

Bones Don't Lie

Current News in Mortuary Archaeology and Bioarchaeology

Vicious Viking Massacre

August 30, 2011 · by Kate Meyers Emery · in Mass Graves, Pathology ·

At St. John's College in Oxford, 35 skeletons have been recovered. All of the individuals are male, and aged 16 to 25 years. A cursory analysis of the wounds suggest that they had been subjected to violence, and this may have been the cause of their deaths. Archaeologists have radiocarbon dated the find between 960 and 1020 CE. The bodies received no formal burial, but were rather placed inside a mass grave. The evidence for violence comes primarily from injuries found in the skulls which were for the most part crushed or fractured. Reassembly of the skulls showed clear blade and puncture wounds, attesting to violence rather than post-depositional destruction. The pattern of injuries also appears to show that the individuals were gathered for a massacre and were not prepared to fight. Osteoarchaeologist Ceri Falys argues that "you get cut marks on the forearms as they raise their arms to defend themselves, but we have minimal evidence of this on these skeletons, it seems that whoever was attacking them, it is likely that they were just trying to run away." Some of the bones even had evidence of charring, suggesting that the individuals may have been burned alive to some extent.



http://news.bbcimg.co.uk/media/images/54523000/jpg/_54523262_brices-massacre-1.jpg(http://news.bbcimg.co.uk/media/images/54523000/jpg/_54523262_brices-massacre-1.jpg)

Due to the dating to the 11th century, the demography of the grave and the skeletal features of violence, archaeologists are arguing that this may be evidence of the massacre in 1002 CE, when King Ethelred the Unready ordered a massacre of all Vikings in England. It was known as St Brice's Day Massacre, because it occurred primarily around November 13th, St. Brice's Day. In his charter, the king wrote: "For it is fully agreed that to all dwelling in this country it will be well known that, since a decree was sent out by me with the counsel of my leading men and magnates, to the effect that all the Danes who had sprung up in this island, sprouting like cockle amongst the wheat, were to be destroyed by a most just extermination, and thus this decree was to be put into effect even as far as death".

From the charter drawn up by King Ethelred, it is known that he ordered the extermination of all Vikings after he was alerted of a plot by them to assassinate the king. In Oxford, it was recorded that the Vikings fled to St. Fridewides church for sanctuary, but were burned alive within it. The evidence from the Vikings in the mass grave seems to match this type of historical event, given both the evidence for violence and burning, as well as

the time period.

<http://media.smithsonianmag.com/images/Vikings-mass-grave-1.jpg> (<http://media.smithsonianmag.com/images/Vikings-mass-grave-1.jpg>)

A similar mass grave was found last year, also in Oxford. The mass grave included the remains of 51 decapitated Vikings, all males from 16 to 25 years old. Like the St. John's burial, this one found at Weymouth dates between 910 to 1030 CE. Another similarity is in the type of violence inflicted on the remains. Study of the Weymouth bones showed that their heads, all found neatly stacked apart from the bodies, were not cleanly removed- rather they were hacked off with swords. Osteoarchaeologist Ceri Boston noted that "we think the decapitation was messy because the person was moving around. One man had his hands sliced through. It looks like he was trying to grab hold of the sword as he was being executed."

While the cause for a mass grave can be difficult to identify, in these cases it seems fairly straight forward. There is clear evidence of violence, some of which are obviously killing blows, and the dating relates the grave to a period of violence towards Vikings. The identification of the individuals as Vikings was done through a combination of artifact analysis and stable isotope analysis of dental remains. Combining the trauma, with their identities and the demographic profile of the burial, the evidence strongly points towards these being Viking burials from the extermination period around the turn of the 11th century. By connecting the two mass graves together, important information about the Vikings who were invading England can be gleaned.

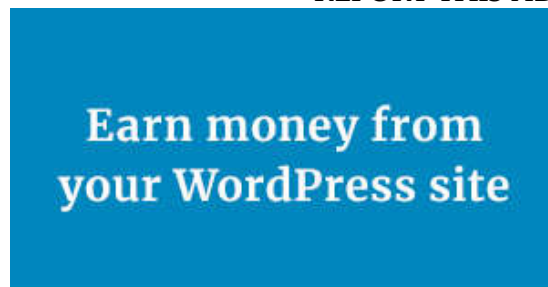
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4 responses to “Vicious Viking Massacre”

1. [Revreese August 30, 2011 at 9:13 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

I remember reading about this a day or so ago, very interesting.

Archaeology has always fascinated me (it was my childhood dream to be like a certain Dr. Jones!) makes me wonder how much history lies beneath our feet that we will never see and their stories will never be heard...

○ [Katy Meyers August 30, 2011 at 9:35 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

The best part of archaeology is the process from discovery to interpretation. It is a wonderful field to be in!

2. [Revreese August 30, 2011 at 9:58 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

I agree! the problem with me is I have a curious mind, an interest in ancient history, and a fertile imagination, so I tend to go on ‘ights of fancy’ imagining what the people’s lives were like, and what the area looked like so many years ago, and what happened there etc etc!.

I would spend so long doing that, I know I would never get any work done, or at the very most, I would ramble on for hours in a long, boring essay or something! 😊 .

I am toying with the idea of studying archeology, but with so many fascinating fields to choose from and the difficulty of finding work, it can be a bit of a reality check!

3. [heathenramblings August 27, 2012 at 3:44 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

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