

A Viking Grave found at the Broch of Gurness, Aikerness, Orkney

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In 1939 an interesting grave dating from Viking times was discovered at the Broch of Gurness, Aikerness in Orkney.¹ It was exposed by workmen engaged in tracing the outline of the rampart-wall, a defensive feature belonging to the Broch period. The interment was enclosed within a stone setting formed in the core of this wall at the N. side of the fort entrance (Pl. 33). It lay at a depth of approximately 2 ft. 6 in. below the modern surface; no special features were

¹ Information has been obtained from notes made at the time by Dr J. S. Richardson, who carried out the excavation.

observed at the time above ground to mark the site. Excavation at the Broch of Gurness has revealed that in the tenth century Norse emigrants settled on this headland. Their farmstead had been established on ground which had been levelled over the reduced walls of older structures. Here it seems that the remains of the rampart wall were unearthed unexpectedly when the grave was prepared in the stony soil. To gain greater depth a rough cist was constructed in the loose stonework of the wall to receive the body of the deceased person. Afterwards the grave was sealed with flags and covered with earth, probably in the form of a low mound. The grave, which was set E. and W., originally contained an extended human body with the head at the W. end. The skull had escaped destruction, but the remainder of the skeleton had decayed completely. Dampness caused by water filtering into the cavity from the soil above had accelerated the deterioration of all perishable material. There were also signs that the foot of the grave had been disturbed, as the cover-stone at this end had been removed at one time. Several objects which had been included with the burial nevertheless have survived.¹ The character of these grave-goods suggests that the remains were those of a woman. She had been laid to rest clothed in a dress made of finely woven wool. An impression of this fabric was evident on the back of one of two tortoise brooches which were lying at breast level. About her neck there was a necklet (Pl. 34a) composed of sea-shells, or possibly fragments of lobster shell. A small sickle (Pl. 34b) made of iron lay at her right side. On her left there was a knife with a wooden handle, but unfortunately this object was beyond conservation.

The two tortoise brooches (Pl. 35) are characteristic of the Norse period and offer the only clue to the age of the burial. They belong to a type which can be dated from the tenth century (type Rygh 652, Jan Petersen, *Vikingetidens Smykker*, fig. 51 C2).² These bronze shoulder-ornaments, which were usually worn in pairs, are identical in shape and design. Both brooches are fashioned with a geometric arrangement of nine pierced bosses linked by narrow bands bearing incised key pattern. The intervening spaces are filled with rather crude and indeterminate openwork designs, resembling stylised human masks and birds symmetrically arranged. A marginal band composed of small oblong panels containing incised motifs provides additional enrichment. The openwork decoration on both brooches is contrasted effectively against a plain inner shell of bronze rivetted behind it. Similar burials of the Viking period have been found elsewhere in Scotland in territories held by the Vikings. As in other instances, the body of this woman with her personal belongings had been placed in a shallow grave just below the level surface of the ground. This interment also follows the Norse practice of burying the dead close to the dwellings. The use of the stone cist, however, is not entirely characteristic. It seems that here it was not planned originally, and could be regarded as an improvisation.