



The Hidden Heritage of a Landscape: Vengeful Vikings and Reckless Rustlers

*Archaeological and historical evidence for the Vikings in Central and
Western Scotland*

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Despite the easily-visible presence of the Vikings in the Northern and Western Isles of Scotland and the Danelaw of England, there is relatively little archaeological evidence for Viking settlement in Central and Western Scotland. However, there is enough evidence from written sources and a handful of archaeological finds to suggest that the Vikings were indeed active in the area from the ninth to the 13th centuries.

Note on terminology

Throughout this report, the terms ‘Viking’ and ‘Norse’ will be used. ‘Viking’ refers to those of Scandinavian ancestry who were raiding rather than settling in Scotland up until c. mid-11th century. After that time, people of Scandinavian ancestry who settled in Scotland and/or were conducting business in the country are referred to as ‘Norse’. This is because ‘Scandinavian’ or ‘Hiberno-Norse’ (Vikings from Ireland) are too geographically specific. Although we occasionally know from written sources where various groups originated – Viking Dublin for those who attacked Dumbarton Rock and Norway for some of the 1263 raiders – we generally do not know where most people came from, only that they carried weapons or wore clothing and accessories which set them apart from other cultural groups living in Scotland at the time.

Background: Viking Raids and Settlement in Scotland

The first recorded Viking raid on a monastery in the British Isles was in AD 793 at Lindisfarne Priory off the Northumbrian coast, accompanied, according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, by ‘... dreadful fore-warnings over the land of the Northumbrians, terrifying the people most woefully: these were immense sheets of light rushing through the air, and whirlwinds, and fiery dragons flying across the firmament ...’ (AS AD 793).

Two years later, the Vikings arrived in Scotland, raiding the monastery on Iona among other targets (AI 795.2). Despite sources from the time which described Viking raids as devastating affairs that killed everyone and laid waste to vast swathes of land, the monastic community at Iona must have survived with its treasures because the monastery was raided again in 802 (AU 802.9), 806 (AU 806.8; CS 806) and 825 (AU 825.17; CS 825).

Eventually the Scandinavians who had been raiding throughout the British Isles began to take land and settle down to become farmers, fishermen and merchants (perhaps with a bit of raiding on the side). Little is known about the timing and nature of Viking settlement in Scotland. The areas of heaviest Viking settlement were in the Northern and Western Isles and northern coasts of the Scottish mainland. England was even more densely settled by Scandinavians, although these were more likely to be people arriving from Denmark than Norway. Scandinavian artefacts and influences spread across Northumbria, Cumbria and the Irish Sea region, and people from these areas were more likely to be the source of Scandinavian contact in southern Scotland (see below) as they traded and crossed the country via overland routes.

A Note on Portages

Evidence of long-term use of the portage route between Loch Long and Loch Lomond can be found in the name Tarbet. The name comes from the Gaelic [*tairm-bert*], which means 'an over-bringing' or 'isthmus' (Watson 1926, 505). Similar place-names can be found throughout mainland Scotland and the Western Isles, such as Tarbert on Harris, An Tairbeart in Kintyre and Tarbat Ness near Portmahomack (McCullough 2000). Using the portage between Tarbet and Arrochar also gave the Vikings access to important areas of the interior of Scotland for raiding and trading, and gave them the element of surprise as a fleet appeared where no fleet should be on Loch Lomond (McCullough 2000, 298). The portage would have been equally as important to those living around Loch Lomond, as it gave them access to seaways, and was probably in use both before and after the Viking Age (McCullough 2000, 157, 298).

Portages have been used across many time periods all around the world, including in Scotland. Although hauling large boats over land might seem like too much effort, portages allowed mariners to avoid difficult waters or continue their journeys in bad weather through more sheltered waterways. For travellers who could either sail up the Clyde and portage to the Tweed or sail up Loch Lomond and portage to another route that led to the Firth of Forth (Crawford 2005, 17-20; see Buchanan 2012, chapter 6), these routes allowed them to save time and avoid dangerous waters they otherwise would have navigated during the voyage around Scotland. During the Viking and Norse period, much of the traffic moving between the urban centres of York and Dublin probably moved along these overland routes.

Viking Evidence in Argyll

Around the time of the siege of Dumbarton Rock, a Viking warrior was buried near the banks of Loch Lomond. In 1851, workers replanting a tree near the Lower Bridge of Froom dug into a mound called Boiden that had earlier been covered by a large cairn (Stewart 1851-54: 144). Among the grave goods were a Viking sword that had been purposely bent (Plate 1), and a spear and a shield boss which showed damage (Stewart 1851-54, 144-45; Anderson 1872/4, 569). Based on the comparison of these artefacts with those from other dated contexts, the burial appears to date to the ninth century (Batey forthcoming, 4-5).

Near the Boiden burial, a small cemetery dating to the Early Medieval and Medieval periods was found ahead of the construction of a golf course at Midross. The site, called The Carrick, yielded a shield boss from the upper ditch fill of the enclosure that was similar to, yet smaller than, the shield boss from Boiden; in addition, several burials contained grave goods (Batey forthcoming, 5). Six burials with grave goods were assigned to the late ninth/tenth century, and another nine without grave goods were similarly dated based on orientation and ¹⁴C results (*ibid.*, 6). Grave 0510270 contained a small shale bracelet that probably belonged to a child (*ibid.*, 7). Another grave likely belonging to a child contained a worn, perforated Anglo-Saxon coin (*ibid.*, 3). Other burials contained Scandinavian grave goods such as a Norwegian whetstone, knives, a slotted tool, a shale finger ring, three fragments of copper-alloy bracelet and a blue glass bead (*ibid.*, 7-10). The jewellery suggests that women and children were buried at The Carrick, which is significant because it signals that there may have been a Scandinavian settlement close by at the time (*ibid.*, 12-13).

Further stray finds dating from this time period have been recorded in Argyll. These are objects that have been found outwith any known Viking site and lack context for why they are there:

- a small number of silver coins were found in a 'stone coffin' in a cairn in or near **Kilmartin** before 1844 (Figure 1). The collection, which include one coin of Æthelred, was deposited c. 980–c. 1020, which was one of the later dates for Viking silver hoard deposition in Scotland (Blackburn and Pagan 1986, 293, no. 191; Graham-Campbell 1995, 23, 84; Blackburn 2007, 75)
- a 'small gold finger-ring' was said by the Duke of Argyll to have been found in **Inverary Park**, but it has never been shown to experts and its whereabouts are now unknown. It was said to come from a rabbit hole at the base of a flat-topped mound that was considered by some to be a Viking-Age burial (Graham-Campbell 1995, 167)
- on the banks of Loch Long, an iron axehead found along **Ardentinny Bay** in the 1990s (Heald 2005: 25). Little has been written about the axe, but as the piece is only c. 14 cm long it was likely a tool rather than a weapon (Plate 2)
- in the 1970s, a copper-alloy penannular brooch was found on the south side of **Loch Leven** between Kinlochleven and the mouth of Glen Coe. The piece appears to be a Norwegian-made replica of the thistle brooches from the Irish Sea that are represented in the Skaill silver hoard from Orkney (Graham-Campbell 1983, 159-60)

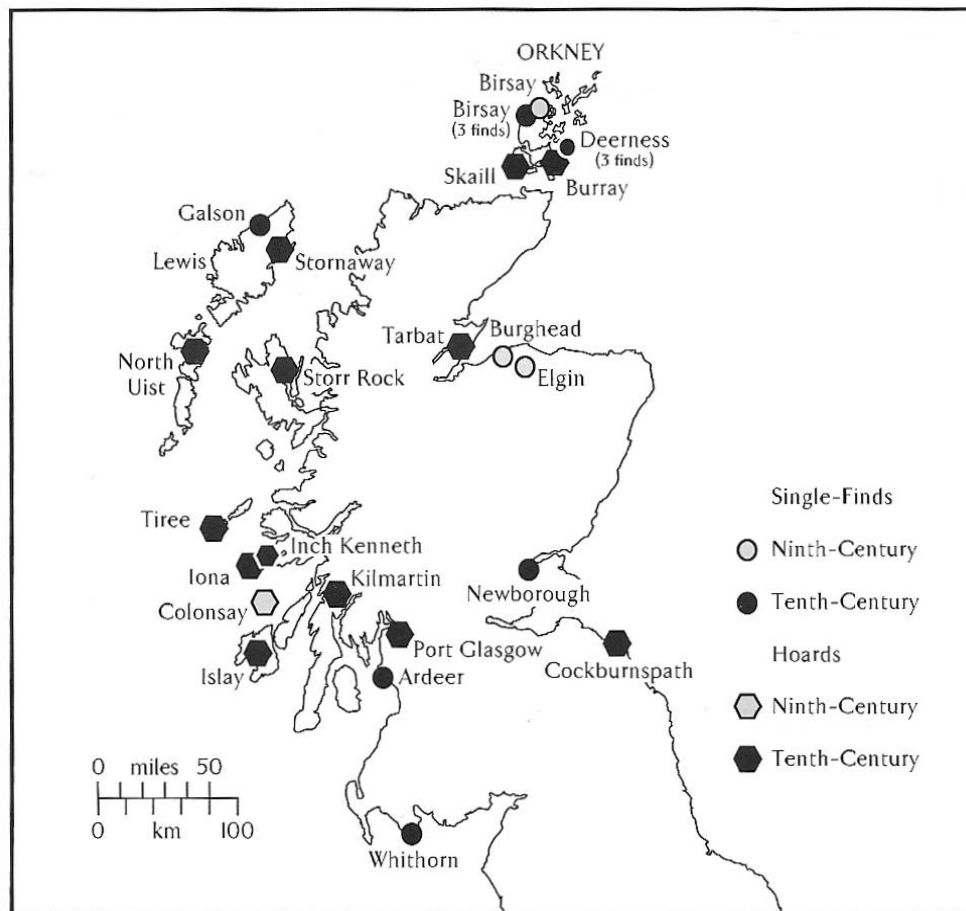


Figure 1: Hoards and stray-finds of Scandinavian character, Scotland 800--1000 (Blackburn 2007, fig. 9)

It is interesting to note that aside from the weapons found in the burials at Boiden and The Carrick, most of the finds attributed to the Vikings are personal decoration (brooches and jewellery), tools or evidence of trade and movement of wealth (coins). Of course, we cannot be sure that the person who lost the Kinlochleven brooch, for example, was actually a Viking. This person may simply have traded with a merchant for the brooch because it was unique.

The hogback stone sitting just outside Luss Parish Church (*Plate 3*) can be dated to the 11th century based on art styles (Lang 1972-74: 218, 220). According to the current minister, the stone was moved into place near one of the gates into the churchyard in 1874. The stone might not always have been associated with the church, but rather might have sat somewhere nearby in the landscape. Hogbacks are unique Scandinavian sculpture found only in the British Isles. Assuming there is a Norse connection with the hogbacks, the presence of a hogback along Loch Lomond suggests that there may have been Scandinavian/Hiberno-Norse wealth and influence in the area, since it is unlikely that anyone would have commissioned the hogback without a reason for placing it here.

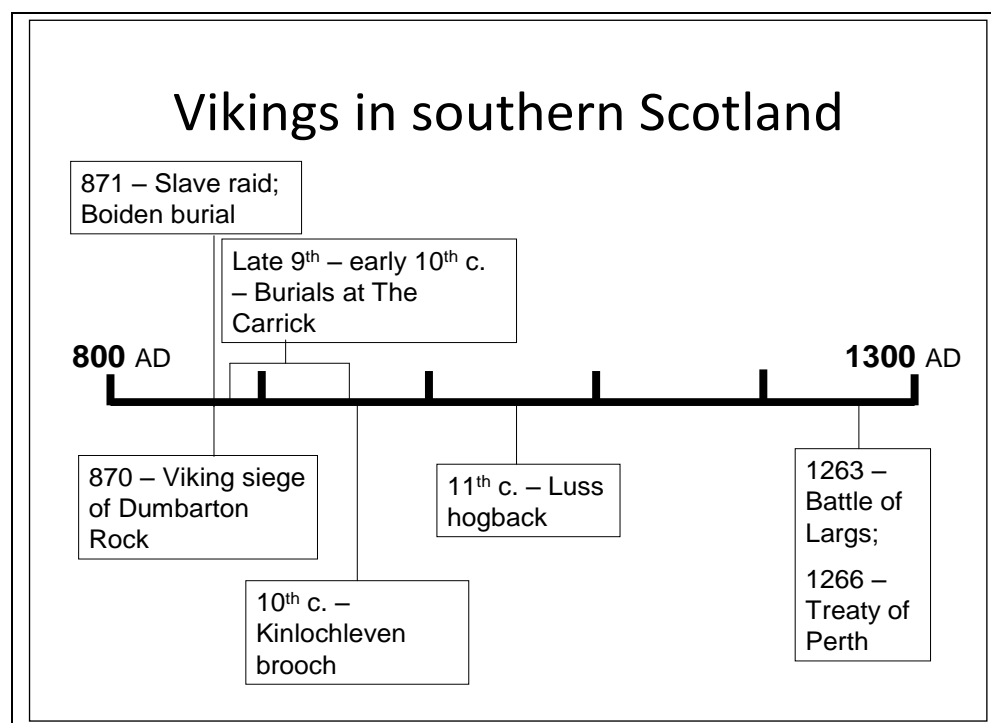


Figure 2 Basic time-line of the Viking presence in central and western Scotland (author's illustration).

Nearly 200 years later after the hogback was made, Scandinavians were still moving through Argyll (Figure 2). *Hakon's Saga* records that in 1263:

'...king Hakon sent forty ships up Loch Long. There they found Magnus, king of Man, and king Dugald; Alan, [Dugald's] brother; Angus; and Murchaid. And when they came into the firth, they took their boats, and drew them up to a large lake, which is called Loch Lomond. Out across the lake lay a county that is called Lennox. There are also very many islands in that lake, and well-inhabited. The Norwegians wasted these islands with fire. They burned also all the dwellings all around the lake, and did there the greatest damage' (Anderson 1990, 625).

This passage demonstrates not only that there was significant settlement in this part of Argyll in the Early Middle Ages, but also that the portage between Loch Long and Loch Lomond via modern Arrochar and Tarbet was in use, probably frequently. However, as in many cases of comparing the sagas with archaeology, there is no physical evidence for the destruction described in the written sources. Not long after this episode of plundering, King Hakon fought Scottish forces at the Battle of Largs and died in Orkney soon after. Based on the outcome of that battle, in 1266 the Norwegian king ceded the Western Isles and the Isle of Man to the Scottish crown, thereby ending Norse control of those areas. The events of the saga do indicate that the men from Norway and the Scottish isles must have been somewhat familiar with the region and the route to get there, suggesting that there was a periodic, if transient, Norse presence in the area over the centuries.

Although the evidence for the presence of Vikings in Argyll is sporadic it covers a period of several hundred years, suggesting that Norse were active in the region throughout the period. So far the evidence – admittedly sparse – suggests that Vikings entered the area of Loch Lomond and Loch Long after the fall of Dumbarton Rock to raid and settle on a small scale, perhaps for the purpose of trade with central Scotland or securing an overland route to the east coast. Small finds such as the Inverary ingot and Kinlochleven brooch may be evidence of trading activity in the region, and the Luss hogback perhaps can be seen as indicative of the wealth generated by Norse merchants. So far, written sources provide the only evidence for Norse activity occurring after construction of the hogback, but archaeological evidence may yet be found.

Vikings in the Clyde Valley

Central and southern Scotland are not traditionally considered to be Viking areas because of a lack of Scandinavian settlements in the region. However, there is evidence that the Vikings were moving through the region, perhaps for raiding or trade. *The Annals of Ulster* record that in AD 870, Ivar and Olaf, two Viking kings of Dublin, lay siege to the Britons' stronghold at Dumbarton Rock ('*Alt Clut*') for four months before finally plundering it (*AU* 870.6). The destruction of this stronghold would have given the Vikings free movement along the River Clyde and up into the early medieval kingdoms of central Scotland via Loch Long and Loch Lomond. In the year following their triumph at Dumbarton Rock, Olaf and Ivar apparently raided throughout Scotland before returning home to Dublin in 200 ships 'bringing away with them in captivity to Ireland a great prey of Angles and Britons and Picts' (*AU* 871.2).

More permanent examples of a Scandinavian presence can be found here, as well. Five hogback stones are part of a large collection of early medieval sculpture found at Govan Old Parish Church (Plate 4), which was an important ecclesiastical centre before the rise of Glasgow. The oldest of the Govan hogbacks closely resembles some of those from Cumbria, and Lang dates it to somewhere in or after the mid-10th century (Lang 1972/4, 212; 1994, 125). The Govan hogbacks are much larger than either the Luss or the Dalserf hogbacks (see below).

There are a few Norse place-names in South Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire and Ayrshire. Although the concentration is tiny when compared to other parts of Scotland, this may be due in part to the lack of place-name study in the region. Busby, for example, is a likely Norse place-name. We need to use caution when ascribing Old Norse names to Scandinavian settlement, though, since the names might

have arrived from England a couple of centuries later with the formation of Anglo-Norman estates in Scotland. However, it does seem that in Ayrshire, at least, Norse names were coined during small-scale Scandinavian settlement (Grant 2005, 136-7). On a more local level, there is little documentation of the ford and the surrounding land at Dalsarf before the late 1500s, so it difficult to suggest a reason for the presence of a hogback there. It is possible that the Viking traders were using the ford as part of an overland route or travelled upriver in boats as a short cut between the Viking trading centres of York and Dublin. Merchants may have travelled, using portages, along the Clyde-Forth or Clyde-Tweed (via the Biggar Gap) (Crawford 2005, 17; Buchanan 2012, 212-17).

A great number of stray finds have come from the Clyde Valley, especially close to the mouth of the river:

- a sword pommel found at **Abington** in 2008 (Buchanan 2012, 212)
- a number of Northumbrian coins dating to the Viking Age were found in 1782 in **Paisley**, Renfrewshire (Blackburn and Pagan 1986, 293, no. 37; Graham-Campbell 1995, 85)
- a sword pommel & two lead weights (Plate 5) from **Dumbarton Rock**. One of the lead weights has embedded in it a piece of blue glass; it is possibly reused Roman glass (Alcock and Alcock 1990, 113, 117, illus. 14)
- a mixed hoard of 'a great number of Saxon coins' and two penannular arm-rings were found just before 1700 near **Port Glasgow** (Graham-Campbell 1995, 21). The coins have since disappeared, but the arm-rings survive (Plate 6). One is a typical piece of Scottish Viking ring-money, while the other, made of three twisted rods with globular terminals, is similar in style to an arm-ring from the Skaill hoard from Sandwick, Orkney and a neck-ring from a hoard at Burray, Orkney.
- the **Hunterston** brooch – this is a large silver brooch of Irish style with gold Anglo-Saxon style filigree and amber settings (Plate 7 and Plate 8). It was produced c. AD 700, possibly at the Dalriada stronghold of Dunadd (Campbell and Lane 1993, 54, 61-2). Some 200 years later, 'Melbrigda owns [this] brooch' was inscribed onto the back of the brooch – an owner with a Celtic name claiming ownership using Scandinavian runes (Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998, 43).

The multifaceted story of the Hunterston brooch illustrates the amount of movement, contact and artistic influence among the various groups living in Britain and Ireland in the Early Middle Ages. The Vikings were not simply raiders, but also built up wealth through trade and interaction with the other people living here. There is no doubt that the Hunterston brooch would have been a high-status item for whoever owned it. The fact that it was in Norse or Hiberno-Norse hands late in its life shows that those of Viking descent who did come to the Clyde Valley to settle or trade did find prosperity there. It is also worth noting that just because other artefacts from the period lack distinctive Scandinavian characteristics, it does not mean that they were not used or owned at some point by someone of Scandinavian origin.

Most of the finds in the Clyde Valley associated with Scandinavians are downstream toward the Firth of Clyde. This is not surprising as the Vikings were very active on the islands off the coast of Scotland, but it appears that they also travelled upstream beyond Govan, as evidenced by a sword pommel that was found at Abington, Biggar (Buchanan 2012, 212). While the piece of a sword could be evidence of raiding, it is not an uncommon grave find for Viking men including those who were traders. The hogback at Dalsarf was certainly meant to be a permanent display of someone's wealth or influence in

the region.

The Dalserf hogback (Plate 9) was found south of the church by grave digger John Ritchie around 1897 (Waddell 1921-22, 19-20). It is the only pre-Reformation stone in the churchyard. This lack of early stone-work, unlike the situation in Govan, suggests that the hogback was not originally located in the churchyard but might have been brought here from another place in the landscape. Several hundred years ago, the road that passes through the village and curves around behind the church down to the River Clyde was the main road between Glasgow and Edinburgh; one of the major fording points along the Clyde was down at the river side where the boat house of Dalserf still stands. Given the traffic that must have passed across and along the Clyde at that time, it is possible that the hogback was originally located near the ford in a prominent place in the landscape. Its visibility might have marked territory or perhaps even displayed the wealth and patronage of a local inhabitant of Norse origin.

Runes from Holy Island

Several runic inscriptions have been found inside and outside St Molaise's Cave on Holy Isle just off the coast of the Isle of Arran. Given the proximity to the Isle of Cumbrae and the site of the Battle of Largs, there have been suggestions that this graffiti was made by King Hakon's men before the battle. This may be true; however, it is equally possible that the visitors were simply Norse pilgrims who left their mark on the cave as the site itself fits into the pattern of later medieval pilgrimage sites in caves in the west of Scotland (Fisher 1997, 192-3; 2001, 62-3). The forms of the runes suggest a date of the late 12th to 13th century (*ibid.*).

The association of the runes with Hakon's expedition is based on a name found in the cave. One of the inscriptions reads: 'Viglekr the marshal carved' (Fisher 2001, 62-3). A man named Viglekr, son of a priest, was mentioned in *Hakon's Saga* as one of the king's commanders as his fleet assembled near Kintyre (Anderson 1990, 617). Only one version of the manuscript places him at the incursion into Loch Lomond (Anderson 1990, 625, n. 8). *Hakon's Saga* is likely more reliable as a historical source than some sagas since it was written not long after the king's death, but like most written documents from this period it cannot be taken as completely accurate in its facts.

Previously a man named Viglekr had been sent as a political emissary to Novgorod in 1251, and after Hakon's campaign in Scotland was active in political affairs in Norway in the 1270s (Bjørge nd). Viglekr's title of 'marshal' in the runic inscription suggests that he was an important person in the hierarchy of Norse Scotland. Presumably all refer to the same man, but there is no way to prove this conclusively. Therefore, we can only assume based on the coincidence of a name and proposed date for the runes that some traces of Hakon's forays into Scotland have been preserved.

Arrochar and Tarbet: Local traditions and Vikings in the modern day

History of the Clan MacFarlane records a version of the 1263 Norse incursions, linking the clan to those who opposed the Norse in battle at Ballyhennan (MacFarlane 1922, 28-9). This account appears to be heavily reliant on *Hakon's Saga* for the main narrative, but also adds details such as the slain clansmen being buried in the cemetery at Ballyhennan – most likely a result of the author musing on the antiquity of the burial ground.

The MacFarlane account of Vikings in the area is heavily reliant upon *Hakon's Saga* for its narrative of events, although the clan history also includes embellishments such as locating the battle at Ballyhennan and mentioning local residents' resistance. Some of these embellishments might have been included to insinuate that the clan had ancient links to power in the area, or perhaps pinpoint the origins of ruins in the landscape. Some also appear to be based on local lore about the Vikings. The clan history mentions a small fort 'supposed to be of Danish origin' at Knockderry (1922, 28; Story 1845, 116). Today, the Knockderry House Hotel is located near this supposed Viking fort and across from Ardentinny Bay, where the Viking axe was found.

The MacFarlane account also mentions two mounds on the grounds of Arrochar House, which were said to be Viking burial mounds (1922, 28). One local resident remembers being told as a child of their presence by a friend, although she says the story was probably meant to scare her rather than be based on fact. She has identified the area of the mounds: between the burn and the loch-side gate to the property before the gates and drive were re-routed toward the south (Figure 3). The area was heavily landscaped when this work was carried out, so the mounds are not readily visible today.



Figure 3 Approximate line of the old gate and drive to Arrochar House seen from the west. The yellow arrows point at the approximate location of the 'Viking mounds' as recalled by a local resident (author's photo).

There is sporadic evidence for Scandinavian activity in Argyll in the ninth to thirteenth centuries, but it is clear that the Norse had a continued presence in the area for centuries. More evidence is likely still hidden; any new finds will go far to shed light on the Viking presence in Central and Western Scotland.

Note

Many thanks to Mary Haggarty for sharing her vast knowledge of local history, as well as memories of growing up in Arrochar.

Abbreviations

AS *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*
AI *Annals of Inisfallen*
AU *Annals of Ulster*
CS *Chronicon Scotorum*

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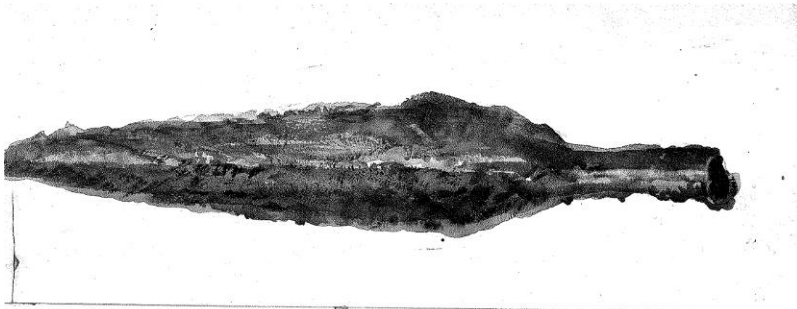
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Artefact Illustrations



*Large Spear Head found at Boidon by McCalvin April 1851.
Sketch same size as the original Weapon.*

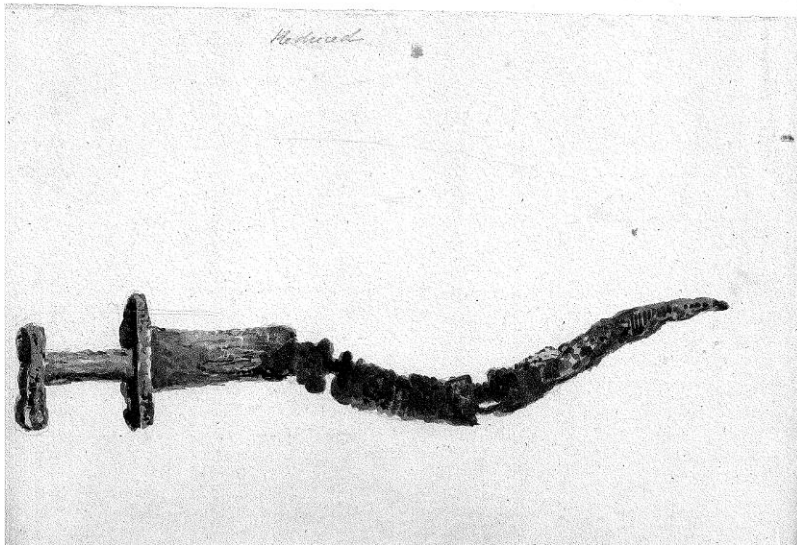


Plate 1 -- Finds from the Boidon burial (copyright Trustees of National Museums Scotland)



Plate 2 -- Photo and x-ray of the Viking axe found at Ardentinny Bay (Crown Copyright)



Plate 3 -- Hogback stone next to a more recent grave stone in the churchyard at Luss Parish Church (author's photo)



Plate 4: Five hogback stones, as well as other Early Medieval sculpture, at Govan Old Parish Church (author's photo)



Plate 5 -- Two lead weights and a sword pommel from Dumbarton Rock, associated with the Vikings by excavators (Hunterian Museum)



Plate 6 -- Two silver arm-rings that survive from the Port Glasgow hoard (Trustees of National Museums Scotland)



Plate 7 -- The Hunterston Brooch (Trustees of National Museums Scotland)



Plate 8 -- Runic inscription and other markings on the reverse side of the Hunterston Brooch (Trustees of National Museums Scotland)

