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X Shedding new light on the Viking age

DESPITE the encroachment of science on the art of archaeology, it must still be every antiquarian's dream to discover, at the turn of the spade (or maybe under the lighter touch of the brush), a unique and beautiful object which sheds new light on life in pre-history.

The story of how just a discovery was made on the Orkney island of Sanday was the topic of one of the most enthralling of a series of lectures in Farr Secondary School during the Easter break. The talks formed part of a four-day conference held in the school by the Edinburgh-based Scottish Society for Northern Studies, which is convened annually in various parts of northern Scotland and Scandinavia, usually in areas of former Norse control.

Olwyn Owen, the archaeologist alluded to earlier, spoke on a rescue dig at Scar in Sanday which uncovered a Viking boat burial with many of the associated grave goods still intact. Weapons, beads, brooches and gaming pieces were all surrendered by the soil, but most breathtaking of all was a beautiful breastplate-like whalebone plaque which won instant recognition as artistically superior to all previous discoveries of its kind.

While Olwyn's lecture concentrated on Orkney, all others dealt with themes in the history or landscape of North Sutherland and included another archaeological contribution, this time from Bob Gourlay, the regional archaeologist, his assistant Dorothy Low and Colleen Batey, of Glasgow Univer-

A conference in Bettyhill, organised by the Scottish Society for Northern Studies, provided a fascinating insight into the Norse occupation. **Jim Johnston** reports.

sity, on the recently excavated Norse burial at Durness.

There, at the north end of Balnakeil beach, a storm had revealed human remains which, on investigation by the police, proved to be of considerable antiquity. A rescue dig was immediately carried out and a series of remarkable finds uncovered.

The body turned out to be that of a 12-year-old child, but one who had been buried with the full regalia of a Viking warrior.

Resting in the sand together with the shrouded body were the remnants of a spear, a sword and a shield along with less warlike goods such as beads of glass and amber, playing pieces of horn and a bone

back in 1960. It had been discovered purely by chance as excavations began for the foundation of the shepherd's house which now stands on the opposite side of the road from the intended site.

One of the first to enter the earth house was the late Andrew Mackay, of Crossroads, Talmine, who, as he felt his way along the subterranean passageway in the darkness, made the most interesting find of the entire excavation — a tiny pair of bronze toilet shears which, in spite of being 2000-plus years old, were still in perfect condition.

Nor was archaeology the sole topic of the conference. Malcolm Bangor Jones, an employee of the Scottish Office who has immersed himself in the

dom of Orkney which then held sway in these parts.

Dr Doreen Waugh, Head of Upper School at Mary Erskine's College, Edinburgh, talked on the Place-names of Strathnaver; Mary Beith, of Melness, covered the amazing story of one Fearchar Lighiche, who founded a school of medicine at Melness in medieval times.

Elizabeth Beaton of Hopeman examined the buildings of North-West Sutherland, and Dr Ian Grimble brought the academic side of the conference to a close with his inimitable account of Robb Donn, the famed bard of the Reay Country who rivalled Burns in his output and expertise.

To round the event off, a ceilidh was held in the Bettyhill Hotel at which the collected academics proved not to be a bunch of dry old sticks but, supplemented by local talent, kept song and story going well into the small hours.

For the 59 academics present — some from as far afield as the University of Alberta — the conference gave an excellent introduction to a rich but little known area of Scotland, and, to the many locals who also attended the lectures, afforded a rare opportunity to examine their cultural roots in a structured way.

It is customary for papers delivered at Scottish Society for Northern Studies conferences to be published at a later date, and this is probable in the case of the Bettyhill conference. If all goes according to plan, final manuscripts will be delivered to the society by the end of this year for publication in 1993.

'The human remains found at Balnakeil beach turned out to be those of a 12-year-old child, but one who had been buried with the full regalia of a Viking warrior.'

comb.

Other lectures of archaeological interest included one by Roderick McCullagh of Edinburgh University on the dig he carried out over the last few years just south of Lairg, while Alex Morrison, of Glasgow University, discussed the souterrain at Eriboil which he excavated

voluminous records of Sutherland Estate, gave an in-depth account of Strathnaver and the Mackay Country in the 17th and 18th centuries, while Barbara Crawford, historian of the Viking world at St Andrews University, gave an illuminating account of Medieval Strathnaver in relation to the Norse Earl-

John O' Great End

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Viking discovery couple to get cash reward

A MIDDLESEX couple who found the grave of a young Viking warrior on a remote beach in north-west Sutherland have been put forward for a £6,000 reward.

Engineer Mr Jack Powell and his wife, Gillian, were on holiday at Durness last year when they came upon the 1,000-year-old grave, opened up in the dunes when strong winds blew away the sand.

Without disturbing their find, the couple told the authorities and set an investigation in motion.

National Museums of Scotland spokeswoman Dr Alison Sheridan said: "The couple obeyed the treasure-trove law in Scotland, where everything found has to be reported.

"The find will be made available for loan to Inverness Museum once all of the conservation and academic work has been done."

She said the remains had been identified as those of a boy of about 12, buried with full-sized armour — possibly his father's.

"He was buried with a sword, a spear and a shield," said Dr Sheridan. "He had a set of gaming pieces and a bone comb, a needle case, a little whetstone and three beads."

Press & Journal.

16.6.92.

To: Bob/Dot

From: Alison MacNeill

re Balnakeil Viking



THE NORTHERN TIMES, DECEMBER 24, 1993

Grave of Ivarr, the Viking?

Sir — It will be interesting to hear what date the archaeologists of the National Museum in Edinburgh put on the grave found at Balnakeil Bay (reported in your issue of 10th December.)

I am hoping that the date will turn out to be the late 9th Century, as there is on record in Icelandic sagas the death of a young boy of high birth, aged approximately 12-14 years, while taking part in his first war expedition with his father.

This boy was called Ivarr Rognvaldsson and his father Rognvald Eysteinnsson was the Earl, or local leader, of the district of Maere, in Western Norway. Rognvald was an important man in Norway, the right hand man of King Harald Finehair, and foremost of the King's commanders. Several of the Icelandic sources say the King went with him on the expedition to subdue the Western Isles, in or around the year 874, but some doubt has been cast on the King's presence.

At any rate, all the sources agree that Rognvald was there, and that he took his young son who was his eldest and his heir and that it was Ivarr's first expedition. This tells us that he would have been in his early teens, or a little younger — this was when a boy was considered old enough to fight in battle. It depended to some extent on his size, keenness and fighting ability. I find it rather touching that the Balnakeil boy's weapons were too big for him.

Young Ivarr died in battle while on the expedition, and the King, in compensation for the loss of an heir, gave Rognvald the lands of Shetland and Orkney and the title "Earl of Orkney".

Rognvald, however, was busy

consolidating his position as the King's premier commander and did not want to be retired to the islands, so he gave the lands and the title to his younger brother, Sigurd.

Sigurd invaded mainland Scotland, and held the north, as far south as the Dornoch Firth, for more than twenty years. He is the man buried in the "Viking's Grave" at Cyderhall near Dornoch.

So the two Sutherland graves, at opposite ends of the county, maybe uncle and nephew from a family whose history is closely bound up with local life from over a thousand years ago. — Bridget Mackenzie, 203 Lednabirichen, Dornoch.

Unfair Sale Ballot?

Sir — In regard to the article in *The Northern Times* (10th December) "Lairg One-Day Sale Stunt Denied," I felt I had to give my comments on the subject.

Over the years I have been at the ballot several times and no matter who was to draw it, as it's done at present, it would not be fair.

There are several different tins with the names of the sellers, comprising crofters in one, farmers in another and estates in another etc. The person who is to draw the ballot is told by the market staff, usually the auctioneer, which tin he has to pick a name out of, and in which order!

There should only be one container with all names in it and drawn from that.

This point has been argued over more than once and still nothing gets done about it.

We've been selling at this market for 30 years and do feel quite strongly about this and I know we are not the only ones. — Mrs Catherine Cameron, 95 Torroble, Lairg.

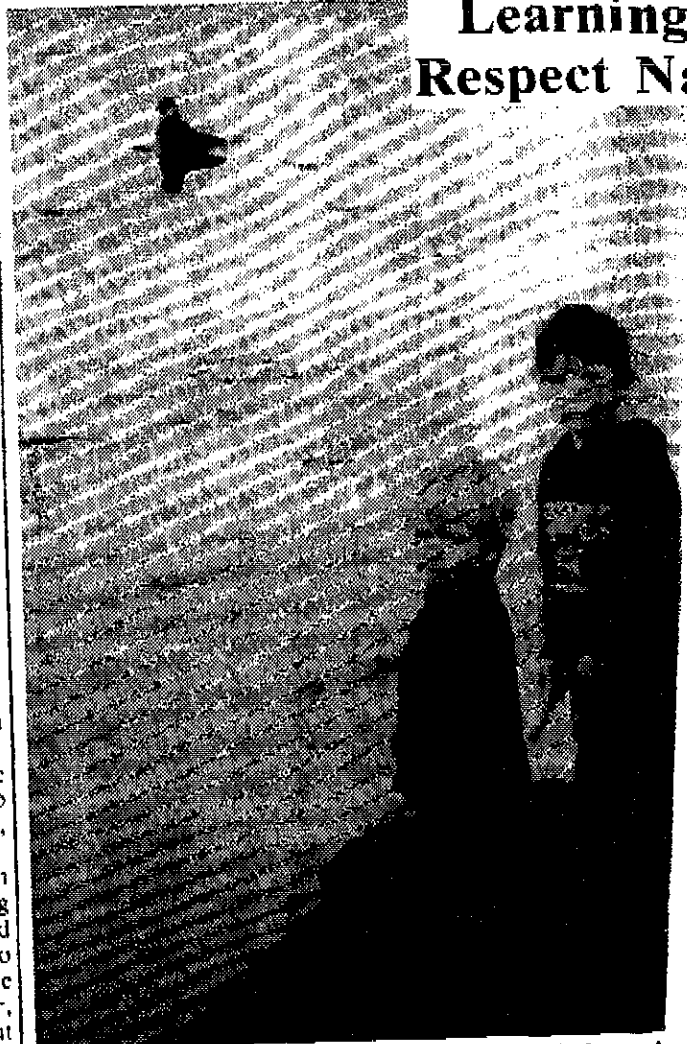
Before dawn the innkeeper and his wife returned for the milking and almost stepped on Runt. "What's this?" he asked.

"He came in last night," said Mary. "I thought he was yours."

"Never set eyes on him." He took Runt by a horn and felt his sides. "A proper runt. He's terrible thin but his muscles are strong. Nothing good food won't mend. He's not from round here."

Joseph looked at Runt, scraggy

Learning Respect N



Cautioned to be quiet and not to disturb the baby seal shore of Loch Fleet, Golspie four-year-olds Ben Mackay and Sam Mackay, Grant Crescent, have an early lesson in nature and its creatures.

HENRY'S 100 ST

The School show "Henry" was performed in the Assembly Hall on three occasions last week.

A matinee performance on Monday for the local primary schools was followed by two public performances on Tuesday and Wednesday. The hall was packed with an enthusiastic audience for both public performances.

"Henry" turned out to be one of the best school shows in recent years and was all the more commendable because of the large cast. Almost

along with two Music Exam Board audience and were with the whole p

It is very like number of pupils achieving such high to the recent intro Arts into the tim S4 and bodes w years.

Although this show with most contributing in :

Golsn

RUNT

by

Joseph