

A Late-Viking Burial at Magdalen Bridge, Oxford? ...revisited

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Summary from original paper by John Blair and Barbara E. Crawford (1997)

'Metal objects and bones found near Magdalen Bridge in 1884 are re-interpreted as the likely remains of a Viking warrior and his horse, buried on an island in the Cherwell around the year 1000. This date, which has seemed improbably late for a 'pagan' grave, makes more sense in the light of evidence from Scandinavia that furnished equestrian burial continued up to c. 1000. The man probably belonged to one of the armies that raided the region from the 990's, or even to Swein Forkbeard's army which attacked Oxford in 1009 and 1013. It is significant that the burial was so close to St Clement's, the possible site of a Cnut-period Danish 'garrison'.'

Aim

The aim of this paper is to revisit the above, considering the original findings and ideas, along with recent reports of similar sites and answer: "Was the Magdalen Bridge site a Viking burial or something else?"

Finds in the dig near Magdalen Bridge in Oxford

The original dig included many finds. The full report of this antiquarian dig can be found in **OXONIENSIA, VOLUME 62 (1998)**.

The Ashmolean Museum purchased a collection that included two high status Viking stirrups.



Diagram 1: Ashmolean stirrups © Ashmolean museum

These high status stirrups are Anglo-Scandinavian, made of iron and have decoration made of inlaid brass wire. They are not a matching pair but were found together near Magdalen Bridge in Oxford.

There were other finds, which included:

- A smaller stirrup, a spur, iron shears and a horseshoe. All recovered from the banks of the Cherwell, not in the water, but above the waterline.
- Additionally the Ashmolean **REGISTER** shows that a 'horse' skull and other bones were found at the same spot. These bones were apparently sold to a dealer in St Clement's by the workmen. Men's thigh bones were also found, which were apparently sold to the Natural Science Museum in Oxford and can longer be traced.

Oxford in the late tenth, early eleventh centuries

Oxford in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries had a Danish Viking population. They were massacred, after taking refuge in St Frideswide's church in 1002AD on St Brice's Day. As the report states: 'It is significant that the burial was so close to St Clement's, the possible site of a Cnut period Danish 'garrison'. St Clement was a favourite Viking saint and churches with the St Celemnt's dedication have been linked to Viking populations.

Could there have been a Garrison or Fort in the Magdalen area?

The **ANGLO SAXON CHRONICLE** suggests that Vikings preferred to make use of water: the sea, a river or marsh, as protection on one side of a fort.

Hedeby and Birka, Scandinavian coastal trading sites, were D-shaped enclosures, as were Repton (Derbyshire), Benfleet and Shoebury (Essex coast) and Rochester (Kent).

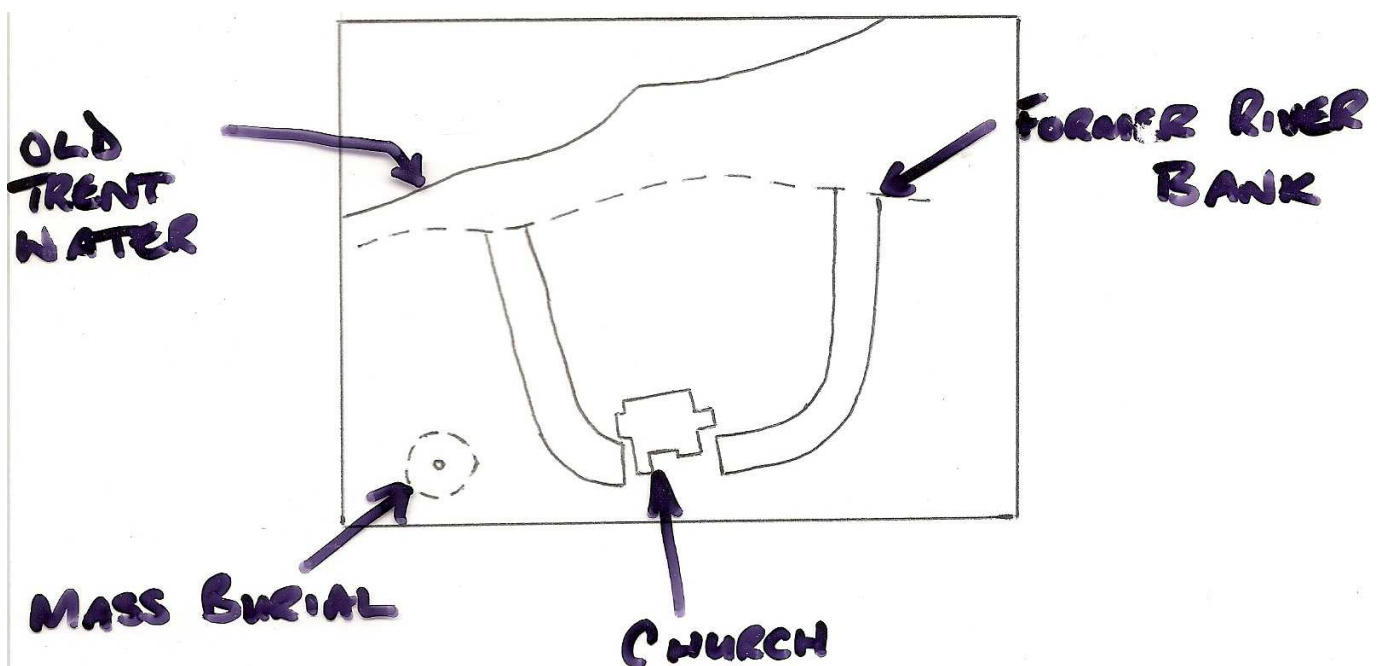


Diagram 2: D-Shaped enclosure at Repton (Derbyshire)

Looking at Diagram 2 you can see the use of natural water courses as part of their defences, which additionally provided access and escape routes using Viking nautical superiority.

'Speculation about the original 'ox ford' should perhaps not exclude a ford on the east side of the town, on the river Cherwell, presumably near the later Magdalen Bridge.'

FROM: 'MEDIEVAL OXFORD', A HISTORY OF THE COUNTY OF OXFORD: VOLUME 4: THE CITY OF OXFORD (1979), PP. 3-73. URL: [HTTP://WWW.BRITISH-HISTORY.AC.UK/REPORT.ASPX?COMPID=22803](http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=22803) DATE ACCESSED: 17 JULY 2012.

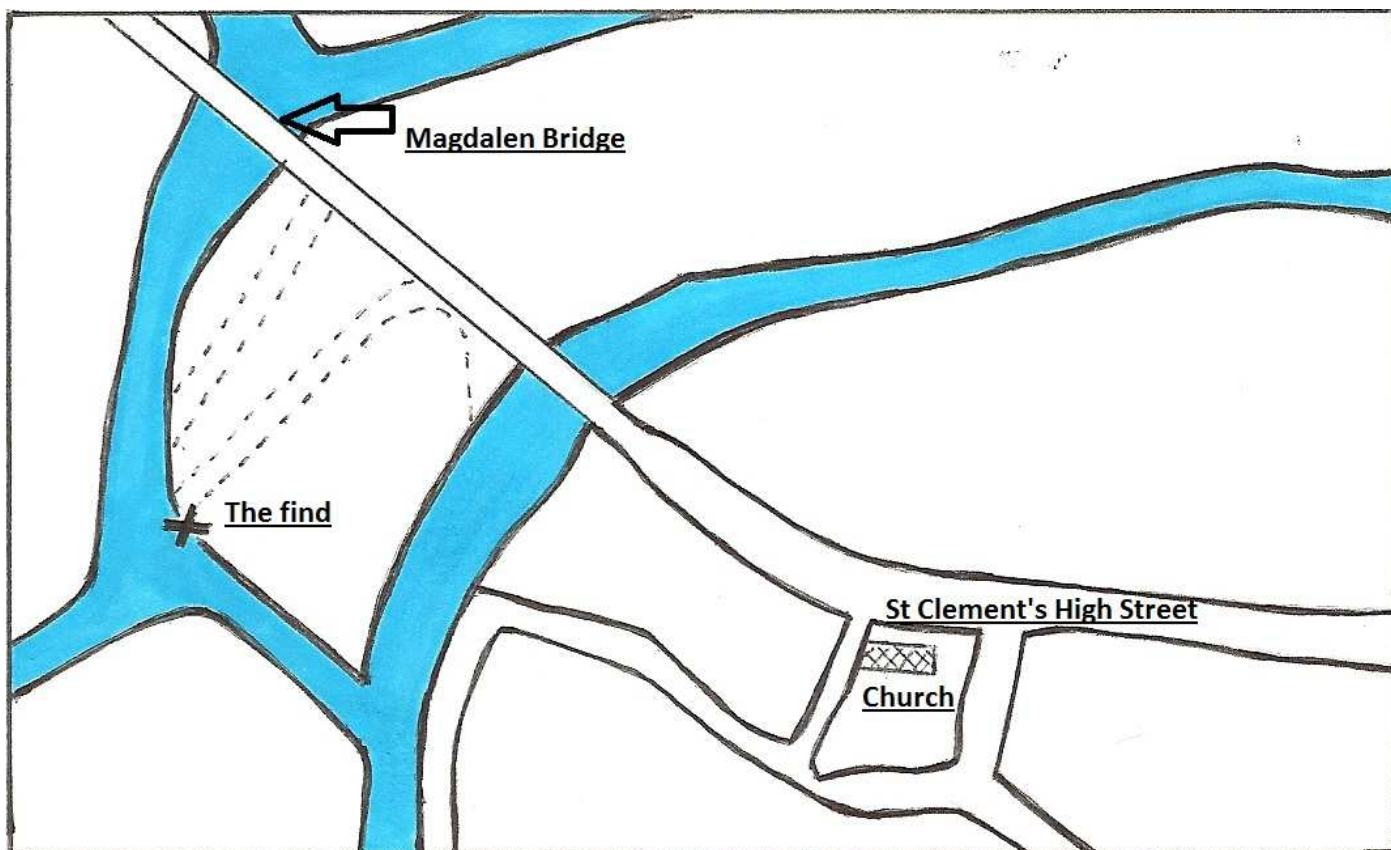


Diagram 3: Is there a D-Shaped enclosure near Magdalen Bridge?

Considering Diagram 3, even if there was no major prehistoric east-west route here which has been suggested, the ford on the Cherwell was of considerable local significance by Anglo-Saxon times. The royal estate of Headington lay on both sides of the river and it must have had importance for a bridge to be built there before 1004. If we draw parallels with known Viking sites, the island at Magdalen Bridge would have been a perfect site for a Viking garrison.

This is a sketch from the oldest map we could find of the area. X marks the supposed location of the finds. The now lost channels across the island which appear on Aga's map (1578) are shown in broken lines.

Consideration 1:

Would the Vikings have buried a warrior and a horse so close to the garrison?

Would a spiritual votive site be so close to the garrison?

Changes in the second half of the tenth century

Viking society changed through the second half of the tenth century. The new armies included Swedish Vikings as well as Norwegians and Danes. These Vikings turned their attention away from Russia back to the west, raiding for tribute or Danegeld from the natives.

Edgar of Wessex (the Peaceful) was crowned king of England in 973AD, and recognised as such by the native Anglo Saxons as well as the Christianised Danish population. A time of dynastic weakness followed Edgar's death in 975AD.

The next successor to the throne was Aethelred (the Unready or Ill Advised), between 978AD – 1013AD and 1014AD –1016AD. He is known to have ordered the St Brice's Day Massacre.

From 980AD, the Anglo Saxon Chronicle records increasing Viking raids on England resulting in the natives buying them off with 'protection' money.

Offerings

Christianity was widespread by Aethelred's reign, although there was a period of return to Pagan ways during Viking occupation. This latter effect was seen in an increase in river 'offerings'. The earlier Pagan Anglo Saxons used to prefer lake deposits more than rivers, but generally any water/earth liminal site might have been used.

The practice of votive offerings was common in the Viking Age, and was thought to have been an offering of thanks to the Gods for successes in previous or good luck in future battles.

As is seen from for example the Witham river deposits, it was not unusual for stirrups to be used as offerings in that period. Similarly in the Thames and Avon, stirrups have been noted in archaeological investigations. The distribution of these votive offerings seems to follow the movements of the 'great army' of 993AD – 1017AD along the Thames and Lower Severn valleys then into East Anglia and Lincolnshire. Viking warbands were known to be mounted and mobile and indeed were thought to have introduced stirrups.

'Many Danish graves contained stirrups, but also other rich horse furniture. Finds of stirrups in the Danelaw attest to the presence of Danish Cavalry in eleventh century armies.' (**GRAHAM-CAMPBELL 1992; SEABY & WOODFIELD 1980**)

Notably, there have been more 'offerings', including stirrups, found in Saxon controlled areas than in the Danelaw. Oxford was Anglo Saxon controlled, standing between the Kingdoms of Mercia and Wessex, and not within the Danelaw.

At Skerne (East Yorkshire), deposits of animal skeletons and Viking metalwork have been found closely associated with the oak piles of a bridge abutment or jetty. Four knives, a spoon bit, an adze and a Viking sword were also found. None of the animal bones showed signs of butchery for consumption. These findings are similar to several in Scandinavia. In one fine example, the Iron Age tradition of bog offerings of horses and weapons can be found at Illerup (Denmark). These ritual offerings were interpreted as giving thanks for success or for good fortune in battle.

Consideration 2:

Recent reports shows offerings that include stirrups and can be close to a bridge abutment or jetty

High Status burials

A high status Viking warrior would not have been buried without display. He would have had a shield, helmet, byrnie, sword, spear and other items which would, more than likely, have been buried with him. No personal 'bling' was found with the Oxford 'burial', which is highly unusual for a warrior's grave. None of these 'display' finds were found, and only human thigh bones were recorded: where were the rest of the warrior's remains?

If a horse had been buried with the warrior, there would have been more of the high status equestrian furniture along with the skull, prick spur and stirrups i.e. bit and harness buckles.

(And significantly: the horseshoe and smaller stirrup found have been dated as much later than the stirrups.)

Consideration 3:

The stirrups are from a high status person.

If the Magdalen Bridge finds were a Viking burial, items seem to be missing from this context?

In Summary

The original paper suggests that the finds were the burial of a Viking warrior and his horse. Review and consideration of recent reports raises a number of considerations:

1. Could there have been a Garrison/ Fort in the Magdalen area?

- Considering other D-shaped enclosures, it is possible. However:
 - i. Would the Vikings have buried a warrior and a horse so close to the garrison?
 - ii. Would a spiritual votive site be so close to the garrison?
- A burial seems unlikely

2. Offerings

- There are many reports relating to these and consider...
 - i. Recent reports shows offerings that include stirrups are often close to a bridge abutment or jetty
- Some similarities exist

3. High Status burials

- There are many reports relating to these, so consider...
 - i. The stirrups are from a high status person.
 - ii. If the Magdalen Bridge finds were a Viking burial, items seem to be missing from this context?
- This was a high status person, but the finds do not align with a high status burial

What this suggests:

Although we may never really know, rather than a grave as originally suggested, consider that it may have been a spiritual site where Pagan Vikings were making offerings to their Gods.

Reference

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