

"The Viking's Grave" at Cyderhall, near Dornoch.

This is classified by the Ordnance Survey as ~~E~~ location NH 7649 8940 ~~3~~, surveyed by T. Buchan, Surveyor, on 6.12.71. "Enclosure (? Hengi-form)": ... "on level ground in an area of glacial ridges is an enclosure consisting of an oval ditch 3.0 m. wide and 0.6 m. maximum depth with traces of an outer bank about 2.5 m. wide. The area enclosed, measuring about 13.0 m. East to West transversely, appears to be the original ground level and is featureless. The outer bank in the West has been mutilated by ploughing, which has also slightly encroached on the ditch. There is no sign of an entrance or causeway. A few clearance stones have been thrown into the N. arc of the ditch.

"The classification of this enclosure is uncertain. It is evidently ancient, and has the look of a hengi-form earthwork about 5."

An accompanying letter dated 29 May 1973 and signed J. L. Davidson, Surveyor-in-Charge Records, Ordnance Survey, says "It is certainly hengi-form in appearance, and although we cannot be 100% certain, we believe it is a ritual monument of some kind.

"Until excavated, ploughing of the site should be prevented if possible ..."

Another letter from the Archaeology Division of the O.S. (addressed to Mr Mitchell, West Rearquhar who had written to enquire about the site) says (no date or address):

"The oval ditched enclosure you saw (at Cyderhall) is a class of monument that we have tentatively classed as a hengi-form earthwork. We are not altogether clear about

the relationship of this type of earthwork to a true henge monument, but it undoubtedly possesses henge characteristics, i.e. a more or less circular area enclosed by a ditch with an outer bank. They are usually of such small size, however, that their attribution to a true henge category is uncertain, although occasional dateable finds from this type of monument suggests that they appear late in the henge tradition.

"... As far as Viking graves are concerned, they are mainly identified by the goods buried with the dead, and both cremation and inhumation were practised. From this you will gather that there is no certain way of identifying a Viking burial mound without excavation. Some graves are under their own mound, others are intruded into older burial mounds, and many have no mark. Our own field investigators have considerable experience in the interpretation of earthworks, barrows, etc., but none would attempt to state categorically that a burial mound was Viking, unless evidence of Viking grave-goods had been recorded."

The above records and letters from the Ordnance Survey represent the position of the present body, the Royal Commission for Ancient Monuments in Scotland, based in Edinburgh.

These reports refer only to the ground evidence and pay no heed to the strong circumstantial evidence both documentary and geographical, to link this site with Sigurth Eysteinnsson, first Earl of Orkney.

- 1) The house of SKIBO was Norse SKITHABOL, "Skith's big farm", one of a line of 4 ból names (Skibo, Embo, Skelbo, Torboll) in this area. These ból names belong to the 850-870 period, before Sigurth became earl of Orkney. Associated with Skibo, and on land belonging to Skibo, were a cluster of Norse names of smaller farms, secondary settlements, doubtless belonging to followers and supporters of the owners of Skibo, which must have been the military centre of the district (from its strategic position). These secondary settlements included Cuthill (pronounced "Kettle"), Eaglefield, Rosebank, Allistie, Steanford and Cyderhall. [more of this later].
- 2) The full Norse development from ból or bólstath names to the secondary farms ending with stathir, land, * is not found, which suggests that the first, mid-9th century, settlement pattern was broken by conflict with the Picts to the south. An interesting development was the -dale farms along the Dornoch Firth - Ospisdale, Spinningdale, Migdale, Swordale, Ausdale, possibly also Astle - which can be dated to the early years of the 10th century, after the death of Earl Sigurth. They were probably garrison-farms, to strengthen Norse defences against the Picts.
- 3) When the ból farms were established as the

first settlements, this area was in Pictish hands, but around 870, Sigurth Eysteinsson became the earl of Orkney and Shetland, receiving the position from his brother Rogwald, a friend of the king of Norway, Harald Finehair.

- 4) Sigurth lost no time in enlarging his territory. He formed an alliance with Thorsteinn the Red, a fiery Viking with many connections in this area. Together they moved south, pushing the Picts out as they came. They took Caithness, Sutherland, Ross and Moray, and killed the Pictish king Meldum, making his wife and son their own personal slaves. The Picts had to agree to a peace treaty, probably around 873: under its terms, the Norsemen would continue to hold Caithness and Sutherland as far south as the Dornoch Firth, as part of Sigurth's Earldom of Orkney, and Thorsteinn would style himself "King of Northern Scotland".
- 5) Thorsteinn then made his home in Caithness with his mother and a large household. He was a braggart, and his boasting goaded the Picts into attacking him at his home. He was killed, probably in 875, and his mother and household escaped to Orkney.
- 6) Sigurth continued as Earl of Orkney, with bases in Orkney, Shetland, Caithness and East Sutherland - Skibo must have been his base in this area. He held the leadership for more than 25 years, and was always known as Sigurth the Mighty. His character emerges as cold and ruthless, efficient and tough. He was feared and respected, but not loved. He had a treacherous nature, and went his own way,

acknowledging no master - nor even King Harald, whose instructions he ignored if they did not suit him.

- 7) Sigurth died as a result of his own treachery, with the sort of irony that Norse writers delight in: he was victorious by treachery against the Pictish leader Maelbrigte, but died as a result of that victory, ~~for~~ killed by Maelbrigte who was already dead. The story as told in the Orkneyinga saga appears in older Irish tales, but probably has a grain of truth in it: that Sigurth died after a victory, from blood poisoning sustained from a wound inflicted by his enemy. Sigurth overwhelmed Maelbrigte by breaking the normal rules governing a peaceful negotiation, killed and beheaded him, probably somewhere in Ross shire. He tied Maelbrigte's head to his saddle bow and rode for home, which was presumably Skibo. On the way, according to the saga, the severed head swung round and a protruding tooth gashed Sigurth's leg. The wound festered, and within days, Sigurth was dead.

This account was written centuries later, in Iceland, but based on an old Torf Einar saga, now lost. There are close Irish parallels, too. The first Icelandic settlers were 30% Irish or Hebridean, so their traditions are mixed.

- 8) The saga says that Sigurth was buried in a mound (hryggr is the word used: it means "mounded") on Ekkjalsbakki, that is, on the bank of the Oykel. From other sources we know that the Norseman called the Dornoch Firth by the name Ekkjal, from the old river name

Sigurth must have been buried in Norse territory, on the north bank of the firth, and we would expect to find his burial place within reach of Skibo.

- 9) The obvious place is Cyderhall, since there is a deed, dated soon after 1223, which names "the lands of Scithebolle and Sywardhoch", that is, of Skibo (Skithabol) and Sidera (Sigurtharhaugr). Sidera is the old name for Cyderhall, and many older folk still use it - with a short i which goes back 1000 years to Sigurth's name.
- 10) The Norse name Sigurtharhaugr means "Sigurth's grave-mound" - haugr denotes a mound, cairn or grave-mound. The change to Sywardhoch is exactly as would be expected as the name became corrupted between 895, when Sigurth died, and 1223 when it was first recorded in writing. Incidentally, the Orkneyinga saga was probably written between 1220 and 1225.

The name Sywardhoch developed through the centuries to Sidderaw, Sidderow, Siddera or Sidera, and was "anglicized" by English-speaking estate ~~clerk~~ clerks to Cyderhall - they must have seen the name rather than heard it, taken Sider to be pronounced "Cyder", and the final -a to be for Scots ha', and restored that as hall, to give Cyderhall, now used widely today. (Rosehall, more properly Rossal, was sometimes spelled Rosal, and this was anglicized to Rose-hall; it really means "horse-field", from Norse hross-vall)

- 11) What links Sigurtharhaugr with the oval mound on Cyderhall?

The oval mound lies between the river Evelix and some ridges and mounds known collectively as "The Skardies". In Gaelic this name is always in the singular, Cnoc Sgardaidh, and the cnoc or hillock to which it refers is uncertain.

Sgardaidh is an adjective meaning "made of scree, of loose, moving sand or gravel". The root is a word which means looseness or mobility, something unstable which moves when stepped on. Clearly something is wrong when this word is applied to the ridges at Cyderhall: they are ridges or eskers left by glaciers of the Ice Age, and are made of extremely hard, impacted gravel. If they were in the least sgardaidh, they would have disappeared long since. Mr Munro, who farms Cyderhall, tells me he has difficulty in putting in fence-posts with modern equipment, and he is certain that no Viking would have attempted to bury any one or anything on or in one of the Skardies when there was gravel and soft sandy soil alongside.

12. So it is unlikely that Cnoc Sgardaidh "hillock of loose gravel" was originally the name of ^{any of} the hard eskers; it was therefore a name given to a mound of gravel somewhere in the vicinity, a mound which has now gone.

13. But sgardaidh may itself be a corruption of the Norse name Sigurth, in this way: - as Sigurtharhaugr became corrupted to Sywardhoch in Scots/English, the local bi-lingual speakers of Norse and Gaelic in the late Norse period (around the 12th or 13th century) would take the last element haugr "mound" and translate it as Gaelic cnoc, with

the same meaning. In Gaelic th became d or t, and the stress would shift to the second syllable, to give Cnoc Sgurdar, which became meaningless later when the Gaelic speakers no longer understood Norse. Sgurdar then fell together with the local word Sgardaidh, which could only happen if the mound in question was formed from loose gravel so that the new word made sense. ~~the~~ A ~~modern~~ ~~survey~~ ~~report~~ glance at the oval site shows that its main material, as it stands today, is loose gravel and sand.

14) Cyderhall, Sidera, the Skardies, Cnoc Sgardaidh are all forms and corruptions, through Norse, Gaelic, English and Scots, of the original Norse name Sigurtharhaugr "Sigurth's grave mound", and their circumstantial evidence leads us to a mound of loose gravel in the vicinity of the ridges.

15) Close to Cyderhall is Cuthill ("Kettle") which is a name which has been associated with a well-known Viking leader, Ketill flatnose. The sagas tell us he left Norway and came to settle somewhere in Scotland (not the Hebrides or the Northern Isles), and was welcomed by men of rank - who must have included Sigurth himself. Cuthill was on Skibo land, and it is as likely that Ketill flatnose came there as anywhere else - his family and Sigurth's had many links, and Sigurth's ally Thorstein the Red was Ketill's grandson. Eaglefield is also close by, probably ~~the~~ Helga-voll "Helgi's field or farm" — Ketill flatnose had a famous son-in-law, Helgi the Lean, who lived near to him after marrying his daughter. Helgi was the son of a Norwegian merchant

and an Irish king's daughter, and he was brought up ~~as~~ in the Hebrides. He was a fluent speaker of both Gaelic and Norse, and believed in both the pagan god Thor and in Christianity. Other Norse farms locally were Rosebank, Norse hrossbakki "horse-bank", Steanford possibly Norse steinvorth "cain of stone (to mark a route or crossing-place on the river)", Allistie, possibly Norse Ulla stathir "Ulli's farmstead". There were probably others, but these Norse names which have survived are enough to tell us there was a Norse cluster-settlement below Skibo, around the lower Evelix river.

- 16) The nature of the grave mound: it seems likely that the mound was a stone chamber with gravel and sand heaped over it. There was plenty of rough stone lying around which may have been piled over the central cavity. Sigurth may have been buried sitting upright with his main possessions - arms, shield, even animals or slaves, around him. We do not know if he was pagan or Christian, but it is probable that he was still pagan, since he had had little contact with the Irish or Hebrideans. Kebab flatnose was Christian, Helgi the Lean half-and-half. The practices of burial - either with or without cremation - do not seem to have differed much after Christianity became the official religion of the Norsemen.

Viking graves were usually robbed at an early date because they were known to contain valuable objects. In the case of Sigurth's

mound, it seems likely that the stones themselves have been taken. This is entirely to be expected, since there was a considerable collection of houses, huts and hovels on Cyderhall in the 18th and early 19th centuries. The inhabitants were evicted in 1815, when the Sutherland Estate acquired the farm; ~~the~~ the land was cleared and the present farmhouse and steading were built, well away from the site of the hut settlements. Traces of these huts may be seen beside the river and on the flank of one of the ridges: they are small, crude dwellings, doubtless overcrowded and unhealthy. Stone to build more huts would be greatly prized, and it would be surprising if the stone mound had not been levelled at this time, if not earlier.

- 17) A final note: a track comes across from Skibo to cross the river at a point below the present steading. Here there are stepping-stones, said to have been there from times long before the first bridge was built over the Evelix. In the Lake District it has been shown that some stepping-stones date back to Viking times. We do not know for certain where Steanford was, but it may well have been at the stepping-stones crossing. It is not beyond possibility that Sigurth's body was brought from Skibo over these stepping stones for burial in his mound.

It might have been expected that Sigurth, a great leader, would have been buried in a mound on a headland overlooking the sea (as Skalla-Grímr was).

His burial in a mound hidden behind two high ridges, beside a steep drop to the river, is explained by the circumstances of his death: he had died most unexpectedly, after treacherously killing the Pictish leader and a Pictish delegation to the peace talks. The Norsemen were left without a leader, in the full knowledge that the Picts would be seeking vengeance. ~~They~~ Sigurth had only one son to succeed him, a sickly youth in his late teens, who was not expected to live long, and he did not — he died within a year of his father. After that there was indecision and weakness for some years; Sigurth's brother Rogwald sent his son Hallath to rule, but he could not cope with the pressures, and went home to Norway, a laughing-stock. Eventually Rogwald's baseborn son Einarr took over, and proved even tougher and nastier than Sigurth. It was he who organized the building of the garrison farms, doubtless to end the encroachments the Picts must have been making into the territory of the Orkney earldom during the years of weakness. It is small wonder that Sigurth's men, leaderless and frightened, did not bury him in a mound on a headland in full view of the Picts in Ross-shire.

If the oval site is prehistoric, it is not impossible for the Vikings to have opened it up to insert Sigurth's remains. They feared ancient burial sites, believing them to be haunted, and would readily add another ghost to those already there.

Description of a known grave-mound from the Viking Age, at Borgarnes, in south-west Iceland.

This account appears in the Year-book of the Icelandic Archaeological Society, 1897 (*Árbók hins Íslenska Fornleifa-félags*, 1897, Reykjavík). It is in rather formal, Victorian-style Icelandic, and the following is a rough translation. The author is not named. I think he was the President Chairman or Secretary of the Society, possibly a professor at the university.

He starts by quoting Egils Saga, chapter 58: "And in the morning at high tide, Skalla-Grímr (who had just died) was laid in a ship and rowed out to Digraanes, where Egill had a mound built at the front of a headland. In it Skalla-Grímr (Egill's father) was laid, with his horse and his weapon and his blacksmith's tools". [Later in Egils saga, the writer tells how Egill's favourite son was drowned, and Egill took the body, opened up the mound and laid his son beside Skalla-Grímr's remains. This saga was written in the 13th century, possibly by Snorri Sturluson, a well-known liar and twister of the truth. In any case, the sagas are mainly works of fiction set in a historical background, and cannot be relied on to record accurate historical detail. However, when the account below was written, all Icelanders believed that every word of every saga was gospel truth].

Skalla-Grímr's grave-mound is in the hollow which lies across the end of the headland of Digraanes; this hollow is called Skallagrímsdalur (Skalla-Grímr's valley). ~~no memory of the forefathers~~
This valley ^{has} ^{been} covered with smooth grass for as long as the oldest men can remember, and the soil is so thick that the grave-mound, which had

sunk down, could not be seen at all, except for a few stones which had been piled together on top of it. Now all the earth has been stripped away so that none of it is left; everywhere there is black sand (black from volcanic rock), mostly soft, and underneath is reddish rock, not very hard ("iron-stone"), and there are many fragments of this rock in the sand. Within the convex hollow where I dug there is a basalt ridge, cracked open, with gravel and sand around it.

The road to the trading station (small town) of Borgarnes crosses the valley diagonally. Immediately to the west of this road, in the middle of the valley (a shallow dip) is Skalla-Grimr's grave-mound. It is now (1897) no more than a rounded elevation, almost circular. There is a depression low down ~~at~~^{to} the north side, and this was full of sand when I was there. This depression shows traces of work (activity), as if some digging had been done in the mound. At first this looks like vandalism, but the whole matter is unclear: whoever the vandal was, he left his work half-finished. This was probably because he could not tackle the big stone laid over the stone cist inside the mound. But Andrijes Fjeldsteth, the owner and farmer at Hvítarvellir, dug the mound up in 1866. He had six men working together, and one of them was Jónas Guthmundsson, the blacksmith, nephew of Thorth Sveinbjörnsson, the judge of the Supreme Court. He was at that time one of the household at Hvítarvellir, and he now lives at Ólvaldsstathir, ~~at that~~

and is aged 65; he is an intelligent and fine man with something about him, and appears to be reliable. He told me about the opening of the mound, as follows:

When they came to the mound (in 1866), it looked like a rounded heap of stones with a big slab of stone on the top. They managed to roll this off. Underneath they found an oval (elliptical) stone cist covered with big stone slabs, and it was full of sand and mud. They thought they would not manage to get all of this up out of the cist without breaking the cist itself to make more room. As they were prepared for the possibility that it might be made of big stones which extended downwards, they first made a big pit on the western side of the cist, to turn the stones into. They then threw out the stones which were already down, and they were pleased with this arrangement (I think he means this gave them more room to work).

Finally they came down to a slab of tufa (red stone), ~~after~~ after clearing almost all the stones out of the cist. At the very bottom of it, they found a lot of iron rust, but no bones and no other metal. The structure of the cist was all ruined and out of order, and in their opinion it must have collapsed when the ground above it was removed - but it was not themselves who had destroyed it, this was already done before they came.

The length of the cist was, from north to south, about 4 (Danish) ells (an ell = 2 feet) i.e. length about 8 feet; and the width, from east to west, about 3 ells (6 feet wide). But

they did not measure it precisely. They did not see any certain indications that the grave mound had been dug before, or the stone cist disturbed — but they were afraid it had. In a report which Andriæs (the farmer) himself gave about this mound-opening (Reports of the Antiquities of Iceland, 45-46, in the Yearbook of the Archaeological Society of Iceland 1886, p. 7.), it says — and Jónas does not remember this — "on one side of the mound, the stones were laid differently, with some of the stones further out". This would not have originated from the disturbance to the structure caused by Egill himself when he "laid his son Þóthvarr down beside Skalla-Grímr."

The great stone which they rolled off the mound still lies beside the road (1891), but the pit they dug has filled up with drifting sand. I had it shovelled away, to see what might remain of the stone cist. But unfortunately nothing of the original structure was left untouched except a little of the eastern part. Great damage has been done — but what's the use of talking? West of the mound was a little spread of stones in the sand, not unlike what one would guess was left from a cairn. I dug there myself, and found nothing except a splinter from a half-rotten tooth of a horse. It occurred to me that Skalla-Grímr's horse could have been buried there in a separate grave and not in the mound beside Skalla-Grímr himself, in spite of what the saga says — it could be an inaccuracy. No reliance can be placed on this.

From the Yearbook for 1908, p. 20. Again the author is not named, but is probably the same as above, the Pres, Chairman or Secy of the Society:

Rumour reached me that the road makers who were laying the road to the town of Borgarnes a few years ago took the stones from which the stone cist inside Skalla-Grímr's mound was built, which were still lying there and to some extent undisturbed at the time when I had the sand dug out in 1896 (see above), and they used them to build the edge of the road. Although I did not believe this story, I asked the local pastor, the Rev. Einar Frithgeirsson at Borg, if there was any truth in it. He said they had disturbed nothing there. But he also said that he himself had had the mound repaired from the outside and restored, and had had a memorial sign put on it.

[Presumably this means merely that the stone from the original mound and cist was piled up into another mound. Today (1985) there is a mound about 5 feet high, circular and about 8 feet in diameter. It has been turfed over, and on top is a flat piece of stone engraved with runes (a modern addition) - I do not know who did this - probably the Tourist Board. The whole mound is planted round with flowers, set in a small park with seats, and a memorial wall with a big plaque shows Egill in anguish riding to Digranes with the body of his son across his saddle bow - this too is modern. It is all a considerable modern tourist attraction]

Please note that there is no question of any Icelandic grave mound being pre-historic. This stone cist and mound cannot be older than 874. Skalla-Grímr died not long after Sigurth the Mighty. It is on record that he knew Sigurth's brother Rogwald in Norway before he left for Iceland. The two families came from the same part of Norway, on the west coast north of Bergen.

The relevant details in this very unsatisfactory account seem to me to be (a) that the mound was of stone; (b) that it contained a stone cist or chamber approx. 8 feet by 6 feet; (c) that this cist or chamber was oval in shape. It is a pity that the accounts give no indication of the depth of the cist, or of possible access passages - but the whole proceeding seems to have been a mess from beginning to end.

Skalla-Grímr was a local chieftain in Iceland, with a big but sparsely-populated district under his control. He was an enemy of King Harald Finehair. He was by no means as important a man as Sigurth Eysteinnsson, Earl of Orkney, who was buried at Cyderhall. I would expect Skalla-Grímr's grave to be smaller than Sigurth's - but the haste of Sigurth's burial may have been a factor.