

The burial site of við Kirkjugarð in the village of Sandur, Sandoy

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Introduction

The settlers who colonised the North Atlantic islands in the Viking Age, left their mark in the form of a variety of tangible remains that today constitute our basic source of information on the period in question.

One class of finds available to us are the remains of burials. Once excavated, these can provide us with much information on questions of origin, range and extent of foreign contacts and settlement history as well as cast light on social conditions as a whole. In Scandinavia, Viking Age burials are a fairly common class of finds. Likewise on those North Atlantic islands settled by the Norse – specially in Orkney and Iceland. But not in the Faroe Islands.

Why this is so, has long been the cause of much speculation. Not that we in any way lack mounds and other features, that according to legend and oral traditions are the remains of ancient burials, for instance *Øttis-heyggur* on the promontory of Giljanes on Vágoy, *Tórmansgrøv* in the village of Vágur, not to mention *Havgrímsgrøv* in Høvi, both on Suðuroy, and *Sigmundargrøv* on Skúvoy. Although a few of these have been investigated or dug into by curious laymen or in con-

nection with tilling, none have been archaeologically excavated. Thus there is still no knowing whether any of the legends have a core of truth to them.

The only, until recently, established burial site is that of *Yviri í Trøð* at Tjørnuvík on Streymoy. Here in 1955, a couple of small boys stumbled upon fragments of human bones protruding from the earth. The following excavation, which took place in 1956-1957 and 1959, uncovered the remains of twelve graves. These had originally been dug into a sand dune, that later was buried under earth and stones from the surrounding mountainsides. Besides poorly preserved skeletal remains, the graves yielded very few objects that could cast light on the nature and date of the burials. The only substantial, but none the less important object found was a bronze ringed pin. The pin is of a Hiberno-Norse type well known in the North and West Atlantic Viking Age and mainly dated to the 10th century (Fanning 1983:30). Since then the site at Tjørnuvík has been unique in Faroese historical and archaeological research and literature (Dahl & Rasmussen 1956, Dahl 1968, 1970).

Thus it was no less than a sensation when

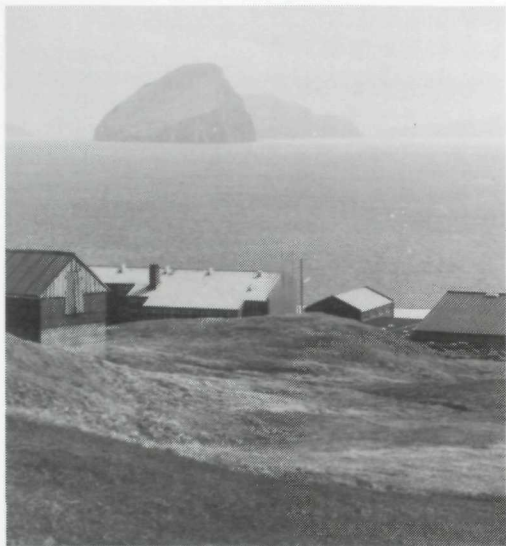


Fig. 1. The mound »Øttisheyggur« on the promontory of Giljanes, Vágoy, that according to legend contains an ancient burial. Photo: S.V. Arge 1989.

it became apparent that archaeologists had discovered the remains of a series of graves at Sandur in the summer 1989. Although the actual excavation and the evaluation of the material is far from complete, we think it important that the preliminary results be presented to an interested public¹

The aim of this paper is thus, to present the results of the first excavation season, to discuss the find in a wider perspective and to indicate some of the questions and problems raised by the material. However before we attempt to do so, let us take a look at the background for the excavation and the context which these burials form a part of.

Excavations in the village of Sandur

The first excavation in Sandur just over 20 years ago, was centered within the actual

church at Sandur. The results were no less outstanding than unexpected, in that what was found were the remains of five successive churches under the present one, built in 1839. The oldest was a small single-aisled stave church, as we know them from Norway, and dated to the 11th century. Thus all in all, six churches have been built one on the top of another on this one spot (Krogh 1975).

In 1972 excavation was extended to the southeastern corner of the churchyard. Here a coin hoard had been discovered by a gravedigger in 1863. The hoard is unique on the Faroes and consists of 98 silver coins from the period of ca. AD 1000-1080/90. The coins came from what we know as Germany, England, Ireland, Hungary, Norway and Denmark. For reasons we only can guess at, the owner wished to hide the coins and buried them sometime around AD 1090. Likewise for one reason or another the coins were never recovered and lay undisturbed until 1863. The hoard has since been subject to many a numismatical discussion and has been decisive for Norwegian numismatology relating to the period (Herbst 1863, Malmer 1961, Skaare 1976, 1986).

The 1972 excavation uncovered the remains of a finely paved stone floor, interpreted by the excavator as the paved floor of a house of a Viking Age longhouse type. Furthermore, the excavator considers it likely that the coin hoard was originally buried beneath the same floor (Krogh 1975).

As the local council were planning to extend the churchyard, further excavations became necessary. These took place in the years 1977 to 1980 and were of an exploratory character. The 2,800 square meters large planned extension south of the old church-

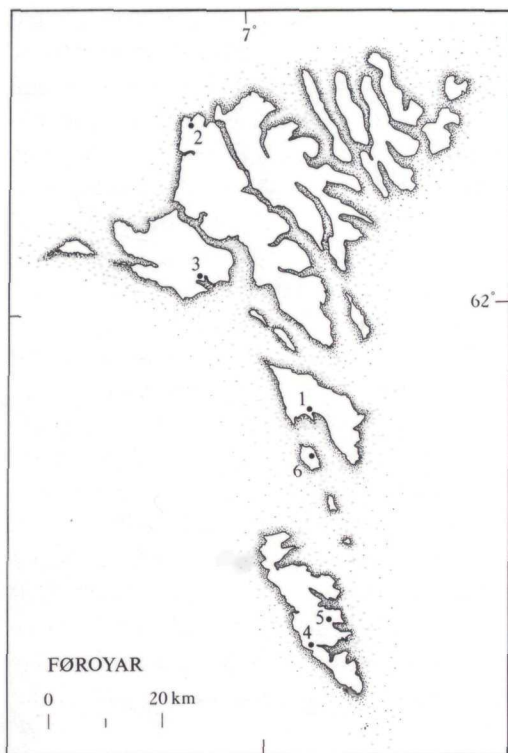


Fig. 2. Map of the sites mentioned in the text. 1. Sandur 2. Tjørnuvík 3. Giljanes 4. Vágur 5. Høvi 6. Skúvoy.

yard was investigated by trial trenching, the results revealing traces of settlement activity within the whole area in the form of house remains, wall fragments, hearths, floor levels, layers of ash, fragments of paved floors as well as various objects and more (Diklev 1981). The houses and various features were not excavated as such and still lie there untouched. The artefactual assemblages recovered date the activity to the Late Viking Age, which date is supported by a radiocarbon dating (Diklev 1981:25; Arge 1990: 55-57)². However it is still unknown how far

back in time this activity stretches. The excavations within the church indicate that around the year AD 1000, at the time when it is commonly presupposed that the Faroes were undergoing Christianization, there existed a settlement here or close by, important enough to warrant the erection of a church. The remains south of what is now the old churchyard reveal evidence of activity – perhaps even a regular settlement – here already in the Viking Age.

As a result of the trial excavations, the easternmost part of the investigated area was released for use in 1980. However time flies, and once again it became necessary to resume investigations of the area south of the old churchyard. The aim of the excavations, begun in 1988, was to investigate the remaining area from east to west – an investigation which resulted in the discovery in 1989 of the burials described below.

Excavations in the new churchyard

Following the start of the actual excavation in 1988, four smaller exploratory areas were opened in the northeastern end of the planned churchyard extension. In the northern end of these areas, a number of stone features were uncovered. These had already been recorded in one of the trial trenches excavated in 1977-1980, where they were tentatively interpreted as forming possible, though somewhat irregular, wall courses (Diklev 1981:18-19). However as investigations during the 1988 season primarily centred on the area south of these features, a closer examination was first attempted in 1989. It then soon became apparent that far from indicating the presence of buildings, these stones formed part of a series of buri-



Fig. 3. From the excavations *Yviri í Trøð* at Tjørnuvík. Photo: S. Dahl 1959.

als – a possibility that had been considered the previous year.

This exiting re-interpretation was soon confirmed by the excavation of one of the most likely features – K5A. Consequently, the excavation area was extended northwards up to the old churchdyke, in order to provide us with more room to work in as well as allow us to form an impression of the extent of the burials. As a number of suspected graves were recorded in the immediate vicinity of the dyke, a ca. 10 meter long section was removed. This revealed the presence of an older structure, in all probability an older dyke, that apparently encloses an area that

today lies beneath the old churchyard. For obvious reasons the extent and function of this older dyke has not been investigated.

Even so the discovery raises a number of questions. First of all it is tempting to see a link between the dyke and the above described stone setting excavated in 1972, hitherto interpreted as the paved floor of a Viking Age longhouse (Krogh 1975:43). Could the longhouse be another type of building? And do we here really have the remains of a building, or do the stone flags form part of another feature altogether? The paving was of such a limited size, that it was then not considered advisable to continue in-

vestigation further. On the basis of recent excavations it seems that the right time may have come to reinvestigate the area.

Beneath the old dyke, several stone features were recorded that due to their form, and not least their location in relation to the 1989 excavated graves, seem to indicate the presence of further graves. Confirmation of this hypothesis requires however that at least part of the old dyke be removed.

The burials

A total of 6 burials were investigated in 1989. Further 5 features, the almost certain K5C and four other likely graves, bring the number of 1989 recorded graves to 11. This number was further increased in 1990 by the discovery of J6G, the position of which indicates the possibility of yet another grave between J6C and J6G. Speculation as to the total number of burials is limited by the fact

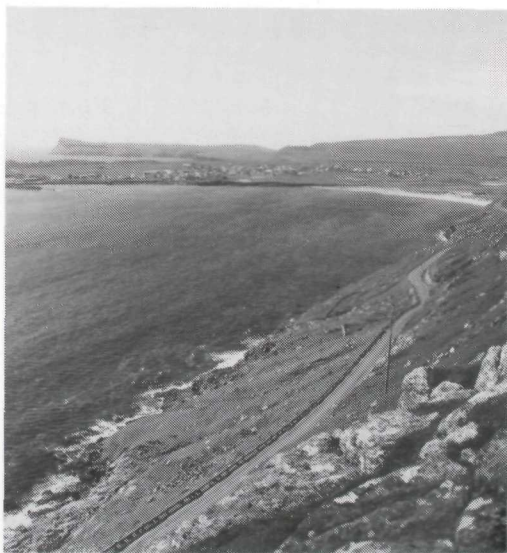


Fig. 4. The bay of Sandur. Photo: S.V. Arge 1989.

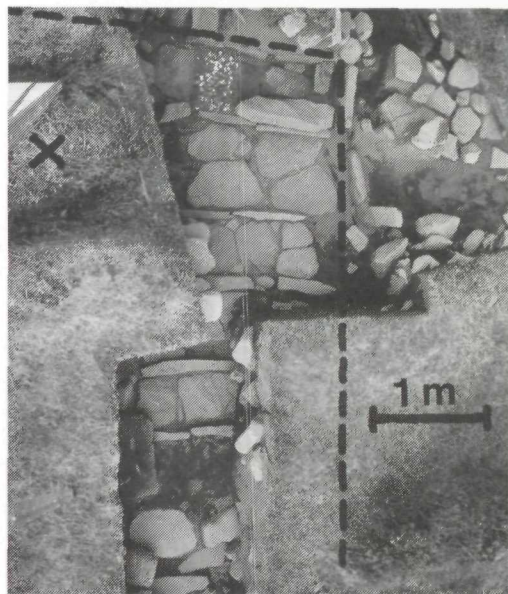


Fig. 5. Flagged paving uncovered in 1972 as a result of investigations of the southeastern corner of the old churchyard. The dashed line indicates the approximate siting of the northern and eastern wall courses. The coin hoard discovered in 1863 is said to have been found about a meter west of X. North is up. See fig. 6, 4. From Krogh 1975. Photo: K.J. Krogh 1972.

that we have no idea of the site's northern and eastern limits. It seems fairly certain that the site continues under the old churchyard and a final estimation of its size must await eventual excavations within that area. However it seems likely that the burial site is quite extensive.

Grave J5A

A trough-shaped pit just under 1,5 meters long, containing the skeletal remains of an as yet undetermined person. The body had been interred on its right side with the knees raised. Several iron objects were found,

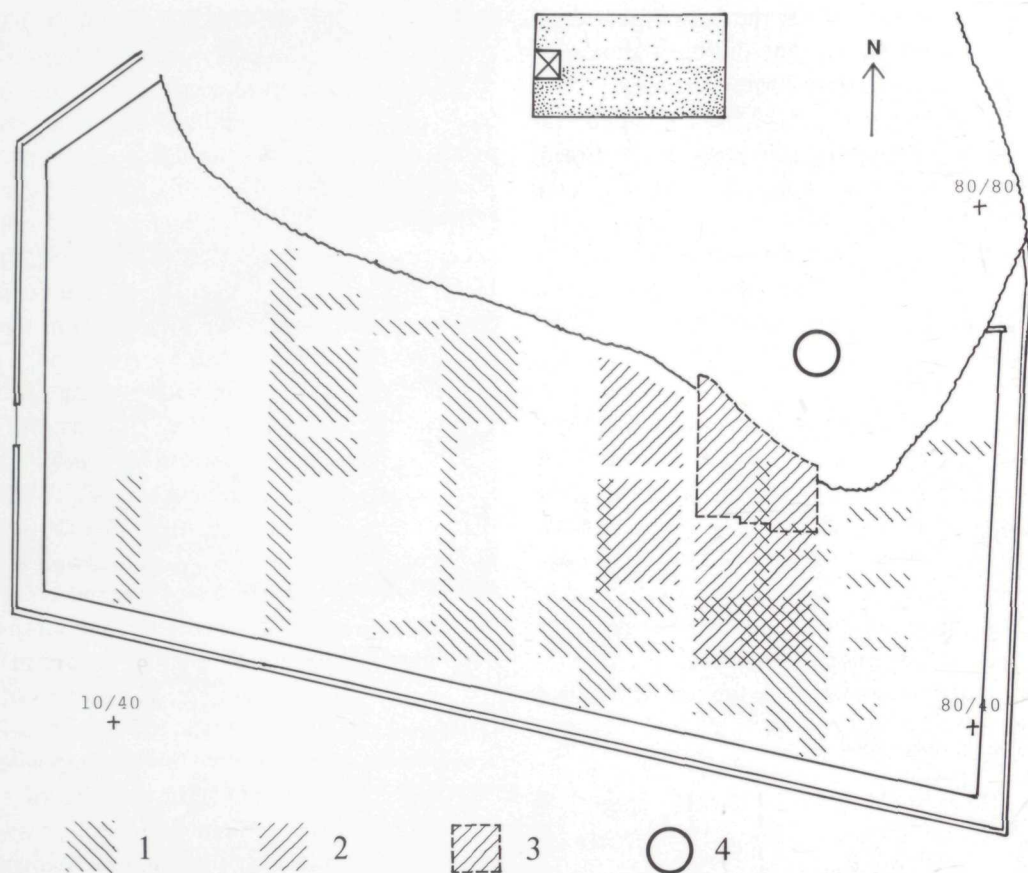


Fig. 6. The church and the churchyard at Sandur – plan of the areas investigated within the new churchyard extension. Key: 1. Trial trenches from the 1977-80 investigations. 2. Areas investigated in 1988-89. 3: Site of the burials located in 1989, see fig. 13. 4. The approximate site of the flagged paving uncovered in 1972 and the coin hoard found in 1863, see fig. 5. SVA del.

amongst these a possible knife. On top of the grave lay a pointed-oval shaped stone setting – irregular and somewhat disturbed. Most of the stones were burnt and of hand to fist size. A larger stone had been placed above the body's head.

Grave J6B

J6B was not only the largest – ca. 3X1

meters – but also the most well built of the investigated graves.

Almost rectangular or slightly trapezoid in shape with the two long sides tapering slightly at the east end, J6B consisted on the surface of a frame of larger stones enclosing a spread of smaller (10-40 cms in diameter) stones. The stone used was shingle as well as stones that seemed to have been cleaved. The



Fig. 7. A segment of the old churchdyke has been removed, revealing the presence of an older stone feature – possibly the remains of an older dyke. Photo: N. Hartmann 1989.

western end was clearly defined by the largest stone of all, measuring all of 70 cms in length. The eastern end, on the contrary, was somewhat less distinct and marked by the presence of 1-3 larger stones. East of the grave lay a stone that had probably been placed as a marker in order to avoid any overlapping of the graves.

Surprisingly, the body had not been interred within the supposed stone cist, but in a rounded rectangular pit ca. 30 cms below the bottom level of the stone frame. In other words the function of the stone setting was only to mark the presence and position of the actual burial.

Along the whole southern length of the pit a distinctive, narrow, dark-colored impression was recorded, interpreted as the remains of a wooden frame. A similar impression was recorded along the northern side of the pit. However, the discoloration was here registered at a higher level and further could not be followed the whole length of the pit. It seems likely though, that the body had been buried in a simple wooden frame-coffin. No traces of a lid or stone cover were found.

In the pit had been buried a young man around 18 years of age and ca. 180 cms tall. The dead man had been laid on his back and had been given his dagger, around which silver thread was found entwined. The dagger had, in all probability, been sheathed and attached to his leather belt, fragments of which were recovered. A fragmentary strap-end was also found, shaped as an animal head with ears, eyes and nose. The corners of the mouth were also indicated. A piece of leather was found rivetted to the opposite end. During conservation the remains of a small pouch or purse were recovered, possibly a woven pouch containing a leather purse. Within the pouch lay three sets of plain lead weights – each set consisting of a circular and a rectangular weight. In addition, the pouch contained three small fragments of silver as well as a number of corroded bronze fragments. One of these was decorated with an interlaced motif. Finally, several small iron bits were found near the skeleton's stomach region.

Grave J6C

On the surface, J6C consisted of a 1,9 meter long and 56 cms wide setting of water-worn stones. The western end of the feature had

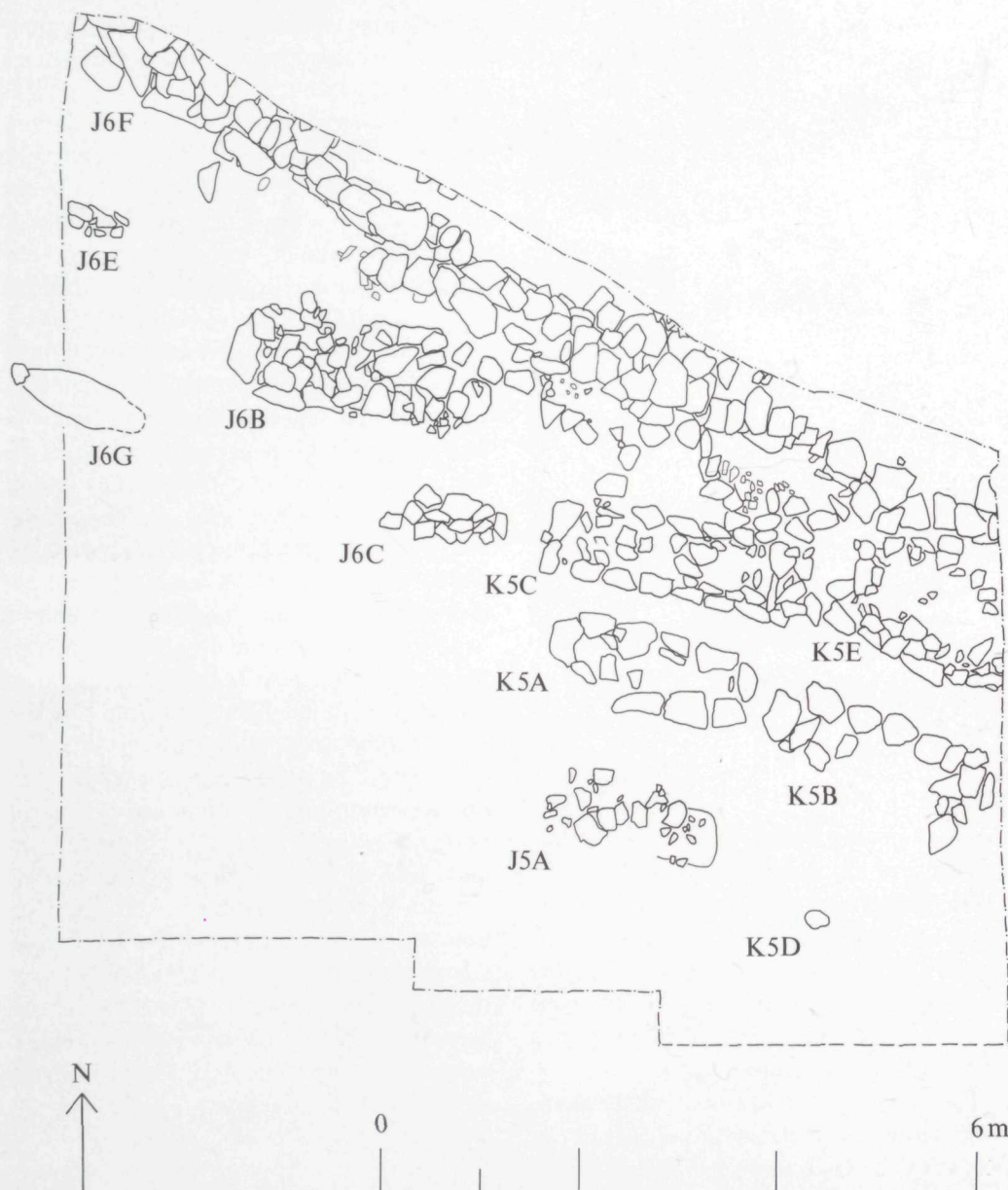


Fig. 8. Plan showing the area excavated in 1988-89. Only graves J5A, J6B, J6C, K5A and K5D have been excavated. Grave J6G was first discovered the following year. SVA del.

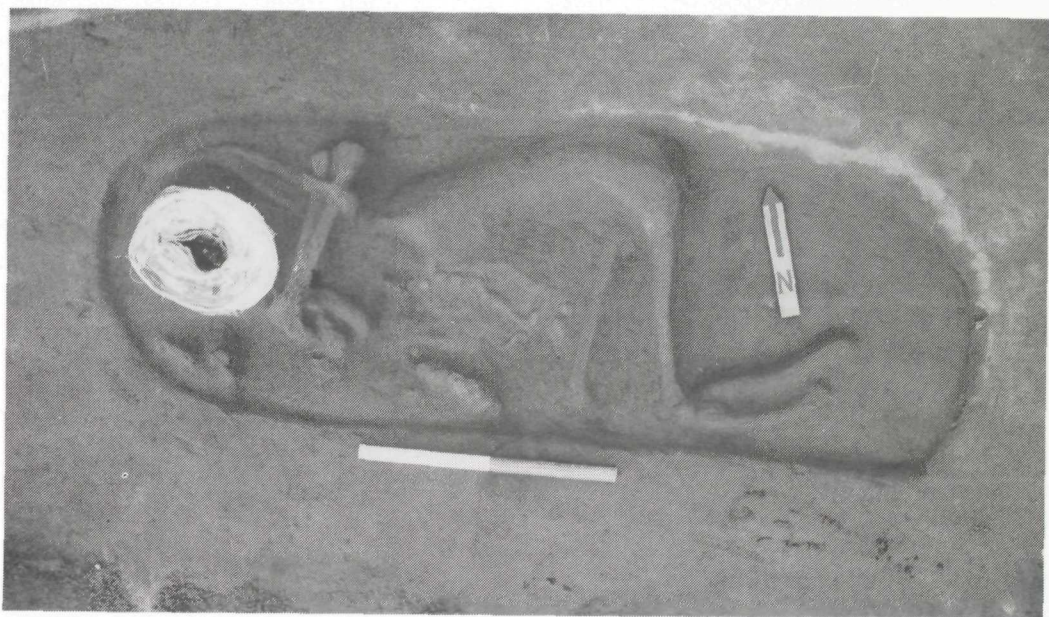


Fig. 9. Grave J5A. Photo: N. Hartmann 1989.



Fig. 10. Grave J6B. Photo: N. Hartmann 1989.



Fig. 11. Grave J6C. Photo: N. Hartmann 1989.

clearly been disturbed, probably as the result of later cultivation. As a result parts of the skeleton lay in disorder. As in the case of J6B the body was found some 30 cms below the stone cover. Contrary to J6B we found no signs of a stone frame, a fact that can hardly be ascribed to later cultivation.

The body had been interred on her back in a trough-shaped pit. On the basis of height – 1,60 meters, and an analysis of the teeth the skeleton is interpreted as belonging to a grown woman.

The only items found were three rusty iron bits, one recovered in close conjunction with her teeth.

Grave K5A

On the surface, K5A consisted of a 2 meter

long and 90 cms wide stone setting of alternatively angular and water-worn stones. These enclosed a rounded rectangular area, the center of which was relatively free of stones. K5A seems separated from K5B to the east by a stone marker. Many of the surface stones had been placed on edge, so that these and several lower lying stones combined to form a uniform rectangular stone cist. All in all, the cist consisted of 5-6 stones in each longside and a stone at each end.

The cist contained the remains of a young woman, in all probability not over 20 years of age, who had been interred stretched out on her back. With her she had a necklace of glass and amber beads, an iron knife, a comb made of bone and what may be the remains of a piece of silver jewellery. In addition we

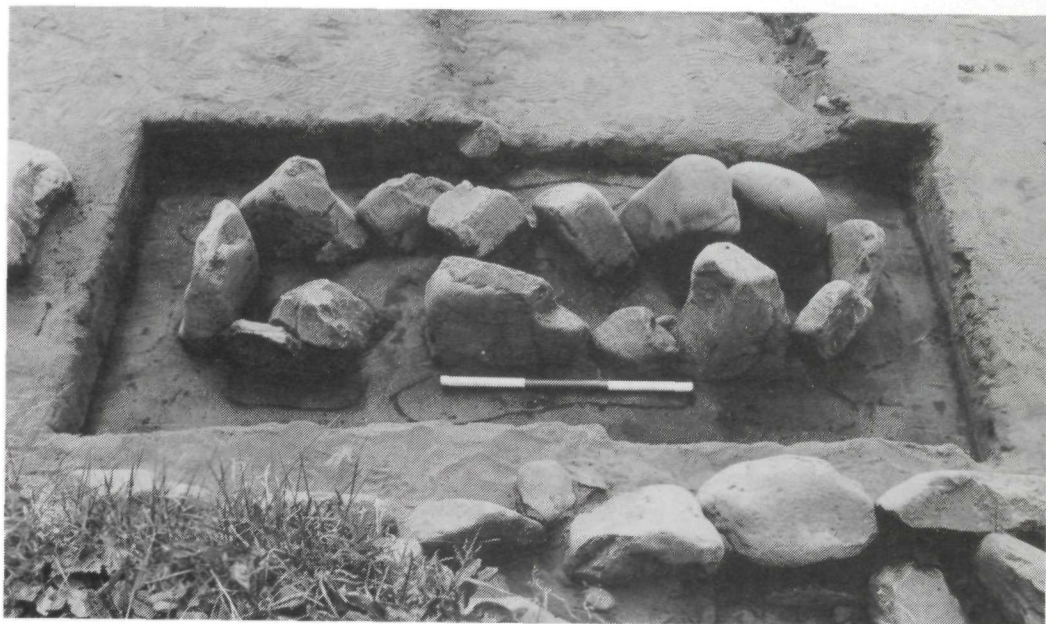


Fig. 12. Grave K5A. Photo: N. Hartmann 1989.

found a couple of as yet unidentified iron bits and a fragmentary clipped silver coin, see fig. 14.

Grave K5B

Grave K5B was very similar to K5A in its surface construction. However only a single stone, besides the two gable stones, formed part of the actual cist. The reminder merely functioned as surface markers enclosing an irregular rectangular area of practically the same size as that of K5A.

We found no signs of a stone built southern longside – presumably the stones have been disturbed and removed by later cultivation.

Grave K5B can, as Grave K5A, be classified as a stone-cist grave, although somewhat

less complete in construction as the actual burial pit is only stone-lined at each end.

Again, as with K5A, the skeleton was that of a young person, not over 20 years of age and in all probability a woman.

The woman had been buried on her back and had been given a knife, a necklace of amber, glass and bone beads, a number of undetermined iron objects and a plain silver finger ring with tapering ends and possibly a twined lock.

Grave K5D

During surface excavation a set of teeth were discovered revealing the presence of yet another burial. Further investigation yielded the remains of a severely decomposed skull and several, likewise decomposed, bones.



Fig. 13. Grave K5B. Photo: N. Hartmann 1989.

The body seems to have belonged to a young person, buried on his or her right side with the knees raised. No grave-goods were found in connection with the body, whose sex is not as yet determined.

Grave J6G

Grave J6G consisted of a 1,5 meter long and ca. 40 cms wide trough-shaped pit containing in it's west end the remains of a decomposed skull and a set of teeth. On the basis of the size of the grave and of the teeth, the body is interpreted as having belonged to a child. Several factors indicated that the body had been interred on his or her left side. Again no grave-goods were found.

Evaluation

The general impression gained from the appearance of the excavated as well as the

recorded but as yet uninvestigated graves, is one of an organized, well-regulated burial site consisting of a series of burials placed end to end in a number of more or less parallel rows. All of the burials are aligned east-west and all seven of the uncovered skeletons lay with their skulls pointing west.

Besides Grave J6B and K5A, all of the graves showed signs of various degrees of disturbance, in all probability due to a later cultivation of the area. It seems likely that stone formed part of the construction of all of the graves, although many may have been removed or disturbed in the following centuries. Likewise the presence of stones in the layers above and surrounding graves K5D and J6G indicates that stones also formed part of their original layout and construction.

Stratification shows that the average depth

of the burials was ca. 30 cms, and that the stone settings were for the most built directly on top of the then existing surface. An observation that fits in very well with the impression of precision and care gained from the stone features. In other words they were built to be seen.

Although the overall impression is one of regularity and conformity, a closer comparison of the individual burials reveals a certain variety and individuality.

On the whole, the state of preservation of the skeletal material was fairly poor. However, teeth or rather dental enamel was found preserved in all seven of the excavated graves. The above cited age and sex determinations are mainly based on the results of a preliminary investigation of the skeletal and dental material carried out on the spot in 1989³. Certain modifications may arise following the more thorough examination planned for the anthropological material.

Dating

The question of the date of the burial site, and in this context whether the site is heathen or Christian is somewhat problematic.

The actual construction of the graves at Sandur with their stone cists and settings have their parallels in Viking Age graves from Iceland as well as Orkney.

Due to their poor state of preservation, most of the grave-goods were recovered as samples that are still under analysis and conservation. It is, therefore, still too early to include these properly in a chronological evaluation of the site. However, the general impression gained from assemblages such as the knives, the silver finger ring and the



Fig. 14. Clipped silver coin from grave K5A. Obverse and reverse shown. Photo: O. Schneider 1989.

weights, is that these belong to the Viking Age.

We had some hopes with regards to the silver coin from Grave K5A. The coin is a so-called Kufic coin, the first of its kind to be found in the Faroes. Initially, it was thought that the coin could be placed with some precision and that the coin was an early type dating from the period AD 747-775 (Arge & Hartmann 1990:30)⁴. Other possibilities include a North African provenance with the coin being minted in the area we now know as Tunisia. If so, the coin can be dated to AD 767-771 and was probably deposited in the grave at Sandur sometime between AD 850-900. However, the possibility of the coin being a later imitation is highly probable – a fact of some importance when attempting to establish the date and origin of the coin. If this is so, the coin must originate among the Khazars or Volgabulgars, and the suggested date is then ca. AD 883-884 – that is some 100 to 200 years later than the date given by the original coin⁵. The date of the coin only



Fig. 15. Some of the graves excavated at Tjørnuvfík. Photo: S. Dahl 1959.

establishes a *termini post quem* for Grave K5A, and is not of importance as such, for the dating of the site as a whole.

One of the relative dating methods available to us, is the radiocarbon dating of animal bone samples recovered from an ash layer excavated in 1990. The ash layer lies west of the burials, and is possibly affiliated with a layer, likewise of ash, found within the actual burial site and cut by Grave J6B. Alternatively, dates could be obtained directly from the skeletal material, if this is found suited for C-14 dating.

As described above, grave-goods were recovered from a number of the graves. On

the whole, grave-goods are commonly seen as indicating heathen burial custom. However, it is important in this respect that we distinguish between on the one hand regular grave-goods such as tools, weapons and household utensils and on the other hand items of a more personal nature and those belonging to the buried person's dress.

Wherever Christianity was adopted, the custom of burying the dead with items of any kind, was gradually abandoned. However, emphasis must be placed on the word gradually, as local variations occurred in different parts of Northern Europe with transitional periods combining heathen and

Christian customs. Thus grave-goods can occur in burials effected long after the society in question adopted Christianity.

However, the question here is whether the grave-goods from Sandur do in fact mirror heathen burial custom. Most of the objects recovered can easily be classified as beeing of a personal nature or as belonging to the buried person's attire – the items found hardly really merit the term grave-goods at all.

In attempting to establish the nature of the burials at Sandur it is natural to compare them with the burials at Tjörnuvík. The graves from both sites share many similarities in their construction. On the basis of the afore-mentioned ringed-pin, generally dated to the 10th century, the burial site at Tjörnuvík is dated to the Viking Age and therefore interpreted as heathen (Dahl 1968:191; 1970:65-66)⁶. In reports on the site the dead are described as lying with their heads pointing north. This is, however, only partly true, as four of the twelve graves are aligned east-west (Arge 1990:fig.11). Although there is some variation in the alignment of Viking Age burials in the north, an east-west orientation is far from unusual.

In this context it is interesting to note that one of the features instrumental to the interpretation of the Haug burial site in Northern Norway as a heathen one, is the very varied alignment of the individual graves. In contrast, individual graves within purely Christian cemeteries all seem to be orientated in the same direction – as a rule east-west – although minor variations within this alignment do occur (Sellevold 1989). These observations could support an interpretation of the site at Tjörnuvík as heathen and the site at Sandur as Christian.

However, a closer study of the burial site

at Haug, leads one to consider whether local topographical criteria might not in fact have dictated the siting and direction of many of the burials, as these are mainly, and quite naturally, placed parallel to the area's contour lines. The same topographical considerations may have been actual for the location of the burials at Tjörnuvík as well as on Sandur. On the latter site, the graves seem to have been placed on the southern side of a slightly sloping deposit of shifting sand.

Even though it is an established fact that the east-west alignment prevailed as a result of Christianization, the question of whether a site is heathen or Christian cannot be determined by orientation alone.

Another feature emphasized in the evaluation of the Haug burial site, is the position in which the dead were buried. The supine position – consisting of the body being laid out on his or her back – is almost totally dominant in Christian burials, as exemplified at the graveyard by the so-called Thjodhilde's church at Brattahlid in Greenland. At Haug on the other hand, the bodies had been interred in a variety of positions – on their back, their front or left or right sides. Although somewhat less varied, the fact that two to three of the buried were interred in a lateral position, while the remainder had been laid on their back, may indicate that the site at Sandur was a heathen one.

Another important fact is that none of the graves at Sandur overlap, but are placed end to end in rows – another feature common of Viking Age burial sites (Gräslund 1985:301).

The position of the burial site in relation to the old dyke and the manner in which the dead are buried with their personal possessions could indicate that the site is a heathen one. On the other hand there is nothing that

rules out the possibility of the burials dating from the period in which the Faroes became Christian – that is around AD 1000.

As our knowledge of early Faroese burial customs is as yet so restricted, there is no way in which we can determine to what degree the site at Sandur reflects local or general Faroese custom and, consequently, whether the burials are representative of respectively heathen or Christian custom.

It seems fair to assume, that the first people to adopt the Christian faith were persons of a certain social status, probably belonging to the leading families of the time. In this respect it would be interesting, if we could, via the archaeological material, establish the contemporary social status of the buried. In the case of Tjørnuvík, the burials and their appointments are interpreted as reflecting a plain and homely standard (Dahl 1968:191; 1970:65). However, as we have so little an idea of how representative the material at hand is, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to draw any conclusions as to the social status the burials reflect.

Further research into the nature of the burials must naturally include other archaeological observations. The relationship between the graves and the flagged paving uncovered in 1972 requires closer investigations. Likewise, the relationship between the graves and the oldest church – Church 1 – excavated in 1969-70. It is, for instance, interesting to note that both the graves and the church are orientated with almost the same diversions from the exact east-west.

Conclusions

As is clear from the above, it is as yet too early to date the individual burials or the site as a whole. Likewise the question of whether

the site is heathen or Christian is still an open one. It is hoped that further excavation will provide us with additional information that can clarify many of the problems raised here. In this respect the C-14 dating of samples taken from the graves will hopefully help us in the right direction.

The hoard of coins unearthed in 1863 together with the excavations within the church itself, the old churchyard and the new have long provided us with tantalizing glimpses of what is hidden beneath the earth here.

When today's remains and results are evaluated in the light of recent studies in settlement history and research into the relationship between farmstead and church (Thorsteinsson 1978, 1981; Krogh 1983) it must be acknowledged that the church site at Sandur is one of the most important and promising ancient sites in the Faroes.

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- Calibrated age: AD 1020. Cal. ± 1 stand.dev.: AD 980-1040. The sample is calibrated according to Stuiver & Pearson 1986, and the only sample dated so far.
3. The provisional results are proposed in: »Rapport vedrørende skeletfund fra udgravning af vikingegrave ved Sands kirke. Pia Bennike — 06.11.1989«.
- It can be added that Pia Bennike, The Anthropological Laboratory of the University of Copenhagen, has previously determined skeletal material from the Faroes. She has in fact analysed all available excavated skeletal material on the Faroes, see Andersen 1978, Nielsen, Grandjean & Bennike 1982 and Bennike 1983.
4. Kindly informed in letter of the 02.01.1990 by antiquarian Bengt Hovén, Kungliga Myntkabinettet, Stockholm.
5. Kindly informed in letter from Brita Malmer, dated 06.09.1990, with enclosed report by the orientalist Gert Rispling, both from Numismatiska forskningsgruppen, Stockholm, who studied the coin in close cooperation with Dr. Lutz Ilisch, The University of Tübingen.
6. The initial publication includes only Grave I, at that time the only fully excavated burial. The excavations continued in the summers of 1957 and 1959, and the results hereof are only summarily described, cf. literature referred to in the text.
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Notes

1. This paper is an adapted and updated edition of the original Faroese version, see Arge & Hartmann 1990.
2. Sample K-3870: 1000 ± 65 BP. 950 AD C-14.