

# Loch na h-Airde Docks

## The 12<sup>th</sup> c. Viking dockyard on Skye



Image: Viking boat pulling into the boatyard through the canal (Credit: Open Virtual Worlds).

Loch na h-Airde, on the peninsula of Rubha an Dunain, on the south-western corner of Skye, contains evidence for a 12<sup>th</sup> century dockyard, built and operated by the Vikings. The dockyard complex consisted of two loch quays and two sets of stone-built boat docks and noosts – stone and turf boat shelters, used when the ships were dragged out of the water. The first dock and noost are larger, with space for a boat up to 17 x 4 metres; it is currently the largest known noost in Scotland. The second dock and noost could fit a boat up to 10 x 2.5 metres. There is also evidence for at least three additional buildings. Finally, a stone-lined canal (a 117 m or 380 ft in length) likely carved from an existing stream, connects the loch to the sea. The canal would have kept the water level in the loch stable and allowed for boats, like *birlinns*, to enter and exit. The harbour yard sits at a strategic location, with easy access to the Inner and Outer Hebrides and the ability to monitor an ships approaching Skye from the West. This was a high area of trade at the time and represented important sea routes. Given the scale of the complex, it is probable the loch was used to construct or repair ships. It might also have served as a staging location or a place to shelter and overwinter boats. The peninsula has a long history of occupation and maritime activity. A cave 400 m to the northeast contains Neolithic and Iron Age evidence of metalworking and possible the production of a wooden paddle. The peninsula was also the home of the MacAskills, a clan of Norse origins, who were *comes liores* (coast watchers) for the MacLeods of Skye. The MacAskills only left the area during The Clearances of the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. The dockyard offers us insights into how boats were built, repaired, stored, and moved during the medieval period in Scotland.

### How Did We Know What to Reconstruct?

In 2000, archaeologists discovered boat timbers in the loch dating to c.1100, including part of a bite (internal frame) from a Norse-style *faering* (clinker). Most evidence of historic vessels in Scotland are from Norse boat burials, making this finding extremely important. A 2009 archaeological study sponsored by Historic Environment Scotland (HES) identified a stone-lined canal and quays. This was followed by an aerial survey of the area in 2011, again by HES that provided more information on the canal and dockyard. The scale of the site suggested that it was an important site on the western coast. Comparisons to the harbour and boat remnants from Laig on Eigg reinforce the Norse link, but also highlight the uniqueness of the Loch na h-Airde docks. A late 16<sup>th</sup> century account by Timothy Pont further testified to the importance of the Rubha an Dunain peninsula.

### How Was the Reconstruction Created?

A digital landscape was created using survey data and height map. Models were created in 3D modelling programs and imported into UNREAL (a cross-platform game engine for creating virtual worlds). The models were then scaled, orientated and assembled. The landscapes were populated with flora and fauna. Where applicable, models of characters and animals were imported and animated.

### How Has the Reconstruction Been Used?

This project has been part of CUPIDO, a wider project, in conjunction with the AROS Centre, Skye. Together, these reconstructions tell the evolution of Skye in the 45 min film, 'SkyeStory'.

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### How to Access the Reconstruction.

You can view a reconstruction of the Loch na h-Airde docks on [Vimeo](#).


Full video available to view at the [AROS Centre](#), Portree, Skye, Scotland as part of the '[SkyeStory](#)'.

### Discover More

Information about area can be found on [Canmore](#) 

Information can also be found at [Historic Environment Scotland](#) 

The history of the Viking constructions at Loch na h-Airde, including the artificial canal the docks served, is also available on [Wikipedia](#). 

You can see what the site looks like today on [Google Maps](#). 

### Project Funding

This reconstruction was part of the [CUPIDO](#) (Culture Power: Inspire to Develop Rural Areas) project to develop new business opportunities in the cultural and cultural heritage sector around the North Sea, to reinforce the economic position, competitiveness and social cohesion of local rural communities in areas with a declining population. CUPIDO is co-funded by the North Sea Region Programme 2014-2020. The partnership has 14 partners from 7 regions in 6 countries around the North Sea.

CUPIDO is mainly about the commercialisation of the cultural sector that contributes towards creating vibrant, sustainable rural municipalities/communities that attract people to live, work and enjoy life. The project offers its partners an opportunity to jointly share resources, knowledge and expertise to commercialise the cultural sector. It enables insight into new business approaches, stimulates the development of products and services, and aims at an average of five new start-ups per area and support to existing SME's. Follow CUPIDO in social media #cupidoNSR

**Date Reconstruction Published:** The digital representation of the Viking Dockyard was produced in 2019.

**The project is funded by the North Sea Region.**