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SHAPINSAY (ON *Hjalpandisey*, either Helping Island, for ships, or, Shipping Island, or maybe *Hjalpandi's Isle*) lies northeast of Kirkwall and less than 30 minutes away by ferry, making it almost part of St. Ola. This highly cultivated island is composed mostly of Rousay flags, with some Eday flags in the southeast, while at Haco's Ness (HY525149) there are volcanic rocks. The whole island is overlain with a layer of boulder clay. It was one of the first areas of Orkney to be successfully "improved". The regular ten-acre fields are the result of

land reform in the 1850s, when the old system of run-rigs was rationalised and much new land reclaimed, with the result that production increased dramatically. As in most parts of Orkney, the farms are all owner-occupied nowadays.

Archaeology Shapinsay has few major archaeological sites on display, but is rich in unexcavated mounds and possible prehistoric sites. At Castle Bloody (HY537165) a mound covers a chambered cairn, on the island's last remaining moorland. There is

The Hillock of Burroughston encloses a well-preserved broch



also a stalled cairn at Haco's Ness (HY525149), with six upright stones set in a large chamber. The site is rather confusing due to later walls. A standing stone, the Mor Stein (HY524169), stands 3m high where it is said to have landed after being thrown by a giant from the Mainland at his fleeing wife!

Iron Age & Brochs The Broch of Burroughston (HY541211) was excavated in 1862 and had fallen into ruin, but has now been tidied up and repaired, and is well worth visiting. This typical broch site faces the sea and is surrounded by good agricultural land. An impressive ditch and rampart enclose a settlement on the shore side.

The doorway and interior are particularly well preserved. The walls survive to a height of about 3m and the intramural staircases and spaces are clearly visible. There is a hole in the centre of the floor with steps descending to a probable well, and an interesting cell with a corbelled roof leading off to the left of the entrance passage. Both have echoes of Minehowe.

There are several other brochs, including Steiro (HY503163), below the old kirk, the large mound at Howe (HY512160), and The Hillock at Ness of Ork (HY536221), where walls and midden can be seen eroding from the shore. Clearly the eastern approaches to the



Elwick and Balfour Village from the east

Stromsøy Firth and Shapinsay Sound were important in the Iron Age.

Romans? It is possible that the Romans may have visited Shapinsay. Agricola's fleet is said to have subdued Orkney in AD83 and other contacts with Orkney's Picts are

recorded. Roman artefacts have also been found at broch sites. Near Stromberry there is a small jetty called Grukalyt Pier (HY467173), which is traditionally named after Agricola, due to the loss of a Roman ship near here. This could all be legend, and Roman goods could have



Broch of Burroughston - well

Broch of Burroughston - corbelled cell at entrance



SHAPINSAY ATTRACTIONS
"by the sun"

- Balfour Castle
- Point of Dishan & Douche
- Balfour Village
- The Gatehouse
- Smithy Restaurant
- Smithy Heritage Centre
- Gas House
- Elwick Mill
- Mill Dam RSPB Reserve
- Vasa Loch
- Little Vasa Loch
- Salt Ness
- Galt Ness & Skerry
- Orkney Stained Glass
- The Ouse & Lairò Water
- Odin Stone
- Skenstoft Beach (Veantrow Bay)
- Quholm
- Sandy Geo, Ness of Ork
- Broch of Burroughston
- Linton Chapel
- East Hill & East Craigs
- Holm of Burghlee
- Mor Stein
- Pool of Harroldsgarth
- Howe Broch
- Old Kirk and graveyard
- Steiro Broch
- Elwickbank view



Sandy Geo on the north side of the Ness of Ork below The Hillock broch

come to Orkney by trade.

Norse Times Although Shapinsay is not mentioned in the *Orkneyinga Saga*, it is featured in *Haakon's Saga*. In 1263, Elwick Bay witnessed the arrival and muster of King Haakon of Norway's great fleet with which he planned to arrest the decline of Norse power in Scotland. Apparently they arrived on a

Saturday and after holding mass in his land tent the King entertained all the local people. It is said that one of his ships was lost on Haco's Ness, but there is no hard evidence for this!

Odin's Stone (HY506193), a large stone about 2m square on the beach below Lair Water, is different from other



The Mor Stane with Castle Bloody chambered cairn in the background

The "Old Kirk" is now roofless



"Master George Buchanan" with nearby date "1656"



stones on the beach and tradition has it that offerings to the Norse God were made there. It has also been suggested that Ting meetings were held here. The nearby farm of Skenstoff (ON Skeidarnaustopt, House at a Noust for a *Skeid*, a type of longship), may have been the landing place for such meetings.

Christian sites At Linton (HY530187) there is a 12th century chapel dedicated to St Catherine which resembles the Wyre chapel. It has walls nearly 1m thick, an oblong nave and a small chancel. A lintel from here was used in building a byre on a nearby farm in the early 1900s, but it was promptly returned when two of the farmer's cattle were discovered hanged in the byre.

In the kirkyard near the now roofless old kirk, which dates from 1802 are the remains of Lady Kirk, said to have been built in 1559, most likely on the site of a much earlier chapel. Renovations were carried out on at least two subsequent occasions. There are several interesting tombstones

here and elsewhere in the graveyard. The present *Old Kirk* was built in the graveyard and initially had an earth floor. Apparently the smell was so strong that women sometimes fainted, prompting the installation of a wooden floor.

The Balfours The house of Sound was originally built about 1674 by Arthur Buchanan. Their grand daughter married James Fea of Pirate Gow fame, who was a Jacobite sympathiser and sent a supply of arms to the rebel army, as a result of which the house was burned down in 1746 by government soldiers. The only remnant today is *Buchanan's Gate*, the west entry to the Castle gardens that incorporates the initials of Arthur Buchanan and Margaret Buxton and the date 1674 from the entrance to their house of Sound.

The Balfours were Jacobites, and suffered financially as a result, but Thomas Balfour married Frances Liginier in 1775, whose money allowed them to buy the Sound Estate

Balfour Castle interior



Balfour Castle from the sea - it dates from 1847

in 1784. They built a new house, Cliffdale, and established the village, then called Shoreside, to house cottars cleared from Sound.

Farm buildings and dykes were erected. Soon the estate was transformed, with fields enclosed and modern farming practices adopted. Following generations of Balfours amassed money, but did not continue the rapid developments of the late 1700s.

Balfour Castle This all changed when David Balfour inherited the estate in 1846. His father William had recently purchased the rest of Shapinsay, and he immediately set about changing the face of the island. The Scottish architect David Bryce

was engaged to enlarge the existing house into the present Balfour Castle, complete with castellated tower, corner turrets, crowstep gables and large picture windows.

The Scottish Baronial style mansion originally had 12 out-



Dishan Tower - salt water shower

Elwick Lodge (1784) and sea-washed toilet





The Wide Firth from one of the searchlight houses at Saltness

side doors, 52 rooms and 365 window panes. The Gatehouse used to be the Porter's Lodge of the Castle and was built in 1851. Crenellations and turrets add a military feel to the whole area. Extensive woods and gardens were laid out, the pier, a school and the home farm built.

South of the pier *The Douche*, a salt-water shower with a dovecote on top was constructed. Balfour also installed a gasworks in about 1856 to illuminate the Castle and village. The circular stone tower remains near the school. It incorporates some stones taken from Noltland castle, including one with a date of

1725.

Although he did not succeed in changing the name *Shapinsay* to his own, Balfour did manage to persuade the Postmaster General to change the postal address of the island to *Balfour*. Presumably this rather pretentious change increased his pride.

The whole of Shapinsay, apart from the Church-owned Glebe, was squared into 10-acre fields, with extensive drains and dykes. New breeds of cattle and sheep were brought in and the latest crops introduced. In 1841 only 748 acres were arable, but by 1874

this area exceeded 6,000 acres.

Balfour Castle makes an interesting visit. The interior has not changed much since David Balfour's time and remains totally unspoilt. The gardens are used to supply a wonderful variety of vegetables and fruit for the family and guests. There is a large plantation of trees sheltering the gardens. Described as "*the most northerly castle hotel in the world*" it offers exclusive accommodation for up to ten guests.

The last Judicial Killing A Shapinsay woman was the last person to be executed in Orkney, in 1728. This young serving woman, a Marjory Meason from Frustigar, was accused of "child murder" and hanged in Kirkwall. She was sentenced "*to be hanged by the neck upon a gibbet until she be dead.*" The execution cost £15 8s, of which a large part was spent on ale to the Wrights, Smiths and Officers.

It took the Magistrates and

Council, 24 armed men plus officers, several workmen and a hangman to perform the grim deed, for which the last was paid 2/- after the poor woman had been killed. Perhaps they all felt very badly about their actions, for there are no further records of ritual judicial killing of young mothers, or indeed anyone else, in Orkney.

Washington Irving, though born in New York, is one of Shapinsay's distinguished grandsons. His father was born at Quholme (HY522214) about 1740, where the original house still stands. He went to sea and was a petty-officer aboard a packet ship, which ran from Falmouth to New York.

He married a Falmouth girl in 1761, emigrated to New York in 1763 and they had three sons. One of the sons, Washington, became the first American author to gain international fame, as well as being a diplomat and US Ambassador to Spain. "*Rip Van Winkle*" and "*Tales of the Alhambra*" are two of his best-known works.

During the mid-19th century the Herring fishing was seasonally important here and salt was stored in the stores at the top of the pier. Cod processing was also carried out in Elwick Bay for a time. The shingle beaches on Helliar Holm were used to dry the salted fish, but the workers lived in bothies in the village and used the sea-washed toilet near the pier. The tide cleaned out the con-



Galtness WWII Coastal Battery house a twin 6-pounder gun

tents twice a day, but it cannot still have been very salubrious. Elwick Mill (HY486169) is one of the largest watermills in Orkney, though it no longer grinds corn. There is a pottery workshop and studio in the nearby old mill.

World War II Coastal Batteries During the two World Wars, Kirkwall Bay was used to detain and search neutral ships to ensure that they were not carrying goods for Germany. At Salt Ness (HY475199) are remains of a WWII coastal gun battery, which was called Galtness and was operational by March 1941. Its function was to

defend the entrance of the Wide Firth from MTBs.

The emplacement for a twin 6-pounder, the director tower, searchlights and other buildings remain. The nearby Castle Battery had two 4.7in guns, and two searchlights, as well as unusual gun emplacements, but was only in use from 1941 to 1943. An AA battery completed this little arsenal, which was manned by over 250 soldiers. There is a very good panoramic view of the Wide Firth from here.

Wildlife Though the land is mostly cultivated there are several good wildlife haunts on.

The Ouse and Odinstone from Chapelbrae with Veantrow Bay behind



Sunset over the Wide Firth from near Vasa Skerry





The "Iona" was the ferry from 1893 until the 1970s



MV "Shapinsay" makes frequent daily runs to Kirkwall

The coastal lochs of Vasa (HY472185), Little Vasa Water and Lairò Water (HY500190), are good places to see wildfowl in winter, while the moorland, low cliffs and rocky shores of the east coast, have terns, skuas and gulls in summer.

The Ouse and the tidal mud flats of Veantrow Bay are good for waders from mid-July and all winter. Vasa Loch is consistently one of the best places to see Whooper Swans in the winter,

with up to 100 being present then. There is a useful carpark at Skenstoft, east of the Ouse and Lairò Water. Grey and Common Seals frequent the skerries and rocky shores. There are many places where close views may be had without disturbance. Otters are also present and may often be seen at Lairò Water in the early morning or late evening.

The RSPB Mill Dam Reserve (HY485175) extends north-

wards up a small valley to the north of Elwick Bay. Originally the water supply for the Elwick Mill, this small artificial loch holds many species of waterfowl and waders. There is an excellent view of the reserve from the hide on its west side, which is about 1.5km north of the village.

Pintail breed here, along with Wigeon, Shoveller, Pochard and other wildfowl. In winter Whooper Swans are often seen



Aerial view of Shapinsay from the southeast



The Mill Dam RSPB Reserve from the hide

here, while Greylag Geese are now present all year. Hen Harrier and Merlin may be seen quartering the area for voles. Water Rail breed here and are regularly heard but rarely seen.

Scottish Wildlife Trust Reserve Parts of the East Hill and East Craigs (Holm of Burghlee, HY536160) form a Scottish Wildlife Trust Reserve, which occupies part of the southeast corner of the Shapinsay. It covers 18.7ha of maritime heath and supports breeding gulls, terns, skua and waders as well as abundant wild flowers in spring and summer. The Holm of Burghlee itself

(HY536158) is a large stack, which is joined to the cliff by a somewhat precarious land bridge.

The coast from Dog Geo to Haco's Ness is low cliffs up to 30m high with many geos, caves, skerries and stacks. Park at a quarry near Dog Geo or beside the Mor Stein. Castle Bloody chambered cairn is prominent on the top of the hill to the east, from which the standing stone are in line. There is a coastal path from Dog Geo to Castle Bloody. The many caves can be entered by small boat, but are not accessible from the land.

Beaches There are several fine beaches on Shapinsay. These include Skenstoft, Sandside, Innsker, Noust of Erraby and Sandy Geo on the north side. Perhaps the best beach on the island is the south-facing Bay of Sandgarth (HY520158) on the southeast corner, said to be the Shapinsay folk's favourite.

SHAPINSAY SERVICES

Getting To Shapinsay Orkney Ferries, Tel 01856 872044 operate daily services to the island from Kirkwall using "MV Shapinsay". Please refer to their latest timetables for details.

Where to Stay and Eat on Shapinsay Balfour Castle private groups by arrangement Tel 01856 711282

Smithy Restaurant lunches and even meals Tel 01856 711722

Hilton Farmhouse open all year booking preferred for lunch and dinner ***B&B. Also tours including lunch Tel 01856 711239

B&B and self-catering is available on Shapinsay. Please check the latest *Islands of Orkney* and *VisitOrkney* brochures.

Shops and fuel Shoreside Shop & PO, Balfour Village, general store and fuel 01856 711300



"We work with what we see around us, the colours of the sea and sky, the shapes and patterns of the waves and tangles, wherever possible drawing on material and inspiration from Shapinsay itself."

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HELLIAR HOLM (ON *Elliarvik Holm*, Elwick Holm or possibly *Hellia Holm*, Cave Holm), shelters Elwick from the south and east Holm Sound, is not navigable, except with care by very small craft, and dries at spring ebbs. Like the Brough of Birsay the islands were probably formerly connected by land.

The island has an Orkney-Cromarty type stalled chambered cairn at its highest point

(HY484154, 28m). There is a large cairn on its north side. The tops of three pairs of upright stalls can be seen as well as the southeast-facing entrance passage. The cairn is about 18m in diameter.

The remains of a small broch lie on the northeast corner (HY486158) above Kirk Geo. Many of the stones are no doubt incorporated into the nearby sheepfold.



Helliar Holm broch

Aerial view of Helliar Holm, Elwick, Balfour Castle and Balfour Village



The lighthouse was built in 1893 by David A Stevenson. The grounding of the steamer *St Rognvald* on the Head of Work in 1891 finally ensured that this leading light was erected. The squat 13m-high lighthouse provides safe sectors for entering and leaving Kirkwall Bay and was made automatic in 1967. There is a small pier below it with deep water, which can be used by small boats in settled conditions.



Chambered cairn

The east side of the island has low cliffs with several small caves, which could possibly have been the source of the name. A small boat could be hidden in the largest of them. The shore between the North Pier and Holm Sound is a favourite place for Common Seals to haul out.

THIEVES HOLM is a mysteriously-named small holm off Carness, passed by every boat entering Kirkwall Bay. Whether thieves were banished there is not clear, but now it is home to a few sheep. Perhaps the strong tides were thought enough to deter any poor souls abandoned on this not very isolated small island.

In 1973 the cargo ship, *St Rognvald*, accidentally went aground here, perhaps the island's main claim to fame. The ship was pulled off by a tug and continued in service, but the skipper, Captain Moncrieff, was dismissed. Orkney Islands Council recently installed a small flashing beacon on the north end of the island

Persons condemned to die were said to have been given the choice of being hanged at Gallowhill, or of being tied to a rock at low tide on Thieves Holm and being left to drown. No doubt the executioners charged extra for this. There was also at one time a custom to display the cadavers of wrongdoers on islets or rocks at entrances to harbours as an example to others.



Thieves Holm lies off Carness at the west end of The String

Since execution was expensive, it was cheaper to leave condemned prisoners on the island to die on Thieves Holm. If they tried to swim for the Mainland, they were likely to be swept away by the tide. A final variation is that the accused were banished to Thieves Holm, tied up in a canvas bag and tied to a stake, where they starved to death, no doubt first being attacked by Black-backed Gulls.

The opportunity of escape, or more likely being saved in exchange for payment was presumably not lost on the authorities. It is said that a girl was banished here in a canvas bag in the 1600s, for stealing her own sheep, but was rescued and escaped to Edinburgh. Later she returned and ended up marrying the son of the Baillie who sentenced her to such a cruel punishment.



The east coast of Helliar Holm has low cliffs with several caves

Common Seals often lie up at Helliar Holm



Cod were processed and dried on Helliar Holm





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GAIRSAY (ON *Gareksey*, Garek's Isle). The home in Viking times of the chieftain Olaf Rolfson and his famous Viking son, **Sweyn Asleifson**, Gairsay is one of the most attractive islands in Orkney and with its excellent haven at **Millburn Bay** (HY450218) and fertile, south-facing land it would have been a natural place for a Viking chieftain to live. Few places evoke the proximity of our Viking past more than Gairsay.

According to the *Orkneyinga Saga*, after the spring work was done on the farm, Sweyn Asleifson and his Vikings went on their *Spring Cruise*, plundering down the west of Scotland, England and Ireland, before returning for the harvest. They then had an *Autumn Cruise* and

returned to spend the winter on Gairsay. Sweyn had a high reputation for bravery, but was also a politician and figures in many saga exploits and intrigues. He was eventually killed at Dublin in 1170, on what was to be his last Viking trip.

Sweyn's sons Olaf and Andrew are not mentioned further in the *Orkneyinga Saga*, except to state that Olaf married Bishop Bjarni's daughter, Frida, granddaughter of Kolbein Hruga of Wyre and settled down as a farmer. The family had considerable other landholdings in Caithness, the Mainland and Stronsay and presumably plenty of wealth from all Sweyn's booty, some of which may well be buried.

Sweyn's Castle, the mound in Millburn Bay (HY451219) has been described as a grave of some Viking chieftain, but it is actually a Bronze Age burnt mound, as confirmed by stones on it. There is also a large boat noust in the bay, which is a very sheltered harbour. The Langskaill pier may also date from Viking times.

Sweyn Asleifson's Great Hall or *Skali* may lie beneath Langskaill (HY435218, ON *Langi skali*, Long Hall), which was rebuilt about 1653 for Sir William Craigie and his wife Margaret Honeyman. The original house had three wings round a central courtyard completed by a screen wall with a parapet and balustrade facing the sea. The east wing was restored around 1900 by the author Storer Clouston but the rest is derelict. There are various interesting ruins nearby, including a large kiln at The Taing.

Gairsay was well populated up until the early 20th century and there are several interesting farmstead remains, as well as a chambered cairn (HY449224) on the hill above the farm of Skelbist (HY447221, ON *Skala bolstadr*, Hall Farmstead). The panoramic view of the North Isles and Wide Firth from the top of the hill (102m) is one of the best in Orkney. Sitting in the lea of the cairn on a summer's day watching the ferries and fishing boats creeping among the islands it is easy to have a sense of timelessness.

The Hen of Gairsay, Millburn Bay and Skelbist from the Hill



Aerial view of Gairsay from the southeast - Holm of Boray on left, Millburn Bay centre and Sweyn Holm on right

The third farm is Boray (HY444213, ON *Bore*, tide race), but it was perhaps the site of a broch. This unexcavated site will no doubt hold treasures for the archaeologist of the future. The old buildings give a sense of long occupation, which has only relatively recently been interrupted by abandonment.

The southern side of the island has all been cultivated, but the hill and north side remain as moorland, except at North Head (HY448231) where there are remains of dykes and buildings. There are further ruins along the shore of Russness Bay, probably of a homestead, (ON *Hrossa nes*, Horse Ness). In common with other islands in all probability the first settlers

Boray was said to be the best farm for corn



picked the best sites for their farms and there will be a whole succession of occupation debris beneath the present three farms.

Wildlife Gairsay has colonies of Arctic Terns, Arctic Skuas, Tysties and many Eider Ducks, as well as a few Great Skuas. Golden Plover and Grouse nest on the hill, while Redshank and Snipe breed in marshy areas.



Langskaill may be the site of Sweyn Asleifson's Hall

Russland Bay is a particularly good place to observe seals swimming and playing. Grey Seals come ashore to pup here and on Sweyn Holm.

Most of the hill is fenced off to limit grazing, allowing many species to regenerate which might otherwise have been eaten before flowering.

Chambered cairn above Russness Bay





Sweyn Holm and Russness Bay from Gairsay

HOLM OF BORAY (ON *Borey*, Tide Race Isle) lies south of Millburn Bay. The strong tides which flow past it ensure plenty of food for the large Cormorant colony on the west side. Many Great Black-backed Gulls also breed among the Scentless Mayweed which covers the top of the island. Common and Grey Seals are often to be seen lying up on the north end.

SWEYN HOLM to the northeast of Gairsay must take its name from its famous previous Viking owner. Grey Seals come ashore to pup here in autumn. In summer Eiders, gulls and some terns nest. Being lightly grazed it has an interesting flora.

The Holm of Boray



HOLM OF RENDALL is a small, flat island which lies off the Rendall shore and with a tiny area of vegetation at its centre. At low tide its area expands dramatically. There is normally a colony of Arctic Terns here and also some Sandwich Terns, which are uncommon in Orkney. Nearby Seal Skerry and Puldrite Skerry are both dry at low ebbs.

TAING SKERRY is south of Gairsay, and has a small area of shingle with some vegetation at high tide. The Boray Cormorant colony sometimes moves here and the birds build their nests right down to the high tide mark. The colony seems to flit between here and the Holm of Boray. This is another very good place to see

Cormorants on Taing Skerry



seals hauled out on the rocks at low tide. The whole area is hazardous without local knowledge due to the many skerries, strong tides and eddies.

GRASS HOLM, a well-named grassy island, has a small flock of native "holmie" sheep. A few gulls nest here and many Greylag Geese roost. It has attractive little beaches on both the north and the south sides.

In winter the sounds around these islands are home to large numbers of Long-tailed Duck, Great Northern Diver, and even the occasional White-billed Diver. Velvet Scoter and Red-breasted Merganser are also to be seen.

Seals lie up on the many dry-ing skerries and points all over this area. They can often be approached quite closely. In autumn Grey Seals come ashore to pup on the Hen of Gairsay, Grass Holm and Sweyn Holm. There are Otters along most of these shores, and although they are rarely seen their presence is obvious from the characteristic fishy spraints.



Damsay is said to have had a house belonging to the Bishop

DAMSAY (ON *Damisey* or *Daminsey*, from Celtic *Dimun*, referring to twin islands) is frequently mentioned in the *Orkneyinga Saga*. It had a small castle on it in the 12th century and was probably Bishopric land. There are extensive overgrown ruins to the east of the loch which is an excellent place to view wild-fowl and waders in winter and in migration times.

HOLM OF GRIMBISTER (ON *Grim's oy*, *Grim's Island*) is the twin island of Damsay and joined to the Mainland by a tidal causeway. There is a croft there which is presently uninhabited, although animals are grazed on the fields. The shallow waters here were formerly very productive Oyster grounds. Pollution from the settlement of Finstown may have killed them off.



The Holm of Rendall has a large Tern colony in summer

The Holm of Grimbister is joined to the Mainland by a tidal causeway



The Legend of Boray Holm is one of many about seals. It is said that the souls of believers in Odin reside in Grey Seals, of which the Holms like the Holm of Boray are favourite haunts. On Johnsmas Eve (midsummer) each year the Vikings come ashore to revisit Earth, leaving their sealskins on the shore while they spend a night of revelry. At midnight, on the strike of St Magnus Cathedral, they re-don their skins and go to sea again for another year.

One midsummer evening a young fisherman was passing and hearing the sounds of music and dancing approached to see what was happening. He crept ashore and hid one skin, so that at midnight one lovely sea maiden could not return. He asked her to be his wife and they had three blissful years together, but then she became ill, and asked to return to Boray, saying that "she would hold a cross, and that if his Christ was strong enough to save her, she would remain for him after midnight."

The Viking souls tried very hard to persuade her to return to the sea, but she did not, and her husband returned to find her clutching her cross, but dead. This is a variation on the many selkie people tales common in Orkney