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St Andrews expert solves royal and ancient puzzle

Friday 30 May 2014

A St Andrews historian believes that a skeleton discovered in East Lothian may be the remains of an Irish Viking King from the 10th century.

Dr Alex Woolf, an expert at the University of St Andrews, has suggested that the remains, uncovered during an archaeological dig almost ten years ago, may be that of Olaf Guthfrithsson.

King Olaf, who married the daughter of King Constantine II of Scotland, was an Irish Viking and King of Dublin and Northumbria from 934 to 941. Dr Woolf believes that the Norse King – or one of his high-ranking officials – was given a warrior's burial in a saint's cemetery in Auldham.



The hypothesis - which will be published next year by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in a book funded by Historic Scotland - was revealed by Scotland's Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs, Fiona Hyslop (pictured) at an event in County Meath this morning (Friday 30 May 2014).

Speaking in St Andrews, Dr Woolf said, "Whilst there is no way to prove the identity of the young man buried at Auldham, the date of the burial and the equipment make it very likely that this death was connected with Olaf's attack on the locale.

“Since we have a single furnished burial in what was probably perceived as St Balthere’s original foundation, there is a strong likelihood that the king’s followers hoped that by burying him in the saint’s cemetery he might have benefitted from some sort of post-mortem penance.”

The remains, which were excavated by AOC Archaeology Group at Auldhame in East Lothian in 2005, are those of a young adult male who was buried with a number of items indicating his high rank. These include a belt similar to others from Viking Age Ireland.

This artefact signals that the body was that of a man who may have spent time in the household of the kings of the Uí Ímar dynasty which dominated both sides of the Irish Sea from about 917 until at least the middle of the 10th century.

Olaf Guthfrithsson was a member of the Uí Ímar dynasty. In 937 he defeated his Norse rivals in Limerick, and pursued his family claim to the throne of York. He married the daughter of King Constantine II of Scotland and allied himself with Owen I of Strathclyde.

Olaf Guthfrithsson sacked Auldhame and nearby Tynninghame - both part of a complex of East Lothian churches dedicated to the eighth-century Saint Balthere - shortly before his death in 941. The proximity of the burial to the site of the conflict, the age of the skeleton and the high-status items found with the body, led archaeologists and historians to speculate that it may be that of the young Irish king or one of his followers.

In the absence of known living descendants, DNA analysis cannot be carried out to confirm the identity of the body, leaving archaeologists and historians to rely on circumstantial evidence to reach their hypothesis.

Dr Woolf, senior lecturer in the School of History at the University of St Andrews, was brought in as the post-dig historical consultant to the project. His role was to provide a historical overview and interpretation for the volume on the site.

He explained, “The site at Auldhame is an Anglo-Saxon church and cemetery that was in use from about 700-900. The final grave in this phase - the cemetery came back into use around 1100 - was a young man buried with weapons and a belt set distinctive of the Dublin Vikings and their satellite settlements around the Irish Sea.

“I pointed out that the abandonment of the cemetery in the early tenth century was probably linked to the destruction of the churches of Saint Balthere, nowadays called Baldred, which included Auldhame and Tynninghame in 941, by the Norse king Olaf who died almost immediately afterwards. None of the other burials had grave goods of any sort (they were probably monks and nuns for the most part), so linking the final burial of the warrior with the raid of 941 seemed an obvious connection.”

Making the announcement in Ireland today at an event highlighting archaeological links between Scotland and Ireland, Fiona Hyslop said: “This is a fascinating discovery and it’s tantalising that there has been the suggestion that this might be the body of a 10th century Irish Viking king. Scotland and Ireland’s archaeological communities enjoy a close working partnership, and this find and subsequent research is of particular interest to both, further emphasising the myriad ways in which the two countries’ histories are entwined.”

Note to editors

Dr Woolf is available for interview **after 2pm today** on 01334 462880, or email aw40@st-andrews.ac.uk (<mailto:aw40@st-andrews.ac.uk>)

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Ref: R&A remains 300514

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