

# A stranger in the dunes? Rescue excavation of a Viking Age burial at Cnoc nan Gall, Colonsay

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with contributions from Paul R J Duffy, Jennifer Miller and  
Penelope Walton Rogers

## ABSTRACT

*The rescue excavation of a Viking Age burial from an eroding sand dune at Cnoc nan Gall, near Machrins on the island of Colonsay, has provided further insights into a cemetery which has long been known to exist in this area. The burial comprised a middle-aged male with associated grave goods, including a Hiberno-Norse copper alloy ringed pin, and an Anglo-Saxon type strap-end, and also included small areas of organic preservation including cloth and botanical evidence. The artefacts and botanical evidence, along with a radiocarbon date obtained from a sample of the in-situ skeleton, suggest that the individual was buried in autumn or winter during the second half of the 10th century AD. Remains of either a stone setting, or cairn, along with the partial organic preservation in the grave, has also provided an insight into the burial customs employed. The grave may have been lined with grasses and the body wrapped in coarse linen cloth and placed on a birch bier or coffin.*

## INTRODUCTION

Following the discovery of human remains eroding from a sand dune at Cnoc nan Gall, near Machrins, on the island of Colonsay (illus 1), a rescue excavation was conducted, funded by the Historic Scotland Human Remains Call-Off Contract (HRCC) scheme. The HRCC provides a means by which human remains of archaeological significance can be recovered at short notice, in situations where no other funding source is available. The fieldwork was undertaken between 1 and 2 July 2010 by Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division (Becket 2010). A section of the eroding dune face (illus 2) was excavated, large enough only to expose the disturbed inhumation and

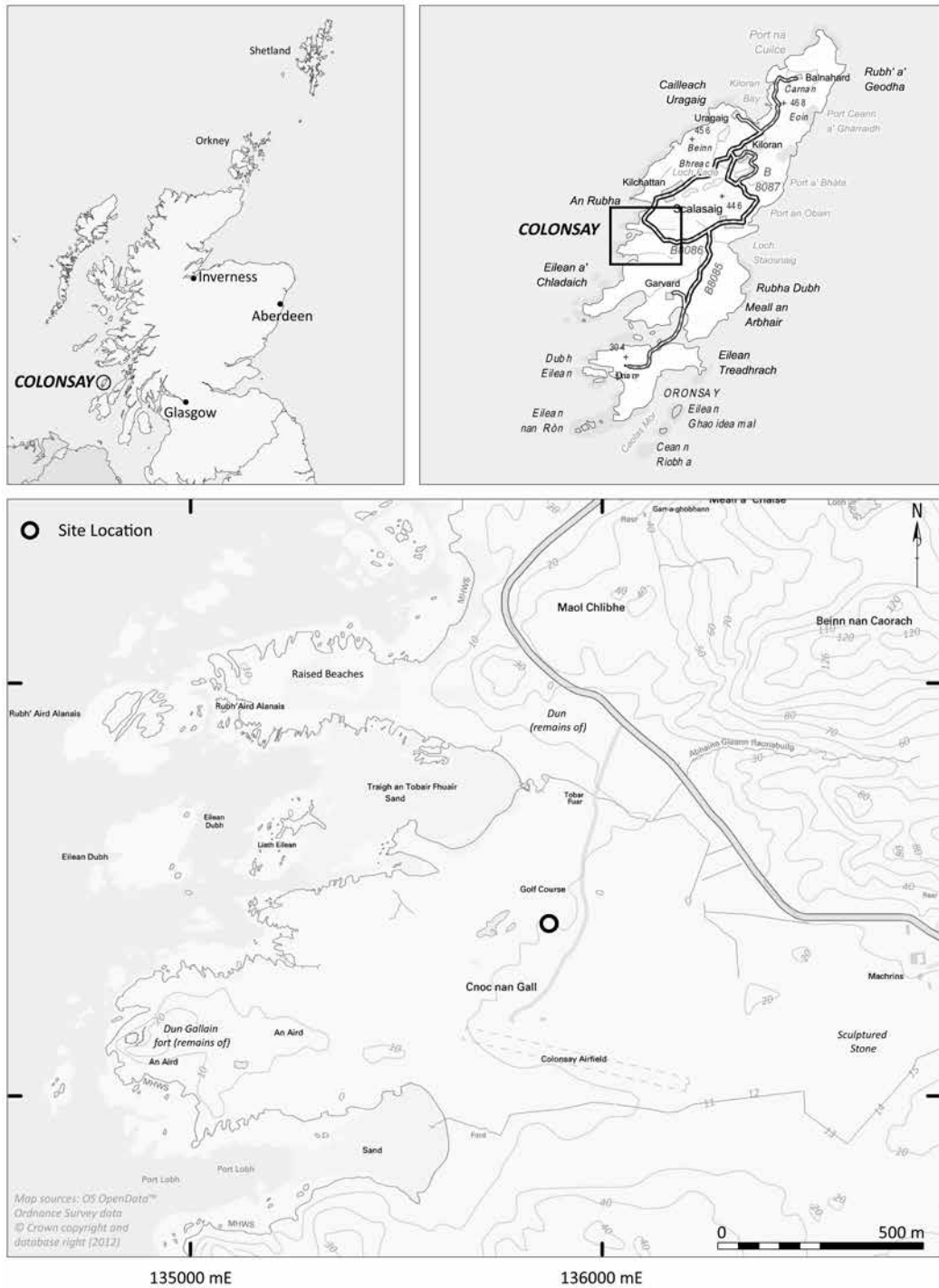
the approximate area of the grave cut. The partially surviving remains of either a cairn or stone setting, which would originally have covered the burial, were left in situ. Remains of two individuals, one primarily in situ, were recovered, along with a range of artefacts. This paper presents the results of the fieldwork and the post-excavation analyses which have been co-ordinated by Northlight Heritage and funded by Historic Scotland.

## LOCATION AND GEOLOGY

The burial was found at Cnoc nan Gall (NGR: NR 3587 9341), in a slightly more prominent mound (c 15m AOD) amongst the dunes in undulating shell-sand pasture (illus 1). The

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ILLUS 1 Location plan



ILLUS 2 The eroding sand dune

remains had been exposed as a result of the loss of the turf ground surface and subsequent wind – and possibly sheep – erosion. Local people encountered the remains and contacted police who, after removing some bones from the site, contacted Historic Scotland. The excavation team were told that there had been recent quarrying for sand in the area and this may have instigated or exacerbated the loss of the turf cover (illus 2). The Gaelic name ‘Cnoc nan Gall’ can be translated as ‘Hill of the Foreigners’ (see discussion).

#### EXCAVATING THE BURIAL (illus 3)

The partially exposed skeleton of a middle-aged male (SK1) was orientated with the skull to the south and feet to the north, in a supine position, with the right arm flexed to place the hand at the right shoulder and the left arm lying across the abdomen (illus 3). Although the

skull and the left side of the mandible had been removed from the site by the police, the right side of the mandible remained in situ, showing that the head had been facing east. Many of the left ribs, the left humerus, tibia and fibula, and some vertebrae had become disarticulated and were recovered from the western dune face. In the sand around the skeleton (SK1) there were clear signs of dark brown staining on the yellow sand, which was interpreted as a remnant of the decomposed soft tissue. Further disarticulated bones were recovered from elsewhere in the dune, including partial remains of an infant (SK2) and a piece of cremated long bone. A radiocarbon date of cal AD 889–984 (SUERC-38611) was obtained from a sample of bone from SK1.

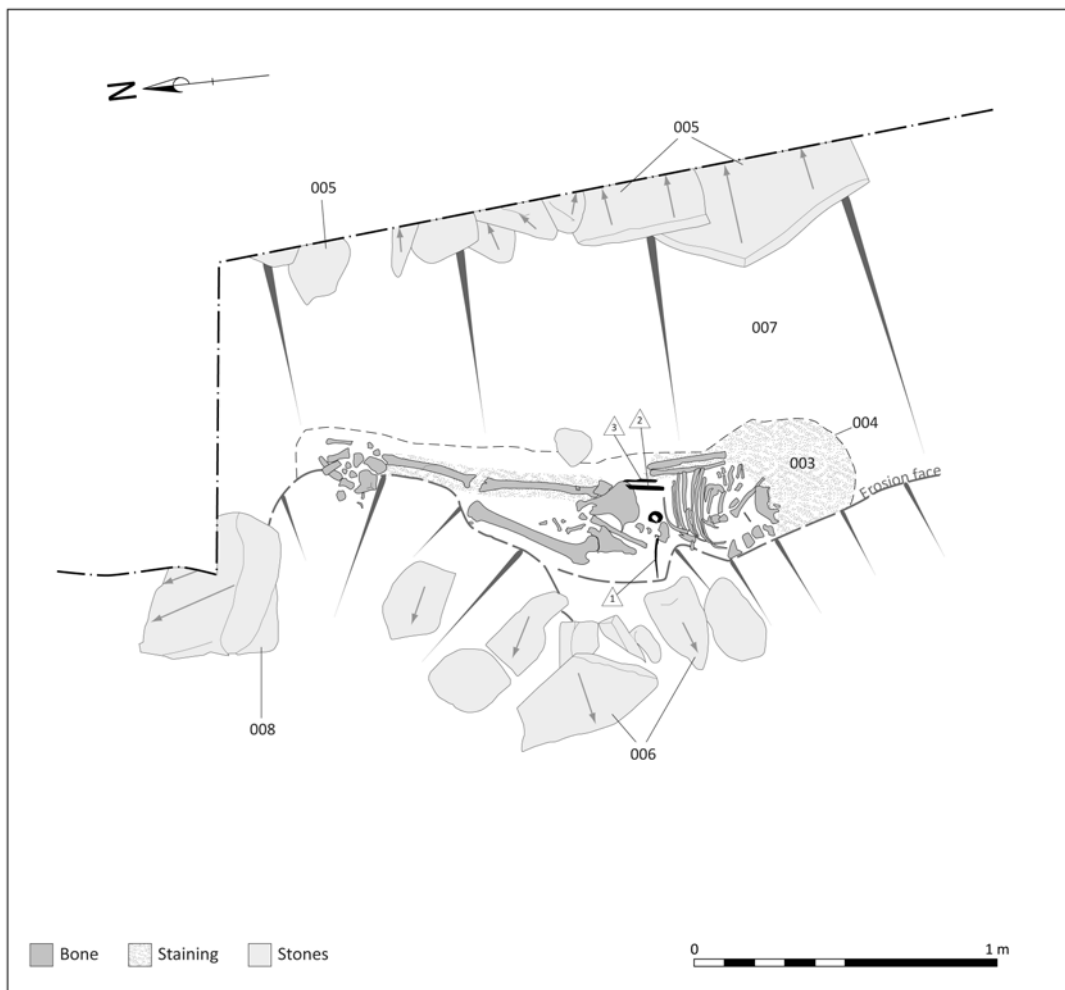
The true extent of the grave cut was unclear due to the similarity between the sand grave fill (C003) and the surrounding windblown dune sand (C002/007). It was not possible within the scope of the project to examine the

TABLE 1  
Radiocarbon date

Laboratory code	Sample	Years BP	1-Sigma	2-Sigma	δ13C
SUERC-38611 (GU26689)	Human bone	1100 ± 25	AD 898–982	AD 889–994	–20.1 ‰

broader context in any detail, but it appeared likely that some form of either a stone setting or cairn had been built over the burial. A large, undecorated, upright stone (C008) defined the northern edge of the burial, and possibly acted

as a grave marker. Further stones of various sizes were present, including large flat slabs to the east (C005), which pitched into the section face at an angle, and more stones (C006) that had eroded from the dune and slipped down the



ILLUS 3 Plan of the burial

slope to the west. None of these stone features were excavated or fully exposed.

The body had been buried with grave goods, and those that remained within the grave (SF1–5, 10–11) were located round the abdominal area of the body. A large copper alloy ringed pin (SF1) was found behind the lumbar vertebrae, orientated with the ring to the east and the point to the west, in other words, at right angles to the alignment of the body. The ringed pin appeared to pass through a mass of organic material (SF4) which had survived beneath the vertebrae of SK1. This material comprised layers which, whilst poorly preserved, included soft tissue, textile, birch bark and grasses. Hazel (*Corylus* sp) buds identified within this material suggested that the burial was conducted in autumn or winter. A fragment of heavy linen textile (SF10) was preserved within this deposit, in close proximity to the ringed pin. This combined evidence would suggest that the body had been wrapped in a coarse linen cloth or shroud which had been fastened behind the body with the ringed pin. The organic material also contained a number of tiny round objects, which were initially identified as possible louse eggs, but under further examination were shown to be eelworm cysts and not of archaeological significance (Harry Kenward pers comm).

A horn-handled knife (SF2) was located parallel to the eastern (right) side of the body and was orientated north/south (illus 3). Lying beside and parallel to the knife was a bone pin with a rounded head (SF3). The head of the pin and blade tip of the knife were pointing towards the south (the ‘head-end’), and it seems plausible that these objects had been placed in the grave together rather than suspended from clothing. The northern ends of these objects lay beneath the right-hand side of the skeleton’s pelvis, where a further lump of organic material (SF5) survived. An X-ray revealed that SF5 contained an artefact (SF11), which subsequent laboratory excavation revealed to be a copper alloy strap-end of Anglo-Saxon type. However, no trace of a strap was identified.

## POST-EXCAVATION ANALYSES

### HUMAN BONE

Paul R J Duffy

#### *Skeleton 1 (SK1)*

The individual was found to be an older adult male who was probably in his mid-40s to early 50s at death, of average build, between 5'7" and 5'10" (1.7m and 1.8m) in height, based on measurement of the right tibia. Evidence of probable age-related ‘wear and tear’ were evident on several joint surfaces, most notably the articulating surfaces of the radius to ulna on both limbs, and on a couple of cervical vertebrae. Similar wear-and-tear was noted on the dentition, in the form of wear of the chewing surfaces of most teeth, although the effects of a gritty diet undoubtedly will have contributed to this condition. Changes at muscle attachment sites on the midshaft of both humeri are most probably also an age-related change, although such variations can equally result from overloading of the muscle, either repeatedly as the result of an habitual task, or as a single event traumatic ‘tear’. In general, the health status of the man was good, considering his age and the period in which he lived. In addition to the mild degenerative changes noted above, the neural arches of his sacral vertebrae were seen to have failed to fuse properly, giving rise to a condition known as spina bifida occulta. This condition is, however, not uncommon and can reach up to 30% prevalence in smaller community populations. It is generally not debilitating in everyday life.

The dental record shows several teeth displaying calculus (plaque) deposits, a severe caries was noted on the distal aspect of the lower right second molar. There were no visible signs of a related abscess, but the observed loss of the right third molar during life and an area of new bone formation and morphology change around the mandibular fossa on this side may also be related to this dental pathology. All

upper left molars had also been lost during life, with the sockets for these teeth showing advanced remodelling. This is most likely also due to dental disease and/or deliberate removal, and would have meant that the chewing of food would have been restricted to one side of the mouth only.

Several minor non-metric traits were identified, all of which have a likely genetic origin. Without a wider population to compare to, such traits can only be ascribed to the natural variation of the human skeleton.

#### *Disarticulated material*

Two groups of disarticulated material were also examined. The first included the neural arch and body of an infant vertebra and a single piece of (probably) human cremated long bone, as well as fragments of rib and vertebrae, most probably part of SK1. The second contained bones of an infant (or infants), including an occipital, a petrous portion of the temporal bone, and two skull pieces.

#### ARTEFACTS

Colleen E Batey

#### *Copper alloy*

SF1 (illus 4)

A complete ringed pin with bent shank and swivelling ring. The lower half of the shank is of flattened section, bent sharply nearer the tip, and decorated on all four faces. In three cases this is a stepped pattern, but on the upper surface the decoration is restricted to a simple incised line following the outer contour. The upper shank is round in section and plain until 12.58mm below the decorated head, where the section reverts to square in form which is decorated with the matching stepped motif on one broad face and incised lines on the remaining three. The length of decorated upper shank is delimited by a single line around the circumference. There is a collar immediately below the socketed polyhedral head

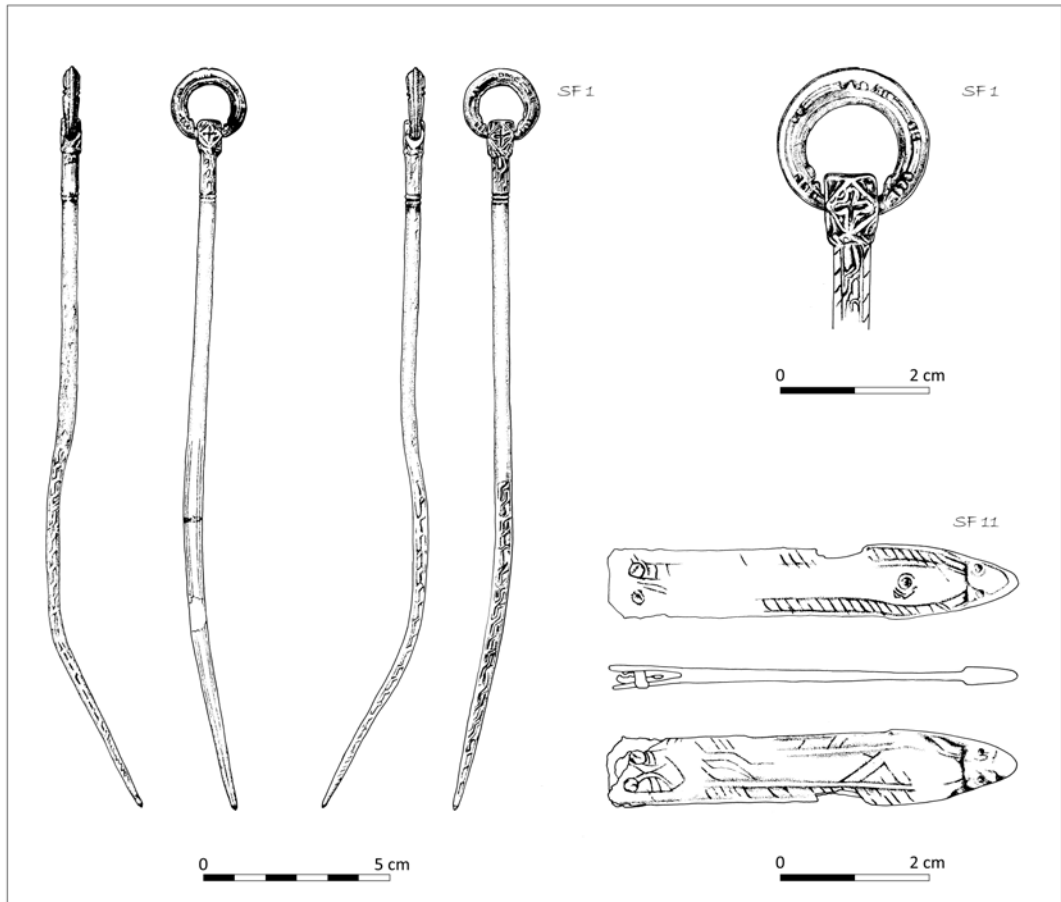
with incised cross and two punched rings on the flattened top of the head. The lozenge-sectioned ring is held in sockets at the side of the head, decorated with incised lines along its length and subdivided by four pairs of crossing incised lines. Overall L (tip to head incl): 184.51mm; Shank Diam: 4.89mm; Ring Diam: 20.38mm.

#### Discussion:

This well preserved and distinctive pin is of a type well documented from the Dublin assemblages by Fanning (1994: 25ff) and termed the 'plain ringed, polyhedral headed' type. This example is of a type dating to the mid-10th century on the chronology established in the Dublin excavations (the type being most prevalent during the period AD 925–50) and likely to have been manufactured within Dublin, where workshop evidence has been identified (both limited evidence for casting and more commonly for the working of wrought metal (Fanning 1994: Appendix 1)). The specific form is closely paralleled in finds DRP116 and DRP124 from Fishamble Street, both dated to the mid-10th century (Fanning 1994: figs 50 and 51). In terms of functionality of the pin itself, the rectangular form of the lower shank, which is decorated by incised lines, would have assisted friction to hold it in place. Likewise, the common bending of the shank, noted from several pins as well as this example from Colonsay, is considered likely to have played a functional role in securing the pin in place – in conjunction with thread which would originally have held the pin through the ring (cf Fanning 1994: fig 63; Appendix 2, fig 106). Graham-Campbell has noted that such ringed pins are found in both male and female graves in Scandinavian Scotland (cf Graham-Campbell 2002: 96).

SF 11 (illus 4)

A complete cast strap-end of rectilinear form with slightly convex sides, with incised decoration on both faces. The bulbous terminal reflects a stylized animal mask with two circular drilled eyes and contoured snout. The butt-end is split



ILLUS 4 Copper alloy artefacts

(and damaged on one face) to accommodate a leather belt, mineralised traces of which remain secured by two in-situ rivets. There are two, or possibly three, further drilled holes along the midline, two are obscured by concretion but the other is clearly incorporated into the design scheme by the addition of a defining circular incised line. The surface is very worn and crude incised interlace in a broad band is delimited by lines roughly contouring the overall shape. Possible extended ears from the animal head may be defined by double incised lines. Post recovery damage on one long edge indicates the friable nature of the surviving metal. L: 55.50mm; max

W: 10.50mm; max Th: 3.33mm (fastening) and terminal 2.95mm.

#### Discussion:

This form of strap-end is derived from the Late Anglo Saxon type and related to the more elaborate and high-status form found in silver of the Trewhiddle style (Thomas 2001: 39). This piece from Cnoc nan Gall is very worn and the small amount of interlace decoration on one face is almost smooth and indistinct now, although there are also traces of incised linear decoration on the reverse side. This is differentiated from the more commonly recovered examples by its

double-sided decoration and Thomas (2001: 45) notes that these double-sided examples are characteristically decorated with a panel of interlace (or hatching in the case of Meols 332 (see below)) between hatched or beaded borders and show differences in the details of the animal-head terminal. The distinctive animal mask at the terminal, matched on both faces, is very simply stylized and there are slight traces of the expanded ears. A similar piece has been discussed by David Griffiths, an antiquarian find from the beach market site at Meols in the Wirral (2007: no 332, 64 and Pl 9), identified as an 'Irish or Hiberno-Norse' type of Thomas Class F (Thomas 2004). In terms of dating though, the double-sided type certainly seems to have originated in the 9th century, but extends into the 10th (Thomas 2001: 45), which could suggest that, although the piece is very worn, it need not have been of great age when deposited in the grave.

The presence of Insular, non-Scandinavian, metalwork in Viking graves is commonly recorded in Scotland and the Irish Sea region. Although the simple form of this strap-end would seem less prestigious than, for example, the Westness brooch from Rousay, Orkney (Stevenson 1968), they do share a commonality of tradition, potentially being rather earlier in origin than the date of deposition. It is not, however, possible to assess just how much wear this piece suffered through use, given the soft nature of the metal used. Paterson has drawn attention to the fact that belt fittings within a burial may have served a different function than intended, citing the attraction of decorative pieces to the Vikings (Paterson 2001: 125). The single strap-end is likely to be part of a belt-fitting set, lacking the buckle in this case, so it may have been included as a trinket rather than a functional item.

There are, however, increasing numbers of belt-fitting sets being identified within Hiberno-Norse pagan graves, such as from Cnip on Lewis (Welander et al 1987: 149–51) – from a rich female pagan grave – and several from

recently excavated male and female graves at Cumwhitton in Cumbria (Rachel Newman pers comm). The presence of such elaborate fittings in an insular context in both male and female graves is significant as such dress elements within Scandinavia are commonly associated with males (see Paterson et al 2014: 146). The simple strap-end from Cnoc nan Gall has some similarities with another stray find from elsewhere on Colonsay (Paterson 2001: fig 11.3), but other finds of strap-ends and related fine metalwork – cf harness mounts, such as those from Kiloran Bay on Colonsay (Grieg 1940: fig 30) – or strap-ends which are often stray finds or metal-detected pieces, are more elaborate (eg Ashaig, Skye *Discovery and Excavation* 1994: 43–4, fig 21).

### *Iron*

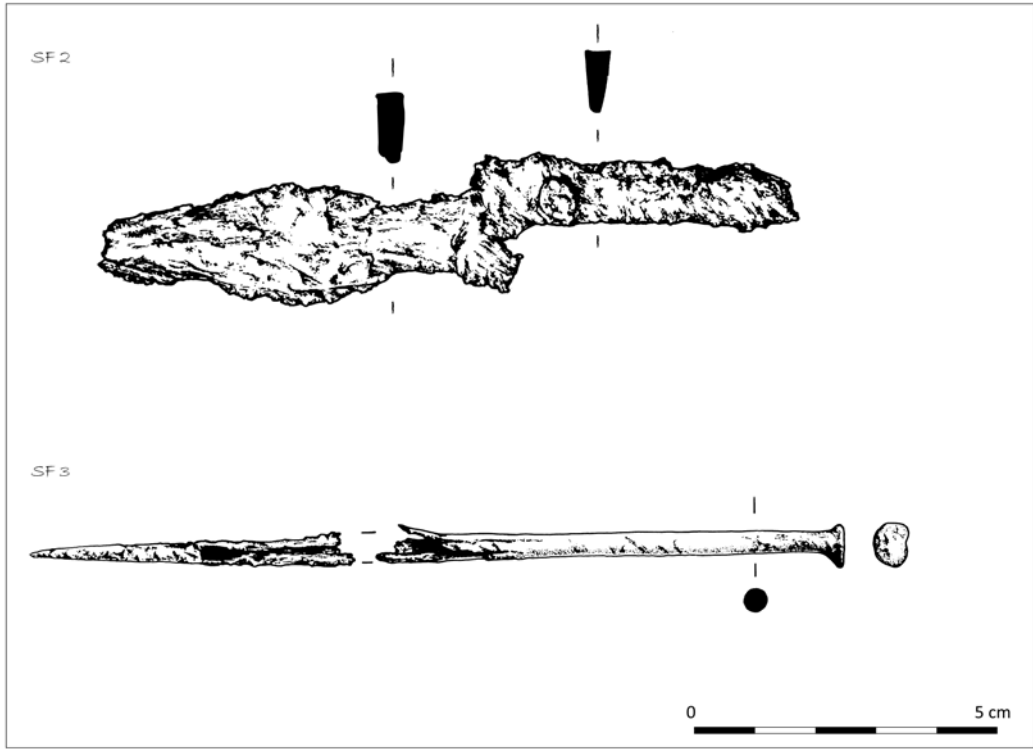
#### SF2 (illus 5)

A highly corroded knife blade and tang, both incomplete. The narrow blade, lacking its tip, is offset to the tang and triangular in section. The broader tang, which is more rectangular in section, has lateral striations, the remains of a horn handle (Esther Cameron pers comm) the edge of which is indicated by a corroded ridge at the shoulder of the blade. Overall L: 114.40mm. Blade L: 66.83mm; Th: 6.73mm. Tang L: 53.85mm; Th: 6.25mm.

### Discussion

The form of the narrow blade is distinctive and the offset nature of its relationship to the tang would suggest a strong grip was afforded. The type of blade is noted from the large Viking age assemblages from Coppergate, York, studied by Ottaway in such examples as SF2841 (Ottaway 1992: 567, fig 231) and a slightly more curving example, SF2954 (ibid: 573, fig 235). As with this Colonsay example, SF2841 also has a straight cutting edge and a long and strong tang; the form is classed by Ottaway as Form C3. A date range in the 9th–11th centuries is indicated in the York assemblage, and Scandinavian





ILLUS 5 Knife and bone pin

parallels are also cited (ibid: 570). It is interesting to note that Ottaway suggests that blades of this form may have been reworked to extend their lives, and cites metallographic examination of the type. It is also possible that knife blades of such straight and narrow form may have had a specific function. In this case, there are no visual indications remaining on the blade length for extreme wear.

Ottaway suggests that the type with long and strong tangs combined with relatively slim and short blades may have served in 'careful work which required controlled downward pressure on resistant material such as wood, bone or leather' (1992: 583). This does, however, include most activities in which a knife would be used. The identification of the mineralised deposits as a horn handle are significant, and a rare recovery.

### *Bone*

#### SF3 (illus 5)

A damaged, long nail-headed pin, broken midway along the shank and in two non-conjoining pieces, with tip intact. Traces of iron residue around the break and green (copper alloy) shading near the head indicates proximity to different metals within the burial context. The shank has a circular section, the plain head is slightly irregular but complete and the upper part of the shank is highly polished through usage. The remaining shank is badly weathered and has a rough surface. The raw material is likely to be an ungulate bone (on the basis that it is not obviously a hollow bone, which would indicate a bird bone was utilized) which has been modified with a knife – although

where the original surface survives there are no remaining facets from this working as it has been worn smooth by use. Estimated overall L: 130mm. Head and shank L: 77.19mm; Diam: 4.24mm. Tip and shank L: 54.05mm; Diam: 3.41mm.

#### Discussion:

The long nail-headed bone pin (SF3) is of the typically Norse form that replaced the short Pictish hipped bone pins (as best exemplified at the Brough of Birsay, Orkney; Curle 1982: illus 57, 94). It is very closely paralleled in the many examples from Pool in Orkney, especially find PL 0006 which is complete and has a length of 112mm (Smith 2007: illus 8.8.9, 477–9). The Colonsay example is within the range noted at Pool by Smith as being between 83mm and 153mm in length (ibid: 477). Similar finds have been noted at Birsay by Curle (eg SF130 which is complete and from a Middle Norse horizon (Curle 1982: 106, illus 48)). Many of the Norse bone pins from Jarlshof in Shetland have more decorative heads, but the simple nail-headed form is also represented (Hamilton 1956: 148, fig 69), apparently recovered from communal middens. The type is a cloak pin and its length would have allowed it to be used on coarse and thick woven fabrics.

#### TEXTILE

Penelope Walton Rogers

#### SF 10

A single, part-mineralised fragment of textile, 8mm × 3mm. It is constructed in tabby weave, 12/Z × 10–12/Z per cm, and the fibre is fully processed flax or hemp. The surface of the textile is slightly matted, indicating extensive wear. The fibres have been identified with the aid of a polarising light microscope (transmitted light) with magnification up to ×400. The diagnostic features are as follows: diameters in the range of 7–19 microns, a smooth profile interrupted by occasional nodes, both narrow and broad

lumina (central channels), and transverse V- and X-marking. The fibres are stained a rich blue-green and the blue-green crystals adhering to them suggest that the textile has been preserved by association with a corroding copper alloy object (probably the ringed pin).

#### Discussion:

This is a heavy fabric and falls towards the lower end of the range of Viking-Age linen textiles. Linens used for clothing, such as the Viborg shirt (Fentz 1992: 86), the garment fragments from Coppergate, York (Walton 1989: 348), and the tunic worn by the man buried at Auldham, East Lothian (Walton Rogers unpublished), were only rarely as coarse as this, most having counts in the range of 14–24 threads per cm. An exception is to be found in the garment of a woman buried at Adwick-le-Street in the late 9th century, although this person had old and mismatched brooches, with evidence for repair of her clothing, which suggests that she was relatively poor (Speed & Walton Rogers 2004). The thick quality of the textile in the Cnoc nan Gall burial, along with the indications of heavy long-term wear, implies that this was a utilitarian textile, such as might be used for an awning or a cover for goods. For example, a similar fabric covered a shield boss in a burial at nearby Kiloran Bay (Bender Jørgensen 1992: 214); and another was found on the outer surface of a brooch, which in turn clasped finer clothing fabrics, at Cnip, Uig, Isle of Lewis (Bender Jørgensen 1987: 166). Its position under the body suggests re-use as a grave lining, or as a fabric to wrap the body for burial. It may have been fastened at the back by the ringed pin.

#### ARCHAEOBOTANY

Jennifer Miller

#### *Micro-excavation of Organic Blocks SF4 and SF5*

Two blocks of organic material (SF4 and SF5) were recovered from the burial, undoubtedly

preserved by close association with the copper of the bronze ringed pin (SF1) and copper alloy strap-end (SF11) respectively. Micro-excavation in water, using low magnification microscopy, revealed these blocks to consist of sequential layers of organic materials overlying the shell sand grave cut. The uppermost layer of organic material in both blocks was consistent with highly decomposed skin and associated body tissue. It is considered likely that this is the skin of the dead individual himself, especially since block SF5 directly underlay the pelvic bones. However, the material was too degraded to have any value for further analysis, or even for confident identification of provenance.

Careful excavation of the strata comprising each block has helped to confirm the proposition that the body had been wrapped in a coarse fabric for burial, possibly a shroud, within the folds of which shell sand had accumulated. Grass roots from the surrounding machair had pervaded the folds of fabric over time. Below the tiny, residual fragments of fabric, a layer consisting of a single piece of probable birch (cf *Betula*) bark and outer wood overlay further grass roots and stems, closely associated with shell sand. Grass remains below the wood/bark were closely packed and included short lengths of leaf blades, suggesting that the grave may have been turf lined or contained grass residual from the grave excavation. The presence of rare budded twigs, including hazel (*Corylus* sp), within the basal sand implies the potential for an autumn or winter burial, whilst occasional suggestions of a twist of heather family (*Ericales*) stems, in close association with the layer of wood/bark, would advocate that the binding together of sheets of birch bark with heather-type rope to make a bier or crude coffin cannot be excluded. Birch bark is easily removed from the tree (Edlin 1973) and has been used since antiquity for a multitude of uses requiring large flexible sheets, for uses as diverse as roofing underfelt, buckets and coffin rolls; whilst heather stems have a similar association with cordage (Dickson & Dickson 2000; Gale & Cutler 2000).

## RADIOCARBON DATING

Alastair Becket

A single sample, the right first metatarsal of SK1, was submitted to the Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre (SUERC) for AMS radiocarbon dating. This sample returned a 2-sigma calibrated date-range of cal AD 889–984. The 1-sigma calibration shows a 41.9% probability date range of cal AD 945–82 and 26.3% probability date range of cal AD 898–920 (calibrated by SUERC using OxCal 4.1). Consideration of these date ranges and the artefacts recovered suggests that the individual died and was interred at Cnoc nan Gall in the mid–late 10th century AD.

## DISCUSSION

Alastair Becket and Colleen E Batey

### THE BURIAL

The artefacts and the skeletal remains from the Cnoc nan Gall grave are in keeping with a Norse burial of this date. Whilst some repositioning of the artefacts may have taken place due to settling and the subsequent erosion of the burial, it seems likely that the ringed pin served to secure a coarse linen fabric used to wrap the body. The location of the ringed pin, behind the body, does not appear to have parallel for this period in a Scottish context. The suggestion that cloth of this coarseness may have originally been used as an awning or covering for goods may indicate that items connected to trading, or at least the storage of goods, were at hand to those who conducted the burial. The cloth was not from a sail (Penelope Walton Rogers pers comm). The strap-end, which was of indeterminate age when placed in the grave, could have been a keepsake kept in a pouch or a fitting on a belt around the individual's waist. The horn-handled knife, itself a significant find, may have been suspended from a belt that has not survived.

The survival of the organic material is remarkable for the insight provided into the

burial practice employed. The layers of material identified by Miller (above) suggest that the body and grave had been carefully prepared before burial (which appears to have occurred in the autumn or winter, based on the identification of hazel buds). The layer of birch bark and possible heather cord is particularly significant as it suggests that some kind of bier or coffin had been built for the body. Birch bark coffins, or wrappings, are known in Viking burials from cemeteries such as Birka in Sweden (Gräslund 1980), but have not previously been identified in a Scottish context. Recent discussion about the role of bark in early Christian graves in Scandinavia has indicated a special significance for birch bark in burials, as a cover for the body or as a cover for the grave. Providing a cover for the body may have given the appearance of a body being made ready for cremation, even if this rite was not ultimately intended (Lund 2013: 54).

#### A CEMETERY IN THE DUNES

This mid-late 10th-century grave is particularly significant with regard to its location and proximity to several other Norse graves. The locality is appropriately named Cnoc nan Gall, ‘hill(ock) of the foreigners’, which, in a Hebridean context, usually means ‘Norse’ (Simon Taylor pers comm). However, recent re-assessment by Peadar Morgan provides a potentially significant insight suggesting that this is a relatively recent naming: ‘Cnoc nan Gall ... is best seen as being named under an antiquarian impulse in response to a local understanding of there having been earlier human activity here’ (Morgan 2012: 144).

Areas of undulating sand dunes are not uncommon locations for Viking cemeteries, (eg Reay in Caithness and Pierowall in Orkney, Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998: 125–7 and 129–34) and it is therefore unsurprising that the partial disarticulated remains of at least one further individual, an infant (SK2), were discovered in the eroded sand during

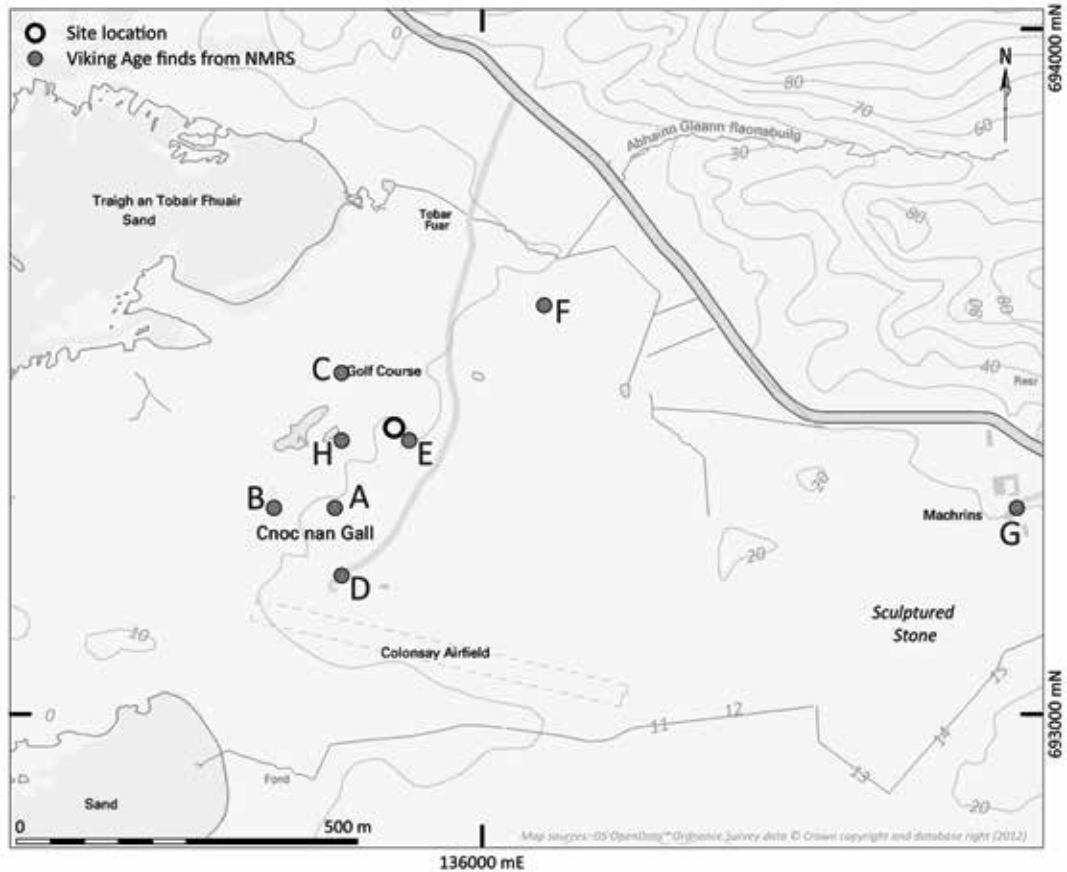
the fieldwork. The reuse of natural mounds for burials or the marking of such burials by stones, as suggested in this example from Cnoc nan Gall, can also be demonstrated elsewhere (eg Westness, Rousay, and Ballinaby, Islay (ibid: 135–8 and 122–5)).

Discerning the scale of such a cemetery is problematic as it is the lack of ordered recovery of individual grave assemblages over an extensive period that tends to characterise such sites. This leads to inevitable confusion about numbers of graves and the precise contents of each grave. The re-interment of human bone assemblages in the vicinity of Cnoc nan Gall (see below) is also likely to lead to potential multiplication of burial numbers and further confusion.

There is a considerable quantity of Norse archaeology in the immediate vicinity which has been recovered over several decades. The most significant known Norse burial on Colonsay is at Kiloran Bay, to the north, where there is an extensive area of dune pasture. The boat burial discovered there in 1882 was accompanied by a rich array of grave goods, including a horse (Anderson 1907: 443–9), which are currently being reassessed by Graham-Campbell and Paterson.

John de Vere Loder (1935: 32–3), writing in 1935, noted that the frequent discovery of eroding burials in the area led to a story that Traigh an Tobair Fhuair (the name given to the small bay to the west of Cnoc nan Gall (illus 6)) had been the site of a battle between Vikings and locals. There is also a local tradition of a small chapel dedicated to St Ciaran in the immediate vicinity, although no physical remains have been identified (site B, illus 6 – NMRS: NR39SE.30). It is possible that some stray human bones may relate to that phase of activity, or have led to the belief that this was, at one time, the site of a chapel.

In 1891, the excavation of a mound in the dunes revealed a boat burial (site C, illus 6; – NMRS: NR39SE.26), accompanied by a sword, shield fragments, a spearhead, an amber bead, a bronze pin, a penannular brooch and fragments



ILLUS 6 Distribution of Viking Age finds and burial sites in the Cnoc nan Gall area

of horse harness and a horse skeleton (McNeill 1892; Anderson 1907: 441; Grieg 1940: 197).

A human tooth along with a horse tooth and some nails (site D, illus 6 – NMRS: NR39SE.46) were discovered in either 1902 (Ritchie 1981: 278–9) or, more likely, 1904 (Katinka Dalglis pers comm: as marked in the handwriting of Ludovic Mann on the inside of a box containing a human tooth: ARCHNN 1694, Cnoc nan Gall) and are now held in the collections of Glasgow Museums. It is currently unclear whether these are actually part of the 1891 grave find (*contra* Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998: 91). It would appear that Ludovic Mann collected this material on 21 July 1904 and makes mention of the find

in a newspaper article of 1936 (*Glasgow Herald*, Friday, 7 August 1936) describing several boat rivets found in the sand on the west coast of Colonsay. These finds are now in the collections of Glasgow Museums (GMs ARCHNN 71–114) and also include a copper alloy sheet fragment, a fragment of jet or lignite and a plain-ringed loop-headed pin (A55–96 cew) (cf Fanning 1994: 15ff). These finds will be considered elsewhere in further detail (Batey & Dalglis forthcoming).

In June 1920, an unaccompanied cist burial was found at Cnoc nan Gall (site E, illus 6 – NMRS: NR39SE.87) and the bones were reportedly reinterred: ‘Quite a number of cists’ were visible in the following year and

horse bones (of unknown antiquity) were also uncovered in the shifting sands (Grieve 1923: 285–6). A settlement site dating to the late first millennium AD, along with a Viking grave, was excavated in 1977–8 (site A, *illus 6*; Ritchie 1981). A flexed inhumation had been placed within a cist and although only the lower (north-eastern) half of the skeleton survived, a number of grave goods were recovered, along with the remains of a small dog. The finds included a bronze ringed pin and a fragment of a decorated sheet of bronze, along with iron objects (Ritchie 1981: 272–4). The bones were reinterred at the site and other human bones were noted in the immediate vicinity, which may represent an earlier disturbed inhumation or a contemporary burial (Harman 1981: 274–5).

In addition to these human remains, a number of stray finds have been noted in the general area, including another plain ringed, polyhedral-headed pin known from Machrins (site F, *illus 6* – NMRS: NR39SE.122), a bramble-headed ringed pin of 11th-century type from Machrins Farm (site G, *illus 6* – NMRS: NR39SE.123) and an antler comb (site H, *illus 6* – NMRS: NR39SE.102).

It can be seen from the above examples that a number of burials have taken place in the Cnoc nan Gall area and the variety of burial practices that have been noted may reflect a lengthy time span over which these inhumations occurred. Without further study of additional graves, and the geographical and temporal extent of the cemetery, it is difficult to establish whether the recently excavated example represents a burial rite which is unusual and exotic or part of an established local tradition.

## CONCLUSION

The assemblage of grave goods from Cnoc nan Gall is consistent with a burial in this location and of this date; the ringed pin from Dublin and the Anglo-Saxon form strap-end demonstrating the Viking sea network, which

was well established along the west coast of Britain at this time (Griffiths 2010). Colonsay itself is in a particularly prominent position on the route between the Irish Sea and the Western and Northern Isles of Scotland, and Cnoc nan Gall appears to have formed a focus for burial in Colonsay's coastal landscape, perhaps for many years.

The lack of weapons in the grave suggests that this man was not a warrior, but his knife, and the use of a coarse cloth to wrap his body, could suggest that he was a craftsman of some kind. We also have a sense of the burial rite by virtue of the unusual preservation of organic materials and the remains of the stone cairn or setting that had been built around and over the grave. The care taken over the burial suggests that this man had been well thought of, although his possessions suggest he was not particularly wealthy.

That the burial appears to have been made within a cemetery is significant, although without further fieldwork and study it will be difficult to fully understand how this burial ground was used. The proximity of the Cnoc nan Gall burial to the inhumation and settlement radiocarbon dated to the early 9th century AD (Ritchie 1981: 268–9) suggests that the area had long been in use as a cemetery.

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