

NC37SE0003

Ass. Docs

~~NM98SW0005~~

**PRESS RELEASE**

**THE BALNAKEIL BOY IS NOT (UNFORTUNATELY) IVARR!**

The burial of a young Viking boy found in 1992 at Balnakeil Bay, Sutherland, is not, sad to say, that of Ivarr Rognvaldsson! A letter by Bridget Mackenzie of Dornoch, in the Northern Times on Christmas Eve, gives a clear account of Ivarr, who was the son of Earl Rognvald Eynsteinsson of Macre, in western Norway. Earl Rognvald and his son are recorded as having taken part in an expedition around 874 AD to subdue the Western Isles. During the expedition, Ivarr, who was on his first expedition, is recorded in the Icelandic sagas as having been killed in battle, and in compensation, his father was awarded the lands and title of the 'Earl of Orkney' by King Harald Finehair.

Unfortunately, all of this was too early for the Balnakeil boy. Dr Coleen Batey of Kelvingrove Museum, Glasgow, who is a Viking specialist, suggests that the nature and style of the weapons and other object found with the burial, date at the earliest from the 10th century AD - a hundred years or more later.

It would indeed be exciting if archaeologists, working in periods where we also have the benefit of historical records, could attribute graves to individuals. Sadly, unless some incontrovertible proof - such as a runic inscription bearing the boy's name - is found with these burials we can only guess who lies within them. The Balnakeil boy, seemingly without any serious wound, and carefully buried close to the sea, may have died of disease at sea rather than in battle, although by Viking standards he was probably old enough to fight.

Unfortunately, we shall never know the name of this young lad who was buried in his lonely grave by the sea. It would have been very exciting to connect him with young Ivarr, but the evidence just does not fit.

All the material from the excavations had to be carefully conserved before study. This is now almost complete, and a short report will soon appear in the proceedings of the Scottish Society for Northern Studies' Bettyhill Conference, which took place in 1992. A second, more detailed report will be published in the future when all the material has been fully conserved, studied and drawn.

Anyone wishing any further information on the burial should, in the first instance, contact Highland Region's archaeologist on 0463-711176.

## THE BALNAKEIL VIKING

The excavation of the Balnakeil Viking was brought about by chance. Storm winds in May of 1991 caused blowouts in the sand dunes, after which a holiday couple strolling through the sand dunes discovered the remains of what appeared to be a human skeleton. The couple, Mr and Mrs Powell, promptly informed the local police of their discovery and handed in a brooch which they had found lying on top of the skeleton. The police in turn, alerted the Procurator Fiscal, and the site was visited in conjunction with the local doctor who confirmed that the remains were indeed human, and probably of some age. Armed with this information, the police carefully covered the remains without further disturbance, and quickly contacted Highland Regional Council's Archaeology staff and requested that the remains be professionally excavated as soon as possible.

This was carried out the next day by Dorothy Low and Robert Gourlay. The remains were found to be situated in the most northerly dune of the northerly of the two bays, protruding from the side, approximately 4m (13ft) above the high water mark, and some 5 to 6 metres (16 to 20ft) below the top of the dune.

The visible remains initially consisted of most of the spinal column, 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 when the encapsulating sand was blown away. There was no visible evidence at this stage of

the skull or bones of the right arm. Careful consideration 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 relative 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 a strong possibility of an imminent collapse of the rear 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 to be lying in association with the skeleton. These were mainly concentrated around the pelvic area in a close group. The first stage of the excavation involved carefully cleaning over these visible remains, and making a full record by means of photographs and drawings (Fig 2).

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, later identified as a spearhead with part of the shaft still attached. Once all of the overlying sand had

been removed, further remains were identified (Fig 2). The skull was found lying on its right side, while lying on the back of the skull was the corroded remains of a shield boss. The position of this, in conjunction with the remains of the spear gave rise to the conclusion that the spear and shield had been positioned resting against one other, forming a kind of canopy over the head. Around the neck area two amber beads, and one blue and white glass bead were found. These would seem to have belonged to a necklace of sorts.

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 in one container - perhaps a leather bag. These finds are identified and located in Fig.3. Once all of these finds had been removed, the bones were lifted and labelled with much assistance from the local doctor. One of the most interesting finds was left until last - as underlying the skeleton were the well preserved remains of a sword, with wooden and other organic remains attached representing the remains of the scabbard. The body had obviously been placed overlying the sword, thus concealing it from view.

We were now faced with the difficult problem of how to lift the sword and scabbard with a minimum of disturbance. Eventually slats from a lone fish box were put to use, and the remains of the sword were isolated and slid onto the slat within a block of sand and carefully secured for transportation.

A few other points of note are worth making at this stage, some with the benefit of hindsight. The sand around the body was

darker and more compact than the dune material itself. This was due to body stain, caused by the decomposition of the flesh. However, this staining had a very definite, continuous "edge" to it, which was both clearly visible, and could also be felt as a hard "scratchy" edge whilst trowelling. It is therefore suggested that this edge was caused by the body having been placed in a shroud, or bag, which had contained seepage up to a point. Also, during conservation work on the sword, feathers were found adhering to the hilt of the sword. After discussion with specialist colleagues, it was suggested that these may have come from a pillow. There was no indication during excavation to doubt this theory.

The remains were then taken to the Archaeology office of Highland Regional Council in Inverness, where they were re-examined. This showed many of them to be in a relatively poor and fragile state. Some basic conservation work was carried out on the advice of the National Museum, and the remains were removed the next day to their conservation laboratories in Edinburgh for specialist work. All of this material has now either been stabilised, or is still in the conservation process. However, some very interesting details are emerging, which are discussed in more detail below by Dr Colleen Batey.

J.M.L.

# THE REMAINS OF THE BALNAKEIL VIKING

## THE STORY SO FAR

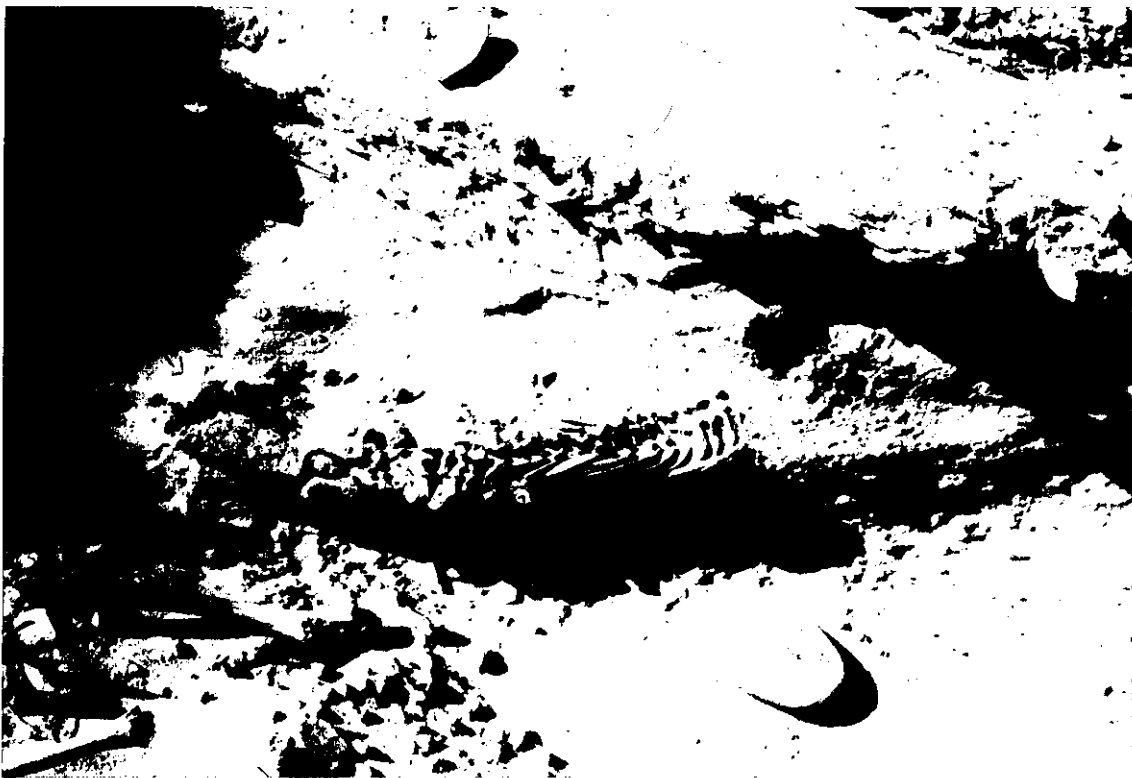


**Highland Regional Council**

Department of  
Libraries and Leisure Services

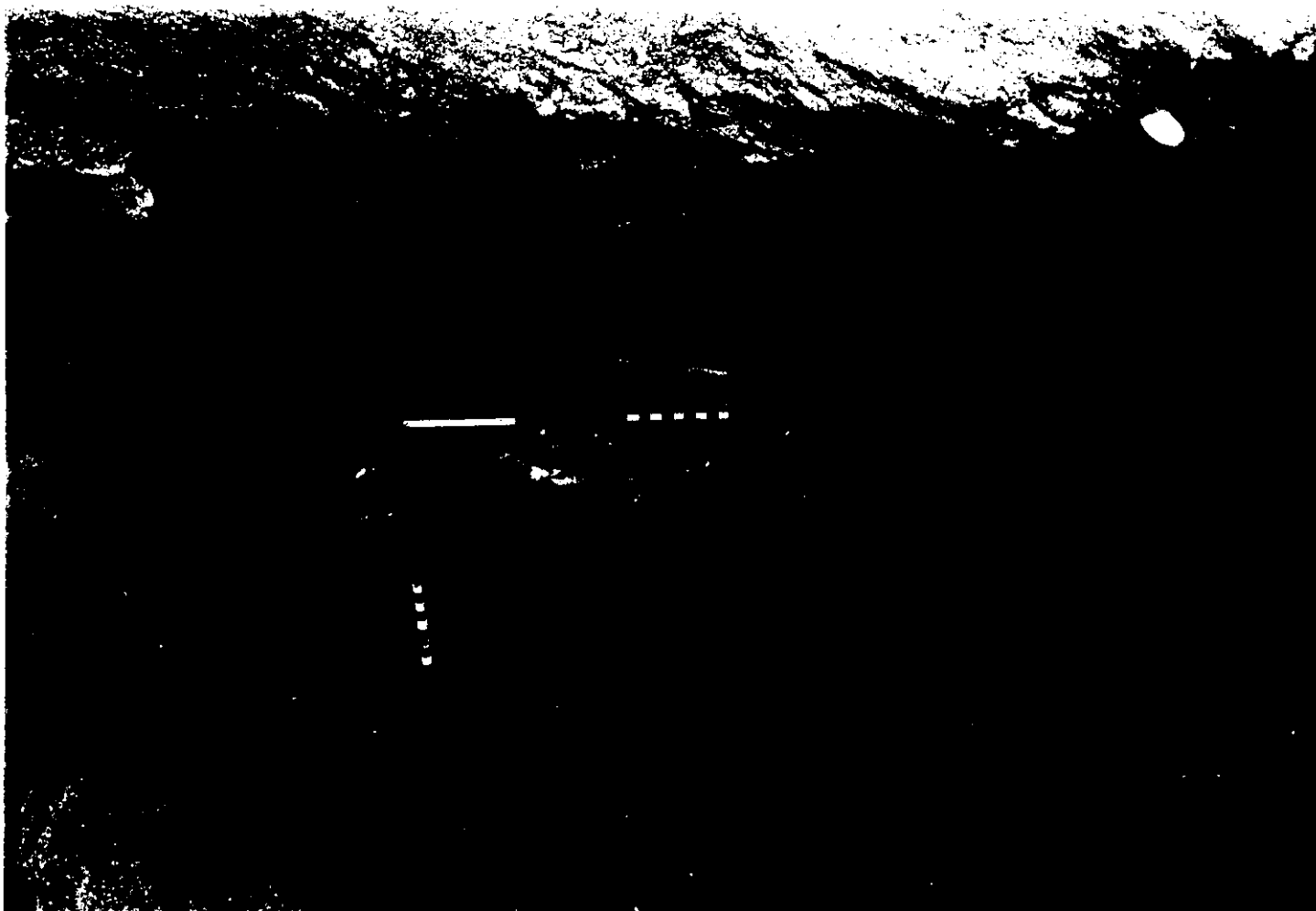
**The remains of what appeared to be a human skeleton and two bronze objects were discovered at the north end of Balnakeil Bay (NC3865 7068) by a Middlesex holiday couple whilst walking on the beach. This was reported by them to the local police, who in turn contacted the Procurator Fiscal. The local Doctor was called in, and certified that the remains were indeed human and probably ancient. Since no further police action was considered necessary, H.R.C. Archaeology section was requested to excavate the remains. This was carried out the following day by R.B.Gourlay and D.M.Low.**

**The remains were situated in a sand dune approximately 4 metres above the high water mark and 5 to 6 metres below the top of the dune. The remains protruded from the side of a recent blow-out in the dune, apparently due to storm winds the previous week.**



**The remains as found: Photo Mr & Mrs J. Powell.**

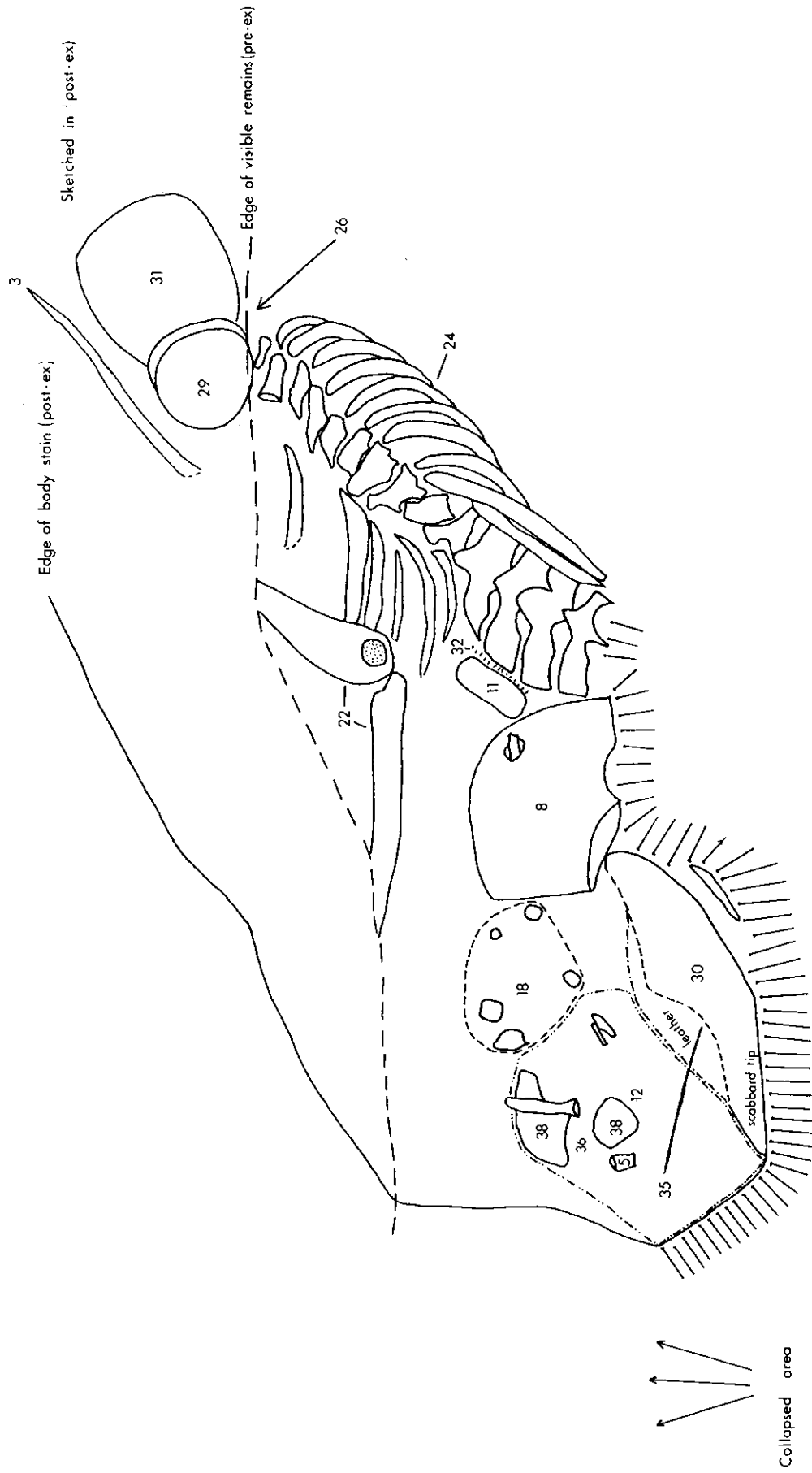
**The visible remains initially consisted of the rib-cage, pelvic bones, spinal column and left arm bones. The leg bones were lying on the sand below the in-situ remains, and had obviously fallen from their original position when the surrounding sand had blown away. There was no evidence of the skull at this stage, which, from the position of the rib cage indicating that the body had been lying on its right hand side, was assumed to be lying undisturbed beneath the sand, and set further into the sand dune. There was also at this stage, evidence of a large circular piece of iron protruding from the side of the dune.**



**The remains after an initial clean-up.**



BALNAKEIL BAY, May 1991. NC 37 SE 002.



**BALNAKEIL BAY, 1991. H NC 37 SE 002**  
**Initial Finds Record**

- 1: Iron object, from area 12**
- 2: Metal nails (6), white flint fragment; from area 12, loose on surface.**
- 3: Metal spear, protruding at approx angle 45 degrees.**
- 4: Copper corrosion fragments from around the area of the ring pin (no 35).**
- 5: Horn / bone playing piece?**
- 6: Metal fragments (5) from middle area.**
- 7: Soil sample; soil contact between body stain and clean sand.**
- 8: Pelvic bone.**
- 9: Soil sample; fibrous matter from area 12.**
- 10: Bone? fragment.**
- 11: Bronze object.**
- 12: Soil sample from the S end.**
- 13: Flint tool; from matrix 12.**
- 14: Bronze nail.**
- 15: Metal object; from matrix 12.**
- 16: Horn / bone playing pieces (2), metal nails (2), bone (1), wood (1), flint (1), lying on the surface of matrix 12.**
- 17: White? quartz pebble; from matrix 12.**
- 18: Horn / bone playing pieces (6), flint (2).**
- 19: Left hand fingerbones (3).**
- 20: Left metacarpals.**
- 21: Soil sample; contact of body stain and clean sand.**
- 22: Left arm bones.**
- 23: Right arm bones.**
- 24: Upper body bones; ribs, spinal column.**
- 25: Bone comb; from rear of skull; by neck, also where beads were.**
- 26: Beads; one amber, one blue / white glass, one ? amber; from rear, base of skull.**
- 27: Issium (part of pelvis).**
- 28: Bone fragment.**
- 29: Shield boss.**

- 30: Sword.**
- 31: Skull.**
- 32: Bone comb from base of rib cage.**
- 33: Various bones etc, out of context.**
- 34: Corrosion fragments, from sheild boss.**
- 35: Ring pin.**
- 36: Strap end.**
- 37: Pelvic bone.**
- 38: Metal, playing piece, pumice, metal disc; from matrix 12.**

**These remains have turned out to be one of the most exciting finds in recent times in the north of Scotland. They have been identified as Viking in age, due to the very typical and diagnostic features of the associated finds. The only item not present in the grave which would have been expected was an axe.**

**No firm evidence of any particular cause of death has yet been found. There were no broken bones, and the skull was intact. It is possible that further specialist examination may yet reveal this.**

**All of the material is currently being conserved in the National Museum. This will be a long process taking anything up to a year, or possibly more. However, even at this early stage, some interesting results are beginning to appear.**

**The finds were all lifted, bagged, labelled and recorded separately. they were found to include an iron spear and shield boss, amber and glass beads, a bone comb, horn playing-pieces from a board game, and various other items which were not identifiable at that stage.**



**The shield boss after excavation.**

**This concluded the excavation stage, and the finds and remains were brought to Inverness. Close examination revealed them to be in a relatively poor state of preservation, and on advice from the National Museum of Scotland, they were immediately removed to their Edinburgh laboratories for urgent conservation work.**

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- 38: Metal, playing piece, pumice, metal disc; from matrix 12.**

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SCOTLAND: THEO SKINNER

Beads keep damp if damp, dry if dry - possibility of surface cracking.

Bone comb Keep damp

Metal work Dry out, use silice gel

Wooden scabard keep damp



Jim Henderson, Northern Times 24.5.91

John Mackay, Press and Journal 0463 222801 27.5.91

Duncan Fraser Police station , Dornoch 0862 810222  
also Inspector McQuarrie

Mr Westwater Procurator Fiscal 0862 892472

SGT? Ascue Bonar Bridge Police 086 32 222

- 1: Iron object *v2*
- 2: Metal nails (6), white flint fragment, *from area of 12, loose on surface*
- 3: Metal spear? *sticking up in air.*
- 4: Copper corrosion fragments *around area of brooch*
- 5: Acorn shell
- 6: Metal fragments from middle area, (5)
- 7: Soil sample of soil contact
- 8: Pelvic bone
- 9: Soil sample of fibrous matter
- 10: Bone ? fragment
- 11: Bronze object *same matrix as 12*
- 12: Soil sample - *s end*
- 13: Flint tool *from same matrix as 12*
- 14: Bronze ? nail
- 15: Metal object *same matrix as 12.*
- 16: Acorn shells (2), metal nails (2), bone (1), wood (1) *lying on surface of 12.*
- 17: White pebble *from same as 12.*
- 18: Acorn shells (6), flint objects (2) *from area of 4 'beads' + 2 nails.*
- 19: Left hand finger bones *3*
- 20: Left metacarpals
- 21: Soil sample, contact
- 22: Left arm bones
- 23: Right arm bones
- 24: Upper body bones
- 25: ~~Metal object from below the rib cage~~ *metal comb part of from rear of skull by beads*
- 26: Beads, one amber, one blue/white glass, one black *from rear of skull*
- 27: Issium, part of pelvis
- 28: Bone fragment
- 29: Shield boss
- 30: Sword

31: Skull

32: Bone comb base of nb cage.

33: Various bones, out of context

34: CORROSION FROM SHIELD BOSS

35: RING PIN

36. STRAP END

37: PELVIC BONE.

38: metal, playing piece. from 12 - on plan + pounce.

**N·M·S**

NATIONAL MUSEUMS OF SCOTLAND

*Department of Archaeology*

RECEIPT FOR OBJECTS BROUGHT INTO NMS

I, Alison Sheridan, hereby acknowledge receipt of the following items:

*see attached list*

from:

*KEEP these  
originals meantime.*

delivered

*Bob*

date: 2

Arch Day book No. 1991/26

*Alison Sheridan  
Assistant Keeper*

BAL/1991.

PRELIMINARY FINDS RECORD.

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- 28: Bone fragment
- 29: Shield boss
- 30: Sword

31: Skull

32: Bone comb

33: Various bones, out of context

34: CORROSION FROM SHIELD BOSS

+ METAL + BONE IN POLICE STATION



NATIONAL MUSEUMS OF SCOTLAND

*Department of Archaeology*

RECEIPT FOR OBJECTS BROUGHT INTO NMS

I, Alison Sheridan, hereby acknowledge receipt of the following items:

*see attached list*

from: *Balnakiel strand, Sutherland*

delivered by: *Dorothy Low*

date: *28 May 1991*

Arch Day Book No. 1991/26

*Alison Sheridan*

*Assistant Keeper*





NATIONAL MUSEUMS OF SCOTLAND

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## Conservation report on the Viking Sword and Sheath Sutherland.

The sword was received in the laboratory in three pieces, two of which were on a wooden support, packed in sand and wrapped with polythene. The third piece, the very tip of the sword, was in a small plastic bag, with some dampened acid-free tissue. Apparently when discovered the sword was damp, it had been recommended that it should be kept in this condition, as we had been told that the wooden portion of the sheath, and perhaps a leather covering, had been preserved.

Examination by eye and with the microscope of this small tip fragment revealed that this was indeed the case: the wooden sheath, at least on the upper surface of the sword was almost intact, and there were areas which appeared to be covered with a dark laminar material, possibly leather. An attempt to air dry a tiny fragment of the wood, found loose in the bag with the tip fragment, resulted in splitting, warping and cracking of the wood, which on examination under the microscope was found to be heavily impregnated with iron corrosion products, ( probably alpha  $\text{FeOOH}$  and gamma  $\text{FeOOH}$  ) although apparently retaining some woody material and properties.

The result of this admittedly less than rigorous test suggested that the object could not be merely dried out without damage to the wood, and probably the leather covering. At the same time, it was necessary to prevent further corrosion of the iron sword, which appeared from the cross-section revealed by the break to have a fairly substantial metal core. Prevention of such corrosion in simple iron objects is normally achieved by holding them at an RH of less than 15%. In this case, that would have damaged the wood and leather, and an alternative solution was hurriedly sought. The alternatives seemed to be to either submerge the object and use a corrosion inhibitor, or to maintain it at very high relative humidity and exclude oxygen. As it was not clear what effect immersion in water would have on the iron oxide impregnated wood, and a danger that such treatment would lead to a loss of cohesion between the wood fibres, the second option was chosen.

The sword was unpacked, and the pieces examined. The upper surfaces of the sword and sheath, where exposed, showed that the sheath had indeed been preserved, as far as one could see, over the full length. The fragments were given supports of Plaster of Paris and then turned, and the three pieces on their supports placed in a polyethylene box. A glass lid was sealed across the top of the box with a bathroom sealant, and oxygen-free nitrogen piped in to the box from a cylinder. A high relative humidity was maintained inside the box by placing cotton wool saturated with deionised water in side the box, and bubbling the incoming nitrogen through a beaker of deionised water. A second plastic tube led the nitrogen output from the box to the fume cupboard. The RH level was monitored, initially at least, by placing an RH paper indicator strip inside the container. The storage of the sword will be monitored regularly while decisions are taken about its treatment. As there was an urgent need to get the sword into a safe storage situation, no photographs or X-rays were taken at

that time, but they will be taken at the earliest opportunity, but with minimal disruption of the storage environment.

#### **Proposed action.**

The storage of the sword under nitrogen at high humidity can only be a short term measure. The sword has not been cleaned to any extent, and it therefore impossible to see what is happening to it, although the small tip fragment will give some information. It would not be possible to maintain this storage environment for any length of time, as it is expensive, and inconvenient to the other users of the laboratory where it is housed. It is imperative therefore that a plan of action be evolved to deal with the urgent need for examination and analysis of the object, and to propose and test methods of cleaning and stabilisation.

#### **Examination and Analysis.**

The priority need is for the present condition of the object to be recorded. This should be done photographically and also by X-radiography. The latter technique will also give information about the hilt, which may contain other materials. It does not seem sensible to draw the object at this stage, as this would expose the object to instability for an extended period of time. Identification of the organic materials present will have to be done by sampling. Small fragments of the wood are available for examination, and SEM examination of these would provide valuable information about the extent of mineralisation of the wood. As far as is known, no detached samples of the supposed leather are available, and therefore it would be necessary to take a sample from the object surface. In order to obtain photographs of both sides of the sword, it would be necessary to build supports for what are now the upper sides of the fragments, enabling them to be turned.

The proposed course of action would therefore be:

1. Remove sword fragments from the nitrogen storage container.
2. Build Plaster of Paris supports for the upper surfaces of the fragments.
3. Record the fragments photographically, on both sides.
4. Remove a sample of the supposed leather for examination and analysis.
5. Replace fragments in container and flush with nitrogen.
6. Transport to Granton laboratories and X-ray.
7. Return to Chamber Street and restore oxygen-free, high humidity storage regime.
8. Devise treatment for the object based on the results of the observations made, and tests carried out.



NATIONAL MUSEUMS OF SCOTLAND

*Department of Archaeology*

30 July 1991

Bob Gourlay  
Highland Regional Archaeologist  
Clachnaharry Old School  
Inverness

Dear Bob,

At last! Here's the photo of the Balnakiel hilt. It should be good enough for a newspaper, even though you can't see the wire hilt binding clearly. Point out that the metal of the blade and tang can be made out, though.

Let me have a copy of the clippings, will ya?

Hope the steatite thing and the Chinese bowl bit arrived safely via Jill. Did I tell you that in last week's "Disappearing World" programme about the Mursi of Ethiopia, the reporter said that they tie stones between the horns of their cattle to make them grow in a particular way? It's one of life's strange coincidences that that particular sentence was broadcast and received by my ears at that very moment! I think the crop circles are to blame.

Cheery-bye

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Alison'.

Dr Alison Sheridan  
Assistant Keeper

3

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SCOTLAND:    THEO SKINNER

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33: Various bones, out of context

## HUMAN REMAINS ON BALNAKEIL BAY

The remains of what appeared to be a human skeleton and two bronze objects were discovered at the north end of Balnakeil Bay (H NC 3865 7068) by Mr and Mrs J. Powell whilst walking on the beach. This was reported by them to the local police, who in turn contacted the Procurator Fiscal. The local Doctor was called in, and certified that the bones were indeed human, and probably ancient. Since no further police action was then required, we were requested to excavate the remains. The finds were claimed by the Procurator Fiscal as Treasure Trove. The excavation was conducted by R.B.Gourlay, and D.M.Low the following day, Saturday 25th May. The following is a summary report.

1. The remains were situated in a sand dune, c.4m above the high water mark, and c.5-6m below the top of the dune. The remains protruded from the side of a recent blow-out in the dune, apparently due to storm winds earlier in the week.
2. The visible remains initially consisted of the rib cage, pelvic bones, spinal column, and left arm bones. The leg bones were lying on the sand below the in-situ remains, and had obviously fallen from their original position when the surrounding sand had been eroded by the wind. There was no evidence of the skull at this stage, which, from the position of the rib cage indicating that the body had been placed on its right hand side, was assumed to be lying undisturbed beneath the sand, and set further into the side of the dune. There was also at this stage, evidence of a large circular piece of metal in the side of the dune, at approximately the presumed position of the skull.
3. The remains were at this stage cleaned over gently to reveal more bones, various pieces of metalwork, and other objects which were lying in the pelvic area. This was recorded by photograph and plan.
4. The next stage involved gently removing the sand overlying and hiding parts of the remains. In the process of this, an additional piece of metalwork was identified protruding c.50cms above the remains. This was excavated and the full extent of the remains exposed.
5. The finds were all lifted and bagged seperately (see attached list), and the skeletal material removed. It became obvious that the remains of what probably was a sword, were lying underneath the skeletal remains. This was in a fairly corroded state, and was removed seperately.
6. The finds and remains were brought to Inverness, where they were closely examined and found to be in a relatively poor

state of preservation. On advice from the National Museum of Scotland's Conservation unit, the finds were removed to the Museum's conservation laboratories on Tuesday 28th May for immediate treatment. The two bronze objects and piece of bone in Bonar Bridge Police Station were collected by R.B.Gourlay on the same day, and will be sent forthwith to the National Museum for conservation treatment.

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<sup>approximately</sup>  
1. The remains were situated in a sand dune, c.4m above the high water mark, and <sup>2.5-6m</sup> below the top of the dune. The remains protruded from the side of a recent blow-out in the dune, apparently due to storm winds earlier in the week. <sup>the remains</sup>

<sup>approx 20cm</sup>  
2. The visible remains initially consisted of the rib cage, pelvic bones, spinal column, and left arm bones. The leg bones were lying on the sand below the in-situ remains, and had obviously fallen from their original position when the surrounding sand had been eroded by the wind. There was no evidence of the skull at this stage, which, from the position of the rib cage indicating that the body had been placed on its right hand side, was assumed to be lying undisturbed beneath the sand, and set further into the side of the dune. There was also at this stage, evidence of a large circular piece of metal in the side of the dune, at approximately the presumed position of the skull.

3. The remains were at this stage cleaned over gently to reveal more bones, various pieces of metalwork, and other objects which were lying in the pelvic area. This was recorded by photograph and plan.

4. The next stage involved gently removing the sand overlying and hiding parts of the remains. In the process of this, an additional piece of metalwork was identified protruding c.50cms above the remains. This was excavated and the full extent of the remains exposed.

<sup>see attached list</sup>  
5. The finds were all lifted and bagged separately (see attached list), and the skeletal material removed. It became obvious that the remains of what probably was a sword, were lying underneath the skeletal remains. This was in a fairly corroded state, and was removed separately.

6. The finds and remains were brought to Inverness, where they were closely examined and found to be in a relatively poor

state of preservation. On advice from the National Museum of Scotland's Conservation unit, the finds were removed to the Museum's conservation laboratories on Tuesday 28th May for immediate treatment. The two bronze objects and piece of bone in Bonar Bridge Police Station were collected by R.B.Gourlay on the same day, and will be sent forthwith to the National Museum for conservation treatment.

# Northern Constabulary

Our Ref :

Your Ref :

RECEIVED from the Chief Constable, Northern Constabulary, per :

\* (a) Officer-in-Charge, .....

\* (b) ~~Officer~~/Civilian Assistant J. Macmillan. .....

Rank & No. ....

the following property 1 PIECE OF BONE .....

TWO BRONZE ARTEFACTS FOUND AT .....

DURNESS. .....

\* Being Productions in the d/o .....

\* Reported Lost/Found .....

\* Belonging to .....

\* I deposit the sum of £ : p as a reward to the finder.

Signature : [Signature] .....

Address : Highland Police Centre Dundee HQ. .....

Date : 28/5/91 .....

Handed over by : J. Macmillan .....

Rank & No. C/A .....

Signature : ..... Date : .....

\* Delete as appropriate