

# Althing and lawthing in Orkney

This is my first column for *Mimir's Well*, and I would like to take this opportunity to tell you about my research into the viking courts and parliaments known as "thing", or "thing", sites.

The thing organisation is well attested in all three Scandinavian countries and formed an integral part of viking and medieval Norse society.

The viking settlers brought the system to their new homelands, such as Orkney.

Unfortunately, the written sources only mention this briefly, and we therefore know very little about the thing organisation here.

The two most well-known sites, Tingwall and Dingeshowe, are easily located as these names both contain the Old Norse word *þing*. These two were most likely local meeting-sites which were used for district things, although we no longer know which districts they served.

Doreen Waugh has suggested two other likely district assembly sites — Hoxa, in South Ronaldsay, and Doomy Hill, in Eday.

Hoxa appears in the *Orkneyinga Saga* as *Haugaeið* — "the isthmus with the mounds" — and the saga also tells us that this is where Earl Thorfinn Skullsplitter was buried in the tenth century.

These features support the idea that Hoxa was indeed a thing site, as, in Scandinavia, these sites were frequently located in burial grounds and by isthmuses. The name *Haugaeið* is, moreover, similar to Scandinavian thing names.

Doomy is derived from Old Norse *dóm-eið* — "the judgement isthmus", and Doomy Hill may, therefore, have served as a marker for a thing site.

Most likely there were other district things as well, but they are rather tricky to identify.

Instead, I am going to examine the thing sites at the top of the hierarchy — the lawthing and its likely predecessor, the althing.

The althings were the general assemblies for all free men, and were later replaced by lawthings, representative assemblies where royal law was introduced and enforced.

In Shetland and the Faeroes the transition between the two seems to have taken place at the end of the 13th century and the beginning of the 14th century, and it may have been the same for Orkney.

There is no unequivocal

mention of an Orkney althing, but as althings formed an integral part of the thing organisation, it would be very surprising if Orkney did not have one. And there is, indeed, one possible reference to an althing in the saga.

We are told that the thing meeting between Earl Magnus and Earl Hakon (where their Egilsay meeting, which led to Magnus' death, was arranged), took place on the "Mainland, where the people of Orkney had their place of assembly".

This is generally seen to refer to Rendall's Tingwall (or sometimes Birsay), but the wording in the saga suggests it may well refer to an althing.

Moreover, a meeting of this magnitude, between two Orkney earls, would most likely have taken place at the althing.

Documents from the 15th and 16th centuries state that lawthing meetings were held in Kirkwall.

According to the saga, thing meetings were held in Kirkwall long before this time, although their exact location is not stated.

The only meeting specifically mentioned is said to have taken place in the 12th century, in the time of Rognavald Kali Kolsson (d.1158).

The sagas also mention two arbitrations (Old Norse *sátt* or *sezt*) that took place in Kirkwall between Earl Rognavald and Earl Paul at an unknown place in Kirkwall and the other a peace meeting between Earl Rognavald and Svein Asleifarson in St Magnus Cathedral.

Arbitrations were private settlements which should be held away from the thing site, and the cathedral is therefore an unlikely place for the Kirkwall thing.

According to local tradition, this was instated found in the spot where Albert Street and Bridge Street meet today.

This place is now known as Parliament Close, and this is supposedly where the Scottish Parliament met during the visit of King James V in 1540.

As the street name implies, here there was a bridge across the Pappale Burn. Today's Parliament Close is also near the 11th-century St Olaf's Kirk and in the area where the earliest Norse settlement in Kirkwall has been traced.

Altogether, this seems a likely location for the thing, as these sites were often situated by fresh water, crossing points, landing places and sometimes churches.



By Dr Alexandra Sanmark



The Tingwall mound, Rendall.

(Picture: Sigurd Towrie)

In terms of location, Kirkwall in general is a very likely place for an assembly, as it is easily accessible from two directions and was also situated on an isthmus — Scapa comes from Old Norse *Skálpeit*, which, according to Hugh Marwick, means "long valley isthmus" or "the isthmus cleaving the Orkney Mainland in two".

The althing site is unlikely to have been located in Kirkwall, despite the lawthing being there, perhaps from c. 1300.

The althing presumably existed long before the establishment of Kirkwall, and these sites tend to be found in very striking places, often with older archaeological remains, such as Old Uppsala, in Sweden, with its three large burial mounds and other major features.

One possible location of an Orkney althing is Maeshowe.

In the saga, Maeshowe goes under the name of Orkahaugr. Berit Sandnes has pointed out that an early Irish name for Orkney was *Innisi Orc* — "islands of the pigs" and Maeshowe can therefore be translated as the "mound of the pigs".

Orc was probably a tribal name for the Orkney Picts and also lies behind the Old Norse name *Orkneyjar*, but here the Celtic *orc* has been replaced by the Norse *orki*, which means grey seal — and "Seal Islands" is, of course, a very fitting name for Orkney.

The vikings are likely to have seen Orkahaugr — "the mound of the pig people" (the Picts) — as a suitable name for the Orkney althing.

The different linguistic roots of Orkahaugr and Orkneyjar presumably did not matter, and were most probably unknown among the population.

It is extremely difficult to decide which of the two names, Orkahaugr or Maeshowe, is the older.

The name Maeshowe is also of Old Norse origin and does not contradict the idea of this having been a thing site.

The form *Mesow* is recorded from the 1760s and can be translated as "the meadow mound".

The first element is an Old Scandinavian word *mað*, meaning "meadow".

This name reminds us of assembly placenames in

however, that it is not necessary for a thing site to have a name containing the element "thing" — indeed, there are a great number of Scandinavian sites that do not.

We know that the Norse used Maeshowe for some purpose. The 12th-century runic inscriptions inside the tomb demonstrate this clearly, while the *Orkneyinga Saga* suggests that Maeshowe had a special place in the minds of the Norse.

We are told that Earl Harald's men hid inside the chamber during a blizzard and at least two men are said to have lost their minds.

More compelling evidence is that the bank surrounding the mound seems to have been rebuilt around AD 950.

This shows that the Norse maintained the monument and made sure its features were in good order.

This is a trait which I have seen in my work on assembly sites in other areas.

The most interesting example is Scutcher Knob, a Bronze Age mound in Berkshire, England.

This functioned as a shire assembly site in the late Anglo-Saxon period (the 10th and 11th centuries). Here the ring ditch surrounding the assembly mound had been recut three times, and in this way, the monument was redefined on quite a substantial scale.

In terms of location, Maeshowe is ideal as a major assembly site, located more or less in the centre of Orkney and accessible from many directions.

Indeed, the natural walking routes through the Orkney

Mainland pass this site. This is illustrated by the saga episode with Harald's men, who stopped at Maeshowe, as they were, in fact, on their way from Stromness to Firth. Moreover, if Barbara Crawford's idea of Norse water routes through parts of the west Mainland holds true, the accessibility of Maeshowe would have been even greater.

The monument's striking appearance also means that it would have fitted the vikings' ideas of althing sites well, and we have several other examples of the vikings in Scotland reusing turf-covered mounds for their thing sites.

The placename Brodgar may add further to the likelihood of Maeshowe being an assembly site.

Brodgar means "bridge farm" and, as I said earlier, bridges and crossing points are commonly found close to thing sites.

Finally, the legal traditions where couples could get married by holding hands through the hole in the Odin Stone and — if they later changed their minds — get divorced by walking through Stenness Kirk and exiting by different doors, strengthen the areas' judicial roots.

The story of Orkney's thing sites does not end here.

I will be back next month to tell you more about the Kirkwall thing and what happened to this after the end of the Norse period.

If you are interested in hearing more about thing sites and about the Orkney vikings generally, why not sign up for our summer school? We would love to see you there!

## Medical records exam success



The Institute of Health Records and Information Management held exams at the Balfour Hospital last year relating to qualification in the "Certificate of Technical Competence in Health Records Practice — Operational Level".

Certificates were awarded to the successful NHS Orkney candidates at a ceremony in the hospital recently. Pictured, from the left are: Anne Spence (trainer), Heather Mackenzie, Lesley Ross, Kelly Nicolson, Katrina Kelday, Ruth Eunson, Tanya Blowfield and Karen Mackay (trainer). (Picture: The Orcadian)

## Councillors to visit site of proposed Firth turbine

Islands councillors are to visit the proposed site of a 27-metre-high wind turbine in Firth after hearing a planning application for the wind energy generator and hearing concerns of a nearby resident.

The application for the turbine was submitted by G. R. Stevenson & Co, Bunness, Firth.

Objektor Graham Wilson of South Wald said that he felt that having three turbines in the area would "spoil the peace and tranquility" of the area. He was particularly concerned about the noise and visual impact.

Councillor James Stookan said that the issue of cumulative impact of wind turbines in Orkney was becoming a greater issue for the council, and that the policy relating to this needed to be looked at.

An attempt to refuse the application was made by councillor Rob Critchton because of the cumulative impact; however, he failed to gain support, and the decision to pay a site visit to the area went through.



Maeshowe, in Stenness — a possible candidate for an Orkney althing site? (Picture: Sigurd Towrie)