

# A VIKING BURIAL AT BALNAKEIL, SUTHERLAND

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The excavation of the Viking burial at Balnakeil was brought about by chance. Storms in May 1991 caused blowouts in the sand dunes which partially uncovered the remains of what appeared to be a human skeleton. These were noticed by Mr and Mrs Powell, who were holidaying in the area, and they promptly informed the local police of their discovery, handing in a pin which they had found lying on top of the skeleton. The police in turn alerted the Procurator Fiscal, and the site was visited with the local doctor who confirmed that the remains were human and of some antiquity. The police carefully covered the remains without further disturbance, and contacted the Archaeology staff of Highland Regional Council, requesting that the remains be professionally examined as soon as possible.

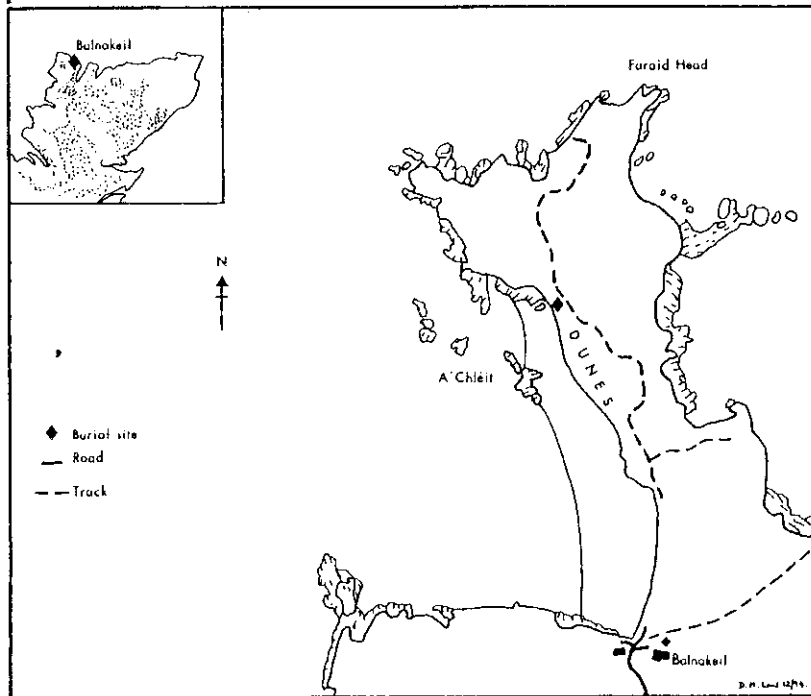
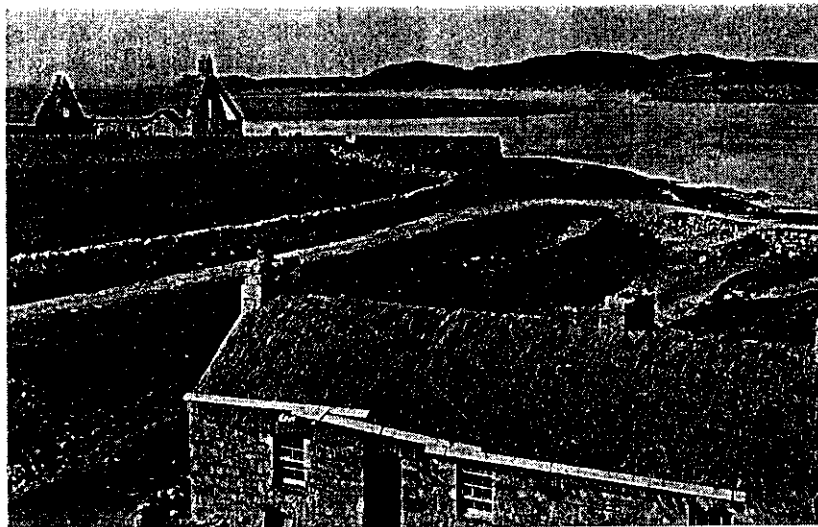


Fig. 3.1 Location of Balnakeil and burial site.

Fig. 3.2 The burial site lies approximately above the gateway to the church, on the far side of the bays.



## THE EXCAVATION

Excavation, undertaken by Dorothy Low and Robert Gourlay, commenced the following day. The remains were situated in the most northerly dune of the northernmost of the two bays [Fig. 3.1; 3.2]. The bones protruded from the edge of the dune, approximately 4 m above the high water mark, and some 5 m to 6 m below the dune top.

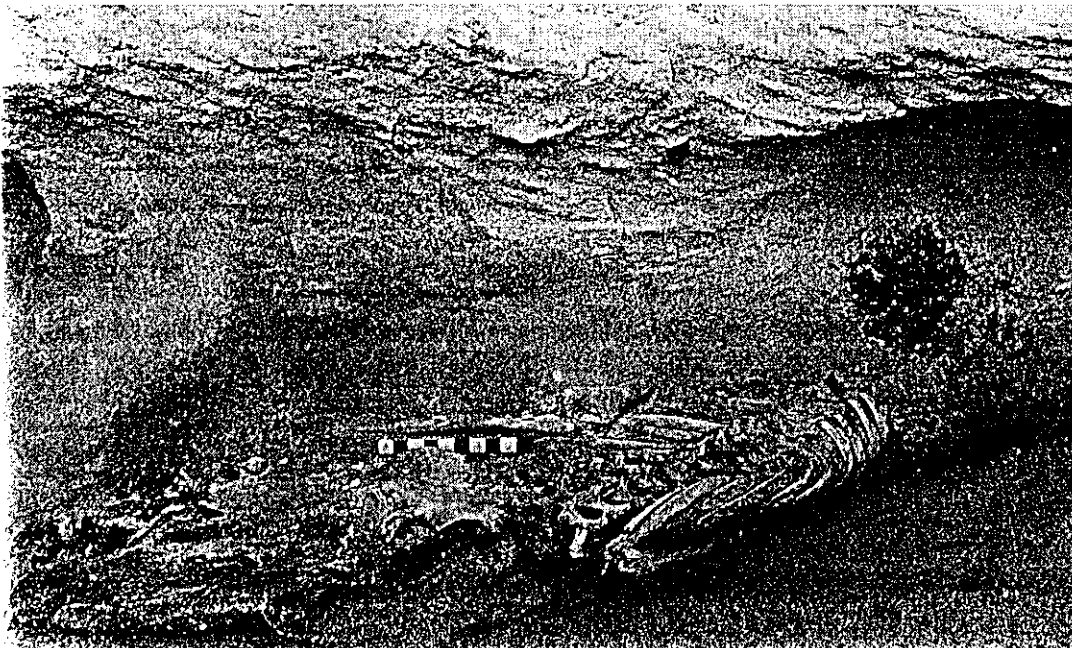
The visible remains initially consisted of most of the vertebrae, rib cage, pelvic bones and the left elbow joint. Some of the leg bones were found to be lying in loose and disturbed sand below the *in situ* remains, and it is presumed that they had fallen from their original position as the sand had blown away. There was no visible evidence at this stage of the skull or bones of the right arm. Examination of the position and angle of the skeleton led to the conclusion that the body had been placed on its right side, so that the rib cage and remaining sand overburden were obscuring the rest of the skeleton. The angle of the body in relation to the sand dune further indicated that the skull probably survived within the main dune, close to where a piece of corroded metal was protruding.

The wind erosion of the dunes had led to a highly unstable situation, with the strong possibility of an imminent collapse of the dune face. This would have led to the burial being covered with a large weight of sand which would have destroyed many of the more fragile remains. This threat also meant that working conditions were somewhat precarious, with small sand falls occurring regularly. For these reasons, the excavation was conducted with the utmost speed!

A number of objects were found lying in association with the skeleton, mainly concentrated around the pelvic area in a close group. The first stage of the excavation involved careful excavation of the visible remains, and the making of a full record through photographs and drawings [Fig. 3.3]. The next stage involved clearance of the sand overburden before it collapsed and destroyed the burial. During this process, the corroded remains of an iron object were found projecting upwards from the skeleton. This was later identified as a spearhead with part of the shaft still attached. Once all of the overlying sand had been removed, the skull could be seen lying on its right side, with the corroded remains of a shield boss lying on the back of the skull. The position of this, in conjunction with the remains of the spear, gave rise to the conclusion that they had been so placed to rest against one another, forming a kind of canopy over the head. In the area of the neck, two amber and one blue and white glass beads were found, representing a small necklace.

The group of finds in the pelvic area was seen to be considerably larger, while the closeness of the finds suggested that all had been held together in one container – perhaps a leather bag. These finds are identified and located in Figure 3.4 and listed below in the Appendix. Once all of these finds had been recovered, the bones were lifted and labelled with much assistance from the local doctor. One of the most interesting finds was left until last.

Fig. 3.3 Excavation of the burial.



BALNAKEIL BAY, May 1991.  
Pre - Excavation Plan

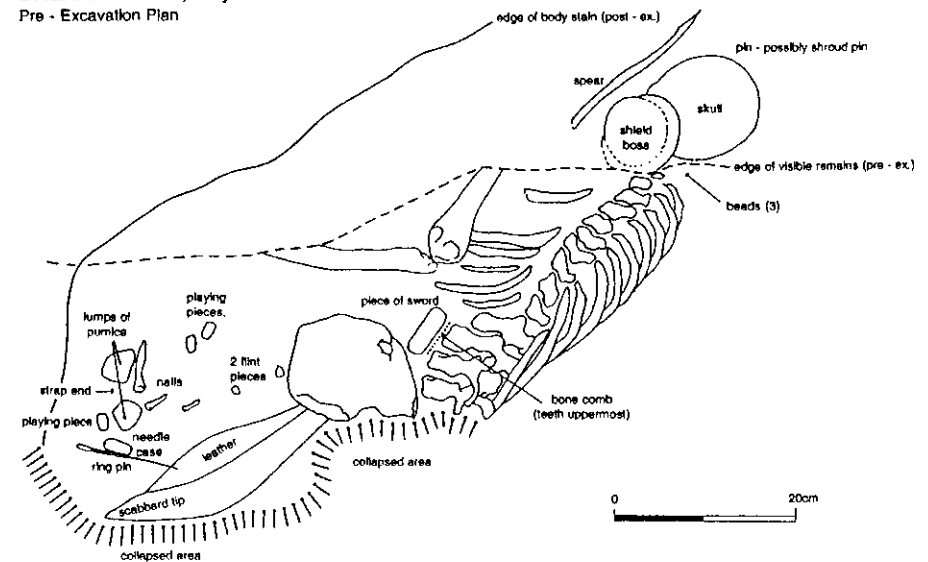


Fig. 3.4 Plan of the burial deposit.

Underlying the skeleton were the well-preserved remains of a sword, with wooden and other organic remains of the scabbard attached. The body had obviously been placed overlying the sword, thus concealing it from view. The difficult problem of how to lift the sword and scabbard with the minimum of disturbance was solved with a slat from a lone fish box from the beach! The remains of the sword were isolated and slid onto the wooden slat, within a block of sand, and carefully secured prior to transportation.

### THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM: POST-EXCAVATION

The remains were initially taken to the Archaeology Office of Highland Regional Council, Inverness, where they were re-examined. Many of them proved to be in a relatively poor and fragile state. Some basic conservation work was carried out on the advice of the National Museums of Scotland, and the remains were removed the next day to their Conservation Laboratories in Edinburgh for specialist work. This material is still in the process of being conserved. The following discussion is based on information provided by the National Museums Conservation Section in late 1994, and some detailed work remains to be undertaken. However, much of the identification work has been undertaken at this stage and it is possible to

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present here a brief interim report on the skeleton and the grave goods from the site. A full report is being prepared for the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*.

### The Skeleton

A detailed report on the skeletal remains has been prepared by Yvonne Hallen and will appear in the final report on the burial. There are a number of interesting features about the remains which can be highlighted here. Although parts of the skeleton were missing at the time of excavation (such as the right fibula, sternum and pubis), and others had been damaged following burial (in particular the skull), the evidence is sufficient to suggest that the remains are those of a young person, probably male and aged between eight and thirteen years old.

Although it is difficult to sex a pre-pubescent skeleton precisely, the balance of evidence suggests it is male, and this coincides with the nature of the burial assemblage. He was approximately 4ft 9in to 5ft (1.48 m to 1.52 m) tall, and the right clavicle, humerus and ulna (ie right arm), seem enlarged in comparison to those on the left side. This asymmetrical development is also seen in the skull, where the left eye orbit is higher than the right one. In addition, there are traces on the skeleton of a nonspecific infection which has caused pitting on both humeri and interior of the skull.

### The Grave Goods

The burial was accompanied by a wide range of objects [Figs. 3.4; 3.5]. These comprised weapons including a sword, shield and spear; items related to his manner of dress, including a ringed-pin or brooch, beads and possible strap end; and accompanying grave goods of 14 gaming pieces which were probably originally in a bag. There was also a possible wooden gaming board (although these wood fragments could have originally formed part of the shield). The distinctive, but badly-preserved antler comb and needle case may be classed as grave goods rather than items related to dress, particularly the suggested needle case in view of the fact that the burial is that of a young male.

A pin-like item at the head may perhaps even be related to a head-dress although this is at present unclear, and could conceivably be related to a fastening for a shroud. The textile traces are still being examined, and the differences provisionally identified, could indicate the remains of a cloak. The evidence of feathers incorporated into the corrosion products of the sword hilt seem to suggest the presence of a pillow placed beneath the body. However, the underside of the sword is also covered with a mass of straw-like material, suggesting a bed of straw. It is possible that a soft surface may have been created by a scatter of straw contaminated with feathers, although there is a concentration of feathers in the area of the hilt.



Fig. 3.5 Reconstruction drawing of the grave (Alan Braby, 1993).

### The Weaponry

The fragmentary spear and domical shield boss were both recovered from the head area; the sword was lying under the body itself. A fragment of mineralised wood adhering to a finger bone may have been from the spear shaft or even the shield grip itself. The positioning of the spear, pointing upwards, in conjunction with the iron shield boss representing the remains of a wood and leather shield, placed as if to protect the head area, can be paralleled from other Viking graves in the British Isles.

At Westness in Orkney, a male burial within a boat was accompanied by several fine grave goods including a sword and a shield boss. In that case, the boss was located as if to suggest that the shield had been laid over the face, and was of specific interest because of the distinctive slash damage on the upper surface (Kaland 1993. 314). In the Balnakeil example, the corrosion on the shield boss has preserved straw, twig and leaf-like remains. A further parallel for the positioning of the spear can be noted from the Isle of Man, where the graves at Ballateare and Cronk Moar both showed evidence of a spear which was placed awkwardly in the grave, probably because the shaft was too long to fit within the coffin (*op cit* 1966. figs. 32, 40). In the Balnakeil example, it is most likely that the spearhead, its shaft and the shield had formed a canopy over the dead boy's head. The domical shield boss is a type which is commonly recorded from Viking graves (Type Rygh 562; Rygh 1885). Several examples were recorded from the graves at Birka in Sweden

Bersu +  
Wilson

(Arbman 1940), and nearer examples can be cited from Reay on the north coast of Caithness (eg Batey 1993. fig 6.4, 154).

The sword itself is interesting, chiefly because of its condition. Although to the untrained eye, this fractured mass of rusting iron seems to be rather unprepossessing, in the hands of the conservator the story unfolds. The corrosion has preserved around the sword (and the spear head/shaft) large amounts of insect pellets which could represent woodworm! The sword was badly cracked by the pressure of the sand on the top of the burial, so it broke during lifting. However, on X-ray, the sword is shown to have an intact hilt, with domical pommel, possibly decorated cross bar and the remains of the padding on the handle section, secured with wires. The blade is virtually complete and housed within the remains of its organic scabbard. There are several questions which can be asked, which include detail of the decorative elements of the hilt concealed within the corrosion, and the nature of the scabbard and its lining. Detailed study can reveal leather, wood and textile traces forming the scabbard (Bersu & Wilson 1966. fig 33, 70-73, re Ballateare and Cronk Moar). *op cit*

The sword is of further interest, however. Firstly, its position within the grave suggests that it lay beneath the body. This is a little unusual because, where the evidence survives, the sword is usually lain to the side of the individual. It will be necessary to examine whether the sword was wrapped within a shroud – if this can be demonstrated – and next to the cloak, if one existed. Examination of the textile traces could help here. Preliminary examination certainly indicates the presence of textile on the underside of the sword, sandwiched between the scabbard and the straw-like material. It is conceivable that the body had been slightly displaced after burial, with the body falling onto the sword, but the supporting evidence for this is not strong. Some of the grave goods do, however, seem to suggest a slight post-burial disturbance, such as the brooch in the leg area.

Of further significance is the fact that the sword is clearly a full-sized example, buried here with a young boy. Whether he himself used the sword is a point to consider. The skeletal remains suggest a slight enlargement of the bones on the right side, supporting the idea that the young boy was forced to develop skills with full-sized weapons. Attractive as this idea might be, parallels are difficult to find, and it is possible that the enlargement may be due to other causes. Certainly, if enhanced muscle development was present, it should also be noticeable on the scapula bone.

There are stories in the saga sources of young boys being taken into battle with their fathers, and presumably fighting with a weapon which was, after all, a major status symbol and potential heirloom. *Orkneyinga Saga* records the death in battle of Ivarr, son of Earl Rognvald, during a campaign in the North of Scotland and Western Isles (ironically to subdue the 'vikings' who were harrying others from the Scandinavian homelands!). As compensation for this death, Rognvald was given the lands of Orkney and Shetland (Pálsson & Edwards 1978. chap 4, 30). The same story is recalled in *Heimskringla* (Smith 1932. chap 22. 58-9), and clearly the Icelandic

tradition of saga-telling accepted the role of young boys in battle, if not always as heroes. In the absence of historical evidence, it can only be suggested that Ivarr may have been no older than 14 years at his death, possibly slightly younger. (We are grateful to Mrs Bridget MacKenzie for researching this information.) The type of sword is commonly found in other Viking contexts dating to the late 9th - 10th centuries, such as at Birka in Sweden (Arbman 1940. taf 4, 5) and elsewhere. A similar fine example from Sties, Sanday in Orkney, can be seen at the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow.

#### *Items Related to Dress*

Although it is most likely that the body was buried fully-clothed, the remains of items in this category are few. A possible strap end, found in the lower body area, could indicate the former presence of a belt. However, this cannot be corroborated on the available evidence.

The three beads, two of amber and the third of glass with applied decoration, probably formed part of a simple necklace. The bead types can be readily-paralleled, particularly the 'eyed' glass example (cf Birka, Arbman 1940. taf 121, 122, 123). The small assemblage may perhaps be mirrored in the single find from the burial of a young child discovered at Kneep (Cnip), Lewis (Cowie *et al* 1993. fig 6A. 4, 169). Where bead necklaces have been identified to date, they are usually from female graves and most commonly there are many beads eg Kneep (Welander, Batey & Cowie 1987. illus 6, 156), presumably because the individual had been collecting rather longer! The token beads may perhaps be paralleled also at Birka (Arbman 1940. 40 grave 91).

The simple copper alloy ring pin or brooch with circular terminals, however, is rather more diagnostic. Parallels can be cited from Lagore in Ireland of a pre-Viking date (Hencken 1951. 73, Fig. 15 no. 1531). The inclusion of an artefact of greater antiquity than the rest of the burial can be seen at several sites throughout the Viking World. In Orkney the situation is similar – compare Westness (Stevenson 1989) and Pierowall (Grieg 1940. 93). The use of heirlooms in burials, pagan or Christian, is not so uncommon as one might think. In the case of a child, it is appropriate to think in terms of such a token link with the past – a cherished gift, perhaps, from a grieving parent? The location of the brooch in the pelvic region seems to suggest that it has become misplaced after burial. It should be a cloak fastening, but in this case could it be securing a shroud or similar item? There is a fragment of textile remaining in the ring of the pin, and further work is required to enable comparison between this and other textile material in the grave.

#### *Other Grave Goods*

This category includes the remaining items which do not fall into the above two categories, but which can be described as gifts to the dead for use in the after-life.

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A bag of 14 conical gaming pieces made of antler, each with traces of a bone peg for affixing to a board, was located in the area of the legs. There may also be traces of a gaming board, in the form of wooden fragments (although see above).

Several graves have produced sets of simple gaming pieces, in carved horses' teeth, glass or antler – eg Westness and Scar in Orkney, and two beautiful sets from Birka in Sweden made of coloured glass (Arbman 1940. taf 148, 1 & 2, from graves 523 & 644). Gaming boards are rather more difficult to identify because they are usually organic and have decayed beyond recognition in the grave. An exception to this is from Ireland, where the site of Ballinderry produced a fine complete example of an incised board with decorative features (Graham-Campbell 1980. 23 no. 92). Elsewhere in Scotland, examples of simple incised stones have been recorded commonly, but not exclusively in pre-Viking contexts (Sterckx 1973; Ritchie 1977. 187, 198-9; Batey 1989. 215 no. 280). It has to be presumed that a board game such as *hnefatafl* or Nine Mens Morris was played. In the Balnakeil grave, a single piece of flint may have originally been in the same bag, but it is not known whether this was actually associated with the playing of the game itself.

Other grave goods include a fragmentary antler comb and a probable needle case (cf Birka, Arbman 1940. taf 167 no. 7, grave 1081), which were both found in the mid-body area. It is conceivable that they were originally attached to the belt suggested above. The comb is a single-sided composite example, and although fragmentary, it is likely that it would originally have had five iron rivets and three or four tooth plates in all. The presence of a comb is not surprising, as both male and female, young and old would have had one. However, if indeed the other item is a needle case, it certainly does suggest an enlightened approach to the education of a young Viking! The needle case is badly corroded, comprising thread preserved in the corrosion products, wound around up to three iron needles. It is not of the type most commonly found, which is made of a bird bone tube, although metal examples are known from Scandinavia (Arbman 1940. taf 168).

## CONCLUSION: THE LOCAL SITUATION

At this stage, the evidence from Balnakeil suggests a single burial of a young boy, interred with a wide range of accompanying items. It cannot be known how he died, because the surviving skeletal remains do not show any signs of fatal wounds. A drowning accident is a possible but unprovable cause. The circumstances of the excavation were not conducive to detailed study of the immediate area, which might hold additional burials. It is increasingly common to discover that an apparent single burial is, in fact, part of a larger group or a cemetery, as at Scar in Orkney (O. Owen, pers. comm.), or as at Reay near Thurso in Caithness (Batey 1993. 152-154). There is a suggestion that at Keoldale on the Durness peninsula, remains of a grave were disturbed

in the last century and recorded briefly by Lethbridge (1950. 96), although its Scandinavian character is fugitive.

The recovery of Norse remains on the North-West coast is exciting, but not unexpected. Cape Wrath was a crucial landmark for the Viking seafarers on their route towards the Western Isles and Ireland. Place-names such as Durness and Tongue prove that the Norse were familiar with the coastline, if not to the same extent with the northern interior (see Crawford & Waugh, this volume). It is even possible that the Balnakeil boy may have had links with Ireland, either himself or through his parents, as suggested by the origins of the ringed brooch in the grave.

There is, however, one certainty – with the increase in coastal erosion more remains of the period will be uncovered along exposed coastal stretches. With careful monitoring this can be used greatly to increase the amount of information available for the period in Northern Scotland.

## Acknowledgement

Colleen Batey would like to thank Theo Skinner of the National Museums of Scotland Conservation Section for his help in the preliminary statements about the conserved pieces; also the assistance of the Artefact Research Unit of NMS for the resources made available during the study of the artefacts. Alison Sheridan (National Museums of Scotland) has also helped to clarify several points of discussion within the paper. The contribution of Mrs Bridget MacKenzie in relation to the Saga sources is also gratefully acknowledged. Figure 3.4 was kindly provided by R Woodcock; the reconstruction drawing (Figure 3.5) was commissioned from Alan Braby (1993); Figure 3.2 is Crown copyright, courtesy of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland.

## Appendix

List of Artefactual Material (provided by T Skinner, National Museums of Scotland Conservation Section) . NMS Accession Numbers IL 921-963.

Sword and fragmentary scabbard  
Shield boss  
Spearhead and part of shaft  
Ringed pin  
Possible strap end  
Small copper alloy ?pin  
12 miscellaneous iron nails  
2 indeterminate iron objects  
Antler comb  
14 complete and fragmentary gaming pieces of antler  
Fragment of mineralised wood with finger bone attached (?shield grip or spear shaft)

Fragment of mineralised wood (?possibly a fragment of gaming board)  
2 amber beads, 1 blue and white glass bead  
Needle case with possible needles inside  
Small lump of pumice  
Small flint flake

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