

The Vikings in the Dornoch area

Sutherland took its name Southern land from being the southernmost area of the Earldom of Orkney in the 9th century. The first Earl was Sigurth the Mighty who died of blood poisoning after a battle with the Picts, around 895, after ruling for about 20 years.

The story went that he had arranged a meeting for negotiation with his enemies, the Picts to the south in Ross, each side to bring twenty armed and mounted men for protection. Sigurth broke the agreement by mounting two men on each horse, and in the ensuing fight, the Picts were all killed. Sigurth cut off the head of their leader, Maelbrigte, and hung it from his saddle-bow. As the Norsemen were riding for home (Skibo), the head swung round and a tooth protruding from the mouth gashed Sigurth's leg. The wound was superficial, but the leg began to swell and throb, and within days, Earl Sigurth was dead. This story may not be true, and is probably of Irish origin, but may have been told to account for the death of Sigurth from blood-poisoning.

Sigurth was a tall, clever, cold man whom everyone respected but nobody trusted. He was the ruthless leader the Norsemen needed at the time, to consolidate their possessions in Northern Scotland into the Earldom of Orkney.

This is the site traditionally called "The Viking's Grave", which may be the site of the mound under which Sigurth was buried. The name of the farm of Cyderhall is a corruption of Siddera, a name still used by older people in the parish; it is derived from the Norse name SIGURTHAR-HAUG "Sigurth's grave-mound".

The site is unusual in that it is not on the top of a hill or headland, as might be expected in the Viking age. This may be because Sigurth was buried in a hurry by his leaderless men, and all the headland sites were in full view of the Picts across the firth, and also because the hillocks in the area, known as "The Skardies", are formed of hard, impacted gravel in which digging is difficult.

The area of Cyderhall around the possible grave-site was densely populated by people living in huts and small cottages, in the 17th and 18th centuries. This may have been the time when the grave-mound was destroyed by people searching for building material. These settlements were cleared by eviction in the earliest years of the 19th century, and the inhabitants were sent to Dornoch Muir, now part of the Harriet Plantation.

These farms with Norse names indicate that there was a cluster of Viking farms on the fertile land belonging to Skibo.

Four big farms with names ending in BO or BOLL (Skibo, Embo, Skelbo, Torboll) were probably the primary settlements occupying the best sites, and farms with names ending in -VOLL, -BAKKI, -LAND, -STATHIR would be secondary, on land belonging to a -BOLL farm. The minor farms took protection from the primary farm, and in return gave it support in the form of produce and men. Bo or Boll means "large farm", and Skibo was SKITHA-BOL "large farm belonging to a man called Skithi". Embo was probably EYVINDAR-BOL "large farm belonging to Eyvind", Skelbo was SKELJA-BOL "large farm of the shells", or "of shell sand", Torboll was TORF-BOL "turf-farm", possibly meaning "large farm built from turf blocks".

The smaller farms were Eaglefield, an anglicised form of Norse HELGA-VOLL "Helgi's field" ("field" here being extended to mean "cultivated land, farm"); Cuthill, pronounced "kettle", which could be a form of a name with the first element derived from the personal name KETILL, the second possible VOLL, "field"; Rosebank, formerly pronounced "Rossbank" was HROSSA-BAKKI "slope of horses". Allistie or Ullest was an old name found in 18th century documents, possibly Norse ULLA-STATHIR "farm belonging to Ulli". Steinford may be from Norse STEIN-VORTH "stone cairn" (marking a crossing-place on the river).

It is possible that the names Keitill and Helgi are those of two famous men from Viking times who are known to have settled in Northern Scotland, before the younger, Helgi, went to Iceland. They were Keitill Flatnose, and his son-in-law, Helgi the Lean. They had left Norway under threat from the Norwegian King, and sought land to settle, in the Orkney earldom. Both were related to Earl Sigurth and knew him personally, and it is quite likely that he granted them land near Skibo. Keitill died of natural causes, and Helgi left for Iceland, taking his large family with him, after the death of Earl Sigurth.

For a few years after the death of Earl Sigurth in 895, the leadership of the Earldom was weak and indecisive. In the early 10th century, Sigurth's base-born nephew, Torf-Einar, became Earl, and proved to be as strong and ruthless as his uncle. He had only one eye, and was a very large and ugly man; he wrote elaborate poetry in his spare time.

The new 10th century Earl, Torf-Einar set about strengthening the defences of the Earldom, and established the dale farms as defence garrisons.

The westernmost were Migdale "soft, fertile glen" and Swordale "grass-glen", then Spinningdale, possibly meaning "glen with a single-span crossing-bridge" – though the name is obscure. Ospisdale, a little to the NW of Skibo, seems to be derived from OSPAKS-DAL "glen of a man called Ospak". Since Ospak is an unusual Norse name, being Irish in origin and borrowed into Norse, and since there was an Earl Ospak in the North at this time, described in the sagas as "Earl of Caithness", it seems likely that this was the man who built Ospisdale, possibly as a contribution to the defence of the Orkney earldom. The earldom of Caithness would have been a subordinate position within the Orkney domain, just as Orkney was subordinate in the kingdom of Norway.

A Viking brooch of the 10th century, the time of Torf-Einar, was found at Ospisdale in the 19th century (now in the Museum of Antiquities, Edinburgh).

It is of the "tortoise" type, usually found in pairs, and has suffered some damage. Similar brooches have been found in Caithness.