

# From Norse thing to council seat

This week's *Mimir's Well* is a continuation from last month's column, where I suggested that there was an Orkney althing located at Maeshowe.

I also discussed the location of the althing's probable successor in Kirkwall and concluded that this site was most likely by Parliament Close, where Bridge Street and Albert Street meet today.

The question is when was the thing site moved to Kirkwall? Whatever view you take of my suggestion of Maeshowe as the althing, it is highly likely that there was an althing site in Orkney before the establishment of Kirkwall.

According to the *Orkneyinga Saga*, the Kirkwall thing existed by the 12th century. The problem with the saga is that it is not fully reliable as a historical source and we cannot therefore use this as firm evidence.

However, in this case, I think the saga may be about right. A major assembly is not likely to have been held in Kirkwall until the town was starting to emerge as the new central place, during the 12th century.

Another possibility is that the saga is wrong and the thing was moved to Kirkwall in the late 13th century — the most probable point in time when an althing

may have been transformed into a royal lawthing.

The move was most likely a natural development as Kirkwall was now turning into a major Christian centre and was also an important trading place, where people would have gathered for a variety of purposes.

In Scandinavia, in the 13th-15th centuries, thing sites were often moved from the Viking Age assemblies to the parish churches. By this time, the churches had become the natural meeting points on Sundays and feast days.

Before this shift, Scandinavian thing sites were frequently located in pagan burial grounds. This takes us back to the idea of Maeshowe as an assembly site.

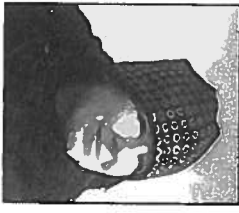
Colleen Baley and James Graham-Campbell suggested in their book *Vikings in Scotland* (1998) that the 'vikings' used an area used for public meetings, Maeshowe as a thing site or a cult site.

Bearing the Scandinavian evidence in mind, it is important to point out that either, or a combination of the two, is possible. Thing meetings, as described in Norse laws and sagas, were highly ritualised and the Old Norse religion most likely played an important part in the judicial proceedings.

The administrative centre in Kirkwall has only shifted slightly

## MIMIR'S WELL NOTES FROM NORDIC STUDIES

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over time.

It seems plausible to think that the area around today's Parliament Close was also the site of the Norse thing. If this was an area used for public meetings, it was presumably also seen as a suitable spot for the meeting of King James V's Parliament in 1540.

Moreover, according to some sources, the site continued to be used by the Stewart Earls, who are said to have erected Parliament House, where official work was carried out until 1648.

Court meetings may also have taken place in the house called Tounngar, or its predecessor, on

Shore Street.

Parliament Close was located in 'the Burgh', which originated in the trading area where the earliest Norse settlement in Kirkwall has been traced.

The Burgh was separated from the ecclesiastical centre around the Cathedral ('Lawrock') by a wide, open space stretching from the Papale burn to the Cathedral.

By the 17th century, when major changes in administrative buildings started to take place, the two areas had grown together. It was from this time that Kirkwall started its transformation to a 'proper' Scottish burgh.

At this time, a tobacch was erected; this is the building named The Ridgeland, situated by the Strynd at the very end of Albert Street.

Tobacch, which were one of the major features of Scottish towns in the 17th century, housed court sessions, prisons and sometimes even shops.

The mercat or market crosses, another important town feature, were in most cases placed just outside the tobacch. The crosses were used for public announcements and punishments and also functioned as a locus for trade.

Tobacch and market crosses were frequently located at the end of the town's high street, which became wider at this point to allow space for market traders. This makes perfect sense for Kirkwall, as Broad Street starts just in front of the Ridgeland.

The local tradition that this was the original location of the market cross therefore seems to be true. At this time, public assemblies must have been held at this end of Broad Street, with smaller meetings in the tobacch, perhaps at times with a popular gathering outside, as is recorded elsewhere in Scotland. The Ridgeland was in use for a hundred years or so. In 1740, the Earl of Morton took the initiative to build the new town hall, now known as 'The Tobacch' on the corner of the Kirk Green and Palace Road.

In 1742, he also granted permission for the stores from the Kirkwall Castle, demolished in 1614, to be reused for the new building.

The tobacch contained, on the ground floor, a prison and guard room. On the first floor was a courtroom and an assembly hall and the attic housed a masonic hall. This building proved to be rather short-lived, as it was demolished in 1849, when the Earl's Palace was converted to sheriff court and jail, and the view of the Cathedral was once again opened up.

In 1894, the next town hall — the one that still bears this name — started being built. Fascinating pictures of both 'The Tobacch' and the day in 1884 when the foundation stone for the town hall was laid, can be seen on the Orkney Communities website ([www.orkneycommunities.co.uk](http://www.orkneycommunities.co.uk)). From the number of people and photographers present, it is clear that this was a major event.

In more recent times, the various council offices have moved between different houses, all located in the heart of town. With the move to School Place, all council offices were finally gathered under one roof.

This is the slightly abbreviated story of the administrative centre in Kirkwall, as other buildings, for example, the Cathedral and the Kirkwall Castle, have been used for various administrative purposes, such as court hearings and prisons.

Seen from this long-term perspective, we can conclude that the centre of power and administration in Orkney has not moved very far over time.

This is a rather common pattern in societies with strong governance.

During the Viking Age in Scandinavia, thing sites shifted as power went to different chieftains.

As the Scandinavian kingdoms developed, and large areas came under dear royal leadership from the 11th century onwards, thing sites started to become more long-lived, although many changes were still to take place before we ended up with the capital cities of Stockholm, Copenhagen and Oslo.

Today, it would, however, be unthinkable to move any of the Scandinavian Parliaments to a different city, as they would be away from the perceived centres of power.

The same idea applies to Kirkwall. Imagine the surprise if it was suggested that the council and the Sheriff Court should be moved to Hatston, Deerness or Sanday. This is not because there is anything wrong with these places; they are just seen as not logical for power and administration.

In this way, we can see how the location of the Norse thing in Kirkwall still today influences where local government and justice is carried out.