

Searching for the Vikings on Nave Island, Isle of Islay

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Nave Island is located off the north coast of Islay in the Inner Hebrides, close to the Scottish mainland and on the western ‘sea road’ of Britain. Covering little more than kilometre square, and only inhabited today by seals, sea birds and a few roe deer, it is a natural paradise and an archaeological wonder. Most striking are the remains of a 14th century medieval chapel that contains the oven and chimney of 18th kelp burners. The chapel sits within an enclosure that is likely to date from the Early Christian period, while beyond it are the remains of late/post medieval farming settlement.

More intriguing and less obvious is a low, grass covered mound a short distance to the north-east of the chapel ruins, sitting amidst rig and furrow (Figure 1). About 20m long and 7m wide, this has rounded ends and curved sides. It was Scheduled as a ‘Viking house’ in 1972, although no exploration of the earthwork was undertaken. Nor has there been since, which is surprising considering the debate about the extent of Viking settlement in Islay (see Mithen, 2021, chapter 7). Other suggestions for the mound include a Viking boat burial and a large kelp burners’ oven.

On a blissfully sunny and calm day in late March 2022 we took the first steps to resolve the mound’s true identity by making an archaeological survey. That consisted of non-intrusive archaeological investigations by analytical earthwork survey and geophysical survey, using Electrical Resistance and Ground Penetrating Radar, with these complemented by a metal detector survey.



Figure 1. Looking south from Nave Island to the north coast of Islay with the possible Viking house in the foreground and the chapel with the kelp burners chimney beyond

The survey demonstrated that the mound pre-dates the surrounding post-medieval rig-and-furrow, ruling out any association with the 18th century kelp-burning industry and strengthening the possibility of a medieval date. It confirmed the curved or bow-shaped long walls and rounded short ends and revealed evidence for stone and turf construction. Some differences in the nature of the walls were indicated along with an internal gully or perhaps former wall line, these suggesting several phases of development for the structure (Figure 2).

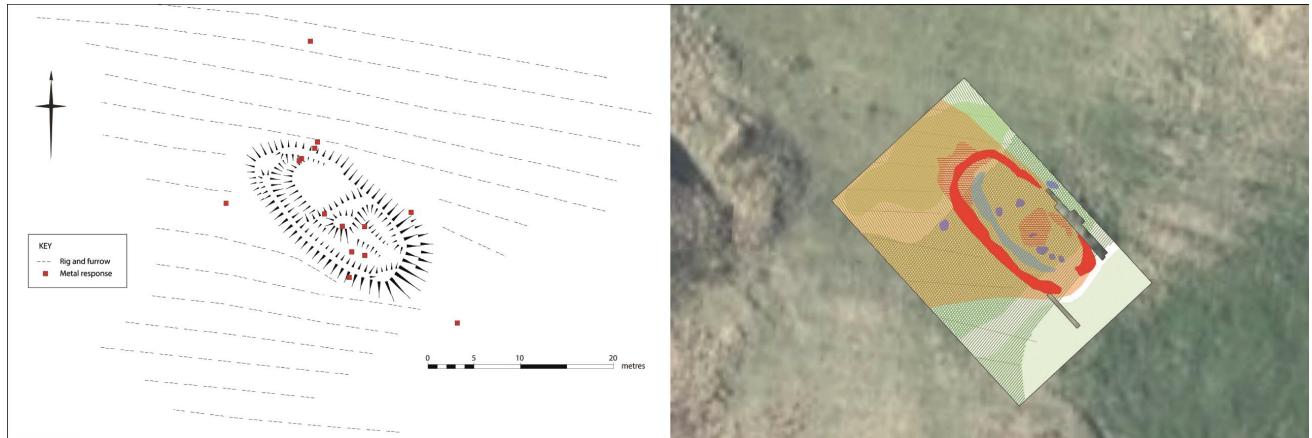


Figure 2. Left: Topographic survey of the earthwork and rig & furrow; Right: Geophysics survey showing walls (red), internal gully (grey) and stone mound

It remains the case, therefore, that the mound on Nave Island displays strong parallels with Viking or late Norse domestic structures recorded from the Western and Northern Isles. Nevertheless, it also remains comparable to Viking funerary monuments, in particular boat burials from the Irish Sea Zone, with clear similarities in overall form and topographic and cultural associations. Ultimately, only an excavation will be able to fully resolve the nature of this intriguing monument.

Acknowledgments

The survey was kindly funded by the Viking Society for Northern Research and the School of Archaeology, Geography and Environmental Sciences, University of Reading. We are grateful to Historic Environment Scotland and Islay Estates for their permissions for the field work, and to Magnitude Surveys for undertaking the geophysics.

Further reading

Mithen, S.J. 2021. *Land of the Ilich: Journeys into Islay's Past*. Chapter 7. Edinburgh: Birlinn