

The Boat-Grave at Balladoole

By Dirk H. Steinforth, manxvikings.jimdo.com (July 15, 2016)

A stone-setting in the shape of a ship on the highest point of Chapel Hill, near Balladoole, Malew parish, marks the place of one of the most spectacular and most intriguing Viking graves in the Isle of Man.

Excavated in 1945 by German archaeologist Gerhard Bersu, it contained a choice selection of grave-goods: such as a shield, a set of richly ornamented harness fittings, spurs and stirrups, buckles and strap slides a knife, and a ring-pin as well as the nails, rivets and washers of a 11m-long boat. The objects are conventionally dated to the late 9th/early 10th centuries.

The distinctly pagan burial custom of the boat-grave would not have been out of place in Scandinavia – were it not for the fact that it had been erected in an earlier Christian cemetery as well as directly atop seventeen *lintel-graves*, quite neatly laid out in three rows, disturbing some of them, with skeletons taken out of their stone cists and limbs torn apart. From the state of the bones, the excavator concluded that the Vikings deliberately slighted the Christians' burials and covered them with their own splendid mound to demonstrate their (and their pagan Gods') superiority over the natives and their religion. It is possible, however, that the Vikings happened on the *lintel-graves* only by accident. This creates several questions regarding the religious as well as social aspects of the burial custom of the Balladoole Vikings and the relationship with the local Manx.

The location in a Christian cemetery

A former Iron-Age hillfort on Chapel Hill had been re-used for a Christian cemetery. The remains of a small *keeill* (chapel) can still be seen some 70m west of the boat-grave site (though it is not clear whether a *keeill* existed at the time the boat-grave was erected). Other *lintel-graves* had been excavated earlier nearer to the *keeill*, but the exact extent of the burial ground is as yet unknown.

The choice of a Christian cemetery for the last resting-place of their dead chief suggests to some a certain familiarity with Christianity on the part of the Vikings and is even considered as an indication for social harmonisation between the Vikings and the native Celts.

The purely pagan fashion of the boat-grave clearly militates against the dead Viking or his family having been truly Christian, but it might be considered that by placing it in the cemetery they tried to 'hedge their bets': Christianity cannot have been an unknown concept, and possibly an attempt was made to secure Christian blessings for the dead man for Paradise, while providing him for Valhalla at the same time, as it were.

Aside from religious considerations, however, there could have been social reasons for the location in the cemetery. It is not entirely clear, when Manx local graveyards

were equipped with *keeills* and burials began to be officiated over by clerics. Possibly at the time of the Balladoole boat-burial there was no *keeill* and the site was rather a community or family graveyard. Accordingly it could be suggested that traditionally the regional chiefs and members of the most powerful families had been interred here, and the choice for the Viking burial would simply reflect the wish to claim the surrounding landscape as their own, to demonstrate legitimacy and the right of the dead man's dynasty to continue his rule. A supposed Christian character of the site would have been secondary or even completely inconsequential to them, and if the cemetery was in fact rather a family graveyard, with no church building or clerical supervision, the pagan burial might not even have been regarded as foreign and improper by the natives.

The location atop the lintel-graves

The juxtaposition of pagan boat-grave and Christian *lintel-graves* and the damage incurred on the latter during the erection of the former present a vexing problem: Was that spot chosen expressly to destroy the Christians' graves, to demonstrate that 'Odin rules', and to humiliate the defenseless natives and claim the place for themselves? The slighting of the skeletons seems to support the idea of a religiously as well as socially motivated act of violence on the Vikings' part. However, this means that the earlier graves must have been visible above ground, so that their existence could have been known to the Vikings in the first place – and this is by now means certain.

First, there are no known grave-markers at Balladoole, such as the famous *Manx Crosses*, and no evidence that the *lintel-graves* had been marked in any other way. Their being lined up in (more or less) precise rows, does suggest some form of organisation.

The second point is more difficult to decide: Excavator Bersu claims that the small bones or hands and feet of the skeletons had still been articulated when they were removed from the *lintel-graves* by the grave-digging Vikings – their interment, therefore, must have happened only a short time before, the broken earth over the graves cannot yet have been re-covered by vegetation, so the Vikings must have been aware of the (quite) recent burials, when they chose the spot for their own. The time for graves to be obliterated by a plant cover, and the one for muscle and sinews to decay in the ground can only roughly be estimated, but it is possible that indeed the Vikings did not encounter clearly visible grave sites when they chose the spot, but only came across them while digging the pit for their grave-boat.

The fact that they removed some of the skeletons from their cists and damaged them has often been taken as (yet another) form of religious violence, even as an attempt to inflict postmortal harm to the Christian dead. Religiously motivated violence against the graves and/or remains of the dead, however, is a thing quite unknown as far as the Vikings are concerned. On the contrary Vikings seem to have respected Christian graves wherever they came to inter one of their own in a Christian cemetery. It seems much more likely (and more 'in character') for the Vikings to have opened the *lintel-graves* in a spirit of light-heartedness which betrayed a certain degree of indifference regarding the decaying remains of the dead in general.

Archaeological as well as literary evidence supports such an idea of a rather 'down-to-earth' attitude towards mortality.

Even if the position of the *lintel-grave* was recognisable for the diggers, the Vikings' insistence to take over the site at the hilltop does not necessarily mean a malicious intention.

The location on the hill

It has been pointed out that the hilltop, being the highest point for many miles, would have been an attractive site for the Vikings in its own right. Well visible not only from the sea, but also from the countryside around, it was an obvious choice for any kind of statement – be it religious or social/dynastic.

Looked at in this way, the position over the *lintel-graves* could well have been chosen completely independent of the presence and visibility of earlier graves as well as independent of religious considerations: the Vikings might have insisted on taking over the prominent location purely to demonstrate their dead chief's power and importance, emphasising its conspicuousness even more by raising a magnificent mound, covered, it is assumed, with the white bones of animals sacrificed during the burial ceremonies. Literary sources attest to this tradition by mentioning the desire of Vikings to be buried in a mound looking out to sea, visible from afar.

Conclusion

All this may appear somewhat 'apologetic', but in order to understand the relationship between Norse settlers and Manx natives during the Early Viking Age it is necessary not to jump to conclusions. In fact there is no unequivocal evidence that the boat-grave at Balladoole constitutes a case of religiously motivated violence against the Manx Christians and/or a demonstration of pagan superiority. A distinct turn *towards* Christianity seems rather unlikely as well. In religious terms, therefore, the boat-grave probably has to be considered as a 'typical' pagan burial – without further implications.

Then there are some social/dynastic/political elements to it: the prominent position on a hill-top, (possibly a traditionally desirable site) as well as the location in the cemetery of earlier, native chiefs, whose succession the Vikings wanted to claim, might thus well have been chosen to claim and assert local authority. It remains unknown, however, how they exercised this authority and what their relationship with the native population might have been.

Further reading

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