the north side of Loch Migdale, is Norse *brekka-voll*, "field on the slope". *Ausdale* is not far away up the Loch Buidhe road above Bonar Bridge. It was probably Norse *Olafsdal* "glen of Olaf" (a very common Norse name).

It is likely, since the Earl of Caithness built Ospisdale in the early 10th century, that the whole line of *-dale* farms was built as a defence against the encroaching Picts. After Sigurth's death in about 895, the Earldom was in considerable danger, because Sigurth's son was his only heir, a sickly youth who died only a year after his father. The title then passed to the sons of his brother, Rognvald. The first to take over was unable to cope and gave up after a year or two, a laughing-stock. At this time the southern boundaries must have been at their most vulnerable, until Rognvald's base-born son, Torf-Einar, took the title. He was a very tall, strong, ugly man with only one eye. He was even tougher and more ruthless than his uncle Sigurth, but also an excellent poet. He seems to have set about strengthening the defences of the southern frontier, and it is possible that he organized a district system whereby the men of Caithness were responsible for building and maintaining Ospisdale, to defend that stretch of coastline, and the men of, say, Assynt built, maintained and defended Spinningdale, perhaps - a defensive forerunner of the parish system organized two centuries later by Bishop Gilbert of Dornoch. Such a system might explain why these garrison-farms have *-dale* names, which became farm names: the defence responsibility would cover the area in which the farm stood, and the farm stood there for the purpose of that defence, so the farm might well have a local-area-name, rather than a field-name.

A *-dale* name which is not on the firth is *Astle*, probably Norse *Asksdal* "glen of a man called Ask", but it is possible that it was *asksdal* "glen with a single ash tree", presumably a landmark. Astle is just over the hill from Ospisdale, and could have been a second line of defence, to prevent the Picts from coming on Skibo from the north, or down the Evelix. I wonder if Astle was originally the name of the strath of the Evelix, which has no definite name today.

THE DEATH OF SIGURTH

Sigurth's death in about 895 is described in the *Orkneyinga saga*, in a form influenced by Irish tales, but rooted in historical truth. Sigurth is said to have grown tired of endless skirmishing with the Picts, which suggests that he was not in full control, or was being attacked on his northern front. He made an agreement to meet the Pictish leader, a man called Maelbrigte, at an appointed place, probably in Rosshire, each of them to bring forty armed and mounted men: this was the normal arrangement when a treaty was to be negotiated between enemies.

When Sigurth arrived, Maelbrigte noticed that each of his forty horses had two legs sticking out on each side (presumably from under a riding-cloak) where there should have been one. He knew that he had been tricked, and was outnumbered, two to one. He called on his men to fight bravely, and as they died, each to take at least one Norseman with him. The Picts were then wiped out, and the Norsemen cut off their heads and fastened them to their saddlebows, Sigurth taking Maelbrigte's head. And the victorious troop turned and rode for home - which was Skibo.

As they rode, Sigurth kicked his horse to spur it on, and Maelbrigte's head swung round. His protruding tooth gashed Sigurth's leg. The wound was minor, but later it begun to ache, to swell and to throb. Within days, Sigurth was dead, from blood-poisoning. The irony of his death, from a wound suffered after a victory, but a victory won through his own treachery, would have been relished by the saga-compiler, but he did not refer directly to it, merely adding that Sigurth was buried "in a grave mound, on the bank of the Oykell".

SIGURTH'S GRAVE

Sigurth's grave-mound is traditionally taken to be the "Viking's Grave", a low oval of ground surrounded by a shallow ditch, on the land of Cyderhall, a farm to the south-west of Dornoch. The entrance to the farm is from the Meikleferry road, just south of Lonemore, but there is better access to the mound from the forestry woods of the Siddera Plantation. (Permission should be sought from Cyderhall beforehand). The mound lies north-east of the farm steading, nearer to the river Evelix, over some hillocks and ridges known as the Skardies. (see appendix A - Sketch-map of Cyderhall Farm)

The O.S. grid reference of the mound is 764894. The site has not been excavated or dated, nor confirmed as being a Viking Grave, and it may never be, since the original mound has been robbed and lowered almost to ground level - as might be expected. Viking leaders were usually buried with a wealth of possessions, and even the stones of Sigurth's mound were precious to the poor hut-dwellers who lived in the vicinity in later centuries. Probably there is not enough evidence left to identify and date the monument, and conversely it cannot be proved not to be the Viking's Grave. What remains is not inconsistent with what we know of Viking grave-mounds of that period. The only discrepancy might be its position: we would expect the grave of an important leader to be on a headland overlooking the sea, whereas this site is not even in sight of the sea, being hidden behind several ridges. The political situation at the time of Sigurth's death would certainly account for this: Sigurth's men had been left suddenly leaderless, and they knew that his successor was a sickly youth. They also knew that the Picts would be looking for revenge from across the Firth, after Sigurth's act of treachery in killing their leader. No wonder his men buried him out of sight of the enemy - they chose a spot within easy and safe reach of Skibo, and one which they may have regarded as sacred already, since there were some pre-historic remains close by (now in the woods known as Siddera Plantation). They buried him in a place where there was running water between the grave and their base at Skibo, as a precaution against his ghost bothering the household.

The mound now is oval in shape, approximately 16 yards by 13 yards, with a ditch about 18 inches deep around it. There is a trench across it, but this was dug during the Second World War, by a squad of four men of the local Home Guard, who were installing a secret device about which they were not allowed to speak. Unfortunately all four have died since the war, and we do not know what they found (if anything), other than loose gravel, when they sectioned the centre of the mound.

The oval lies approximately south-east to north-west, on flat ground west of Siddera Plantation. Immediately to the south of the flat ground is a steep-sided ridge, to the north the ground falls away to the river Evelix. On each side of the mound, exactly 50 yards away on each side there is a heap of stones, thickly covered in lichen. The more easterly heap has the remains of a horse-shoe-shaped structure in it. These may be part of a more extensive burial-ground, but this part of Cyderhall land was greatly over-populated in the 17th and 18th centuries, when many poor huts, cots and hovels crowded the area. These two heaps could be the remains of some of these, but most were cleared away when the people were evicted to Dornoch Muir in 1815. The present farmhouse of Cyderhall was built at this time.

The original grave-mound must have been much higher. It is likely that Sigurth was buried sitting upright, and stones built around and over him, the whole covered with gravel, sand and earth, and then turfed over. We can compare it with a grave in Iceland, that of a contemporary of Sigurth, a man who certainly knew Sigurth's family in Norway before he went to Iceland. His name was Skalla-Grim and he died about the same time as did Sigurth. His mound is on a headland in south Iceland, at Borgarnes.

Picture 6: Skalla Grim's grave mound

The ground area is smaller than that of the oval at Cyderhall, and there is (now) no ditch. This mound was roughly excavated by amateurs in the 19th century, and later restored. There was evidence of other mounds close by. This probably gives us some idea of what Sigurth's grave-mound looked like.

The importance of the grave at Cyderhall is that, if it is indeed the burial place of Sigurth Eysteinsson, it is the only grave of a known, dated, named and documented Viking leader in the whole of the British Isles, and as such it should be excavated and preserved as carefully as possible.

PLACE-NAME EVIDENCE

Apart from the mound itself and its traditional name "The Viking's Grave", there is other reason to identify Cyderhall with Sigurth's burial. The saga says he was buried on the bank of the Oykell (*á Ekkjalsbakki*), and we know from other sources that the Norsemen called the Dornoch Firth *Ekkjall* from the ancient name of the Oykell river which flows into it. The bank referred to could only be the north bank since Sigurth was at home in Norse territory when he died. He would have been buried on Skibo land, of which Cyderhall was part. There are stepping-stones across the Evelix river between Cyderhall and Skibo, and these probably date back to times before the river had bridges at all.

More conclusive is the name *Cyderhall*, which is even today often given its old form *Siddera*. The name is first found in a document of 1222-3, as *Syuardhoch*. It was coupled with that of Skibo (the lands of *Scythebolle et Syuardhoch*, the deed says). *Syuardhoch* is a Scots spelling of the Norse name *Sigurtharhaug* "Sigurth's burial mound". This deed dates from the time when the Orkneyinga saga was being compiled in Iceland, and the name has not been influenced by the saga.

Syuardhoch evolved to give us various stages such as *Sytheraw* (1275), *Sythera, Sydra, Sitherow, Sidera,* and in 1733 *Siddera* - all with the short *i* that goes back to Sigurth's name. It was anglicized to *Cyderhall* from *Sidera*, by someone who did not know the pronunciation of *Sider*, and who took the final *a* to be a corruption of *ha*, for *hall* (Rosehall suffered the same process of false refinement).

THE SKARDIES

Near the "Viking's Grave" is a series of steep-sided hillocks, perhaps fifty feet high, running north-east to south-west. These ridges are eskars, left by glaciers in the Ice Age. They are composed of very hard impacted gravel, and are known collectively as *The Skardies*. In Gaelic, however, the name is in the singular, *Cnoc Sgardaidh* "hillock of loose sandy scree". This Gaelic name is remarkable for two reasons:

1. it is always singular, not plural or collective;
2. it is inaccurate since the ridges are of hard impacted gravel, not loose sandy scree.

It is therefore not unreasonable to assume that this name has been transferred from the original grave mound of Sigurth, after the mound was lowered and no longer a *cnoc* or hillock.

CNOC SGARDAIDH

The Norse name *Sigurtharhaug* became *Siddera* in the mouths of Scots-English speakers. In Gaelic, at the time when the people were bi-lingual in Norse and Gaelic, *haug* would be translated to *cnoc*, and the name would become *Cnoc Sigurdar* (the *th* sound became *d* or *t* in Gaelic). The stress would shift and the *i* drop out, to give *Sgurdar*. *Sgurdar* would fall together with a Gaelic adjective *sgardaidh*, and this description of the mound as a "hillock of loose gravel" probably fitted very well, although the name is really a corruption of "Sigurth's grave mound".

So Cyderhall, Siddera, Cnoc Sgardaidh, The Skardies and Sigurtharhaug are all the same name in different forms, English, Gaelic and Norse, and they all mean "Sigurth's gravemound"

Picture 7: View of Skardies

THE SKIBO FARMS

We cannot say for certain who built or owned the Norse farms on Skibo land. Rosebank was across the river from Cyderhall, towards Clashmore, and the old steading may still be seen. It was *Rosebank*, Norse *hrossa-bakki* "horses' bank, slope of the horses". *Steanford*, a name in use still in 1745, was beside the river below Cyderhall, probably Norse *stein vorth* "stone cairn" - to mark a path or a crossing of the river, possibly the stepping stones. *Allistie / Ullest* "Ulli's farm" was downstream from Cyderhall, but we do not know exactly where.

Cuthill, pronounced "Kettle", is puzzling, but may have been *Ketlar-voll* "field or farm of Ketill". Ketill was a very common Norse name, but this particular Ketill has been associated with a famous Norwegian Ketill Flatnose, a contemporary of Sigurth Eysteinsson. Certainly the two families were known to each other, and *Laxdoela saga* tells how Ketill had to leave Norway and settle in Scotland : he was made welcome by leading Norsemen of mainland Scotland, and given his choice of land to settle. He could not have done this without Sigurth's authority. Sigurth's ally, Thorstein the Red, was Ketill's grandson, so he may well have chosen to settle on Skibo land. Some Icelandic sagas say he went to the Hebrides to live, but against this is the evidence of local tales : Ketill figures in the legends of the east coast, but not in the west.

Eaglefield, along the coast north-east of Cuthill, was Norse *Helgavoll* "Helgi's field, farm". Helgi was another very common name ; indeed Ketill Flatnose had a son and a nephew called Helgi, as well as his well-known son-in-law, Helgi the Lean. If Ketill did live at Cuthill, Helgi the Lean may well have been at Eaglefield, for the son and the nephew were unmarried at that time. Helgi the Lean was the son of a Norwegian merchant who went to live in Ireland and married the Irish king's daughter. Helgi's parents sent him to be fostered in the Hebrides as a young boy, but when they went to fetch him two years later, they did not recognize him, he was so thin. He grew to be tall and thin, and was always known as Helgi the Lean. He was bi-lingual in Norse and Gaelic, and in his religious beliefs, too : he was a Christian, as was Ketill and most of his family, but he always said when he was out at sea in his boat, or in a serious crisis, or with an important decision to make, he called on the pagan god Thor to help him - but he did believe in Christ, too. He had a very large family, and after Ketill's death, he went with them all to live in Iceland. Helgi's sister was married to Thorstein the Red, Ketill's grandson, so relationships within the family were complicated.

It is by no means certain that Ketill and Helgi the Lean lived in Cuthill and Eaglefield, but it is as likely as anywhere else, and the links with Sigurth are certain.

OLD DORNOCH NAMES

There are a few Norse names once in use around the town of Dornoch itself before it became a Royal Burgh in 1628. *Croft Voland* or *Welland* looks like Norse *voll-land* "land cultivated into a field or holding". *Croft*, or Gaelic *croit* has been prefixed to form a Gaelic name from one originally Norse. *Croit* really means exactly the same as *Welland*. *Tolme* was the name of a rounded hillock on Balloan land. This was Norse *holm* "island", here a little piece of raised land surrounded by marsh. The initial *t* is Gaelic, and means that *holm* had been taken over as a loanword into Gaelic. Both *Tolme* and *Croft Welland* belong to the late Norse period, around 1200-1300, when the barriers between Norse and Gaelic were coming down, each language borrowing freely from the other, both spoken by a bi-lingual population. After 1400 Norse as a separate language had died out in Scotland, except in the Northern Isles.

SCARCITY OF NORSE NAMES

Of the place names in the parish of Dornoch listed by Dr Bentinck in his history of the cathedral and parish, out of a total of 171 names, only 16 are Norse, 11 are English or Scots, 143 are Gaelic and 1 may be Pictish in origin. This is a very small proportion of Norse names although they do cover most of the more important farms ; they are sparse compared to Caithness, Orkney, Skye or Shetland. This scarcity must reflect the precariousness of life in a frontier

area, which must have prevented full social development of the Norse settlements here, and kept the numbers down; the original and subsequent settlements were small and the more easily absorbed into the growing Gaelic population, towards the end of the Viking age in this district.

NORSE SETTLEMENTS OUTWITH DORNOCH PARISH

Beyond the parish of Dornoch, as well as the *-dale* garrison farms along the firth, we find Norse settlement along the more fertile glens, such as Strathcarron. Here are several Norse names : another *Langwell* "long field", *Syal* "sheepfold", *Gruinards*, Norse *graen garth* "green enclosure", *Corbost* "copse farm". Up the strath are *Alladale* "Alli's glen" and *Diebidale* "deep glen", also *Amat* "meeting of rivers". Up the river Shin we find *Wellgreens* "green fields", and *Carbisdale*, possibly "glen of the farm by the copse", but possibly an imported name from Ireland. The linen shieling at Linside has already been discussed. *Rosehall* ("horses' field") is near *Oape* "creek, bay" (in the river Oykell), and beyond that, yet another *Langwell* ("long field").

On the Lairg road out of Rosehall is *Aucharrigill* : the *auch* is a later Gaelic prefix "field", but *Arrigill* is Norse, possibly meaning "ravine of the grouse". Around Lairg we find *Torroble*, another spelling of *Torboll* "turf-farm", presumably built from peat blocks, the farm of one of the earliest settlers here. Another *-bol* farm was *Collaboll*, on Loch Shin near Tirryside : this was probably Norse "Kolli's farm", or possibly "Kalvi's farm".

Rogart must be a Norse name too, in spite of the spelling *Rothegarth* in a deed of 1222-3 (the same deed gives us the first spelling of Syuardhoch). *Rothegorth* looks very Gaelic, but if it were Gaelic, it could not possibly have developed to the pronunciation *Rogart* has today. I think it was Norse *rauth-garth* "red enclosure". Above it, we find yet another *Langwell* "long field", and *Mornes* "promontory on the moor or hill", *Teanga* " a tongue of land between two burns", and *Breacue*, probably another spelling of *Breakwell*, from Norse *brekka-voll* "field on a slope". The three other Norse names in Strath Fleet have already been mentioned : *Torboll* "turf farm", *Eiden* "edge of the moorland" and *Rossal* "horses' field".

Crossing through to Strath Brora, we pass *Schiberscross* formerly *Sibyrsoc* (1360), *Sipursate* (1444), *Scheberskek* (1472), *Schebriskeig* (1525), *Schiburskek* (1562), *Sevirscraig* (1566). This succession suggests Norse *skaki* "point, low promontory" preceded by a personal name, possibly *Sigber* -thus "Sigber's point" (in the river Brora). To the west of this, on the upper reaches of the river is an unexpected Norse name *Grumby*, which appears to be a *-by* name for a big farm on prime land. Norse *grim-by* "grim farm" seems to be the interpretation, but it must be dubious.

A little to the east, up a tributary, is *Strath Skinsdale*, Norse *skinns dal* "valley of fur or skin", with *Amat* "meeting of rivers" not far away. To the south, and west of Loch Brora is *Coire Aghaisgeig*, a Gaelic name "the corrie of the field of Ascaig" - *Ascaig* is the Norse name underlying this, possibly Norse *ha-skagi* "high point" which must have been on the loch itself. Above it is *Beinn Horn - horn* is a Norse word used to denote the outskirts of a district, a distant corner. North of Brora is *Achrimsdale* "field (Gaelic) of Rimsdale", which is Norse *hrimsdal* "glen of frost" (or of sheets of white flowers resembling frost).

Kintradwell and *Crakaig* lie between Brora and Helmsdale : *Kin-* maybe *ceann* "head", and *tradwell* is Norse *trothvoll* "fallow field, pasture" ; *Crakaig* was Norse *krok-vik* "crooked inlet", referring to an odd bay which was re-shaped by one of the Earls of Sutherland many centuries later. To the north is a glen called *Sletdale* "smooth glen".

Coming down the coast, *Uppat* was possibly Norse *upp-vatn* "upper-loch" or *upp-vath* "upper ford", and *Backies*, once *North Backie* and *South Backie*, hence the English plural form, is Norse *bakki* "bank, hillside".

The Norsemen clearly penetrated and settled all the glens and fertile lands of South-East Sutherland exactly as the Picts and Gaels did. Their place-names are all over the district, often taken over and disguised as Gaelic names (eg. *Aghaisgeig, Breakue, Birichen*) or as English names (eg. *Rosehall, Cyderhall, Rosebank*). They reveal a farming economy with a certain permanence. Perhaps the fact that they are not so numerous as in Caithness or Orkney is accounted for by three facts : (1.) the nature of the land makes settlement in Sutherland more sparse anyway, and concentrates it in a few straths and coastal strips ; (2.) Gaelic was never a major language in North Caithness or in Orkney ; (3.) It was a frontier area. Fact (1.) meant that Gaelic was overlaid directly on top of Norse rather than alongside it, as in Skye, and this may explain why Norse placenames in South-East Sutherland are relatively sparse, although far-flung.

Reverse side of Ospisdale Brooch.

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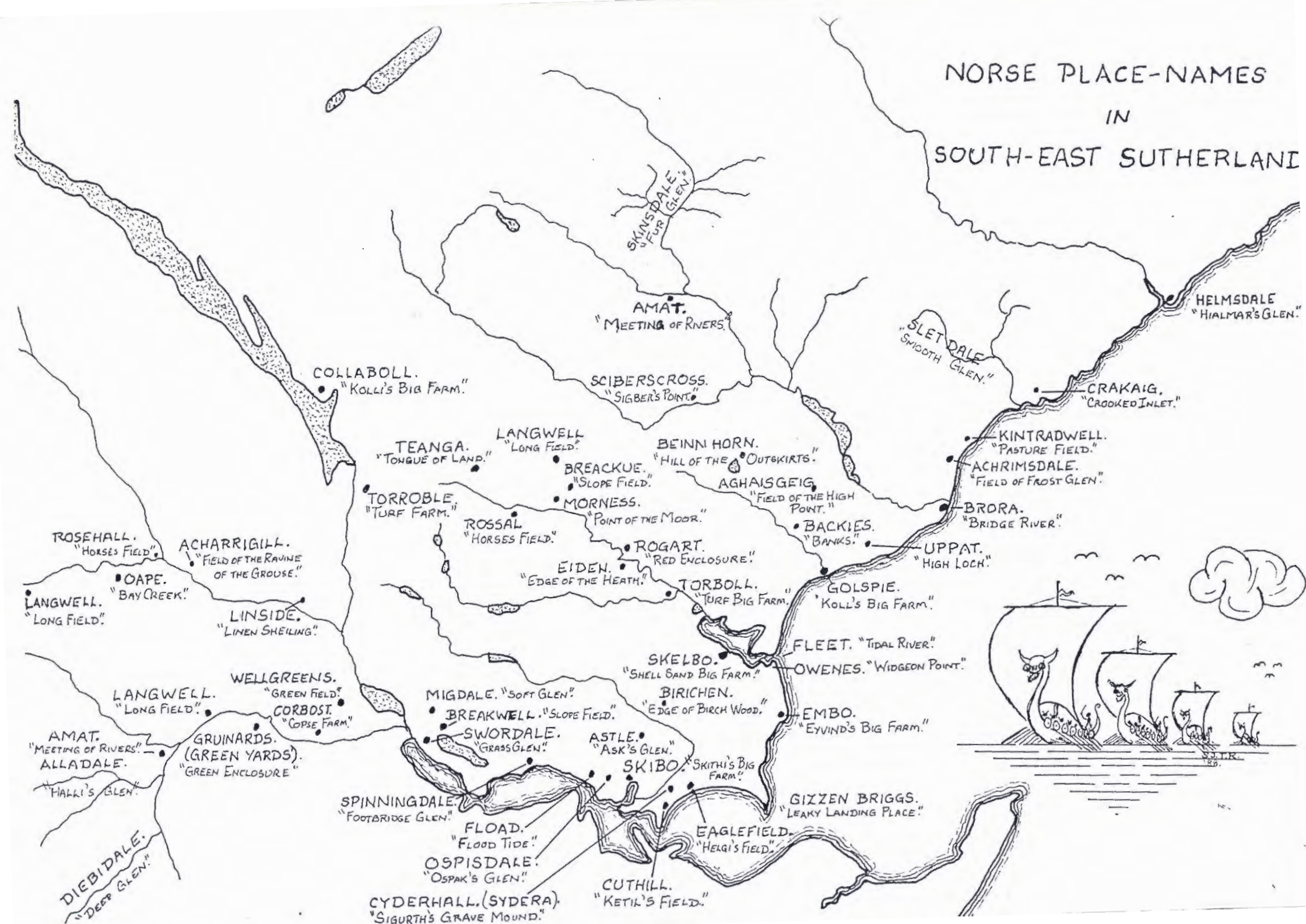
MAPS : O S Maps 1:50 000
Sheet 16 Lairg and Loch Shin.
17 Strath of Kildonan.
20 Beinn Dearg.
21 Dornoch Firth.

O S Maps 1:25000
Sheet NH 79 and part of NH 89 : Mound.
NC 60/70 Strath Fleet


NORSE PLACE-NAMES
IN
SOUTH-EAST SUTHERLAND
SKINSDALE. "FUR GLEN."
AMAT. "MEETING OF RIVERS."
SLETDALE "SMOOTH GLEN."
HELMSDALE "HIALMAR'S GLEN."
COLLABOLL. "KOLLI'S BIG FARM."
SCIBERSCROSS. "SIGBER'S POINT."
CRAKAIG. "CROOKED INLET."
KINTRADWELL. "PASTURE FIELD."
ACHRIMSDALE. "FIELD OF FROST GLEN."
LANGWELL "LONG FIELD."
TEANGA. "TONGUE OF LAND."
BEINN HORN. "HILL OF THE OUTSKIRTS."
BREACKUE. "SLOPE FIELD."
AGHAISGEIG "FIELD OF THE HIGH POINT."
TORROBLE "TURF FARM."
MORNESS. "POINT OF THE MOOR."
BRORA. "BRIDGE RIVER."
ROSSAL "HORSES FIELD."
BACKIES. "BANKS."
ROSEHALL. "HORSES FIELD."
ACHARRIGILL. "FIELD OF THE RAVINE OF THE GROUSE."
ROGART. "RED ENCLOSURE."
UPPAT. "HIGH LOCH."
OAPE. "BAY CREEK."
EIDEN. "EDGE OF THE HEATH."
TORBOLL. "TURF BIG FARM."
GOLSPIE. "KOLL'S BIG FARM."
LANGWELL. "LONG FIELD."
LINSIDE. "LINEN SHEILING."
FLEET. "TIDAL RIVER."
SKELBO. "SHELL SAND BIG FARM."
OWENES. "WIDGEON POINT."
WELLGREENS. "GREEN FIELD."
LANGWELL. "LONG FIELD."
MIGDALE. "SOFT GLEN."
BIRICHEN. "EDGE OF BIRCH WOOD."
CORBOST. "COPSE FARM."
BREAKWELL. "SLOPE FIELD."
EMBO. "EYVIND'S BIG FARM."
AMAT. "MEETING OF RIVERS."
SWORDALE. "GRASS GLEN."
GRUINARDS. (GREEN YARDS). "GREEN ENCLOSURE"
ASTLE. "ASK'S GLEN."
ALLADALE. "HALLI'S GLEN."
SKIBO. "SKITHI'S BIG FARM."
SPINNINGDALE. "FOOTBRIDGE GLEN."
GIZZEN BRIGGS. "LEAKY LANDING PLACE."
FLOAD. "FLOOD TIDE."
EAGLEFIELD. "HELGI'S FIELD."
OSPISDALE. "OSPAK'S GLEN."
DIEBIDALE. "DEEP GLEN."
CUTHILL. "KETIL'S FIELD."
CYDERHALL. (SYDERA). "SIGURTH'S GRAVE MOUND."

CYDERHALL (SYDERA) AND THE VIKING'S GRAVE.