Archeologists in N. Iceland discover Viking age chief buried in ship with his sword and dog

BY STAFF | JUN 14 2017

Yesterday archeologists, who are working at a large burial site in Eyjafjörður fjord in north Iceland, announced that they had discovered the remains of a ship burial dating back to the Viking age. A wealthy chieftain seems to have been buried in one of his boats along with some of his worldly possessions, including a sword and his dog. More unexplored burial sites are believed to be located at the site.

UPDATED June 15: Second Viking Age ship burial found at archaeological site in N. Iceland

SECOND UPDATE June 15: Archaeologists think they might have found a third boat burial at site in N. Iceland

The grave is believed to date back to the 9th or 10th centuries. The sword, which was found close to the surface is in very poor condition. The archeologists expect to remove the sword from the ground today.
A site of regional significance during Viking Age

The archeological dig takes place north of the town of Akureyri at a site which is believed to have been of enormous local importance during the Viking age. A few hundred meters south of the burial site is Gáseyri, which was the primary trading post in Eyjafjörður fjord during the Viking age.

The area where the ship burial was found is known as Dysnes, a name which points to Viking age graves, as dys is an old word for burial mound. The word Dysnes could be translated to "Burial ness". The precise location of the boat grave is then known as Kumlateigur, kuml being another old word for burial, and Kumlateigur translating as "Burial stretch". Both place names are ancient and point to more than one grave.

Eleven years ago a second boat burial was discovered at Kumlholt ("Burial hill") just south of the present site. The archeologists working at the site expect to find more graves as they explore the site fully.

An important find

Yesterday's discovery is important for a number of reasons. While it was common to bury wealthy chiefs in boat burials during the Viking age, relatively few boat graves have been excavated in Iceland. One possible explanation is that boats were too valuable, with extremely limited domestic sources of timber for boat-building.

Discovering Viking age graves with swords is similarly uncommon, and both finds point to the burial site of a wealthy local chief. A second Viking Age sword was discovered in South Iceland September of last year.

Read more: Goose hunters find a beautifully preserved 1000-year old Viking sword
Undisturbed Viking age graves are also rare, as many Viking age burials discovered in Iceland have been disturbed and robbed. For example, the second boat grave which was discovered at Kumlholt eleven years ago had been opened and disturbed at some point. It is impossible to know what valuables and artifacts have been removed from disturbed graves.

**Exploration a race against time**

Archeologists who spoke with the Icelandic National Broadcasting Service said they were working in a race against time, as the burial site is being eroded by the sea.

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The waves have already destroyed half of the boat in the grave, washing away any artefacts which were contained within. The bones and the sword discovered were lying close to the surface.

"The ocean has washed away most of the boat, and probably some of its contents. We have found human bones scattered in the surface, so we can determine that a man once lay in the boat. The fact that we found the sword suggests that this grave had not been disturbed by grave-robbers. So, at some point we had a completely undisturbed Viking age grave, which we lost to the ocean."

Icelandic archeologists have sounded alarms that many archeological sites around the coast of Iceland are being eroded by the ocean which is washing invaluable remains out to sea.
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