

THE GIANTS' GRAVES: A 19TH CENTURY DISCOVERY OF HUMAN REMAINS ON LUNDY

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ABSTRACT

Nineteenth century antiquarians regarded human remains found on Lundy as Viking. More recently this has been regarded as an over-romantic view, but comparison between certain aspects of this discovery and other finds on Lundy and elsewhere in the UK suggest that there might well be an Hiberno-Norse association. This paper summarises Victorian and more recent evidence. A version of this paper has appeared elsewhere as Gardner (1998); a full report appears as Gardner and Ternstrom (1997).

BACKGROUND

In 1856 an extension of farm buildings on Lundy uncovered human remains (Figure 1). The tale of this discovery spread and grew with the telling as Victorian antiquarians and journalists embellished the facts with fancy. Recently however, contemporary letters between members of the Heaven family and their friends have been traced and the few facts can now be reliably summarised as follows: Several skeletons were found in a line about 0.6m deep, most notable of which was one body, presumably extended, and allegedly 2.5 m in length, contained in a cist. The skull of this 'Giant' was resting in a shallow basin cut into the end of a granite block measuring 1.4m. x 0.3m. x 0.3m, which formed part of the cist (Figure 2). The ground was described as 'slightly mounded', and a layer of limpet shells lay over much of the area. Other bodies, heads to the west, extended in a row (Figure 3), and a pit containing disarticulated bones was also found apparently associated with some glass beads and fragments of gilt bronze, pottery and shells.

20th CENTURY EXCAVATIONS

In 1928 and 1933 two separate attempts were made to re-discover the Giants' Graves (Gardner 1961). These were unsuccessful in that no cist structure was found, though more individual burials were revealed and these appeared to be dated by coins and pottery to the 15th century.

The present author, involved in the 1960s in an island-wide archaeological survey, conducted excavations in the field adjacent to the farm buildings erected in the mid-19th century. Two sites of relevance were discovered:

- a A rock-cut ditch associated with occupation material of the mid 12th century, and possibly the site referred to in the Orkneyinga Saga as a 'stronghold' to which Swein Asleifsson pursued Hold of Bretland (Gardner 1996). This was sealed by a massive 2m thick wall, ostensibly part of the 13th century stronghold of the documented

Marisco family.

- b A Christian cemetery, with burials in orderly rows, some of which were detected with the help of the field notes of the 1928 and 1933 investigators. One grave was completely excavated and showed the burials to have been dug through a midden of the 14th/15th century and to have been sealed by a midden of the early 17th century. It contained large quantities of limpet shells and pottery, and overlay a granite grave slab of trapezoidal shape, other examples of which are still to be seen in the 19th century foundations of farm buildings on the island.

The sequence of activity on this site can therefore be summarised as follows:

- 12th century: the presence of an occupied and defended structure, with rock-cut ditch.
Early 13th century: levelling of this site and the construction of a further defended structure.
Mid 13th century: demolition of this structure. (Both the archaeological and historical evidence support this interpretation.)
Post 13th century: midden extended over the site and continued in use until the mid- 15th century.
Post 15th century: Christian cemetery laid out but was itself to be the site of a midden by the early 17th century.
19th century: farm construction removed grave slabs and eventually uncovered the burials which are the subject of this note.

All this is quite straightforward, the only anomaly being the 'Giant' and cist grave, and the peculiar 'pillow' stone, together with the early glass beads and fragments of bronze (the pottery and shells found in 1856 being probably the same as encountered in the 17th century midden).

DISCUSSION

Where in the above sequence should the 'Giant' be placed? It should be said that no datable animal remains have been found on any site older than the 12th century midden, and Victorian reports of the opening of a 'cist', presumably Early Iron Age, produced no skeletal material, arguing against any suggestion that the 'Giant's' remains were pre-historic (Gosse, 1853).

The island has one of the most important Celtic Early Christian sites in Britain, with many cists and a 'founder's grave', and four inscribed memorial stones of the 5th - 6th centuries. Not even a human tooth has survived the acidic peat soil (Thomas, 1991).

Whilst an early Chapel has not been located, there exists the probability of such a structure; the early cemetery however is 500 m to the west of the Giant's Grave. Even so the pillow stone is best explained as a pillar stoop, for holy water, and thus presumably derived from a Chapel. Over 140 years have elapsed since the discovery and there is now little firm evidence with which to date the Giant. Much has happened in Viking studies since that time however, even in Britain, and there are a number of circumstantial parallels which may be of relevance.

It appears to have been common practice for Viking burials to have been associated with Early Christian sites, even if the deceased were not themselves Christian (eg Balladoole and

Jurby, Isle of Man) (Kermode, 1930) Such burials are usually in slab-lined cists and pillow stones are not uncommon. Examples of stone simulated ship-burials (eg Westness, Orkney) have been described as oval 'cists' with a stem or prow-stone. Is this the function of the Lundy 'pillow', removed from a Christian site?

The adjacent 'pit' is paralleled at Repton, where again disarticulated remains, dated to c. AD 875, were found this time in an earlier Christian structure and interpreted as the possibly exhumed remains of the 'Great Army', brought to Repton to accompany the occupant of the focal cist, coincidentally also a 'Giant' discovered in the 17th century (Biddle and Kjoelbye-Biddle, 1992). The site at Repton, not uniquely, continued to be used as a Christian cemetery. Although the Lundy pit burials could have been the result of 16th century grave clearances, the evidence from Bull's Paradise was for the re-interment of earlier grave occupants, fragmented, with the newly dead, and not in charnel pits.

The glass beads, although of a common type, have generally been regarded as 9th century Hiberno-Norse and there is little from the extensive excavations in Dublin, Repton or York to confidently challenge this view.

Associated with the beads in the 19th century account, were pieces of red pottery and limpet shells which we regard as compatible with the 17th century midden, but the fragments of bronze, gilded, perforated and rivetted are strongly reminiscent of the shoulder of a Viking 'tortoise' brooch, often joined in pairs by a short 'chain' of glass beads.

In conclusion we may summarize, by process of elimination, that the burials were not pre-historic or Early Christian, although in a cist, because: first, on Lundy bones do not survive 1000 years; and second, the integral 'pillow' stone is paralleled in Early Medieval local church furniture, suggesting at least an Early Medieval date for the Giant. It is not typical of the 16th century burials, although the seven bodies 'in a row' most probably are of this date. The Giant's Grave seems to have stood alone, arguably accompanied by the pit burials. The glass beads seem to be from a Hiberno-Norse context, but could be late survivals. On balance the circumstantial evidence suggests an interment perhaps contemporary at the latest with the 12th century occupation, and speculatively even that of a player in the tales of the Orkneyinga Saga.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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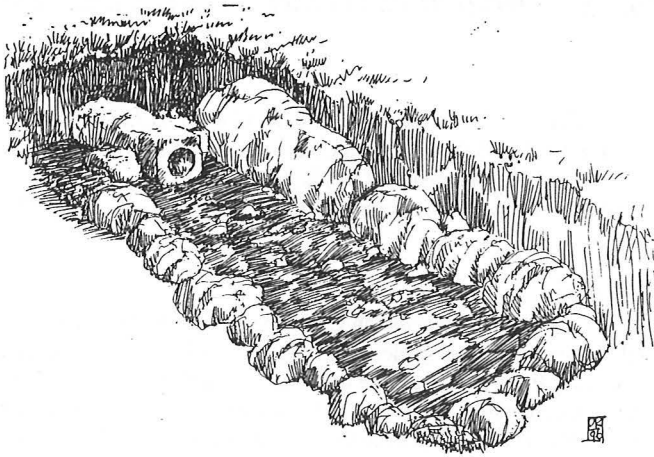


Figure 2: Réconstruction drawing of grave.

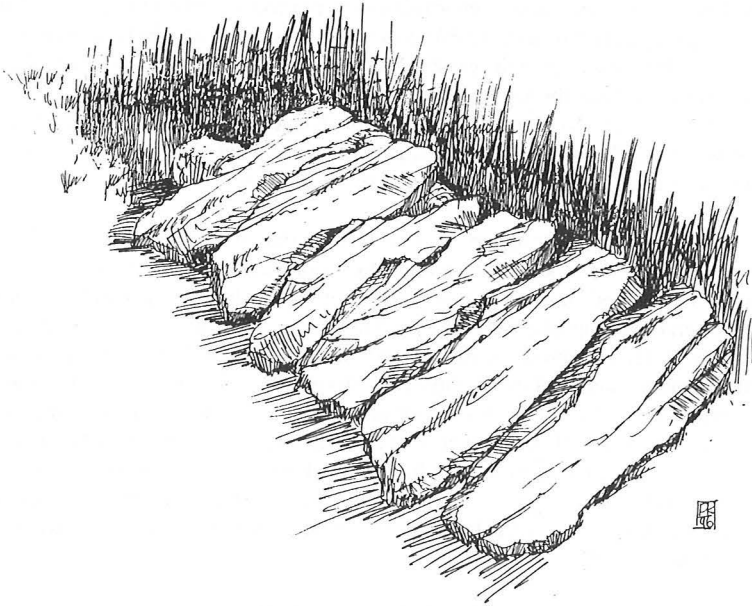


Figure 3: Reconstruction drawing of grave covering.