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INVESTIGATION DU PAYSAGE VIKING A LUNNASTING, SHETLAND: DATATION, CHARACTERISTIQUES, FONCTION

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Abstract: This article explores the Viking Age landscape at Lunnasting on the archipelago of Shetland. It aims to understand how the *thing* site emerged, what his characteristics were, and what other function(s) it may have had before it became an assembly site. The article investigates the Iron Age roots of the site and underlines the continuity with its Viking successor. Comparisons with other assembly sites in Scotland and Scandinavia will show that Lunnasting's close proximity to a prehistoric fort is a rather unusual characteristic. It will become obvious throughout the paper that Lunnasting was an unusually powerful and important place even long before the Vikings appropriated it, and continued to operate as a central place of power for centuries following the end of Norse occupation.

Keywords: Shetland; Assembly; Vikings; Lunnasting

Résumé: Cet article explore the paysage Viking à Lunnasting, dans l'archipel de Shetland. Son but est de comprendre comment le site du *thing* norrois émergea-t-il, quelles étaient ses caractéristiques, et quelle(s) autres fonctions le site a-t-il peut-être eu avant de devenir une assemblée Viking. L'article se penche notamment sur les racines préhistoriques du site, et souligne la continuité avec son successeur. Des comparaisons avec des sites archéologiques équivalents en Ecosse et en Scandinavie montrera que la proximité de Lunnasting à un fort préhistorique est une caractéristique inhabituelle. Il deviendra évident à travers cet essai que Lunnasting était un lieu important même bien avant que les Vikings ne se l'approprient, et continua de fonctionner comme centre de pouvoir pendant plusieurs siècles suivant la fin de l'occupation norroise.

Mots-clefs: Shetland ; Assemblée ; Vikings ; Lunnasting.

Introduction

Shetland has a well-known Norse heritage. The archipelago, located about 170 km north of the Scottish mainland and originally settled by the Picts, was invaded by the Norse sometime between the late seventh and eighth centuries (Ballin Smith, 2007, p. 294). It

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subsequently belonged to Norway until the Norse Earldom of Orkney and Shetland was formally transferred to Scotland in 1472 (Bjørshol Wærdahl, 2011, p. 37). Shetland's Norse heritage is evident today. Place names betray their Norse etymologies, while substantial archaeological remains such as those of Jarlshof, the main Viking settlement on Shetland, provide stark visual reminders of the archipelago's Viking past. As with most areas settled by Norse people in the Viking Age, Shetland boasts several *thing* sites. But much of Shetland's early medieval past has been overlooked in favour of its neighbour, Orkney. In the past ten years, few pieces of scholarship have focused on Shetland's *thing* sites, although Alex Sanmark has recently conducted investigations on the archipelago. In her 2013 article 'Patterns of Assembly: Norse Thing Sites in Shetland', Sanmark identified the locations of several *thing* sites and studied their characteristics. The present article aims to directly add to Sanmark's work and will focus on Lunnasting, an area located about 28 kilometres north of Lerwick, on the east coastline of Shetland's main island.

In a first part, this paper will briefly present the historical and geographical context in which Lunnasting inscribes itself. For clarity, it should be noted that 'the Iron Age' in this paper refers to the period between c. 500 BC and the beginning of the 'Viking Age', which starts in about AD 750.[2] Secondly, it will detail the history of the site's main archaeological remains, and try to identify continuity in their (re-)use. This will enable us to investigate the possibility that Chapel Knowe, the site of a medieval chapel, was first used as an Iron Age fort, and later as a Viking assembly site. Lunnasting will also be compared to other Shetland and Scandinavian *thing*-sites in terms of its significance as a historic landscape. Peculiarities such as its location within a prehistoric fort will be discussed as well. A last section will review more anecdotal evidence which might confirm the area's long association with religious cults, and its lasting influence as a seat of power in later centuries. It will be concluded that Lunnasting was unusually important as an assembly site, and may have functioned as a central place of power long before the Vikings appropriated the area and reused it.

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[2] In the context of medieval Nordic archaeology, the Viking Age is normally considered to be the last phase of the Iron Age. In European (continental) archaeology, the Iron Age ends around 400. The terminology employed in this paper, while perhaps not strictly correct, aims to reflect the complex nature of Shetland as a border region in between European and Nordic contexts.

Context:

Lunnasting is one of eight definite *thing* jurisdictions in Shetland (Sanmark, 2013, p. 97). The others are: Delting and Nesting, directly west and south of Lunnasting respectively; Aithsting, Sandsting, and Þvæitaþing in the western part of the archipelago; Rauðarþing covering the northernmost isles; and finally Tingwall, covering the southern (and most populous) part of the Mainland (Sanmark, 2013, p. 97). Lunnasting gets its name from the Lunna settlement where one may presume the actual *thing* was held. 'Lunnasting' per se is not a legal entity anymore, and instead denotes the old parish's name, now merged with nearby Nesting. The name nevertheless survives locally, as with Lunnasting Primary School, for instance. There are few, if any written sources concerning Lunnasting during the Viking Age. *Orkneyinga saga*, which was written down in the thirteenth century and tells the history of the Earls of Orkney, mentions Shetland in a variety of contexts (Finnbogi Guðmundsson, 1965). However, Lunnasting never appears specifically. Archaeology and toponymy therefore provide the bulk of our material. Lunnasting, as its name indicates, was the *thing* site serving the Lunna area. A quick overview of a modern map shows that to this day, Lunna remains a place-name in active use. The local church is still named Lunna Kirk, there is nearby a farm called Lunna Farm, and the local laird's house is known as Lunna House.[3] The history and possible significance of all three of these buildings will be discussed again in the last section of this paper. The name also appears in several landscape features such as the Lunna Ness peninsula, and the island of Lunna Holm.

John Stewart (1987), who has worked extensively with Shetlandic place-names, has determined that the name 'Lunna' derives from Old Norse *hlunnr-eið* (Stewart, 1987, p. 300). As Sanmark summarised, 'ON *eið* denotes an isthmus or portage, and ON *hlunnr* refers to the wood rollers used for pulling boats across land' (Sanmark, 2013, p. 100). This is in line with Lunnasting's location on the edge of the mainland. The main Lunna-named places are located within a few hundred meters of each other. The church, together with a fortified prehistoric mound situated right next to it ('Chapel Knowe'), stand on a verry narrow strip of land which

[3] These have all been listed and recorded by Historic Environment Scotland in 1971. The listings can be accessed at: http://portal.historicenvironment.scot/hes/web/f?p=1505:200:::NO:RP:SEARCH_UNDERWAY:1.

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is evidently the isthmus suggested by Lunna's etymology (Canmore ID 1194). Lunna House and its farm stand a few hundred meters to the north of the church, past the isthmus proper. As will be argued in the next part of this article, there is evidence that Lunnasting had already been used as a symbolic place of power long before the Vikings arrived. The presence of multiple prehistoric burial mounds (HES nr SM2691) show that the area's location had long been considered suitable to host religiously and socially important landmarks.

Location:

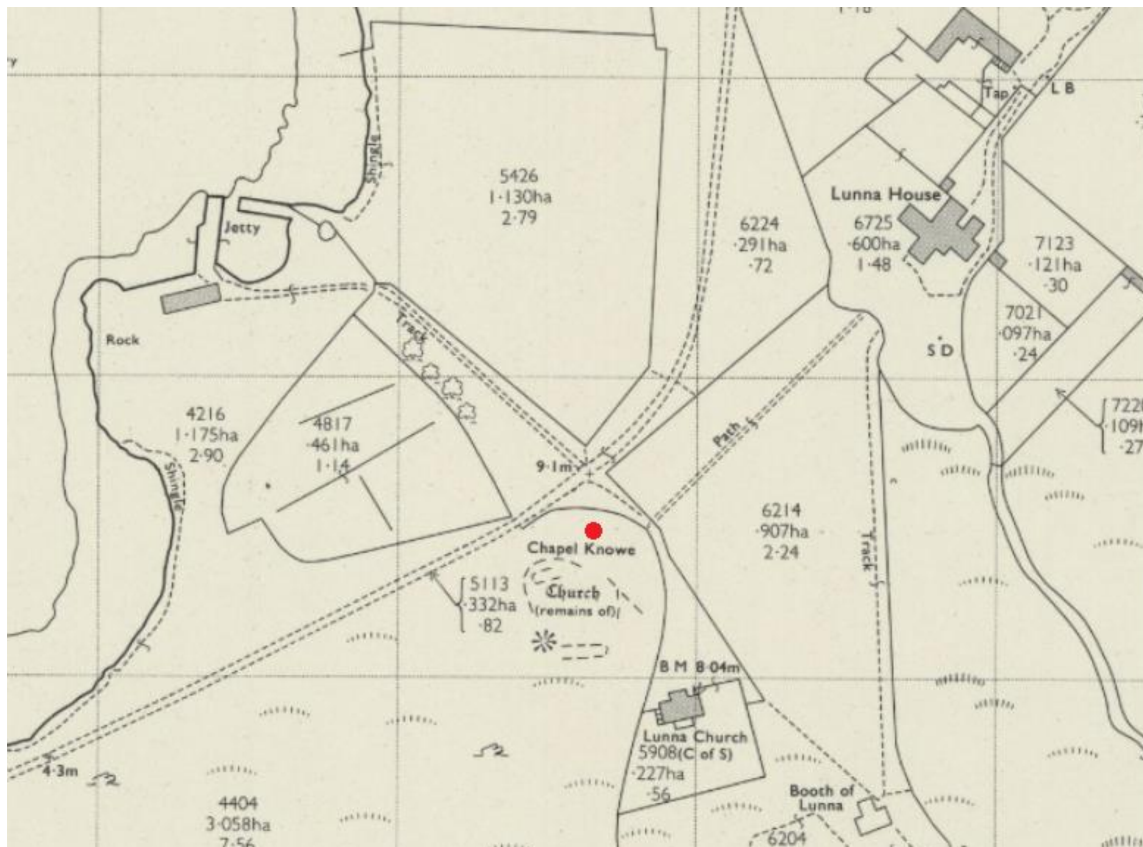

Figure 1. Lunnasting, OS map, 1:2500. Crown Copyright 1971. In red, the suggested site of assembly.

The precise location of the actual assembly site in Lunnasting is completely unknown, and is a matter of speculation. However, an obvious location for it, based on archaeological remains and landscape features, is the enclosed mound known as Chapel Knowe (fig. 1).

Firstly, there is philological evidence for this suggestion. As mentioned previously, *hlunnr-eið*, from which 'Lunnasting' derives, denotes the presence of an isthmus (Stewart, 1987, p. 300). Chapel Knowe is situated right at the centre of this isthmus. In addition, this location would have allowed the site to be close to water which is the one feature that most known Nordic assembly sites have in common (Sanmark, 2013, p. 9). It is also worth noting that on its north side, the isthmus is C-shaped, which would have provided a naturally sheltered harbour. The mound is also at the crossroads of three paths, one which leads deeper inland and connects Lunna with the rest of Shetland, one that goes towards the water (where there is now a harbour which perhaps already existed then), and one that continues eastwards towards the rest of the peninsula. It is known that Norse assembly sites were often located close to main roads for ease of access. (Sanmark, 2009, p. 207-210). A hamlet called 'The Herra' (etymologically related to the administrative unit *härad*) lies along the road heading inland from Lunna, a few miles to the south (Coolen, 2012, p. 30). There is possibly a link between the two locations although it remains unclear. The location at Chapel Knowe is also roughly in the middle of the peninsula, which fits with Sanmark's observation that *thing* sites on Shetland were usually centrally located within their districts (Sanmark, 2017, p. 199). Lastly, as part of her investigation of all known Norse *thing* sites on Shetland, Sanmark (2017, p. 219) has observed that many reused pre-Norse broch mounds because they resembled Norse burial mounds, and thus had a symbolic significance (discussed in detail later in this article). On a more practical level, the hilly location would have also provided an ideal raised platform for a lawspeaker around which people could have gathered.

Functions:

There are traces of successive layers of buildings on the mound, including a medieval chapel (a broken font found on site confirms this beyond doubt), a dwelling, and a kiln, while Iron Age artefacts have been excavated there (Canmore ID 1194). The seven other artificial mounds found in the direct vicinity of Chapel Knowe point to its possible origins as a sacred monument too (HES nr SM2691). But the presence of older finds on the mound does not exclude the possibility that it was used as a Viking assembly site, and previous religious use does not preclude a later legal function either. Indeed, Triin Laidoner has speculated that gravemounds could also play a legal role in addition to having a religious meaning, as they

often marked hereditary land and could be used as evidence for one's claim to inherited land (Laidoner, 2020, p. 13-14). While it cannot be stated with certainty that Chapel Knowe was originally a gravemound, the possibility cannot be excluded, and it is most probably in any case an artificially mound which might have served a similar function as that of a gravemound.

In addition, there are other examples of assembly sites incorporating other structures. The courtyard sites of Norway, for instance, which consist of a group of buildings erected in a square or circle around a yard, have been interpreted as assembly sites with enhanced political and judicial functions (Hem Eriksen, 2019, p. 52; 107). While Lunnasting was evidently not a courtyard site, it nevertheless shows that some *thing* sites were densely built up, and followed complex architectural patterns illustrating a rigid social order. The isthmus of Lunnasting may well have been an organised landscape such as seen in more developed parts of the Viking world. Marianne Hem Eriksen also points out that at the centre of the Norwegian courtyard sites, a burial mound could serve as the lawspeaker's platform, thus showing a single site's multiple facets (Hem Eriksen, 2019, p. 107-108). The parallel with Chapel Knowe is clear. Similarly, many links have been drawn between assembly sites, churches, markets, and games 'arenas' in Scandinavia, which shows that one site could have a variety of uses (Ødegaard, 2018, p. 151-152).

This interpretation of *thing* sites, as supported by Marie Ødegaard but also Alex Sanmark and Marianne Hem Eriksen, shows that these assemblies did not simply play a legal role but served as community hubs where the population could create bonds, network, and socialise (Sanmark, 2017, p. 117-118). It is therefore logical that an assembly site such as Lunnasting displays a vast range of archaeological remains relating to different spheres of community life. The reuse of a site already enclosed by a wall may also have had a symbolic meaning, as the people gathering for the assembly would have entered through an opening leading into this strictly defined area. Hem Eriksen (2019, p. 108) likens the attendees' resulting moves and circulation within this space as a performative, almost theatrical act. It thus appears that Chapel Knowe provided the ideal space required for an assembly site.

It is worth noting, however, that *thing* sites are not usually located right next to permanent houses or settlements, but rather on their periphery. An example can nevertheless

be found in Iceland, in Þingnes, where the assembly site was surrounded by farmhouses (Myrberg, 2009, p. 107), but it is otherwise very uncommon. It is therefore unclear whether the buildings found at the isthmus Lunna were in constant use, or only accommodated attendees on a temporary basis, perhaps only when an assembly was held.

Although all Norse *thing* sites performed a similar function, they were not all the same and some were more important than the others (Sanmark, 2017, p. 7-8). Written sources including many Icelandic sagas but also *Guta saga* show that it was common in the Nordic world for it to be at least three levels of assemblies: local assemblies, district-wide assemblies, and regional assemblies (Peel, 2009, p. 5-15; 29). Sanmark has remarked that assemblies' roles could shift throughout the course of their lives, and that a large assembly could also serve at a local level (Sanmark, 2017, p. 8). She has also pointed out that some assembly sites functioned for short periods of time and then disappeared, while others were used over centuries (Sanmark, 2013, p. 96). The different periods represented on Chapel Knowe show that Lunnasting was an important site for many centuries. The rampart which encloses it can be interpreted as a sign of military power, while the kiln and dwelling represent the economic sphere. The chapel and the mound itself, of course, are evidence of the site's religious importance in the long term. While the reuse of older monuments and sites was common in Scandinavia and Norse Britain (Sanmark and Semple, 2008, p. 246-260), few *thing* sites display such clear evidence of economic, military, and religious powers all at once.

Dating Lunna's *ting*

Brian Smith has argued that Shetland's numerous -*ting* place names appeared late – he posits around 1300 (Smith, 2009). Thus, he rejects the possibility that these may be Viking Age *thing* sites. Admittedly, there are several examples of assembly sites which were created *de novo* in the Viking Age and later (Sanmark and Semple, 2008, p. 250-251), perhaps because their new location was more convenient, or districts were rearranged. But while Smith's arguments are convincing regarding Þvæitaþing and Rauðarþing, the exact locations of which cannot even be pinpointed today (Sanmark, 2013, p. 99), the wealth of historical artefacts and archaeological remains at Lunna lends credibility to the hypothesis that this was a Viking Age assembly site, possibly with earlier origins as well. Another element which suggests that

Lunnasting is a very early site, is the fact that it is not named after a parish like most other assembly sites on Shetland, but after landscape features (Sanmark, 2013, p. 100). This is a more ancient method of place-naming. In Scandinavian contexts, such place-names have routinely been dated to the early Iron Age of even the Bronze Age in some cases (Brink, 2008, p. 58).

In fact, Shetland's main assembly site, Tingaholm, also shows significant archaeological remains similar in scope and richness to those found at Lunnasting, and it was also named after its landscape characteristics ('the island of the Thing'). Interestingly, evidence of Iron Age activity was also unearthed there (Coolen and Mehler, 2011, p. 8-29), and it is the only other firmly identified *thing* site on Shetland which may have originated as an Iron Age and/or Pictish site. It is therefore possibly the result of long-term association and continued use that these two assemblies became the most prominent in the Shetland islands – at least as evidenced by the material remains. However, a truly unparalleled characteristic of Lunnasting is its location within the walls of a prehistoric fort. While the reuse of older sites and monuments was common, these were not necessarily fortified strongholds. But in the case of Lunnasting, Chapel Knowe is fully enclosed within fortifications. No other assembly site on Shetland exhibits such a close relationship to an ancient fortified place.

In Norse Scotland, there are several documented examples of Viking assembly sites which reused Iron Age, pre-Viking 'broch' mounds. These are especially common in Orkney and Shetland. As mentioned previously, Tingaholm was certainly an older site which was reused in later periods. On Orkney, Dingieshowe, in Upper Sanday, is strikingly similar to Lunnasting. It is also located on a very narrow isthmus, and is mostly flat except for the steep broch-mound towering over the shoreline. Traces of a stone wall have also been found in this mound (Canmore ID 3062). Other possible assembly sites reusing Iron Age mounds include Hoxa and Maeshowe (Semple et al., 2021, p. 211-212). Broch mounds, by nature, were already associated with the elite and symbolised power. Most of them may have already been reduced to turf-covered grassy mounds by the time the Norse settled Scotland, which means that they were therefore convenient to reuse directly, and also resembled Scandinavian mounds (Semple et al. 2021, p. 228).

Outside of Britain, it is rare to find *thing* sites so closely associated with a prehistoric fort, and a quick overview of well-documented *thing* sites in Sweden and Norway has failed to produce similar examples. Sanmark's survey of all *thing* sites in Södermanland, a rich and populous area of mainland Sweden in the Viking Age, also did not uncover any equivalent association (Sanmark, 2009). A possible parallel may be found on Gotland, in Roma, where the *all-thing* site was located just across a small lake facing the fortifications at Hallegårda (Myrberg 2009; p.109-110). The fortifications, however, seem later than those found at Lunnasting, and apart from denoting a centre of power, the two sites might have little else in common. But on Öland, which is famed for its numerous prehistoric Iron Age ringforts (Fallgren, 2009), one possible *thing* site is known in the vicinity of a fort. According to local tradition, the assembly place is marked by the so-called 'Tingstenen', which is near a major road linking the east and west coasts, and within walking distance of Träby Borg.[4] It is worth noting that it has also been suggested that the island's forts themselves were used as early assembly sites alongside other functions including defence (Holmring, 2014, p. 55). This would notably explain the relatively low number of clearly identifiable *thing* sites on Öland. A similar pattern of use may also explain Lunnasting's location within a prehistoric enclosure. A more thorough survey of *thing* sites from the perspective of their distance to the nearest fort may be insightful but is outwith the scope of this article.

The Lunnasting Ogham Stone

To add to the evidence that Lunna was an ancient, prominent site, one may note that an ogham inscription was found in the area (although not on Chapel Knowe itself). Ogham is an ancient alphabet which was used to write Old Irish (Gaelic) and Pictish. Many examples can be found engraved on stone monuments similar to runestones, and they are the oldest surviving use of ogham (McManus, 1991, p. 40; 61). Ogham inscriptions often give the same sort of information as Viking runestones. They were notably used to assert ownership over land and commemorate people, which the Lunnasting stone may have done (Rodway, 2020, p. 20-21). Many inscriptions, however, remain undeciphered, because while Old Irish is well

[4] The author personally knows the site but has not found any recent scholarly literature about it.

understood by scholars, the Pictish language is mostly unknown, mainly due to the lack of sources and the rarity of surviving examples.

The Lunnasting inscription was most probably written in the language used by the Picts (thought by some to be Brittonic Celtic, by others to be completely non-Celtic) and, as such, it is not yet possible to confidently decipher it (Rodway, 2020, p. 1-2). Several attempts have been made notably by Katherine Forsyth, and it is likely that the inscription contains at least one personal name, which might indicate that it was used to commemorate the dead, or perhaps assert ownership (Forsyth, 1996, p. 408; 416). Forsyth has been unable to offer an interpretation for the stone's inscription, except for the last of its four words which she reads as 'Nechtan', a male personal name (Forsyth, 1996, p. 418). It is thus likely that the stone, and therefore the site that it stood on, was connected to someone specific. In addition, she identified the carving of a cross in the left corner of the stone, although it is impossible to know whether the cross and lettering are contemporary, or whether the cross was added later on. She interprets the stone's lack of other ornamentation and the fact that it was designed to be upright as evidence that the stone's function was first and foremost to display the text without distracting from its message, which is suggestive of its importance (Forsyth, 1996, p. 418).

The fact that the inscription is written in 'Pictish' points to a pre-Norse origin for the stone. This is consistent with the dating of the Iron Age fortifications. However, Forsyth has pointed out that the use of dots to separate the words is typical of Scandinavian runic inscriptions and the carver might therefore have been influenced by Norse practices. The dating of the stone is therefore unclear, although the Scandinavian influence means that it was probably made in the eighth or ninth century (Forsyth, 1996, p. 412). The dots specifically suggest the later date, but it is not impossible that a Shetland-based pre-Norse carver may have known of his colleagues' methods, not least because of the extensive contacts that the British Isles had had with the Scandinavians long before Shetland was formally colonised.

Another hypothesis is that the inscription was indeed carved during Viking occupation, which would thus evidence cohabitation between Celtic and Norse cultures. It is unlikely that the Pictish language died out straight after the Scandinavians' arrival, and it is therefore a possibility that the Ogham inscription was contemporary with the Viking assembly

site. In fact, assembly sites elsewhere in northern Europe, including Scandinavia, are often marked by runestones. Indeed, some *thing* sites were established by powerful individuals aiming to assert their authority over an area (Sanmark, 2017, p. 174). The Lunnasting inscription, which as mentioned previously contains a personal name, might be connected to such an individual who, perhaps, founded the assembly site on their land, or claimed a connection to the various mounds found in the direct vicinity (HES nr. SM2691). However, this is speculation.

Lastly, Lunnasting might also be an example of a Celtic assembly site which was taken over by the Vikings. Sanmark has studied several cases of assembly sites in Scotland which may have originated as Gaelic *thing* sites and been reused by the Norse, or in fact used by both communities at the same time (Sanmark, 2017, p. 233-238). There is an example of such a 'dual' assembly site on the isle of Skye, at Tinwhill, where a Norse *thing* and a Gaelic one were found in close proximity of each other (Sanmark, 2017, p. 185-7). Other sites such as Tinwald in the Hebrides may have been managed by a Norse-speaking elite, while catering for a Gaelic-speaking community (Sanmark, 2017, p. 238). In Lunnasting's case, the Ogham inscription might have been carved for a Celtic '*thing* site', which was later superseded by its Norse equivalent.

A Long Religious Association

As mentioned, there are at least seven other artificial mounds in the direct vicinity of Lunna Kirk and Chapel Knowe, which might be evidence of the continued use of the area for religious purposes (HES nr SM2691). Although no excavation has taken place, their similarities with Scandinavian examples are striking. Considering the importance of the site in Viking times, it is not an unreasonable assumption to assume that these are indeed Norse mounds. However, burial mounds were also a common feature of pre-Christian Celtic burial practices, and it is thus prudent to remain open-minded about their actual dating (Maldonado, 2013, p. 17). The fact that the current mounds are much higher than could be expected of a Celtic mound might be explained, however, by their reuse by the Norse. This was a common practice that allowed the new settlers to appropriate their predecessors' places of power and effectively hijack their heritage to make it theirs (Pedersen, 2011, p. 347-351). There were superstitious

reasons for this reuse too, as both Norse and Celtic people believed that supernatural creatures lived within the mounds. Several types of beings were believed to live underground, including benevolent guardians who watched over farms (Laidoner, 2020, p. 13-14), but also aggressive ghosts guarding their mounds (Ármann Jakobsson, 2011, p. 291-293). Destroying the mounds, or otherwise desecrating them in any way, would have therefore been avoided in fear of having to confront these beings (Ármann Jakobsson, 2011, p. 291-293). Similar beliefs were held by ancient Celtic people (Ó hÓgáin, 1990, p. 185-186). There is thus continuity in the religious use of the site from prehistoric times to this day.

The present landscape at Lunnasting is dominated by Lunna Kirk which is the oldest church in active use in Shetland. The current building dates from 1753 when the Hunters were asked to build a chapel of ease on the site (Ritchie, 1997, p. 94-95). It is unclear whether this church was the first to be built in this exact spot, and Anna Ritchie acknowledges that it was built 'possibly on medieval foundations' (Ritchie, 1997, p. 94-95), although excavations would be required to confirm this hypothesis. It is plausible, however, that the site had previously been used for religious purposes. There had been a mausoleum there, for use by the Hunter family, parts of which were incorporated into the porch of the 1753 church. One of the surviving tombstones dates from the seventeenth century (Ritchie, 1997, p. 94-95). It is, however, unknown when the mausoleum was first built.

History does not help us make sense of Lunna Kirk's origins, nor does it inform the nearby chapel's development. Indeed, the question of Shetland's Christianisation is complex. Shetland was officially Christianised in 997 when Earl Sigurd of Orkney was forced by Olaf Tryggvason to convert himself, his crew, and the islanders. This traditional view is related in *Orkneyinga saga* (Finnbogi Guðmundsson, 1965, p. 26-27). However, it is likely that the people of Shetland were already familiar with Christianity long before 997. Efforts to Christianise the population had been ongoing for several centuries already, spearheaded by missionary figures such as Saint Findan, and it is likely that several forms of religion cohabitated for a while (Barrett, 2003, p. 208-218). It should therefore not be assumed that a Christian monument or site must post-date the Vikings, as there is scope for earlier forms of Christianity in early medieval Shetland. It should also not be assumed that the Vikings who settled in Shetland were automatically pagan. Evidence is scarce for Shetland, but the oldest church on Orkney

was built in a typically Norse style around the same time as Shetland's Christianisation (Barrett, 2003, p. 220). Sanmark has investigated the parallels between assembly and church sites, and she notes that churches could be erected on existing *thing* sites. In the context of Scandinavia, she dates this development to the tenth and eleventh centuries (Sanmark, 2017, p. 143-144). Further archaeological investigations are necessary to determine the dating of the chapel remains on Chapel Knowe, but its location is consistent with the reuse of *thing* locations as church sites.

Lunnasting's Later Use

In later centuries, Lunna became a permanent seat of power through the establishment of the Hunters' estate. In fact, Lunna House might also be an ancient structure, although this hypothesis, based on comparisons with similar examples, currently remains completely unproven. The current house was built around 1660 by Robert Hunter, Chamberlain of the Lordship of Zetland (Grant, 1893, p. 92). It is surrounded by many landscaped features including follies, gates, and walled gardens, but also had its own farmstead, a kiln, a pier, and a harbour (HES nr GDL00271). It has been speculated in amateur literature that Lunna House was built on the foundations of a medieval manor, which itself was built on top of a Viking longhouse. The site has, however, not been fully excavated and therefore we must remain cautious. It should be added that this article's author has been unable to verify this claim, and its sources are unknown, although local oral history is often worth considering. It is also worth noting that Shetland has the highest concentration of rural Viking longhouses anywhere in the Norse world (including Scandinavia), with at least sixty examples uncovered so far (www.shetlandamenity.org). As there are visible remains of what was likely a longhouse on Chapel Knowe, it is possible that others were erected in the immediate surroundings. It is therefore plausible that Lunna House was also built on top of a similar dwelling. Lunna House would not be the only early modern Shetlandic mansion to be built on top of, or nearby Viking longhouses. Belmont House, built only a few years after Lunna House in 1675 on the island of Unst, was built very close to a boat-shaped longhouse, the foundations of which were excavated in 2008 (Larsen et al., 2013, p. 181-216).

Lunna Farm is located near the main house and clearly functioned as its Home Farm. However, a farm was recorded at Lunna already in 1507 (Sanmark, 2013, p. 100), which may confirm the theory that a medieval manor existed before the current seventeenth-century house. Unfortunately, without excavating, it is impossible to tell how old the farm truly is. However, the presence of a farm already in the late medieval period strongly suggests that the isthmus at Lunna had been more than a symbolic site. I propose that the presence of an Iron Age stronghold, together with evidence of industrial activity, adds weight to the possibility that farming may have taken place in the area in prehistoric times as well.

A similar observation can be made regarding the harbour. While it is not explicitly documented in early medieval sources, it may nevertheless be much more ancient. It has already been noted that Shetland's *thing* sites were all located at an isthmus and/or near freshwater. This type of location had a symbolic role, which can also be seen in Christian traditions (Sanmark, 2013, p. 102-104). Additionally, access to water would have been very convenient for access as well. There is no evidence for a market place in Lunna, although this does not exclude the possibility that commercial activities took place in the area. As discussed previously, *thing* sites in Scandinavia were often associated with commercial activities and other such social gatherings. It is also known that the Norse settlers on Shetland practiced fishing extensively in addition to farming (Marttila, 2016, p. 9-12), and the area would have provided an ideal sheltered harbour. These observations, while anecdotal and speculative, deserve further research in future, the results of which may shed light on the full range of activities which took place in Lunna.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the *thing* site at Lunna provides a rich archaeological and social landscape which is evidence of the area's thriving past. The presence of cultic sites and burials, both pagan and Christian, together with a large dwelling, evidence of industrial activity, and a probable Iron Age fort, show that this settlement played an important role in the long term, and was used not only as a meeting place but as a central hub for social activities. The reuse of monuments and replacement of older structures with new ones up until the eighteenth century shows continuity in the site's use and prestige. The wealth of archaeological remains

spanning multiple centuries, including a rare ogham inscription dated to the Viking Age, also suggests that this was the site of an early assembly, perhaps even pre-Viking, and not a late medieval creation as has been suggested for other Shetlandic *thing* locations. Chapel Knowe, because of its ideal geographic location and numerous archaeological remains, was proposed as the tentative location for the actual *thing* site. Its position at a crossroad overlooking the isthmus follows the same pattern as other assembly sites identified in Norse Scotland including a strikingly similar example at Dingieshowe on Orkney. Interestingly, the fact that the area seems to have developed around an Iron Age settlement mirrors the situation at Tingaholm, and further research into the connections between these two important assembly sites would be welcome. It is hoped that this article will have shed light on Lunnasting's fascinating heritage, and inspired archaeologists to investigate it further.

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