

‘Ardvonrig’, Isle of Barra: an appraisal of the location of a Scandinavian accompanied burial

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ABSTRACT

This note assesses the likely location of the ‘Ardvonrig’ accompanied Viking Age burial found in 1862 on the Isle of Barra in the Outer Hebrides, and considers whether the exact location of the burial can be determined following a visit to the site in 2014. The possible reasons for the choice of burial location are then assessed.

THE LOCATION OF THE ‘ARDVONRIG’ BURIAL

The burial excavated by Commander A G Edye (named ‘Edge’ in the original report) west of the village of Borve (or Borgh) on Barra in September 1862 has led to a great deal of confusion over the years. It was originally reported as a male burial accompanied by a sword and shield (Edge & Williams 1863: 229–30). The finds were later sold to the British Museum – whose staff were not convinced that a sword had been found – and they subsequently catalogued the object as a spear (Gordon 1990: 153). Later examination by Kate Gordon, published in 1990, determined that the object was a weaving batten, also known as a weaving sword (Gordon 1990: 153). The other typically male item excavated by Edye, a ‘shield’, turned out to be another item of textile equipment: heckles (Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998: 83). As the burial also included a pair of oval brooches of 9th-century type, along with a comb, ringed pin, shears, a perforated whetstone, and a needle case, Sigurd Grieg claimed that a double burial of a male and female had been found, although only a single skeleton was mentioned in the original report (Edge & Williams 1863: 229–30; Grieg 1940: 72–3; Gordon 1990: 155; Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998: 82–3). The notion of a double burial remained until the work of Gordon, who

demonstrated that Edye had found a single burial which, in the absence of osteological sexing, was almost certainly a female (Gordon 1990: 153). Like most non-Christian Scandinavian¹ burials in Scotland, it is dated to c 850–950, with the early style of oval brooches perhaps making a date of c 850–900 most probable (Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998: 82–3, 154; Paterson 2014, pers comm).

Despite this certainty regarding the artefacts and the number of burials, uncertainty has continued over the location of the burial. The reason for Commander Edye’s presence on Barra was to undertake a coastal survey of the island for the Admiralty chart issued in 1865 (Admiralty chart 1865). It has been noted that in the mid-19th century, ‘excavation’ had become a popular pastime, leading to Royal Navy crews engaging in the activity, and this is presumably what happened on Barra (Graham-Campbell 2004: 209, 234). Unfortunately, due to the nature of Admiralty charts, the location of the burial or its associated landscape features was not given. The report by Edye and Williams did not state exactly where on Barra the burial was found or provide a site name, nor did Joseph Anderson in his review of the evidence for Scandinavians in Scotland (Anderson 1875: 555). However, ‘Ardvonrig’ was used by the British Museum when cataloguing the artefacts after they purchased them from Edye in 1895, so the name may have come

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from the excavator (Smith 1923: 128). It was certainly published as the location by Reginald Smith, Assistant Keeper of British and Medieval Antiquities at the British Museum (Smith 1906: 76). The site was given as 'Ardvouray' in a 1914

article by James Curle (Curle 1914: 307–8). As noted by James Graham-Campbell and Colleen Batey, the precise location has been 'somewhat problematical' since Ardvonrig 'is taken to be a variation of Ardvoray (Ardvouray) – the name given to the peninsula of land between the west side of the road at Borve and Borve Point' (Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998: 83). The Admiralty chart resulting from Edye's survey refers to the 'Ardbhurive breaks' off the coast of the peninsula, providing yet another variation of the name (Admiralty Chart 1865). However, an important piece of information provided by Edye and Williams was that the burial was found in a mound with a standing stone 'about 7 feet in height' (213cm) upon it (1863: 229).

Although the Ardvoray peninsula is rich in archaeological sites, there are currently only two standing stones visible, both of which are in a field used for grazing. Considering that it is difficult to mistake a standing stone over two metres tall for anything else, it is reasonable to start an investigation for the site at these standing stones (NGR: NF 6527 0144). The northern stone is currently leaning badly and 105cm is visible above ground. Eleven metres south of this stone is another which is now lying on the ground (illus 1). The fallen standing stone currently is approximately 56cm wide at its widest point and has 224cm (approximately 7ft



ILLUS 1 The two standing stones east of Borve village, Barra. Photograph by the author



ILLUS 2 The standing stone following the excavations by the Young Archaeologists' Club in 2002–3. Photograph used by the kind permission of Jonathan Grant

4in) in length visible, with the foot of the stone covered by ground. The stone was approximately 240cm long when fully excavated by the Young Archaeologists Club in 2002–3 (illus 2) (Grant 2014, pers comm). Unless an otherwise unrecorded third standing stone west of Borve was removed sometime after 1862, then the fallen stone must be the one referred to by Edye and Williams. Some support for only two standing stones being present at the site when the burial was excavated may be found in the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map of Barra, which was published in 1885 but surveyed in 1876, only 14 years after Edye's coastal survey and excavation. The map shows the same two stones that are present today (OS 1885).

Considering the weight of such a stone, which Edye estimated at 'about two tons', it is likely to be in its original location, especially considering that there are no buildings close by and the road (A888) is 75m to the east (Edge & Williams 1863: 231).² The 'tumulus of sand'

mentioned in the excavation report is not evident at the site and is likely to have been lost due to erosion. The fallen standing stone is currently lying in a roughly rectangular pit following the excavation in 2002–3 (which only unearthed a whisky bottle), but in the 1960s the stone was laying on the surface (Grant 2014, pers comm). Assuming the standing stone to have been raised as a marker of some kind, Edye dug near it and found the burial 'at the depth of about three feet' (Edge & Williams 1863: 229). It thus seems probable that the stone fell over sometime in the aftermath of the excavation due to the soil close to its base being removed.

DISCUSSION

In many respects the Ardvonrig burial site is typical for Scandinavian burials in Scotland. As with almost all burials in Scotland, it is close to the coast, in this instance less than 200m from



ILLUS 3 The two standing stones with the cairn in the background. Photograph by the author

the promontory *Stong Mòr* (Harrison 2007: 175; OS 2007). As well as the standing stones themselves, the burial site is approximately 42m south of another pre-Viking Age man-made landscape feature, a cairn which is clearly visible from the site (illus 3) (OS 2007). Scandinavian burials in association with earlier man-made landscape features are not unknown in Scotland, and cairns in particular are associated with burials at Boiden (Loch Lomond), Swordle Bay (Ardnamurchan), Brough Road, Birsay (Orkney), Cnip (Isle of Lewis), and Tote (Isle of Skye) (Stewart 1853: 144; Lethbridge 1920: 135; Morris 1989: 288; Dunwell et al 1995: 720; Harrison 2007: 176, 178; Harris et al 2011: 19). Consequently, the cairn in the vicinity of the Ardvonrig standing stones has been considered a candidate for the burial site, but it is too distant from the stones to make this likely,

considering the direct association between stone and burial in Edye and Williams' report (Edye & Williams 1863: 229). Viking Age Scandinavian burials in the proximity of large standing stones are extremely rare, with very few examples known in Scandinavia, although on the island of Bornholm, Denmark, some burial mounds were marked with a standing stone at the cemetery at Bækkegård (Thäte 2007: 183, 205). Yet there is a burial associated with a standing stone at Ballinaby, Islay, also in the Hebrides, approximately 140km from Barra and not a particularly difficult sailing journey in good weather. The comparative closeness of these two burials is somewhat remarkable since they are the only certain Scandinavian burials associated with standing stones in Britain.³ The Ballinaby burial was found in 1788 and also included oval brooches (Anderson 1879–80: 71). This discovery may have been the reason for Commander Edye hoping that digging at the standing stone on Barra would prove fruitful. The Ardvonrig standing stone is unlikely to have been erected by the Scandinavians as a memorial stone – as supposed by Edye and Williams (1863: 230) – and is instead almost certainly from an earlier period. It is one of a number of standing stones on Barra, including a cup-marked stone above Bhrèibhig village (Currie 2009: 180).

It is difficult to know why standing stones were chosen for these two burials but, along with their coastal locations, both of the stones are likely to have been prominent landscape markers and aids in navigation. Such markers may have also helped those attending the funeral to locate the event, which would have been an important consideration if the mourners were widely dispersed as they may have been in the Hebrides. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, the re-use of prominent monuments for later burials has been linked to claims of land ownership and legitimacy, and those choosing the burial site at Ardvonrig may have been asserting their control over the land and the sea-way (Bradley 1987: 3; Pedersen 2006: 351; Thäte 2007: 220, 277). It is worthwhile considering the audience for the Ardvonrig burial. The funeral itself, with the deposition of grave-goods, was a one-off event regardless of its duration, intended

for those in attendance. However, the use of a prominent landscape marker had the potential to embed the event in the memory of the attendees, and those not at the funeral could have come to recognise the burial place as the event entered into oral culture and perhaps became part of local folklore (Pedersen 2006: 351). In this way the burial may have been made part of a ‘lasting monumental legacy’ (Semple 2013: 44). Yet non-locals, including other Scandinavian groups travelling via Barra, would not necessarily have realised that the ancient standing stone was the site of a Scandinavian burial, so the intended audience was presumably a local one. Although the location of any Viking Age Scandinavian settlement is not presently known on Barra, it should be noted that the standing stones are close to the present village of Borve whose name is derived from Old Norse (ON) *borg*, ‘fortified site’ (Stahl 2000: 109). Although it is not certain how old the placename is, it is at least possible that it was named for a Viking Age fort and settlement. It would have been an ideal location, accessed via bays on either side of the Ardvoray peninsula: *Bàgh Halaman* to the south and the twin beaches of *Tràigh Tuath* (Gaelic ‘north beach’) and *Tràigh Hamara* to the north (OS 2007). Fresh water was available from the river *Abhainn Mor* (OS 2007).

The number of ON placenames on Barra suggests a long-term presence by an ON speech community (Gammeltoft 2006; Stahl 2000). Even the name ‘Barra’ itself, first attested as *Barrey* in *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, written by the Icelander Sturla Þórðarson in the 1260s, contains the ON ending *ey* ‘island’, while its first element is either ON or Old Celtic (Gammeltoft 2006: 58, 68). Speaking of the Hebridean island names, Peder Gammeltoft expressed the opinion that they clearly show ‘that the naming took place within an almost exclusively Scandinavian language sphere’ (2006: 64), and a complete linguistic break appears to have occurred in the Outer Hebrides with the arrival of speakers of Old Norse (Kruse 2005: 144). A continuing Scandinavian presence on Barra after the burial at Ardvonrig is also attested by the Kilbar stone, discovered in the disused cemetery of Cille Bharra in the north of the island.⁴ The stone

has a cross on one side and a runic inscription, SC 8 Kilbar, on the other, which includes the Scandinavian name Þorgerðu. It is dated to the early 900s and thus may be a generation or two later than the Ardvonrig burial (Barnes & Page 2006: 221–32). Indeed, Scandinavian culture was so strong on Barra that it appears to have had a skaldic poet who was given a by-name based on the island, Ormr Barreyjarskald (poet of Barra), some of whose work is found in the Prose Edda (Sturluson 1995: 90). Consequently, as the burial at the standing stone is the only non-Christian Scandinavian burial known from the island, it could signal that the claim to ownership and legitimacy made by re-using an ancient monument did not need to be reiterated. Although the exact reasons for choosing the burial location must remain conjecture, and there are likely to have been a number of factors involved, we can now say that in 1862 Commander Edye/Edge excavated a single burial, probably of a female, and almost certainly at the larger of the two standing stones at ‘Ardvonrig’ near Borve village on the Isle of Barra.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank James Graham-Campbell for discussing the site with me and pointing me in the direction of the 1863 report, Jonathan Grant for information about the 2002–3 excavations and for allowing me to use his photograph, and Caroline Paterson for discussion of the artefacts. The fieldwork was made possible by financial support from The Strathmartine Trust Sandeman Award Fund, for which I am immensely grateful, and the article was written while I was an Impact Research Fellow at the University of Stirling. The article has benefited greatly from the insightful suggestions of the reviewers. Any errors remain my responsibility.

ENDNOTES

- 1 ‘Scandinavian’ is used in the sense of displaying culturally Scandinavian characteristics, such as accompanied burial, rather than meaning that the person buried had necessarily emigrated from Scandinavia or had Scandinavian ancestry.

- 2 For location and viewshed maps see ‘Outer Hebrides’ in McLeod 2015.
- 3 There may have been a standing stone near at least one of the Scandinavian burials at Reay on the coast of Caithness, see ‘Northern Mainland’ in McLeod 2015 and references therein.
- 4 The ‘earliest record we know of the Kilbar cross is in a drawing dated 2 v1863 by Captain Adolphus Edge, R.N.’, which only shows the cross side (Barnes & Page 2006: 221). This appears to be the same A G Edge/Edye who excavated the burial at Ardvonrig.

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