

Huts or Halls: the landscape of *skáli*-sites in north-west England

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Research by the presenter has demonstrated that Viking-Norse settlers across the colonised North Atlantic targeted large, highly-visible mounds for their settlement sites. These mound-site areas were also closely associated in Orkney with Skaill ON *skáli* ('hall') place-names, used in medieval saga literature, and in particular in *Orkneyinga Saga*, to denote the significant hall-buildings of the chieftains of Viking-Norse society. The halls were designed as theatrical spaces, appropriate for feasts and drinking, meetings and decision-making. The relationship between *skáli*-sites and mounds linked the longhouses discovered on mounds with the hierarchical social organisation of the Orkney earldom indicated by the place-name and literary record.

Sites in north-west England designated as *skáli*-sites (for example Scales, Ulverston, [Cumbria]) do not as currently interpreted appear to fit this template. In most Old Norse dictionaries, *skáli* has been given two divergent meanings: a temporary hut linked to a shieling system, or an important drinking-hall. The former meaning has until now been applied to English *skáli*-sites (see in particular the work of Gillian Fellows-Jensen), but without supporting landscape or archaeological evidence. In contrast the acceptance of the 'hall' meaning for *skáli*-sites in Orkney has been underpinned by a profound understanding of the Orcadian landscape gained by the locally-based historians and scholars of Scandinavian settlement in the archipelago, such as Hugh Marwick and William Thomson, and confirmed by the archaeology. The *skáli*-sites in Orkney are located on the islands' prime coastal agricultural land with access to important sea-routes and landing places, and have produced major longhouse settlements. These were not the hut-sites of a shieling-system.

However, the landscape locations of the English *skáli*-sites have not been investigated and a preliminary survey of sites in the Cleveland area of England suggested that reviewing them with an understanding of the Scandinavian approach to using the land, threw doubt on the assumed designation of a shieling hut in a marginal area. Using the settlement models developed in Orkney and drawing on that Cleveland research this paper will present initial work on the *skáli*-sites of north-west England. The landscapes of Cumbrian sites will be analysed, and the paper will move on to hypothesise about the hitherto elusive character of the Scandinavian settlement landscapes. Very little is known about the settlement process or character in this area as so very little is attested archaeologically: place-names and their landscape context are all thus critical resources in investigating a period of significant change in rural society.