

The Vikings in Lewis

Edited by Brittany Schorn
and Judy Quinn



LANGUAGES, MYTHS AND FINDS

VOLUME 2

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CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF THE VIKING AGE
UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM
2014

Languages, Myths and Finds – Volume 2

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First published in Great Britain by the Centre for the Study of the Viking Age,
University of Nottingham, 2014

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ISBN 9780853582991

Graphic design, typesetting and printing



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Cover photograph © Brittany Schorn

Preface and Acknowledgements

This booklet is volume 2 of a series produced by the *Languages Myths and Finds* project, exploring Viking heritage in historically significant areas of the British Isles and Ireland. The project and this series of booklets are funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council. The research presented here is the result of collaboration between the authors and our partners on the Isle of Lewis. Above all, we are indebted to Dr Mary MacLeod Rivett, a professional archaeologist and lecturer at the University of the Highlands and Islands. She has very generously contributed her time and her truly unique wealth of knowledge about the archaeology of Lewis. We also owe thanks to others whom we met with on research trips and corresponded with in 2013 and 2014: Catriona West (Heritage Manager Comhairle nan Eilean Siar), Ashley Ferrier (Museum nan Eilean), Mark Elliot (Museum nan Eilean), John MacIver and David and Rosie Roberts (Uig Community Centre), James Crawford (professional stone mason and reconstructor of the Bosta Iron Age House) and Dr David Caldwell (Edinburgh).

This booklet is the result of interdisciplinary collaboration between its four authors. The information presented in it draws on primary medieval sources and published scholarship. References to the texts used are listed in the bibliography at the end of the booklet; readers are encouraged to look there for further information about the Vikings in Lewis, and also to visit our project website at www.languagesmythsfinds.ac.uk.

Introduction

David Etheridge, Michael Hart,
Eleanor Heans-Głogowska, Patrycja Kupiec

The Lewis Chessmen are among the most iconic images of both the Isle of Lewis itself and the Norse heritage of the whole of the British Isles. The Chessmen are highlights of the collections of both the British Museum and the National Museum of Scotland, where they are seen by millions of visitors every year. Soon visitors to the Isle of Lewis will also be able to see them on the island where they were found, in the new premises of the Museum nan Eilean at Lews Castle.

This extraordinary find of ivory chess pieces provides a glimpse into a fascinating period in the history of Lewis, and vividly illustrates its place within the Scandinavian world of the medieval period. Vikings first reached Scotland's shores in the late eighth century, and their presence as raiders, settlers and traders is part of a history that culminated in four centuries of Norwegian rule in western Scotland (to 1266).

This booklet will follow three main strands of evidence to illuminate the cultural context in which the Chessmen came to be on Lewis, and their legacy into the present: archaeological finds from the Scandinavian settlements on Lewis; the influence of the Old Norse language on place names; and material from Old Norse sagas and poetry that makes mention of Lewis, the Hebrides or Hebrideans.

Archaeology

Archaeological finds from the Isle of Lewis have advanced our understanding of the Norse settlement in this territory, which was once considered liminal and marginal in the context of the Viking expansion. Excavated Viking-Age settlements at Bosta and Barvas shed light on the daily life of the Norse farmers, the new agricultural practices they brought with them and the continuity of use of certain technologies, such as pottery. This continuity is indicative of a blending of existing cultural traditions

with those of Scandinavian settlers, and supports the integration of the two groups. The evidence from Viking-Age burials from the Cnip headland and Bhaltois show how these new identities were mediated through the use of artefacts interred with the deceased. The stable isotope analysis done on the bones from the Cnip headland cemetery suggests different places of origin for this small group of people, which really emphasizes the complexity of Viking-Age society on the Isle of Lewis. The settlement where this group of people once lived remains to be discovered. Numerous stray finds (objects found by chance and with little or no associated archaeological context) point towards a high density of Norse settlement on Lewis, an impression supported by the number of place-names derived from Old Norse. Future archaeological excavations may further redress the balance between the onomastic evidence, and the archaeological record from Lewis.

The Lewis Chessmen

The Chessmen were found in Uig, probably in early 1831, but the exact location and timing of the find were kept secret. It is known from old accounts there were at least 93 pieces, of which 78 have survived to this day; at the time of writing 11 are



1573 map of the Hebrides. © National Library of Scotland.

held in the National Museum of Scotland, while the remaining 67 are at the British Museum. There are enough pieces to show there must once have been at least four sets. The pawns are carved in various shapes, some decorated, but the greatest interest has always been in the principal pieces: the Kings (8), Queens (8), Bishops (16), Knights (15) and Rooks (12).



The Lewis Chessmen: a Bishop, a Queen and a Rook.

Photo by David Etheridge.

A few pieces may have been carved from whalebone, but the majority were probably carved from walrus ivory (tusk), the sources for which were northern Norway and Greenland, already indicating a strong Scandinavian link. The style of the carving suggests they were made sometime between 1150 and 1200. A single drawing exists of a similar chess piece found in Trondheim, Norway. No other parallels are known, making the Lewis Chessmen unique.

There is one other feature that also points to Scandinavian provenance – four of the rooks (all depicted as foot soldiers) are biting their shield rims! An early thirteenth-century history of the Norwegian kings known as *Heimskringla* describes how the warriors of Óðinn would ‘go berserk’, a frenzied state which involved biting their shields as they went into battle. This puts the Scandinavian links of the Chessmen beyond doubt.

Why and when were they buried in Uig is unknown, but in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the Western Isles were part of the Kingdom of Norway and Uig has good evidence for Scandinavian settlement. Someone of wealth had these pieces made, and brought them to the island or traded them. At some later point in time, they were hidden as a hoard – perhaps as a result of the changing political landscape. With the Treaty of Perth in 1266, the Outer Hebrides became part of Scotland and Scandinavians on Lewis could leave if they wished. The Chessmen mark the last flourishing of Scandinavian art and culture on the island.

The Scandinavian Place-names of Lewis

The Scandinavians who settled and ruled the Hebrides until they were ceded to the Scottish crown in 1266 called the islands **Sudreyjar** (Southern Islands). This reflects their position in the Norse-settled islands relative to Orkney and Shetland.

Many of the place-names of Lewis come from the time of Scandinavian settlement. Sometimes it can be relatively easy to recognise Old Norse elements, for example **Brue** comes from the Old Norse *Brú* (Bridge). In other cases the derivation is less obvious.

Habost for example, comes from Old Norse *Hábólstaðr* (High Farm).

It can be very difficult or impossible to reconstruct place-names. This is because most of the place-names from the Hebrides are preserved in much later documents by which time the name may have already undergone many changes. Most importantly, Old Norse place-names have been adapted into the Gaelic dialect of the islands. The meaning of Old Norse elements may have been lost very early on. Richard Cox notes that *Balabhair*, which derives from Old Norse *Balavarða* (the cairn of the grassy bank), now refers to a pass between two hills. This demonstrates that the Old Norse meaning of the name was no longer understood by those who used it. Our earliest source for the place-names of the Hebrides is Ortelius' map of 1573.



Photo by Michael Hart.

Textual Sources

Historical sources such as the Icelandic sagas of the Norwegian kings and the Chronicle of the Isles can help to shed light on the history of the Hebrides in their Scandinavian milieu. Particularly important is *Orkneyinga saga*, the saga of the Orkney Islanders, which highlights the significant role of the Hebrideans in the politics of the North Sea world.

In addition to their appearance in historical sources, Hebrideans and the Hebrides also appear in Old Norse-Icelandic saga literature. The term *saga* (story) comes from the Old Norse-Icelandic verb *segja* (to say) and denotes a lengthy prose narrative not unlike the modern novel. The most critically acclaimed sagas are the *Íslendingasögur* (Sagas of Icelanders), which contain stories about Icelanders from the settlement period onward involving feuds, legal disputes and violent action. The *fornaldarsögur* (sagas of ancient times) are set in the distant heroic past and include extensive mythological and legendary material. Both the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur* are useful for the study of the Hebrides in the Viking Age and medieval period because of their portrayal of the islands and Hebrideans visiting or living in Iceland. They provide an insight into medieval Icelandic attitudes toward Hebrideans and the place of the Hebrides in the Scandinavian mindset.

Another textual source for the study of the Hebrides is skaldic poetry, which was written by named poets in praise of kings or earls and their deeds. The metrical form of this poetry, which is structured by alliteration and complex internal rhyme, is thought to have preserved much of the original wording of poets despite centuries of oral transmission. Because of this, skaldic poetry may preserve accurate historical details which can be used to reconstruct the history of the period. Much of this poetry, including two fragments written by a Norse-Hebridean poet, is recorded in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, a poetic manual and guide to mythology written c. 1220.

CHAPTER 1

Settlement

David Etheridge, Michael Hart,
Eleanor Heans-Głogowska, Patrycja Kupiec

The Archaeology of Viking Settlements on Lewis

Despite the apparent density of Norse settlement on Lewis suggested by the place-name evidence, the archaeological evidence for Norse sites is relatively scarce. There are two likely reasons for this underrepresentation. First, in contrast to circular and cellular prehistoric structures, the ruins of rectilinear buildings typical of the Viking Age cannot be easily distinguished from later medieval and post-medieval structures. Secondly, it is likely that many of the farms and settlements established by early Norse settlers have survived to the present day, with the earliest phases obscured by subsequent activity. To date only two sites on Lewis have been securely identified as Viking settlements, the sites of Barvas/Barabhas and Bosta/Bostadh (see facing page).

Bostadh

The name of the site, which almost certainly derives from the Old Norse *bólstaðr* (meaning cultivated and settled land, a farm) attests to the likely presence of an early Norse settlement. Excavation in 1996 revealed at least three semi-subterranean figure-of-eight-shaped structures, occupied between the sixth and ninth centuries, overlaid by a short-lived rectilinear structure and extensive midden (domestic waste dump) deposits, both tentatively dated to the Norse period. Steatite (also known as soapstone) bowl fragments excavated from near the rectangular structure confirm its likely Viking-Age date. Steatite artefacts recovered from the pre-Norse contexts in



Reconstructed Iron-Age house at Bosta.

Photo by Patrycja Kupiec.



Steatite vessel fragment from the Viking-Age midden at Bosta.

Photo by David Etheridge.

the Western Isles are rare and confined to typologies of other stone artefacts typical of the Iron Age.

Barabhas

A small-scale excavation of one of the sites eroding from Barvas machair (a coastal sand landscape) confirmed it to be the remains of a Viking-Age settlement. The remains of at least two sub-rectangular domestic structures with double-skinned stone-and-turf walls were exposed, alongside a rich midden deposit. C14 dating of the excavations indicate a date range between the late-tenth and fourteenth centuries.

Viking pottery

A distinctive Norse pottery style characteristic of the settlements in the Outer Hebrides was identified based on the assemblage from the Udal, North Uist. It has since been identified at a range of sites from Lewis in the north to Tìree in the south. Pottery of this style was found at both the Barabhas and Bostadh excavations, and was recovered as a surface find near the eroding Viking-Age cemetery on Cnip headland, suggesting that there may be an undiscovered Viking settlement in the vicinity.

The range of forms of the Norse pottery does not appear to derive from any Hebridean precursor, suggesting that the incoming Norse settlers may have had a major impact on the manufacture of pottery. Interestingly, there are no obvious parallels for this new style of pottery in the Viking settlements of the Northern Isles,



or in the Scandinavian homelands. The use of pottery in the Outer Hebrides can therefore be seen as a sign of continuity, albeit significantly modified to fit new cultural norms.

Viking-Age pottery found by the Languages, Myths and Finds team.

Photo by David Etheridge.

Place-Names: Naming the Landscape



The Beach at Bosta.

Photo by Michael Hart.

Several place-names and place-name elements reflect Norse settlement on Lewis; *staðr* ('stead') place-names are particularly common:

Bosta > Bólstaðr (Farm)

Many *staðr* names have a second element which describes the farm. This can be a personal name or feature, for example: **Kirkibost > Kirkjubólstaðr (Church Farm)**. Habost (the high farm) has already

been mentioned and **Làbost > Lágbólstaðr (the low-lying farm)** is another example.

Other loan words from Old Norse also show settlers 'naming the landscape':

Uig comes from **vík (bay)**, an element also seen in **Kirovick > Kýrvík (Calm Bay)**. Another element **vágr**, which also means 'bay' or 'creek', is preserved in **Carloway > Karlavágr (Karli's Bay)**. **Kneep** also has Old Norse origins; **gnipa** translates as a peak.

A few other examples of Old Norse loan words describing landscape features are: *beirgh* (peninsula) from Old Norse *berg*;

cleite (hill) from *klettr*; *dail* (valley) from *dalr*; *gil* (ravine) from *gil*; and *ós* (outlet) from *óss*.

Settling in the Hebrides

Representations of land-taking and settlement are common in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. The settlement of Iceland is recorded in great detail in a text called *Landnámabók*, and many sagas begin with an account of a settler travelling from Norway to Iceland and establishing a new home.

In a number of texts, the impetus for Norwegian migration in the Viking Age is said to have been provided by the overbearing rule of King Haraldr inn hárfagri (the Fair-haired). In *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, a saga detailing the reign of this seemingly tyrannical king, Haraldr vowed never to cut or comb his hair until he had possession of the whole of Norway. He proceeded to conquer and subdue those who stood against him, forcing some to leave Norway in search of other lands to inhabit. Although some settled in Iceland and the Faroes, many travelled to Orkney and the Hebrides. These fugitives spent the winter in Orkney and the Hebrides, but in the summer they are said to have gone raiding in Norway. In retaliation, Haraldr travelled west to Orkney and the Hebrides and killed many of the men who had settled there.

Haraldr's expedition to the west is also mentioned in *Landnámabók*. In this account of the expedition, Vikings, Scots and Irishmen invaded the Hebrides after Haraldr had conquered the islands and returned to Norway. In response, Haraldr sent a man named Ketill flatnefr (Flat-nose) to reconquer the Hebrides. He succeeded in reclaiming the islands and became the chieftain over them, but he failed to pay the tribute demanded by Haraldr. Ketill clearly thought that the Hebrides and the resources he had amassed as chieftain there were worth keeping as his own, even though he incurred the wrath of the Norwegian king and lost his possessions in Norway as a result.

Haraldr's conquest of the Hebrides is similarly recounted in *Orkneyinga saga*, parts of which may have been written as early as c. 1200. The historicity of Haraldr's conquest has been questioned, and some consider it a literary motif which was developed in response to the expedition to the Hebrides led by Magnús berfœttr (Bare-legs) in the last years of the eleventh century. According to *Orkneyinga saga*:

Magnús konungr helt sunnan með Skotlandi; ok þá kómu í móti honum sendimenn Melkólms Skotakonungs ok buðu honum sættir, sögðu svá, at Skotakonungr vill gefa honum eyjar allar, þær er liggja fyrir vestan Skotland ok fara mætti stjórnföstu skipi milli ok meginlands. En er Magnús konungr helt sunnan at Sátíri, lét hann draga skútu yfir Sátíriseið. Konungr helt um hjálmvöl ok eignaðisk svá allt Sátíri... Magnús konungr helt þaðan í Suðreyjar, en sendi men sína í Skotlandsfjörðu; lét þá róa með öðru landi út, en öðru inn ok eignar sér svá allar eyjar fyrir vestan Skotland.

(King Magnus was making his way along the coast when messengers from King Malcolm of Scotland came to offer him a settlement: King Malcolm would let him have all the islands off the west coast which were separated by water navigable by a ship with the rudder set. When King Magnus reached Kintyre he had a skiff hauled across the narrow neck of land at Tarbert, with himself sitting at the helm, and this is how he won the whole peninsula... From there, King Magnus sailed to the Hebrides and sent some of his men over to the Minch. They were to row close to the shore, some northwards, others south, and that is how he claimed all the islands west of Scotland.)

The frequent appearance of the Hebrides in *Orkneyinga saga* demonstrates the political and strategic importance of the islands. Sveinn Ásleifarson, for example, who was a major figure in the twelfth-century disputes over the earldom of Orkney, went to the aid of his Hebridean ally Holdboði Hundason in his struggle against a Welsh chieftain. Earl Rognvaldr warned Sveinn against this, declaring that Hebrideans were not to be trusted. This warning was proven correct when Holdboði betrayed Sveinn and secretly made peace with the Welshman.

CHAPTER 2

Life at the Coast

David Etheridge, Michael Hart,
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The Outer Hebrides together possess some 2,500 km of coastline, and historically much of their settlement has been on or near the coast. Exploitation of coastal resources, and communication across waterways, have therefore played a critical part in the islands' history, not least in the period of Scandinavian settlement. The location of Lewis in the north Atlantic placed it far from the Scottish and Scandinavian mainlands, but also lent it considerable strategic importance in long-distance travel.

Archaeology

Fishing

One of the clearest indicators of a significant change in technology and dietary preferences at the onset of the Norse settlement in the Western Isles is the radical shift in the exploited fish species and fishing methods utilised. This transition has also been reported from the Norse colonies on Orkney, Caithness and Shetland, where species such as cod and hake became overwhelmingly dominant.

In the Outer Hebrides, this abrupt change seems to have shifted the emphasis more towards herring, but this is probably dictated by the local availability of species rather than cultural factors, and it distinguishes the Western Isles from the Northern Isles. Herring fishing is a communal task, which involves cooperation among a number of families, and requires an investment in boats and nets. When successful, large

quantities of fish can be caught, and their processing and redistribution require a large labour force and organised exchange network. The fish bones recovered from the midden deposits at Bornais, Barvas, The Udal and Bostadh reveal a preponderance of offshore species, which stands in marked contrast to pre-Norse sites, where the excavated remains are suggestive of fishing activities limited to inshore waters. The Norse community in the Western Isles thus made a conscious decision to break with the older tradition, and to exploit new resources.

Sea-faring Technology

Fishing, trading, migration, visiting and raiding were all heavily dependent on ships. While overland travel on foot or horseback could be slow and laborious, sailing was fast. Ships could carry heavy cargoes over long distances, reaching speeds almost impossible to maintain on land. Yet despite their importance to daily life, ships and boats of any era are poor survivors. Very little is known about the boats that plied the waters of Scotland before the ninth century.

Boat burials from the ninth century, however, provide more information about the range of smaller vessels in use. The recently excavated boat from Ardnamurchan



Eroding settlement site and midden at Galson beach.

Photo by David Etheridge.

was no more than 5.1 m long and 1.7 m wide. The boat from the burial at Kiloran, Colonsay, may have been as much as 11 m long. The two boat graves from Westness (Rousay, Orkney) were 5.5 and 4.5 m long. The Scar boat-burial (Sanday, Orkney) was about 7.15 m long. The smaller boats were probably *faering* (four oars) while the Kiloran and Scar boats may have been *sexaering* (six oars). These are boats suitable for trading, fishing, ferrying and general getting about in coastal waters. No boat burials have yet been found on Lewis. By the ninth century timber on the island was in short supply; the landscape was already treeless. Boats and the timber for repair and maintenance would have come from elsewhere. When a vessel reached the end of its life, every decent timber would have been salvaged.

Place-Names

The Scandinavian place-names of Lewis reflect how the settlers lived off the sea, lakes and rivers as well as off the land.

Two words for ‘net’, *tàbh(an)* and *cabhall*, come from Old Norse *háfr* and *kafli* respectively; and *sgòd* (sail corner) derives from Old Norse *skaut*.

The names of some common seabirds also have Scandinavian origins.

For example, *arspag* (black-backed gull) derives from Old Norse *svart-bakkr*; and *sgarbh* (cormorant) from Old Norse *skarfr*.

Fresh-water fishing is reflected in place-names containing the Old Norse word for salmon, *lax*: **Laxdale** > **Laxdallr** (**Salmon Valley**) and **Laxay** > **Laxø** (**Salmon River**).



View of Uig beach.
Photo by Michael Hart.

Sailing and the Sea in Norse-Hebridean Poetry

Four fragments of Old Norse-Icelandic poetry written by Hebrideans are the few surviving remnants of an Old Norse-Icelandic poetic culture in the Hebrides. Each of these fragments is preoccupied with sailing and the sea, suggesting that one of the defining features of Norse-Hebridean poetry was an interest in nautical and maritime themes. Two fragments by a poet named Ormr Barreyjarskáld (Poet of Barra) are preserved in Snorri Sturluson's *Skáldskaparmál*, a guide to the language of poetry written c. 1220. In one of these fragments, Ormr calls the sea *Ymis blóð* (Ymir's blood), which refers to the myth of the creation of the sea from the blood of the primordial giant Ymir. In the other fragment by Ormr, an unidentified ruler is denoted by the kenning *valdr vagnbrautar*, which can be translated as 'the ruler of the ship's path'. In this kenning, the sea is presented as a path to be traversed by ship, and the ruler to whom Ormr refers is praised for his command of the waves.

The remaining fragments of Norse-Hebridean poetry are quoted in *Landnámabók* and attributed to an unnamed Hebridean. Although these fragments contain no sea or sailing imagery, the title given to the poem from which these fragments come is *Hafgerðingadrápa*, which contains the word *hafgerðingar* (enormous waves). Since one



The sea at Carnish.

Photo by Michael Hart.

of the fragments from this poem mentions a journey, the reference to mighty waves in the poem's title would suggest that the journey in question is a perilous sea voyage in turbulent waters.

The dangers of the sea were personified in Norse mythology by the goddess Rán. In *Skáldskaparmál*, she is said to have been married to a figure called Ægir, a name which means 'sea', and their nine daughters were the waves. According to Snorri, Rán had a net which she used to catch people who went to sea, making her not only a personification of the sea, but specifically an animate representation of drowning at sea. Since Rán appears in kennings in many skaldic poems, it is possible that verses of *Hafgerðingadrápa* which have not survived contained references to Rán to conceptualise the roughness of the waves encountered by the unnamed Hebridean.

It is not difficult to account for the prevalence of the themes of sailing and the sea in the very small corpus of Norse-Hebridean poetry. For the inhabitants of an archipelago such as the Hebrides, close proximity to the coast in all directions meant that the sea was a constant presence, and sea travel was an essential element of island life. Consequently, Norse-Hebridean poets gave expression to the very close relationship between those living on the islands of the Hebrides and the sea, and their surviving poetry is dominated by nautical imagery and maritime themes.

CHAPTER 3

Life on the Farm

David Etheridge, Michael Hart,
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Modern excavations of the Viking-Age settlement sites at Barvas and Bostadh have enabled reconstruction of daily life at a Norse farm on Lewis. A careful recovery of plant and animal remains deposited in middens has shed light on the dietary preferences of the farms' inhabitants, as well as their cultivation and husbandry practices. Literary texts also attest to the crafts undertaken at these farms: the Hebrides were particularly famous in the medieval period for the quality of their weaving and spinning.

Archaeology

Barvas

The recovery of plant and animal remains from the midden at the Barvas site enabled a reconstruction of what was cultivated and eaten at a Norse farm on Lewis. Carbonised grains and seeds suggest that both barley and oats were staple crops. A comparable assemblage dominated by hulled barley, oats, rye and flax was recovered at Bornais on South Uist. Flax cultivation increased in importance in this period, and it was present at both Kilpheder and Bornais. The evidence for flax cultivation in the Outer Hebrides in the Norse period corresponds well with the evidence from the Northern Isles, where flax might also have been first introduced by Norse farmers. The expansion in oat cultivation and the increase in the quantities of barley also mirror trends reported elsewhere in Scotland in the Norse period.

The animal bone assemblage was dominated by sheep and cattle. The analysis of their ages at death revealed that the majority of calves were killed shortly after birth, while the sheep were kept for at least a year, and often two. The pattern of culling young calves is characteristic of an economy based on dairy products, with cows calving regularly to produce the maximum amount of milk per annum. The sheep were culled only when they achieved a worthwhile meat weight or, in the case of those killed at two years, a fleece as well. It appears that the site's inhabitants only kept the minimum number of animals required to maintain the flocks and herds. The analysis of the bone assemblage from The Udal site on North Uist revealed a strikingly similar pattern, suggesting a focus on dairy production could have been widespread for the early Norse settlers of the Outer Hebrides. The place-name evidence suggests that the seasonal movement of people and animals to summer shielings was practised by the Norse settlers, but the archaeological evidence is scarce.

Small quantities of pig, red deer, horse and otter bones were also recovered from the site. These suggest a broad-spectrum economy, which would have been supported not only by farming, but also by hunting, both for meat and for animal pelts.



Cattle grazing at Bosta beach.

Photo by Patrycja Kupiec.

Bostadh

The bone assemblage recovered from the Norse phase at the Bostadh site was dominated by cattle and red deer bones, with abundant sheep, horse, pig and otter, and small quantities of goat, grey seal and pine marten. In contrast to the Barvas site, the age of death for the cattle does not reveal a large number of animals dying young; the majority of animals were kept over the winter, up to the age of prime maturity for meat production. There is also evidence that some calves were killed during their first summer, presumably to increase the supply of milk available to the site's inhabitants. The sheep-bones assemblage was too small for meaningful comparison with the Barvas assemblage, but the limited data available suggests that most animals would have survived into maturity. During the Norse period the inhabitants of the site relied more heavily on hunting, with a significant increase in red deer bones, and evidence for the skinning of otters.

New Subsistence Practices

Comparison of the faunal and plant record from the Norse and pre-Norse period in the Western Isles points to important changes in livestock management and arable economy. In the case of the latter, the Viking period sees the intensification of barley and black oat cultivation (possibly utilising heavier and damper soils) and the introduction of rye. Since rye cultivation is best suited to poor and dry soils, its introduction in the Viking Age is probably indicative of the expansion of the arable area into land which the earlier population either did not have the technology to farm successfully or did not consider to be worth exploiting. Flax also becomes a new staple for the Norse farmers in the Hebrides, Shetland and Orkney. Its main uses probably included weaving into linen, pressing for flaxseed and the production of linseed oil. The intensification in cereal cultivation paints a picture of a society focused on maximising the yields from the arable farming.

Sheep were more important to the regional economy and together with cattle they dominate faunal assemblages from all the sites discussed. The focus seems to have been on dairy, but the age profiles of the flocks and herds suggest growth in the importance of meat, skins and fleeces. Relative to earlier times, sheep were kept alive longer in the Norse period. There is also evidence of heavier reliance on hunted animals, such as red deer and otter, than in the preceding Iron Age. It is not clear whether this represents intensification in trading activities, or simply a broad-spectrum economy practised by the Norse settlers. While the assemblages vary from site to site, they all mark a significant departure from earlier practices.

Place-Names

As noted in the Introduction, *bólstaðr* is a common place-name element denoting a farm. Other loan words also show that the Scandinavian settlers were farming on Lewis.

Livestock farming is shown in the place-name Croir, from Old Norse *króar* (pen or fold). Sheep farming is indicated



Photo by Michael Hart.

by the name **Flavig** which comes from Old Norse *Fjárvík* (**Sheep Bay**).

Richard Cox's study of the place-names of Carloway reveals many examples of loan words from Old Norse into Gaelic relating to farming such as *geàrraidh* (enclosure, site) from Old Norse *gerði*; *gàrradh* (enclosure, dyke) from Old Norse *garðr*; *lobht* (loft, terrace) from Old Norse *lopt*; and *ból* (animal couch, stall) from Old Norse *ból*.

Many place-names contain the element *shader/siadar*, which derives from Old Norse *sætr* and denotes a shieling site.

The place-name **Kirrival** is from Old Norse *Kýr Fjall* (**Cow Hill/Mountain**), which may also refer to a shieling site.



A reconstructed beehive shieling.

Photo by Patrycja Kupiec.

Weaving and Spinning in the Hebrides

Of all the crafts and activities conducted on the farm, weaving and spinning are especially associated with the Hebrides in saga literature. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, for example, a Hebridean woman named Þórgunna arrived in Iceland with a range of exquisite textiles. These textiles included bedclothes, English sheets, a silken quilt, bed-curtains and a bed-canopy and were coveted by a woman named Þuríðr, with whom Þórgunna stayed in Iceland. Although the sheets were of English origin, it is possible that some of the textiles brought to Iceland by Þórgunna were made in the Hebrides. Indeed, Þórgunna may have made some of them herself, as she spent her time at Þuríðr's house weaving when there was no haymaking to be done.

The quality of Hebridean spinning appears to have been so great that it is associated with magic in *Qrvar-Odds saga*. Oddr, the protagonist of the saga, was presented with a magic shirt by an Irish princess named Qlvqr. According to Qlvqr, Oddr would never be cold at sea or on land while wearing the shirt; he would never become tired when swimming, never be harmed by fire and never be hungry, and swords would not wound him unless he ran away from battle. Oddr asked Qlvqr about the circumstances of the shirt's tailoring, and she replied with the following verse:

Serk of frák ór silki
ok í sex stöðum gervan:
ermr á Íralandi,
önnur norðr með Finnum,
slógu Saxa meyjar,
en suðreyskar spunnu,
váfu valskar brúðir,
varp Óþjóðans móðir.

(I have heard of a shirt of silk made in six places: one arm in Ireland, the other in the north by Finns, Saxon girls began it, and Hebrideans spun it, French brides wove it, on the warp of Óþjóðan's mother.)

Although the involvement of Hebrideans in the spinning of Oddr's magic shirt may derive from the depiction of Hebrideans as sorcerers elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic literature (see the section entitled 'Hebridean Magic' in chapter IV of this booklet), the magical properties attributed to the shirt may equally represent the superior quality of Hebridean spinning.

CHAPTER 4

People

David Etheridge, Michael Hart,
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As well as telling us about the places where Viking-Age inhabitants of Lewis lived and died, archaeological and written sources can be used to learn more about who these people were and how they lived their lives. The evidence paints a picture of a dynamic society made up of people from different origins, speaking Scandinavian and Gaelic languages, with contacts far and near.

Archaeology

Stable Isotopes and Mobility

In contrast to cultural affiliation, which may be adapted and changed throughout a person's life, Sr-isotope analysis of tooth enamel provides evidence for an individual's place of origin directly. The characteristic Sr-isotope ratios of particular geographical areas are preserved in the tissues of feeding animals (including humans), and they can be used to reconstruct the place of residence at the time of the tissue formation. Teeth are usually selected for the study of mobility in the past, not only because they are usually well preserved, but also because once the enamel is formed it is not remodeled, so its composition is a reliable indicator of childhood exposure.

Seven individuals (four adults and three children) from the Norse phase of the cemetery at Cnip on Lewis were analysed for the ratios of Sr-isotope. The results suggest that the group was of mixed origins. While five individuals had Sr-isotope values which were consistent with local origins, two individuals (an adult man and an

adult woman) were immigrants to the island. Interestingly, their Sr values excluded Norway as their place of origin. They were also raised separately, with the male most probably spending the first years of his life in a region with Tertiary volcanic rocks (the nearest potential areas being the Inner Hebrides or northeastern Ireland, and the more distant possibilities Iceland or the Faroes), and the woman originating in an area with marine carbonate rocks, possibly eastern or southeastern England or Denmark.

The results of this study suggest that the majority of the individuals buried at Cnip cemetery did not belong to the first generation of Norwegian settlers. The presence of an imported Norse jewellery assemblage buried with a woman who was born and raised on Lewis suggests that she adopted a Norse identity. It has been suggested that her jewellery set was of considerable antiquity prior to the burial, and perhaps it represents an heirloom passed from generation to generation. The presence of two migrants in this relatively small burial ground demonstrates that both men and women were highly mobile in this period. The scant material wealth interred with the two migrant individuals has led to the suggestion that they might have been slaves; however, the care that was taken to mark their graves with kerbstones attests to a degree of respect. More detailed discussion of the cemetery at Cnip can be found in chapter V.

Modern DNA and Norse ancestry

DNA evidence regarding the genetic ancestry of the modern population of the Outer Hebrides suggests the lasting genetic legacy of the Scandinavians, albeit with a lower genetic input than is found among modern inhabitants of Iceland and the Northern Isles. The difference between these Norse colonies could have been caused by a range of factors: the survival of a different proportion of the indigenous population after contact, recent gene flow, or population decline. Two studies of mtDNA markers (mitochondrial DNA, which in humans is inherited solely from the mother) of over 450 individuals from the Western Isles have indicated that the ancestral contribution of matrilineal lineages from Scandinavia is relatively low, at c. 11%. Interestingly, the survey of Y-chromosomal DNA (only passed from father to son) showed a much higher proportion of Scandinavian ancestry (22%), which suggests a stronger genetic legacy of Scandinavian males in the Outer Hebrides.

Precious Metal Hoards

One of the distinctive features of the Viking Age in the British Isles is the number and size of precious metal hoards found from this time. These include datable artefacts such as coins. It is presumed that most hoards were buried in the ground as a security measure, but for some reason the owner or owners failed to return and collect them. What can the content of the hoards tell us about the people who buried them?



Moss of Dhibadail Hoard.

Photo by David Etheridge.



The Lews Castle Hoard.

Photo by David Etheridge.

At least 31 hoards with Scandinavian influence that date between c. 800 and 1150 are known from Scotland. The single richest hoard from this time was found at Cuerdale, Lancashire, and many more hoards are known from England and Ireland. Gold seems to have been in short supply, whereas silver was relatively plentiful. To define Scandinavian influence scholars have used the presence of certain kinds or combinations of artefacts, chief of which are silver arm-rings, sometimes known as ‘ring-money’. Other features of a Scandinavian hoard include the presence of ‘hack-silver’: silver artefacts or ingots that have been chopped or cut into pieces. The presence of Anglo-Viking, Arabic and continental coins also points to Scandinavian influence. Sometimes weights (usually of lead) are included, and occasionally the balance for weighing is found too. Silver ingots and complete silver artefacts from other cultures are also found. The largest hoard of its kind from Scotland, from the Bay of Skail, Orkney, contained several complete and near complete silver penannular thistle brooches.

The distribution of hoards from northern Scotland is coastal and amounts to a total of 25 finds from Glasgow and further north. Of the four hoards from the Outer Hebrides, two are from the Isle of Lewis. Both hoards demonstrate Scandinavian influence.

The hoard from Moss of Dhibadail on Lewis contained three silver arm-rings and two silver finger rings, all of Scandinavian style. No coins were found with this hoard, which is dated to the tenth century.

The second hoard was found in the grounds of Lews Castle, Stornoway. It consisted mostly of hack silver, specifically the remains of silver arm-rings that had been cut into several pieces. With the hoard, which had been wrapped in a linen cloth and placed in a drinking horn before burial, were a number of continental coins indicating the hoard was deposited between 990 and 1040.

At two different locations and on two different occasions there were persons who found it necessary to hide their wealth and for some reason never returned. Were these passing merchants, raiders, or islanders? They certainly had Scandinavian contacts.

Place-Names



Photo by Michael Hart.

Many place-names in Lewis contain personal names, allowing us a valuable glimpse of the Scandinavians who settled and lived on the island. For example, the place-name **Swainbost** derives from **Sveinabóstaðr** (**Sveini's Farm**).

Richard Cox has identified several personal names in the place-names of Carloway; one of the most interesting of these is **Lagmann** which comes from Old Norse **Lǫgmaðr** (**Lawman**). This name is recorded in chapter 39 of *Orkneyinga saga*, in the description of Magnús bare-leg's attack on the Hebrides:

En er Magnús konungr kom í Eyjar, tók hann at herja fyrst í Ljóðhúsum ok vann þau. Ok í þeirri ferð vann hann allar Suðreyjar, ok tóku hǫndum Lǫgmenn, son Guðrøðar Suðreyjakonungs.

(As soon as King Magnus landed in the Hebrides he attacked and took control of Lewis. In the course of the expedition he took over the whole of the Hebrides and captured Logmann, the son of Godrod, King of the Western Isles.)



Photo by Michael Hart.

The name **Njáll** can be seen in the place-names **Mealabost**, **Njálabólstaðr** (**Njáll's Farm**) and **Mealaisbhal** (**Njáll's mountain**).

The Scandinavian name **Njáll** is a name of Gaelic origin, *Niall*. Perhaps the most famous **Njáll** is **Njáll Þorgeirsson**, the hero of *Brennu-Njáls saga* (The saga of Burnt-Njáll). This saga is set in Iceland around the time of the Icelanders' conversion to Christianity (1000). It tells the story of a violent feud which culminates in the burning of **Njáll** and his

family in their farmhouse. **Njáll** is given the opportunity to escape but chooses death rather than a life of shame and dies in the fire along with his wife and grandson.

Some place-names refer to people but not by name. **Capadal**, or **Kappa Dalr** is the **Valley of the Champions**.



Njall's Mountain.

Photo by David Etheridge.

Hebridean Magic

In some Old Norse-Icelandic sagas, Hebrideans are associated with the practice of magic. One of the most detailed accounts of Hebridean magic appears in *Laxdæla saga* and centres on a Hebridean man named Kotkell who had recently moved to Iceland with his wife and sons. According to the saga, they were *seiðmenn* (sorcerers) and *mjök fjölkunnig* (very skilled in magic), and their presence in the district was unwelcome. The noun *seiðmenn* associates the family with the practice of a particular kind of magic called *seiðr*, which in *Ynglinga saga* (part of *Heimskringla*) is described as an unmanly form of magic capable of bringing death, bad luck, or illness. That Kotkell and his family practise *seiðr* is a sign of their disreputable character, and the magic they performed in *Laxdæla saga* brought misfortune to many of their enemies.

It is said in the saga that one day, Ingunn Þórólfsdóttir visited her son Þórðr to ask for his help in dealing with Kotkell and his family, who had stolen her livestock and practised magic under the protection of the local *goði* (chieftain). After sailing to his mother's farm, Þórðr rode to the home of Kotkell and his family and charged them with theft and sorcery, for which the punishment was outlawry for life. Kotkell's sons were furious when they found out about Þórðr's charge, and the family prepared to use magic against its accuser. Kotkell raised a *seiðhjallr* (magic-platform) from which

spells were chanted by the family to stir up a blizzard and a stormy sea. On the voyage home, Þórðr and his followers were drowned.

Although Kotkell and his family were forced to move because of this sorcerous act, Kotkell spoke *kænliga* (cleverly) and persuaded a man named Þorleikr Hǫskuldsson to provide him and his family with a place to live in exchange for four horses. These horses were later stolen by a man named Eldgrímr after Þorleikr refused to sell them to him. Hrútr Herjólfsson, a kinsman of Þorleikr, killed Eldgrímr after being told of the theft of the horses by a farmhand, believing that he was performing a service for Þorleikr. Þorleikr was angry when he found out about Hrútr's killing and employed Kotkell and his family to punish Hrútr for his actions. One night, the family of sorcerers travelled to Hrútr's farm and performed *seiðr*, which involved beautiful chanting. Hrútr realised what was happening and instructed all the members of his household not to leave the building and to stay awake for as long as possible to avoid harm. Eventually, however, everyone fell asleep, and the magic of Kotkell and his family had disastrous consequences. Attracted by the chanting, Hrútr's favourite son Kári stepped outside into the magic and immediately fell down dead.



Languages, Myths and Finds Team at Uig: David Etheridge, Eleanor Heans-Głogowska, Brittany Schorn, Judy Quinn, Patrycja Kupiec and Michael Hart.

Photo by Mary MacLeod Rivett.

CHAPTER 5

Journeys to the Next World

David Etheridge, Michael Hart,
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In many ways, the evidence from Lewis tells us as much about how the island's inhabitants died as how they lived. Burials and texts speak too about the religious beliefs of their makers and what they expected of life after death.

Archaeology

Some Scottish burials from the ninth and tenth centuries strongly suggest the presence of Scandinavian settlers. Burials from this time are sometimes in boats, or in graves shaped like boats, and accompanied by distinctive Scandinavian artefacts including dress ornaments. It is a style of burial not previously encountered in the Scottish record. Before 800 no one was burying their dead in a boat and very few graves had any kind of artefact with them, let alone recognisably Scandinavian artefacts.

Boat Burials and Grave Goods

Before 900 the most common form of burial found in the Scottish archaeological record is the long cist. This was a body length grave, lined with stone slabs, into which the body was laid, sometimes in a wooden coffin or on a wooden bier: sometimes there is evidence for a shroud. Once the body was laid to rest, usually on its back, the cist was often sealed with more slabs, before the grave was backfilled. It is very rare to find grave goods in a long cist grave. Long cists are sometimes found under small mounds of pebbles, or under much larger cairns, both round and rectangular; but most often

they are found in the regular rows of an organised cemetery, where the graves are aligned on an approximately east to west axis. There are numerous examples of long cists and long-cist cemeteries from Scotland, but they are most common on the east coast, and particularly around the Firth of Forth. A long-cist cemetery has been found eroding out of the sandy cliffs at Gabhsann (Galson).

At least 34 confirmed burial sites with Scandinavian grave goods are known from Scotland, with other sites suspected but not confirmed (typically a sword or a brooch has been found, without trace of the burial). Many of these confirmed sites consist of just one burial, but at least five represent all or part of a cemetery. Of the five cemeteries, three are in Orkney, one is almost opposite on the mainland near Dounreay, and the fifth is at Cnip, Bhaltois, on the Isle of Lewis. One other Scandinavian-style burial is known from Bhaltois. In the context of other burials from this period in Scotland, especially outside the Northern Isles, this makes Lewis (and in particular Bhaltois) an incredibly rich location, and worthy of special attention.

In 1915 the remains of a wealthy grave were found near Bhaltois, at a location opposite Traigh na Clibhe, approximately 150 m west of the old school and 60 m north of the road, close to an earthwork thought to be an Iron-Age dun (a fortified structure, typically stone-built). The find was made by children who discovered some of the grave goods eroding out from the side of a potato bed. The artefacts consisted of two oval bronze brooches (sometimes called tortoiseshell brooches, from their shape), with fragments of a chain that once linked them together, typical of female Scandinavian dress of the ninth and tenth centuries. These brooches were worn in pairs, one below each shoulder, to fasten together the straps of a gown. They are common finds in Scandinavian female graves of this time. Also found were a decorated bronze roundel and part of a strap that once attached to it; a bronze penannular brooch that might have been used to fasten a cloak; a decorated belt buckle; an amber bead; and fragments of two iron implements – one appeared to be part of a socketed spearhead, the other perhaps a knife. A skull and other human bones were retrieved. Although the oval brooches are Scandinavian in style, the roundel, the penannular brooch and the belt buckle have ‘Celtic’ decoration; the remainder of the artefacts are undiagnostic.

On 20th July 1979 human bones were discovered eroding out of a sand bank on the south side of Cnip headland, at the northern end of Traigh na Beirigh, and on the 22nd the decision was taken to excavate the remains immediately, since it was not known whether they were recent. Although no archaeologist was present, the excavation and recording was sufficiently thorough to allow a reconstruction of the grave. Several objects were found during the exhumation. Once it was realised the discovery was archaeological in nature, an archaeologist from the National Museum inspected the site. The artefacts were taken to the Royal Museum of Scotland for cleaning and analysis. The skeleton was identified as that of a female, about 1.6 m (5’3”) tall, aged between 35 and 40 years old. She had been buried with a pair of gilded bronze oval



*Archaeologist Mary MacLeod Rivett at site of the Viking-Age burials at Cnip.
Photo by David Etheridge.*

brooches over the chest area; forty-four coloured glass beads around her neck; a comb made from antler near her upper right arm; a short iron knife; a whetstone pendant for sharpening; a bird-bone needle case with two iron needles; an iron sickle; a bronze ringed pin (the pin has an articulated oval ring attached to the head); a matching belt buckle and strap-end in bronze; and one iron rivet.

The oval brooches immediately suggested links to Scandinavia, as do a number of the other finds. After the brooches, most attention has been given to the glass beads. Thirty-nine beads are segmental: that is, the beads are segmented as if they were two or more separate beads stuck together. The colours are striking, comprising blue, silver, gold and yellow. They could have been worn as a necklace or suspended between the two oval brooches. The segmented form was common in Scandinavia; similar beads were manufactured in Sweden and Denmark. Ringed pins used to secure cloaks originated in Ireland and travelled widely: an example was found at the eleventh-century Scandinavian settlement of L'Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland. More often they are found within burials in Ireland, Scotland and West Norway. The belt fittings, on the other hand, are unusual. They are not thought to be part of Scandinavian female dress, though they occasionally occur in male burials. The pendant whetstone is typical of the time, and examples are known from Scandinavia, but the remainder of the grave



Two ninth-century bronze oval brooches and a set of coloured glass beads, from Lilleberge, Norway, similar to the finds from Cnip. © Trustees of the British Museum.

goods have no specific references to the Nordic countries and could have been made within the Western Isles.

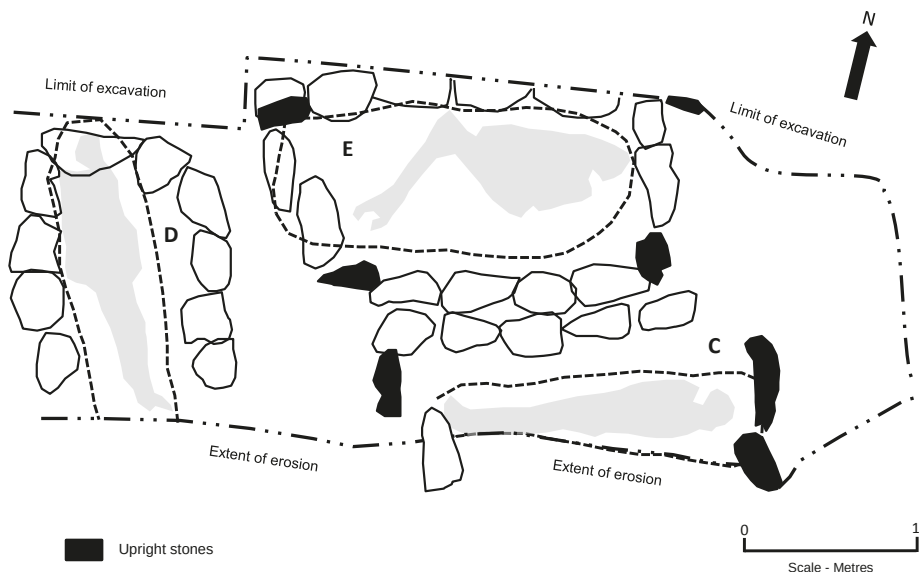
Either the dress fashion has been copied from direct contact with Scandinavian women, or this burial represents the life-style of a Scandinavian community living on the Isle of Lewis in the later tenth century. As one of the brooches was broken and repaired some time before it was buried, it may have been that Scandinavian settlers brought these items with them, but found that once broken they were not easy to replace.

But this tenth-century woman was not the only person to be buried in Cnip around this time. By 1995 a further six burials had been found in the vicinity of the first, prompting archaeologists to label the site a cemetery. Between 1991 and 1994 two infants, a child and three adults were found buried in the sand dunes. Radiocarbon dating placed them all within a ninth- to tenth-century bracket; isotope analysis of teeth of individuals from this cemetery is discussed above in chapter IV. The only definite grave goods interred with the child burial were an amber bead and a stone pendant that resembled a whetstone but bore no trace of use. The pendant has a parallel from Scandinavia, as a similar one was found at Birka, Sweden. Amber beads are difficult to date, but when found in British burials they have been associated with other Scandinavian artefacts.

The three adults were in a small cluster, with each grave marked by a kerb of stones, ensuring that none of the graves were cut into each other. Two of the adults were aligned with the head to the west (C and E), while the third was aligned with the head to the north (D). Of the two, one was a male buried without grave goods (C), aged 35–45 and estimated to have been about 1.67 m (5'6") tall. The other (E) was of a female, also aged 35–45, probably about 1.60 m (5'3") tall. This woman had been buried with a bone dress pin and an iron plate. The third burial (D) with head to north was of a male at least 40 years old, approximately 1.62 m (5'4") tall. He had been buried without grave goods.

Where bone pins were found in the grave, perhaps the deceased was buried clothed, or wrapped in a shroud. We know the wealthy female grave from Cnip was buried clothed because fragments of the textiles she was wearing were preserved in her brooches. Microscopic examination of the textiles indicates she was wearing at least four different fabrics, two of which were of linen, one possibly of silk. One fabric could represent the remains of her tunic, another fabric would have been from her pinafore skirt, while a third could have been from the skirt fastening loops that passed over the shoulder. The ringed pin might have fastened a cloak. The identified fabrics had a weave and spin common in Scandinavian women's graves of this type.

Both of the infants had been buried near the adults, in apparently unmarked graves. One infant (approximately 6 to 9 months old) was buried with an amber bead. The other infant had either died at birth or within a few weeks of birth.



Cnip – plan of the adult graves. After Dunwell et al. 1995, illus. 9.

Radiocarbon dating indicates that some of the burials could have been as early as the later eighth century, while others could have been as late as the early tenth century. All of these burials are earlier than the wealthy female grave, which was dated by the grave goods to the later tenth century. The site is thought to represent a small part of a more extensive cemetery on the Cnip headland, spanning at least the later eighth to later tenth centuries, the only known example of this date from the Western Isles.

The burial evidence from Bhaltois suggests a group of people during the ninth and tenth centuries who had strong connections with Scandinavia and expressed those connections through the way they buried their dead and the artefacts they buried them with.

Place-Names

The Papar and the Conversion of the Hebrides

The first Scandinavian settlers in the Hebrides arrived in a land which had long accepted Christianity. The interaction of the Norse settlers with clergy is reflected in the *papar* place-names, coined by Scandinavian settlers in northern and western Scotland. In the Hebrides there are **Pabbay (the Island of Priests)** and **Payble (Settlement of Priests)**. More information on a project exploring these names can be found online at: www.paparproject.org.uk/introduction.html.

The *papar* place-names raise many questions about the interaction between pagan Norse settlers and the Christian inhabitants of the islands. Evidence of the conversion of Norse settlers in the Hebrides is provided by a cross stone slab from Kilbar, which is dated to the late tenth or early eleventh century. The cross carries a runic inscription dedicating it to the memory of Þorgerðr, Steinar's daughter.

...(t)ir·þ:ur·kirþu:s(t)in(a)r ...r-is-kurs:sia(:)rstr ...(k)a

...eftir Þorgerðu Steinar's dóttur es kors sjá reistr (This cross was raised in memory of Thorgerth, daughter of Steinar)

The runic inscription from the Kilbar Cross

St Óláfr: a Norwegian Saint in the Hebrides

Óláfr Haraldsson (d. 1030) lost both his crown and his life on the battlefield of Stiklestaðr in Norway. However, after his death he was celebrated as Norway's greatest king. Óláfr was also quickly venerated as a saint and martyr and became Scandinavia's first native saint. The relics of St Óláfr were placed over the altar at St Clement's church in Oslo before being transferred to Trondheim. Trondheim became an archbishopric

in 1154, and also had authority over the Hebridean church, the diocese of Suðeyrar (Southern Islands, also known as Sodor in English).

Churches dedicated to St Óláfr can be found throughout the Scandinavian world and in the British Isles. In Lewis the church at Gress is dedicated to Óláfr (St Aulá's). St Clement, another saint popular in Scandinavia and in areas of Scandinavian settlement, is honoured at St Clement's church in Dell, Lewis. (For more information on the churches of Lewis see <http://www.cne-siar.gov.uk/smr/>).

A Hebridean connection can be found with another important saint, St Magnús of Orkney. Magnús was martyred in c.1118 and before long he was honoured as a saint. In *Orkneyinga saga*, a Hebridean farmer by the name of Holdboði is described as one of two companions with Magnús when he was captured and it is said that it was Holdboði who related the story of Magnús's martyrdom.

The Dead in Old Norse Mythology

In Old Norse mythology, the dead were believed to reside in various places. According to Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning*, men who died in battle went to Óðinn's hall Valhöll, where they would fight every day in preparation for the final battle between gods and giants at the end of the world and feast every night. By contrast, those who died of sickness or old age went to a place called Niflheimr, a land surrounded by high walls and an enormous gate and ruled by Hel, the daughter of Loki. The drowned were thought to live with the sea goddess Rán, who is sometimes presented as the guardian of the drowned in skaldic poetry. Although most of these places were separate from the other worlds of the Norse cosmos, it was possible for the living to travel to the worlds of the dead, but the journey was a perilous one. In the myth of Baldr's death, for example, Hermóðr was forced to ride through dark valleys and leap over the gate of Hel in his attempt to bring Baldr back from the dead.

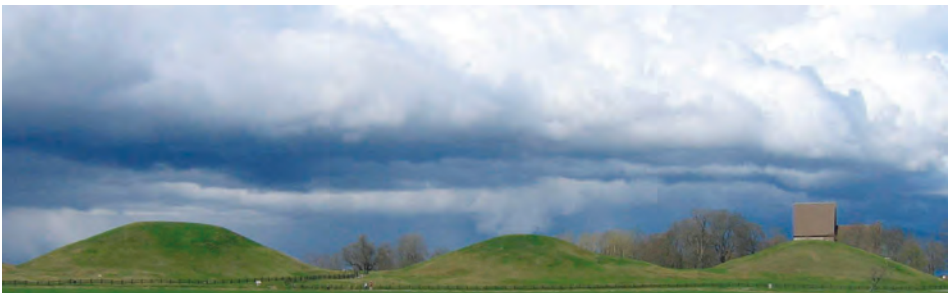
In Old Norse-Icelandic saga literature, the dead are often to be found living on in the mounds in which they were buried. These undead mound-dwellers, who were called *draugar* (ghosts), took the form of reanimated corpses and were frequently hostile to the living. The hauntings of these corporeal ghosts were usually brought to an end only by the intervention of great heroes, and defeating a *draugr* was proof of a hero's prowess.

Battling a *draugr* in *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar*

In *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar*, the protagonist Hrómundr Gripsson defeated a mound-dwelling *draugr* at the suggestion of a Hebridean man named Máni. Hrómundr was raiding in the Hebrides in the retinue of a king called Óláfr when he came across a man whose cattle had been taken by Óláfr's men. Hrómundr asked the man for his identity, but the response he received provided far more than a name:



*Trondheim cathedral, Norway which houses the relics of St Óláfr.
Photo by Leszek Gardela.*



*Royal burial mounds at Uppsala.
Copyright "Wiglaf" at English-language Wikipedia (www.en.wikipedia.org).*

Karlinn segir, at byggð sín væri allskammt þaðan, ok kvað meiri fremd at brjóta hauga ok ræna drauga fé. Þessi kvaðst Máni at nafni.

(The man says that his house was a very short distance from there and said that it would be more honourable for them to break into mounds and plunder the wealth of ghosts. He said that his name was Máni.)

Máni's reply to Hrómundr was a direct challenge to his heroism. The Hebridean may only have been a simple farmer, but he proved himself to be acutely aware of the difference between honourable and dishonourable action. Máni's response was enough to spark Hrómundr's curiosity, and the hero asked the Hebridean if he knew where to find such a mound. Of course, Máni knew exactly where to find such a mound and demonstrated his knowledge of legendary history by telling Hrómundr the story of Þráinn, a sorcerer king who was buried in a mound with a sword, armour and great treasure. Although Máni noted that no one was in a hurry to go to the mound, presumably because the area was haunted by Þráinn, Hrómundr asked Máni for directions and sailed away with Óláfr and his men in search of the revenant's burial place.

After sailing for six days, Hrómundr and his companions found Þráinn's mound and broke it open. Inside, they discovered a *dólgr mikill* (great fiend) who sat on a throne and was described as being *blár ok digr* (black and big). Initially, the *draugr* made no attempt to prevent Hrómundr from stealing his treasure, but after Hrómundr taunted Þráinn for his weakness, the two of them wrestled in a fight to the death. In the end, Hrómundr destroyed the *draugr* once and for all by cutting off its head and burning it to ashes, allowing him to take possession of a ring, a necklace and a sword called Mistilteinn from Þráinn's hoard. As a *draugr*, Þráinn may have been seen as a formidable foe and communicated real-world fears about the restless dead, but he also provided an opportunity for Hrómundr to prove his heroic prowess and acquire priceless treasures.

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Languages, Myths and Finds

Translating Norse and Viking Cultures for the Twenty-First Century

The *Languages, Myths and Finds* project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, ran in the years 2013-14, coinciding with the British Museum's international exhibition *Vikings: Life and Legend*. The aim of the project was to encourage conversations between specialist university academics and advanced research students in Old Norse and Viking Studies, and local communities around Britain and Ireland who were interested in knowing more about their Viking heritage. The communities chosen for the project were Cleveland, Dublin, Isle of Lewis, Isle of Man and Munster. Five small teams of academics and students were chosen to work with each community by developing and researching topics most suited to that locality, as identified in dialogue with the community. These booklets are the products of the research done by those teams together with the local partners, especially during field trips to the localities in the spring of 2014. The full set of five booklets can be viewed on the project website, <http://languagesmythsfinds.ac.uk>, where there is also further information about the project.

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