

SCOTLAND

ORKNEY

A VIKING-AGE SETTLEMENT UNDER WINDBLOWN SAND

BAY OF SKAILL (HY 2365 1962).

The Birsay-Skaill Landscape Archaeology Project (Oxford University) began in 2003, led by D. Griffiths, and is aimed at building a landscape context for multi-period sites at Birsay Bay, Marwick Bay and the Bay of Skaill on Orkney's West Mainland.¹ These bays are seriously affected by coastal erosion and exposures include well-known, and in some cases extensively excavated, prehistoric and early historic sites, notably on the southern edge of the Point of Buckquoy and Brough of Birsay, and Skara Brae. Using extensive geophysical and topographic survey, the Project has explored areas surrounding the known sites, identifying new concentrations of archaeological potential away from the shoreline, and using targeted excavation to characterize and sample some of the deposits revealed by survey. Two landscape zones in particular are affected by significant spreads of wind-blown sand: Birsay Links west and south of the Palace Village at Birsay, and the Links of Skaill surrounding the bay frontage and hinterland of the Bay of Skaill. The project has used various types of geophysics and test excavation to characterize deposits beneath the sand overburdens.

Fieldwork at Birsay has concentrated on using geophysics to establish fresh contextual information surrounding sites and structures observed by, amongst others Morris et al. in the 1970s-early 1980s.² At Marwick Bay, an eroding settlement mound on the foreshore was recorded and sample-excavated in 2009, and a scheduled chapel and mound site immediately inland were surveyed. At the Bay of Skaill, initial survey in 2003, and further survey and excavations in 2004-8 were concentrated on the northern bay environs, outwith the WHS buffer zone surrounding Skara Brae.³ This is an area of considerable archaeological potential, yet due to the blanketing effects of centuries of windblown sand deposition (now grassed over to form rough grazing land), very few systematic archaeological observations had been made. Several large sandy mounds are discernable topographically, lying across the northern hinterland of the bay along the line of a stream or burn, separated by between 25 and 100m of low-lying grassland. Fieldwork has established that there are five such mound sites in this area (excluding Broch of Verron, HY21NW22). The largest of these has a historic name: 'Snusgar', probably from ON *Snus* or *Snoos* ('prominent') with *garðr* ('dwelling' or 'enclosure'). The name was however first recorded relatively late – in the *Old Statistical Account* of 1795, when

¹ The Project has been funded by Historic Scotland, Orkney Islands Council and Oxford University. Project web site: www.conted.ox.ac.uk/research/projects/birsay-skaill

² Morris 1989, 1996 and forthcoming.

³ Griffiths 2006; Downes et al. (eds) 2005, 27.

masonry exposed in its flank was (perhaps fancifully) described as the ‘Castle of Snusgar’.⁴ St Peter’s Kirk (formerly the parish church of Sandwick) stands prominently nearby on the northern side of the bay, somewhat isolated from modern inhabitations. The current building dates to 1836 but its predecessor probably had later medieval, and possibly early medieval origins. The 1858 Skaill Viking Hoard, the largest Viking silver hoard from Scotland, was discovered in sandy rabbit burrows somewhere in this area, although the precise location was not recorded at the time.⁵ A hypothesis which the Project has sought to elucidate is that the presence of the kirk, the mounds, and the hoard, together imply that the north side of the Bay of Skaill represents a significant central place in the early historic period. Climate change in the later medieval period, and increased mobility and deposition of windblown sand, are possible reasons why the area declined and is largely depopulated today.

Excavations at the Bay of Skaill

Gradiometry showed a dense concentration of magnetic anomalies in the ‘Snusgar’ mound and its four neighbouring mounds. Snusgar mound itself was the first target for excavation in 2004-6; this exercise showed a large structure with 1.5m thick double-faced walls (now very fragmentary and robbed-out) had once existed on top, and also that the structure of the mound itself was composed of a series of layers of midden (organic debris) and ash, contained by flat spreads of stone. Their pinkish-grey deposits contained numerous Viking-period finds of bone pins, comb fragments, steatite vessels and other artefacts, worked stone, and iron objects. Radiocarbon dating of carbonised grain by SUERC shows these layers were created relatively rapidly in the period AD 900-1050. A cormorant bone from a layer much lower down inside the mound produced a calibrated date of AD 700.

The 2010 excavation area was originally opened as a small test-trench in 2005 on a large sand mound termed the ‘East Mound’, 100m to the E of ‘Snusgar’, revealing Viking and Norse-period middens stratified over a well-preserved stone building with in-situ orthostatic internal divisions or ‘furniture’. Excavation continued in 2006-8 and was extended in 2010. A coherent complex of stone walls has now been revealed standing up to 1.2m high with clearly-defined internal and external areas, stone flagged and compacted clay floors, yards and entrances. Outside to the SE of outbuildings were rich, deep midden deposits. Underlying these were a drain system and an earlier phase of stone buildings of a less rectilinear, more curvilinear plans, perhaps dating to the early or even the pre-Viking period (radiocarbon dates pending). External to the buildings exposed in 2005-8 (now themselves viewed as outbuildings) was a square ‘yard’ area to the SW which was heavily burnt and contained very large quantities of metalworking waste, vitrified ferrous slag and hammerscale, with a small crucible and a blob of silver indicating non-ferrous metalworking. This was fully excavated in 2010, revealing a series of four well-preserved bowl hearths separated by laminated clay floors, and producing large amounts of ferrous and some non-ferrous metalworking residues. Radiocarbon

⁴ OSA 1795.

⁵ Graham-Campbell 1995.

dates taken in 2008 indicate that the upper fills of the metalworking features contain charred material from around c.1000 AD (further samples from 2010 are pending).

In 2008 the central section of a large longhouse, with walls standing over a metre, was exposed immediately to the north of the smaller buildings excavated in 2005-7: connected to them by a staircase and flagged yard. In 2008 the central section of the longhouse was exposed, divided laterally into two zones by a transverse stub wall, with a stone flagged entrance area, a drain and central walkway to the E, and box benches and hearth deposits to the W. There was strong evidence for spatial zoning in the character of deposits and the stub wall indicated the division between animal and domestic occupation. Finds and a coherent group of radiocarbon dates provided a Viking/Late Norse date between c.1000-1200 AD, which has been supplemented by a series of OSL samples processed at the Research Laboratory for Archaeology, Oxford University. OSL also provided a date taken from the mid-section of the 1.5-2m deep sand overburden, which seems to have filled the building complex and almost completely buried it by the 15th century AD.

The longhouse was almost fully exposed in 2010 (with only a small part of the interior within the western end remaining wholly unexcavated between two trenches) [1]. Both ends of the building were identified, confirming it is 23.6m long and 4.5m wide (max), with intact stone side benches, laminated ash and clay floors and hearths, sunken stone-lined box-pits, and symmetrically-sited post-holes.⁶ The building was constructed in at least three phases (to be confirmed by further post-excavation and dating): beginning with a simple bow-sided longhouse, later extended E to create the byre/working area (when the stub wall was probably built), and to the W with a substantial rectilinear longhouse style extension to the living area (on a slightly tangential angle to the main axis) [2]. The W extension was constructed with wider side-benches and cooking hearths in a central kerbed zone. The internal entrance passage between the dwelling area and byre is well-preserved with a flagged floor and the lower door socket *in situ*.

A wide range of Viking/ Norse finds have been retrieved from occupation deposits and middens, consisting of polished bone pins, a glass linen smoother [3], a Hiberno-Norse ringed pin [4], blue glass, polychrome and amber beads, polished whetstones, antler combs and comb fragments, and large numbers of iron objects including keys, ties, nails, knives, hammers and rivets, iron slag and non-ferrous slag. An assemblage of worked steatite contains both Norwegian and Shetland-sourced material. There was also a widespread scatter of coloured glazed ceramics (reddish orange with red appliqué dots) and gritty unglazed sherds – these are from post-occupation deposits and may coincide with the latest use of the site, possibly in the 12th or 13th centuries. All registered finds, soil chemical, micromorphological and ecofact samples were 3-D plotted, offering good potential for spatial and zonal analysis. Stratigraphic analysis, phasing and further radiocarbon dating are under way. The finds are being conserved on behalf of Historic Scotland by AOC Conservation Services, Edinburgh.

Animal bone preservation was good. Cattle, sheep and horse bones are well-represented, but dog, seal, whale and red deer bones were also found. There seems to have been a

⁶ Griffiths and Harrison 2011.

consistent form of seabird exploitation, as a series of similarly-fractured gannet humeri have been found. Gadids (the cod family) dominate the fishbone assemblage although not exclusively, and there are numerous deposits of limpet and periwinkle shells. The archaeobotanical evidence includes substantial and well-preserved quantities of carbonised grain, mainly barley, but also flax and oats. Burnt seaweed is found alongside hazel, willow, turf and peat as fuel, with the short-lived woods concentrated as charcoal in a walled metalworking area on the south-western periphery of the building complex. Archaeozoological evidence is being studied by I Mainland of Orkney College, fish remains by R Nicholson of Oxford Archaeology, and Archaeobotanical evidence by D Alldritt, Archaeobotanical Services Glasgow.

Wider implications of the results

The 2010 season provided a definitive account of deposits and structures in the East Mound which made the results of previous seasons of excavation and survey there vastly more meaningful. There now exists in the project record a compendium of structural, artefactual and environmental detail on the development of early historic landscape and settlement in the coastal margins of the Bay of Skaill, which promises to cast fresh and significant light on previous discoveries during further analysis. The decline and cessation of domestic activity in relation to the influx of windblown sand in the middle ages is a significant theme. Close comparisons in building form, material culture and chronology may be made to excavated structures from other major North Atlantic Norse settlements, e.g. Jarlshof (Shetland), Skaill, Deerness, and Pool, Sanday (Orkney) and Bornais and Cille Pheadair (S Uist, Western Isles).⁷ Abandonment due to sand inundation is noted at several of these. The longhouse at the Bay of Skaill was apparently the residence of a head farm, manufacturing metals, and exploiting the terrestrial and marine environments in roughly equal measure. The neighbouring mound of Snusgar also had a significant contemporary settlement imprint, albeit less well-preserved in archaeological terms. The presence of the kirk and possibly the hoard, hint at the earlier presence of an estate centre, and the *Skáli* name which is the origin of Skaill (ON, probably denoting a drinking hall or chiefly residence) may well be associated with one or all of these structures.

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⁷ Hamilton 1956; Buteux 1997; Hunter et al. 2007; Parker Pearson et al. 2004; Sharples 2005.

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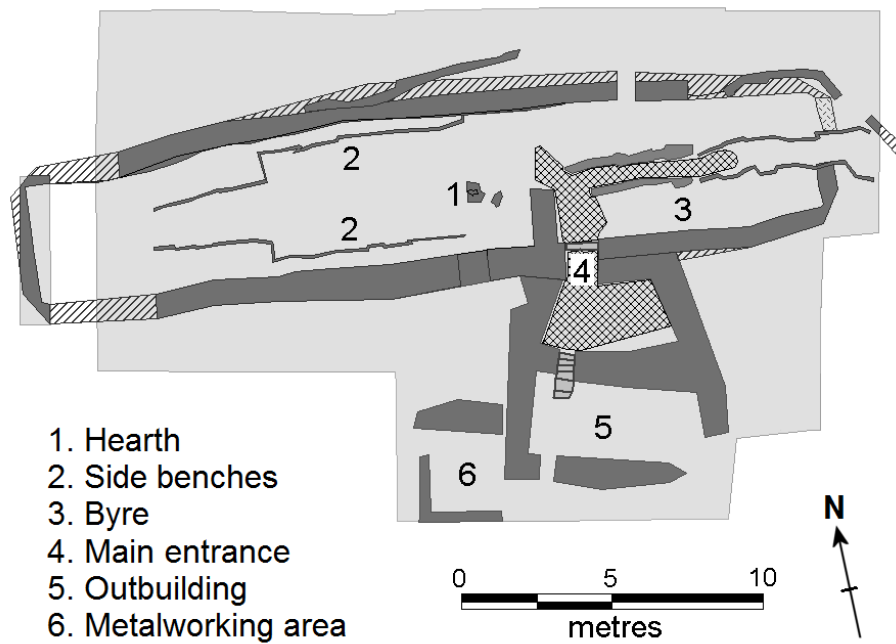
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Images/ Captions:

1. 2010 excavation from Air, E at top



2. Schematic site plan, N at top



3. Black glass linen smoother



4. Hiberno-Norse ringed pin (upper); antler comb fragments and biconical blue glass bead (centre); ceramic spindle whorl and Norwegian steatite bowl sherd (lower)

