

## THE VIKING'S GRAVE

I am sure that you will all know the outlines of the Norse invasion and settlement of the Dornoch Firth area. You will find it all in the Orkneyinga saga, which was using an older work, the lost Torf-Einars saga. Orkneyinga tells briefly how the Earldom of Orkney was set up in the late 800's. The story is probably embroidery, to account for the title of Earl ending up where it did, but it could have been true. The King of Norway, Harald Finehair, either went on an expedition to the Hebrides with his right-hand man, Rognvald Eysteinnsson, or sent Rognvald on his behalf, to put down some troublesome Vikings who were attacking his possessions in the west. Rognvald and his brother Sigurth were both commanders in the King's forces, experienced soldiers and men of influence.

On the expedition, in about 873, Rognvald took along his eldest son, Ivarr, a lad of twelve or thirteen, and in the fighting, young Ivarr was killed. Myself, I think the young boy recently found buried on the beach at Balnakiel, Durness, may well have been young Ivarr, but the experts say he cannot be older than the 10th century. Until I see the evidence, I cannot accept this - not from pique but because no-one can convince me that the difference between 873 and 900 is perceptible in archaeological terms. Very little is known of Viking life and accoutrements at this period, and I defy anyone to show me an object like a shield or a sword and say "This is 10th century, it cannot be from 873". The boy was certainly high-born, well-equipped and the right age, and rather pathetically was carrying a sword that was too big for him - or at least was buried with it.

Anyway, Ivarr died, and the King, in compensation to Rognvald for the death of his son, gave him the Northern Isles, Orkney and Shetland, with the title Jarl, or Earl, of Orkney. Rognvald, however, was busy consolidating his position as a man of power in Norway, and may have suspected that the King was trying to clip his wings by sending him abroad. For whatever reason, the saga tells us that he passed on the gift to his younger brother, Sigurth, who then became the first Earl of Orkney. He was the Viking who is buried in the Viking's Grave, at Ciderhall, south-east of Dornoch.

Sigurth Eysteinnsson was an ambitious man who figures in several of the Icelandic sagas. The writers picture him as a tall man, strong, ruthless, able, well-organized, a good leader but a cold and treacherous person, one who would use any means available to achieve his own ends. He



went his own way regardless of anyone else, including the King, and he was clever enough to evade any trouble from Norway. He was undoubtedly the right man to carry out his purposes for the Earldom of Orkney, and he remained Earl for about 25 years, a remarkable feat for those days. He was known as Sigurth the Mighty.

His first act as Earl was to form an alliance with a drunken Viking called Thorsteinn the Red. He needed Thorsteinn's ships and men, just as Thorsteinn needed Sigurth's brains, experience and coolness. Together they crossed into Caithness, and attacked the Picts.

They drove them south, through what is now Sutherland, Ross and Moray, and on into the very heart of Pictland, Perthshire. They killed the Pictish ruler of Ross, Meldun, and took his wife and son as their own personal slaves. The sagas have a lot of fun with this, because Sigurth had a wife who both feared and hated him, and Meldun's widow was given to her as her maid. The widow was Irish, and turned out to have magic powers, and the two women ganged up on Sigurth - he was afraid of the supernatural, and the Irish slave was the only person he ever feared. In the end he gave her to his ally Thorsteinn, whose formidable mother was said to be a witch.

The Picts were forced to surrender and agree to the terms of a peace treaty, which were that Sigurth would hold all the land north of the Dornoch Firth, but the Picts would recover Moray and Ross, and Thorsteinn the Red would be allowed to call himself "King of Northern Scotland", which seems to have been the summit of his ambition. Sigurth must have smiled to himself over this : Thorsteinn's future was clearly limited, the only doubt being which of three fates would overtake him - would he drink himself to death before the King of Norway heard he was styling himself King, or would the local Picts be goaded beyond endurance by his constant boasting and gloating ? In the end it was the last : he was murdered in his stronghold in Caithness, and his mother and the rest of his household, including Meldun's widow, fled to Orkney. They later went to Iceland.

This was the time when Sutherland got its name, the southern land (of the Orkney Earldom). It remained the southern boundary of Norse territory for only a hundred years, but it has always retained that name - but not in Gaelic.

Sigurth, left now in sole possession of his new Earldom, had the task of consolidation and the manning of his defences, especially against the Picts who were always trying to regain their lost territory. He set about arranging enough colonization to establish garrisons in the frontier area, supported by a few primary farms to supply the garrisons with food, horses and men.



The big farms with names ending in -bol or -bo belong to this time, the late 800's - Torbol "farm built of turf blocks", Skelbo "farm of shell-sand", Embo "Eyvind's farm" and Skibo "Skithi's farm". Eyvind and Skithi were very common Norse names, and we know nothing more about these two.

Skibo must have been an important site strategically. It commanded the mouth of the firth as well as the back entrance to the district, along the shores of the firth. The land around it was fertile and easy to work, and it had its own bay which in those days was deep enough to take longships - they drew very little water. From Skibo the Norsemen could see right into Pictish territory in Ross, and could watch for invasion from the south. There is little doubt that Skibo was Sigurth's headquarters when he was in the south.

Around Skibo, on the rich flat land below the escarpment, a cluster of smaller, dependent Norse farms is found, a secondary settlement which you would normally expect to grow up around a primary farm. The original settler took a large tract of land and then gave parcels of it to members of his family and dependents. In normal, peaceful times, farms with names ending in -voll, -stathir, and -land are found. Sure enough, below Skibo, on land belonging to Skibo, they are found as expected - but not around the other big farms, Torbol, Skelbo and Embo. This may simply be accident in that the Skibo farm names have been preserved ; or it may be that the times were not peaceful, and the secondary settlement did not develop in the normal way, but was confined to the place which was best defended - Skibo. It was the area closest to Pictish territory, but of the four big farms, the easiest to defend because of its natural features.

Below Skibo are Rosebank, Eaglefield, Cuthill and Ciderhall, all farms with Norse names. No longer in use, but recorded in old documents, are Steanford and Allistie. The latter seems to be the only -stathir name in the district.

Sigurth was constantly harried by the Picts in Ross, who obviously wanted their land back. He had the problem of defending all his possessions from the local Picts and also from marauding pirates, many of them of mixed Norse-Celtic blood. The Picts in Ross became such a nuisance to him that in the end, in about 895 or a little later, he proposed peace talks with the new leader of Ross, whose name was Maelbrigte. The arrangement was the usual one for negotiations : each leader would be attended by a bodyguard of twenty armed men on horseback, and they would meet at an appointed place, in this case probably at the head of the Dornoch Firth.

Maelbrigte was there on the appointed day, with his twenty men, and they saw the Norsemen approaching along the firth. It was not until they were quite near and it



was too late for Maelbrigte to flee that he saw what Sigurth had done : there were two legs sticking out from under the big riding cloak on each side of every horse. Sigurth had broken the rules for negotiations and brought forty armed men instead of twenty. Clearly his intention was not peace talks. This gave the saga writer a fine chance for a nice bit of heroic rhetoric - Maelbrigte had time to address his men, urging them to fight bravely and to the death, and each to take at least one Norseman with him as he died. The interesting thing about this story is that it is the Picts, not the Norsemen, who are the heroic figures, and the Norsemen are cast as the villains - it must have come from a Celtic source.

This is borne out by what is said to have happened next: the Norsemen attacked and wiped out the twenty Picts and their leader, and then did something very un-Norse, they cut off the heads of their victims and hung them by the hair from their saddle-bows. Then they rode for home, which was Skibo. You have to bear in mind that this is a story, and this element of it is almost certainly drawn from Irish sources. The same story appears in Ulster, with the same names but in Irish form. But did the Irish borrow from the Norse and return the story suitably embroidered, or was it the other way round ?

Anyway, Sigurth took Maelbrigte's head, and Maelbrigte had a protruding tooth which stuck out of his mouth. As Sigurth spurred his horse for the gallop home, the head swung round and the sharp protruding tooth scratched his leg. Just a minor abrasion, nothing to worry about - but three days later, Sigurth was dead, from blood-poisoning. This is the sort of story the Norsemen relished, with a good dollop of irony among the blood and treachery : a powerful earl kills his enemy by double-dealing, and then the dead man gets his revenge by killing his enemy after his death. Great stuff. I imagine that what really happened was that there was a skirmish somewhere with the Picts and Sigurth suffered a minor wound, later dying of blood poisoning. But the saga's version does add a little spice.

His men, who must have been panic-stricken, buried him, under a mound, says the saga, on Ekkjalsbakki, the bank of the Oykeall. We know, from elsewhere in this saga and others, that Ekkjall or Oykeall was the Norse name for the Dornoch Firth. The place where Sigurth was buried was on Skibo ground, but across the river Evelix, on the farm now called Ciderhall. [SLIDE - Map]

There is not the slightest doubt that the name Ciderhall is derived from the Norse name Sigurthar haugr "Sigurth's grave-mound". All the different stages of the name's development from 1227 to the present day are well documented. Even now, the older of my neighbours in Birichen always refer to the farm as Sidera, not Ciderhall, and they pronounce it with the short i that comes from Sigurth's name and has endured for over a



thousand years. The name Siddera is also preserved in the name of the plantation alongside the farm.

The problem is to identify the mound. The N.E. part of the farm, alongside the river Evelix, is full of strange ridges and steep-sided hillocks ; these are eskars [2 SLIDES - Eskars] - deposited by glaciers in the Ice Age, and they are extremely hard, being composed of impacted gravel that is very difficult to penetrate. Mr Munro, the present farmer at Ciderhall, says that he has great difficulty in making holes to put in fence-posts, using modern equipment. He reckons that if Sigurth's men had a body to bury, they would not seek out an eskar to put it in. The word used in the saga is heygthr, which means "mounded, put under a heap", a term often used of something laid on the ground with stones piled on top, not necessarily with a burial underneath. But it could also mean buried, then heaped over, first with stones and then with sand, gravel or earth.

In Barbara Crawford's article in the book "The Firthlands of Ross and Sutherland", there is an aerial photograph with the Viking's Grave marked with an arrow. The site marked is on top of the tallest of the eskar ridges. Barbara tells me that this was a mistake made by the editor of the book, and she did not intend the arrow to be put there. So you can ignore that. [SLIDE - Big eskar]

Between the long eskar and the river, on flat ground with light sandy soil, there is an oval site, and this is known locally as The Viking's Grave. It is flat, with a ditch round it, some 2-3 feet deep. The central oval within the ditch measures about 13 yards by 16. [2 SLIDES - Oval]. The oval is aligned approximately NE to SW. [SLIDE - Ditch]. It is on a flat open piece of land, and about 20 yards away on each side is a heap of stones, so that the three sites form a straight line. In one of these heaps the remains of a curved structure can be discerned. [SLIDE - Stone-heap]

Opinions differ, to put it mildly, about this oval site. All the pre-history experts say it is a henge site from pre-historic times. Joanna Close Brook, who is a Pictish specialist, says it is a Pictish site. A man known as "It's Later Than You Think" who reckons that most sites in the north are 18th century says it is the foundation of an 18th century building which was made of turf blocks on stone foundations. Personally, as a Viking enthusiast, I see no reason why it can't be a Viking site and the grave of Sigurth himself. I do have some evidence for this view, apart from the strong documentary and place-name evidence. There is a grave-mound in Iceland, at Borgarness on the south coast, and this is the grave of Skalla-Grimr, the father of the saga hero Egill. Skalla-Grimr was a contemporary of Sigurth, and he knew the family of Rognvald and Sigurth in Western Norway before he went to Iceland. This grave is a good parallel because it is an individual, personal grave - many surviving



grave-mounds in Norway are mass graves of those who fell in battle, which is no use for comparison. Skalla-Grimr was a local leader, and contemporary with Sigurth, so I think a valid comparison can be made. [SLIDE - Icelandic Grave-mound]. [SLIDE - Norwegian grave-mounds]

The Icelandic grave is a mound on an oval base of dimensions similar to those of the Ciderhall oval - and in Iceland there can be no question of pre-historic or Pictish, it has to be pure Viking. The Icelandic site has been restored to some extent, I suspect by the local Tourist Board, but there is a record of what was found when it was excavated in about 1860 : a double chamber of stone slabs, with no entrance, like a divided box, had been heaped over with earth and stones to form a mound. The internal chamber had collapsed, and the grave had been robbed, but fragments of bone, weapons and horse-harness were found. The report is not very specific, as it was written by an elderly Icelandic minister soon after 1860.

I was interested in a report by the Ordnance Survey's Archaeological Division in the 1970's, with a minute description of the site - but to my surprise, with no mention of the very obvious trench across the centre. This was made by a secret unit of the Home Guard during the second World War ; they had the task of installing some kind of secret weapon there, sworn to secrecy and not allowed to tell even their wives. Only four local men were involved and unfortunately all four are now dead, so we can't ask them if they found anything as they cut across the oval - nails, or teeth, or anything at all.

The Ordnance Survey report says : "As far as Viking graves are concerned, they are mainly identified by the goods buried with the dead .... and 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 at all.... No-one would attempt to state categorically that a burial mound was Viking unless evidence of Viking grave-goods had been recorded"

This OS report represents the position of the Royal Commission for Ancient Monuments in Scotland, in Edinburgh. I find the suggestion that an older mound might have been opened very interesting. The area along the river and within the present Siddera Plantation is full of hut circles and chambered cairns, all from the pre-historic period. Dr Robertson has uncovered several not previously recorded. It is possible that the oval site belongs among these early settlements, and that Sigurth's men opened up an ancient mound and inserted their leader's body. As the report makes clear, there is precedent for this practice.

You would expect a leader of Sigurth's importance to be buried on a prominent headland overlooking the sea, in a



symbolic ship burial, that is, in a grave or grave-mound shaped like a ship. But in Sigurth's case you have to bear in mind the circumstances of his death. The local garrison had been left leaderless unexpectedly, and they knew that Sigurth's only son was a weak and sickly boy. The Picts were seething only a mile away, across the firth, infuriated by the treacherous attack on their leader and his delegation. Everything the Vikings did on the coast could be seen from Ross, which made burial on a headland out of the question. My guess is that they brought Sigurth's body down from Skibo by night, and buried him in a place out of sight of the Picts behind the eskar, to keep the news of their leader's death secret as long as possible. Why there, so far from Skibo itself? Why not up on the escarpment near the house? I think they wanted to be sure of running water between the grave and the house, to prevent Sigurth's ghost from bothering them. If there was some sort of sacred site from ancient times there across the river, it is likely that they would see Sigurth's burial there as merely adding one more restless spirit to those already infesting the place. It is not known whether Sigurth was a Christian or not; many Vikings at this time were converted - but the saga writers seem to have pictured him as still pagan. If so, he may have been buried sitting upright and surrounded by grave-goods such as weapons, jewellery, and food, even sacrificed animals or slaves. It is doubtful if Sigurth could have received the full funeral ritual, however, and his grave-goods may have been sparse.

There are stepping stones across the river between Skibo and this site, stones which were there long before the river was bridged. It has been shown that stepping stones in the Lake District are often of Viking origin, and the same may be true here. The name Steanford is associated with them, and that is a Norse name.

The eskars, or ridges of hard impacted gravel, have the name The Skardies in English, but in Gaelic the name is in the singular: Cnoc Sgardaidh. It can be shown that this is a corruption of the Norse name Sigurtharhaugr "Sigurth's grave-mound", just as Ciderhall is, by the Scots/English route. I understand that the word Sgardaidh is found as a place-name near Tain, for a bank of loose shifting sand, and I believe that the form of the name Cnoc Sgardaidh was influenced by this word - which Watson says was a dialect word peculiar to this area. Underlying Cnoc Sgardaidh is the original Norse name, corrupted in Gaelic usage as it was in English. As the name applies to the big eskar it points us to that N.E. corner of the farm where the oval site is found. [SLIDE- Names chart]

So the names that have survived, Ciderhall, Sidera, the Skardies, Cnoc Sgardaidh, are all forms of the same name given to the spot in about 895, Sigurtharhaugr "Sigurth's grave-mound". They give us exceptionally strong place-name evidence in support of the identification of the



oval site. Add to this the documentary evidence of the sagas and the old Skibo deeds, and what it all adds up to is the only burial site of a known, named, dated and documented Viking in Britain.

So why has it not been excavated ? Would there be any point now, I wonder, when the site has clearly been robbed and flattened ? Viking graves were always likely to be robbed because of the valuable objects buried with the dead ; and in this case even the stone slabs would be taken, probably in the 17th and 18th centuries when a township of huts and hovels grew up here - the sites of the houses can still be seen - housing the very poorest people with no land, no tenure, no rights at all, people who were always desperate to find food and shelter, and had to scrape a living where they could. They would strip the site of anything usable for any purpose during the two hundred years the huts were there. At the beginning of the 19th century, when the Sutherland estate owned Ciderhall for a short time, the township of huts was swept away and the site cleared for agriculture.

Close to Ciderhall is Cuthill (pronounced "Kettle") which has been associated with a well-known Viking leader, Ketill Flatnose. Many Vikings were called Ketill, and this farm name may not contain the name Ketill at all - but a case could be made for this being the home of Ketill Flatnose. We know that he left Norway to go to live in Scotland ; the word means not the Northern or the Western Isles but the mainland of Scotland. He settled in Scotland for some years before his family left for Iceland. Ketill's family and Sigurth's were related, and the sagas say Ketill was "welcomed by men of rank" in Scotland, who must have included Sigurth. Sigurth's ally Thorsteinn the Red was Ketill's grandson. So perhaps he did settle at Cuthill - who knows, he may have been a golfer.

Close by is Eaglefield, Norse Helga-voll "Helgi's farm". Helgi was a very common Norse name, and Ketill had several relatives, son, sons-in-law, nephews, of that name. The most famous of them was a man called Helgi the Lean, who married Ketill's daughter and came to live near him. Helgi was of mixed Norse-Irish blood, and was brought up in the Hebrides. He was a fluent speaker of both Gaelic and Norse, and believed in both the old religion of the Norse gods and the new Christianity. Very tall, very thin, he became well-known after he went to Iceland. I make no claim that it was Helgi the Lean who settled Eaglefield - but it is certainly possible. [4 SLIDES : Shetland house, Jarlshof, Icelandic turf-house, turf-house in colour].

After Sigurth's death, things fell into chaos, as they so often did after an exceptionally strong leader. His own son was too unwell to be able to rule, and he died a year after his father. The succession reverted to Sigurth's brother Rognvald, and he tried to set up his sons as Earl



of Orkney, but they were unable to assert their authority. In the end it was a baseborn son of Rognvald's by a slave woman who took over, and showed himself to be every bit as ruthless and intelligent as his uncle Sigurth had been. His name was Einarr, known as Torf-Einarr, and he was Earl for some thirty years.

During the years of uncertainty after Sigurth's death, the Picts in Ross obviously seized their chance and began to encroach on Norse territory from the Dornoch Firth. It was Einarr's task to drive them back and to set about stopping up the routes by which the Picts could enter. He did this by establishing the -dale farms along the firth : Ospisdale, Spinningdale, Migdale, Swordale, Ausdale, and over the hill behind Skibo, Astle, to prevent an attack from the rear by way of the Evelix river. They seem to have been built as garrison farms, and this explains why they have names in -dale : their purpose was to defend the glens, each one guarding its own area and preventing entry into the district.

Two circumstances give us the date of these garrison farms, the early 10th century. One is the name Ospisdale, which is from Norse Ospaksdal "Ospak's glen". Ospak is an interesting name of Celtic origin, probably Irish or Hebridean, and not at all a common name. The only Ospak in the records of the 10th century Norse world is Ospak, Earl of Caithness, under Einarr's overlordship. This Ospak died around 920, fighting in battle in the Hebrides. If he was the Ospak who settled Ospisdale, we have to wonder if Einarr was organizing his defences on a district basis : perhaps Caithness ran and maintained Ospisdale, and (say) Kildonan was responsible for the upkeep of (say) Spinningdale, and so on. A pre-runner of the parish system later brought in by Bishop Gilbert ? But this is pure conjecture, based on that unusual personal name. The other link to the early 10th century was also found at Ospisdale. In the 19th century a large brooch of the type known as a tortoise brooch, from its shape, was found somewhere at Ospisdale (the exact site and circumstance of the find was not recorded). It is now in the National Museum of Antiquities in Edinburgh. It is damaged, and the other brooch of the pair has not been found, but it belongs to a type of ornament found mainly in Caithness, from the first half of the 10th century. While it does not tell us when Ospisdale was settled, it does confirm that it was occupied in the time of Torf-Einarr. It is interesting that it was a woman's brooch, of a type worn by high-born Norse women. Ospisdale cannot have been only a garrison for soldiers.

Ross was still Pictish at this time. It was not until the last years of the 10th century that the next strong Earl changed that. Sigurth the Stout, who was a great-grandson of Torf-Einarr, showed leadership qualities like those of his ancestor, Sigurth, and led his forces south into Easter Ross, and took from the Picts all their land north of Inverness. Ross became a Norse possession, and



Dingwall was set up as an international trading town. The Picts retained Moray and Southern Pictland, but they had lost Ross for good. Easter Ross, including the north side of the Black Isle, was settled, the usual pattern of primary -bol farms being developed into secondary farms with names ending in -voll or with natural features as a name element.

Tain and Edderton are both Norse names belonging to this period, the end of the 10th century. I think they take their names from the strange formations of points and narrow promontories sticking out into the firth. Early spellings make it clear that the last element of Edderton is the same as the single element of Tain, so that we have Tain and Edder-Tain. Tain is probably Norse tangi "triangular tongue of land sticking out into the sea", a feature which has vanished now but shows clearly on Pont's map of the 16th century. Edder- is Norse eithar "long thin promontory, narrow finger of land with water on each side" - still a feature of the firth at Edderton.

To the east lie Arbol and Cadboll with their secondary farms, Bindal, Seafield, Tarrel and Shandwick. These are on the same pattern as the farms around Skibo, across the firth, but I think they are later.

Finally could I put in a plea to you to ignore any suggestion that Tain is from Norse Thing "assembly". Thing is never used as a placename on its own, any more than Assembly is. And I must ask you not to believe Adrian Clark when he publishes comments which he says I have made. I see that his latest is to declare that I said the old name for the Cromarty Firth, Sikersund, is named after Sigurth the Mighty. What I did say, and he took me up wrong, was that it was named after Sigurth the Stout, a hundred years later. Adrian is entitled to his own opinions, but he is not entitled to misrepresent me in public, and to publish things that I did not say under my name. However, I daresay he means well, and I bear him no ill-will.