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Mimir's Well — Notes from Northern Studies

'Ting' sites in Scandinavia and Orkney

AN OCCASIONAL
COLUMN

By DR ALEX SANMARK, reader in Medieval Archaeology at the Institute for Northern Studies, and associate professor of archaeology at Uppsala University

THE TING (or *thing*) organisation was found across Scandinavia in the Viking Age and formed an integral part of society.

In fact, it was so important that the Viking settlers brought this system to their new homelands in the North Atlantic, such as Orkney. Here, Tingwall and Dingeshowe, are the two most well-known and easily located ting sites, but there are other Scandinavian assembly sites too. Likely *thing* site candidates include Hoxa in South Ronaldsay, Ting in Westray, Tingy Loup in Sanday, Doomy Hill in Eday and Knowe of Gruddo in Rousay.

This pattern of sites distributed across a larger area is similar to that seen in Scandinavia where each administrative district had its own *thing* site. These districts were called *herað* in Old Norse, the language of Viking Age Scandinavia. This organisation seems to have been brought to Orkney too. This is suggested by the *Orkneyinga Saga*, which uses the term *Birgisherað*, usually translated as "Birsay", although a better translation is "the *herað* of the *byrgr*", where *byrgr* refers to a fortification of some kind, probably on the Brough of Birsay. Most importantly though, this name shows the existence of administrative units and it seems likely that the islands were divided into different *herað* districts, all with their own *thing* sites.

The *thing* was an arena where the elite and the wider community met for parliaments and court meetings, but in order to find out more, detailed research is needed. We get some further clues from the meaning of the Old Norse word *þing*, which in its earliest form meant both "time and meeting," and it can therefore be translated as "gathering at a fixed time." This fits in with information from other written sources, which show that major *thing* meetings were held a set times of the year, for example midsummer. Additional meetings were called after specific incidents, such as violent crimes that needed to be urgently resolved.

Written sources also tell us that *thing* meetings should be held at the "correct site", and the location of *thing* sites were therefore chosen with great care. These sites were probably created by the most powerful in society, whose aim was to make sure these sites were signposted as places where important decisions were made — and obeyed, in the same way as court and parliament buildings do today.

By comparing the *thing* sites in Scandinavia with those in the North Atlantic settlements, we can see that they shared some specific features and attributes, which all carried symbolism and meaning. One such example is large mounds, which occur at *thing* sites in Scandinavia, often located by large cemeteries with burials going back to the Early Iron Age. Mounds are found by *thing* sites in Orkney too, as we will see later.

This leads to the question why mounds were such important *thing*-site features. In practical terms, they were naturally useful as site markers and as platforms for those speaking to the people gathered for the meetings. However, the significance of mounds is more complex. There are strong links between mounds and land ownership. In Nor-



RIGHT: Dr Alex Sanmark.

The assembly site at Tingwall.

way, a 14th-century law stated that a person should prove that they owned a particular piece of land by counting the generations back "to the mound and to pagan times."

In this sense, ownership of land was closely linked to the idea of being the legitimate heir. This is important in the context of *thing* mounds, as it was only landowners who could vote and raise cases at the assembly. Other people had the right to attend the meetings but could not take actively take part.

Another reason for the use of mounds was their importance for the ancestor cult, which formed a large component of Viking Age religion. By using a mound, for example sitting on one, the dead could be honoured or even 'woken up' to reveal their secrets. In Icelandic sagas, the habit of sitting on a mound was strongly connected to the claiming of kingship and royal rule. In the Saga of the Norwegian king Olav Trygvason, young Björn sat on his father's burial mound when he first claimed the throne.

In Orkney and other parts of Scotland, broch mounds are the most frequently occurring mounds at *thing* sites, probably with good reason. At the time of the Viking settlement, the broch remains were most likely large turf cov-

ered mounds and therefore very similar to the large burial mounds at *thing* sites in Scandinavia.

Examples of such Orcadian *thing* sites are Tingwall, Dingeshowe and Hoxa. In Shetland, there is Lunnasting and in Caithness Thingsva, outside Thurso. These mounds were probably seen as symbolising the ancestors of the local population, and it was therefore important for the Scandinavian settlers to appropriate them in order claim power and legitimacy to rule.

Other types of mounds or natural hills were also used as markers for *thing* sites, probably for the same reasons. Orcadian examples include Gruddo and Doomy Hill. The name Gruddo may come from the Old Norse words *grítr* and *haugr* and can therefore be interpreted as "Peace Mound." This name can be explained through Icelandic sagas and old laws where it is stated that the *thing* consisted of an enclosed space, where *thing* peace (*grítr*) applied. The reason for this was that the *thing* was an arena for conflict resolution, asylum and protection. Killing and wounding people was prohibited at the assembly, and the person who committed such a crime could be executed on the spot. This was one of the few occasions when the death penalty could be exercised in the Viking Age.

It was also important for the leaders to make sure that *thing* sites were located in places that could be easily reached by the population of the assembly district, and they were therefore always located by good communication routes.

In Scandinavia, this often meant at convergences of major land routes and waterways, while in Orkney *thing* sites tend to be located by the sea, often at narrow isthmuses that could be used as portages for boats. Dingeshowe is perhaps the most obvious example, but this also applies to Doomy, Hoxa and Ting, as shown by landscape reconstruction and place-name studies. The name Dingeshowe goes back to the 'mound of the *thing* portage/isthmus' which of course describes the site perfectly. The site could be reached from both directions and the view from the mound meant that the site was easy to control. The mound itself is clearly visible from the sea and could act as a marker for travellers to the assembly.

In conclusion, *thing* sites were highly important for the functioning of Viking Age society, and this is clearly seen in the care that went into their selection, maintenance and longevity.



The assembly and cult site at Gamla Uppsala, Sweden.