

Gurness



Orkneyinga Saga: *Then was Earl Magnus borne to the Mainland and buried at Christ's Church which Earl Thorfinn had built.*

There are local traditions and place-names associated with the transportation of Magnus's body from Egilsay to Birsay and his shrine from Birsay to Kirkwall. The names and traditions tell of resting places where the body and shrine of Magnus were placed during these journeys. The places are often denoted by the place-name Mansie or Mans Stane, and take the form of a mound with a stone marker.

The Mansie Stane traditions are linked to another old Orkney custom dating back to the time when coffins were carried to church. In order to protect the spirit of the deceased, the coffin could not be laid on the ground but was rested on a stone known as a wheelie stane, and deriving from the Old Norse words 'resting stone'. A number of these wheelie stanes can still be found in the landscape with more being remembered only through place-names, the stones having been previously removed.

In the journey from Egilsay to Birsay, the first resting place, perhaps the landing place, is described as a green mound in Evie. This story is accompanied by a tradition that the grass grew green where Magnus's body was landed. The most detailed tradition records that the body was landed at a geo, south of the Point of Aikerness and that the ground there, which had been heather, soon after the landing was replaced with clover-rich green grass. The Broch of Gurness has been suggested as the possible site of this first resting/landing place although there is no evidence to support this, other than the fact Gurness, prior to excavation, was a very large green mound.

However, it is also possible that the boat carrying Magnus's body landed further to the north, somewhere near the Knowe of Stenso and Gressy Geo, in order to avoid conveying the body over the low-lying ground in the hinterland of the Bay of Aikerness.

The Broch of Gurness is a large Iron Age monumental structure surrounded by a contemporary settlement. After the broch fell out of use, settlement continued at the site, albeit on a smaller scale, in the Pictish and Viking periods. The discovery of a 6-7th century cross-slab, and a Viking grave at Gurness indicate that it became a focus for early Christian and pagan burial and therefore there is a possibility that the site was regarded as a sacred place – maybe even a safe place to rest a body.

Watch out for more brochs as you walk along the coast towards Costa Head, and if the weather is fine, you should be able to see matching brochs on Rousay to the North.

References

Gurness Canmore entry: <http://canmore.org.uk/site/2201>

Marwick, E. nd Archive Papers. Orkney Archive. D31/2/5/15

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