

CHAPTER 16

STATUS AND IDENTITY IN NORSE SETTLEMENTS: A CASE STUDY FROM ORKNEY

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The predominant theme in discussions of Norse Scotland and other parts of the North Atlantic is the date of arrival, and the subsequent cultural impact, of Scandinavian settlers. Yet identifying early (pre-10th-century) Norse settlement has proven particularly tricky and elusive in archaeological terms. Even where there are arguably elements of continuity from pre-Norse times, excavations on settlement sites have yielded much more extensive and coherent data on occupation, economy and landscape formation for the later 10th and 11th centuries onwards. There are acknowledged dangers in seeing cultural and technological innovation exclusively in terms of migration-led introduction. Many, if not most, of the major structural changes wrought to patterns of settlement and resource exploitation occurred, not in the early Viking period, but around AD 1000 or even later, as shown by the work of James Barrett and colleagues on fishing and the marine economy (eg Barrett *et al* 2000; Barrett 2012). Thus many of the changes towards a stable political geography in Orkney, an archipelago off northern Scotland, may be seen as coincident with the development of a semi-autonomous Norse earldom in the Middle Ages, rather than as true ‘Viking’ innovations of the 9th or early 10th centuries. Increased economic diversification and social complexity associated with the emergence of large central farms within each parish, all components of a consolidated Norse presence, are major themes to be addressed in their own right.

Much remains to be done to disentangle the social and settlement hierarchy. In particular, there seems yet to be little methodological common ground when it comes to gauging perceptions of past status. Work on place names, and historical structures of territorial lordship, has yet to be fully integrated with studies of climate, soils and environmental resources. The role of material culture in shaping the development of a mature, landed Norse society is arguably also as yet underexplored. This paper seeks not to establish a new interdisciplinary platform for ongoing research on these questions (which would be far too ambitious an objective), but to offer some thoughts on the period of consolidation of Norse presence between the mid-10th and early 13th centuries AD, based on recent findings in a landscape research project in

Orkney. As summarized below, the project investigates a complex of multi-focal or neighbouring mounded settlement sites, with large stone buildings, engaged in intensive terrestrial and marine exploitation, which has left its mark on the surrounding landscape.

THE BIRSAY-SKAILL LANDSCAPE PROJECT

Since 2003, Oxford University, with the support of Historic Scotland and Orkney Islands Council, has been undertaking landscape archaeological research on the west-facing coastal areas of Orkney's north-west Mainland: the Birsay-Skaill Landscape Archaeology Project.[†] Since 2004, this has involved a partnership with Orkney College Geophysics Unit (OCGU). An essential underpinning of the project is to contextualize and enhance existing archaeological knowledge from excavations and chance discoveries with new techniques of extensive landscape survey and sample excavation. The areas selected for study are those with the greatest settlement and economic attractions in the past, yet also those most vulnerable to coastal erosion, namely the three bay hinterlands of Birsay, Marwick and Skaill (Figure 16.1). In each case we know most about their archaeological potential through destructive

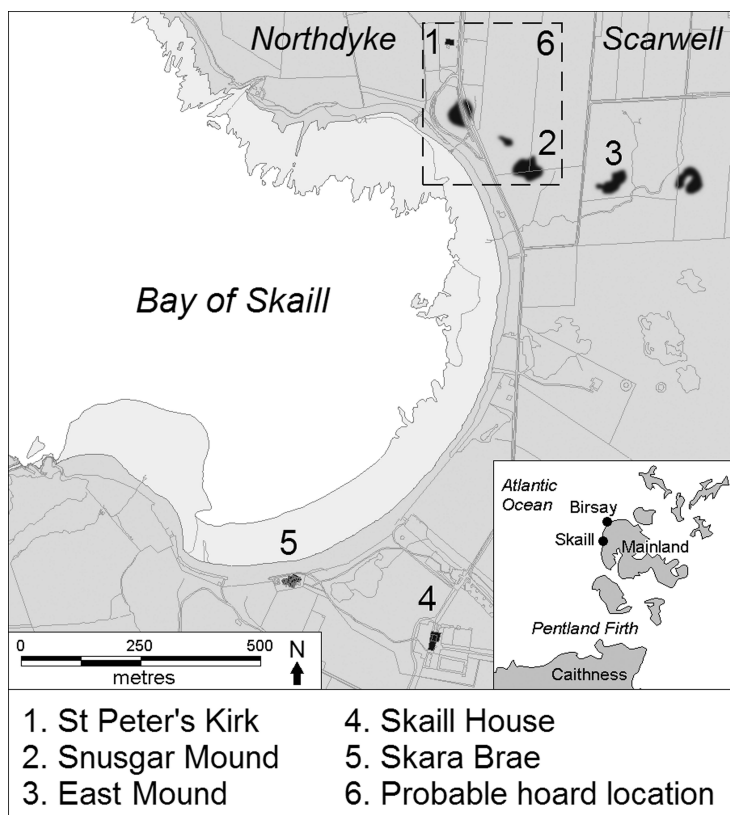


FIGURE 16.1 Map of Bay of Skaill and (inset) Orkney (© University of Oxford)

exposures in the shore erosion zone, some of which were subjected to systematic excavation, albeit small in area extent. Each of these areas is a low-lying opening in the otherwise precipitous red sandstone Atlantic frontage of the Orkney Mainland's west coast. At Birsay and the Bay of Skaill in particular, the shore is backed by links (extensive deposits of calcareous wind-blown sand, now mostly grassed over to form machair), a type of landscape overburden which, except at erosive margins and in deflation exposures, has hitherto been regarded as making the extensive detection and mapping of underlying archaeological deposits very difficult. This chapter will focus on one of these areas, the Bay of Skaill, a focus of major survey and excavation by the project which has yielded much evidence regarding late Viking Age and medieval society.

The Bay of Skaill (Figure 16.1), in Sandwick Parish 9km south of Birsay Bay, is a deep erosive opening in the West Mainland Atlantic façade, with a history of dune formation stretching throughout the Holocene (De la Vega Leinert *et al* 2000). Its circular shape reflects its probable origins as a freshwater loch opened to the sea, and it is best known as the site of Skara Brae, the Neolithic settlement (often termed a 'village') now open to the public and at the centre of a portion of the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site. As 'Brae' (Scots: 'hill') indicates, until cleared and made accessible to visitors in the 1920s and 1930s, it was located within an upstanding mound of sand and archaeological settlement debris. This was part-destroyed by the encroaching sea in 1850, leading to the discovery of the Neolithic settlement. Another sandy mound, 100m to the west of Skara Brae, is still partially intact to its full height, but badly eroded on its northern sea-facing side with masonry and middens showing in exposed section. A Viking grave was found in its upper layers in 1888. The mound has received the sporadic attention of archaeologists and soil scientists in the last few decades (Griffiths 2006; Morris 1985). The World Heritage Area has recently been subjected to a full geophysical survey by Orkney College on behalf of Historic Scotland.

Most of the work of the Birsay-Skaill Landscape Project has so far been concentrated on the north side of the Bay of Skaill, where fewer indications of archaeological potential were previously known. A badly eroding broch (a monumental Iron Age domestic building, predating the Viking Age by several centuries) known as Verron stands on the cliff edge at the outermost north-western point of the bay, and further inland in a former sand quarry in 'Sand Fiold', the extensive sand deposits lining the higher ground north-east of the bay, an apparently isolated prehistoric rock-cut cist grave was discovered and excavated in 1989 (Dalland 1999).

Beginning in 2003, a swathe of land measuring 1000m by 400m on the northern edge of the extensive sandy links surrounding the centre of the bay has been subjected to geophysical, topographic and remote-sensing survey and mapping, supplemented by coastal survey and documentary research. These investigations have identified and mapped an extensive cluster of sandy mounds of archaeological character, which number at least four (and if the morphology of two of these is taken as suggesting a coalescence of more than one individual mound, their number may be up to seven). The mounds are located in an arc around the bay hinterland on the edge of the sandy links, fronting a system of freshwater streams connecting dune slacks

within the links to the sea. The most prominent mound, although not the most extensive in area, is the only one to have a name — the ‘Castle of Snusgar’. It is attested in records going back at least to the *Old Statistical Account* (OSA) of 1795, which recorded some stone masonry exposed on the flank of the mound (Sinclair 1791–99, 458), and the first Ordnance Survey maps.² On the earliest known map of the bay, Walden’s *Plan of the Links of Skaill* (1772) (reproduced in Lysaght 1974), Snusgar is not annotated by name, but an apparently upstanding structure on a large mound is depicted at approximately its location. This is also the reputed site of the Skaill Hoard, the largest Viking silver hoard yet found in Scotland, which was composed of at least 115 pieces of bullion and 21 coins, the date of which suggests deposition between AD 950 and 980 (Graham-Campbell 1995, 108–127; Griffiths 2013). The initial unearthing of silver items in early March 1858 occurred when a boy engaged in kelping³ delved into a rabbit-hole with an iron hook and brought out a piece of silver wire; this was followed by more discoveries over the following days as a result of extensive sand sifting by numerous other people. It was over two weeks later that a Kirkwall antiquarian, George Petrie, heard about the discovery, and began purchasing and collecting silver items from their finders, subsequent to which they entered the collections of the National Museum of Scotland.⁴ The precise location of the hoard was not accurately recorded at the time, however, and sufficient doubt persists that it is not possible to determine the location except within an area (measuring roughly 300m north–south) between the ‘Castle of Snusgar’ and the parish kirk of St Peter, which is the most precise definition given by Petrie himself at the time.

The results of geophysical and topographic survey on the mound cluster to the north of the bay, whilst showing promising evidence of concentrations of settlement marked by extensive magnetic contrast (normally derived from *in situ* burning associated with domestic and industrial activity), did not in themselves provide a date or a cultural attribution for the deposits identified. In order to explore the nature of the geophysical anomalies further, selective excavation was undertaken on top and on the flanks of Snusgar in 2004–06. The excavation trenches on top of Snusgar revealed a badly eroded and robbed-out, but nonetheless impressive, series of masonry features including an east–west wall of 1.3m width with external facings and a rubble core. Associated with these features were extensive midden layers, rich in Norse-period finds, sandwiched between lenses of wind-blown sand. There had been an extensive building complex here; its reduced and partial state of preservation is probably partly due to stone robbing for the construction of field dykes in the 18th and 19th centuries. The stratigraphy of Snusgar was investigated in deeper section in another trench on the south-eastern flank of the mound in 2005–06. This confirmed that the mound was constructed of layers of domestic refuse and peat ash, with intermittent episodes of clean wind-blown sand. It is clear that the struggle to maintain stability and fertility against blanketing influxes of sand was an unremitting one for the inhabitants. The layers were generally flat in profile, and soft surfaces vulnerable to erosion had been deliberately stabilized by the admixture of stones and organic material. The latter has provided a significant return of archaeobotanical, archaeozoological and micro-artefactual data, and residues such as hammerscale from metal-working, through systematic soil sampling and flotation. The finds indicated that,

apart from some later industrial activity on top probably related to kelping, the areas of Snusgar so far investigated reflect predominantly Norse-period construction activity. Radiocarbon dates taken from charred grain and short-lived wood species date the principal build-up of deposits to between AD 900 and 1050,⁵ a picture confirmed by a series of Optically Stimulated Luminescence (OSL) dates taken in 2006 on midden deposits and the wind-blown sand layers.⁶ The lowest buried land surface sampled on the north-east flank of the mound produced a cormorant bone, which was dated as AD 489–774 at 95.4% probability.⁷ Hints of an earlier prehistoric core to the mound, which were picked up by Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) in 2005, have yet to be tested or confirmed. It must be remembered that these large sandy settlement-influenced formations are not single-phase or even single-process accretions. One or more earlier concentrations of archaeology may lie within them, and indeed may have assisted accretion by acting as a trap for wind-blown sand.

Another less prominent but more extensive mound inland 200m to the east of Snusgar, now termed the ‘East Mound’, was also subjected to geophysical survey in 2004. A test trench here in 2005 was extended and deepened to a full-scale area excavation in 2006–10. Lacking the apparently historic name and antiquarian associations of the neighbouring mound, this was initially a less-promising target. Magnetometry and GPR gave only diffuse hints of archaeological structures. It became clear in trial trenching why this was the case — the archaeology was buried under a thick layer of wind-blown sand which has since been shown to be up to 1.5m deep over some areas of the site. An initial discovery of coherent and (compared to Snusgar) much less badly damaged and disturbed stone walling and midden material in 2005 led to the progressive widening and deepening of this investigation. Successive small rectilinear stone buildings on the crest of the mound, surrounded by midden material, were investigated in 2006–10. These turned out to be ancillary structures within a closely grouped cluster based on a significant residence. Out with their south-west corner, a small stone-walled yard area produced extensive ferrous metalworking residues, which are undergoing further analysis. In 2010, the building into which the flagged entrance led was revealed as a substantially preserved stone east–west aligned longhouse measuring 26.3m in length and 4.9m in width (Figure 16.2). The 2010 exposure revealed an internal division between domestic and byre areas. The shape of the exterior walls shows evidence for the classic Scandinavian ‘bow-sided’ morphology. The ‘domestic’ area was identified as such by the presence of orthostatic stone side benching facing a central hearth area. This is differentiated from the ‘byre’ area by a half-width stub wall. A flagstone-paved passageway was exposed, running longitudinally through the centre of the ‘byre’ area of the major building, before turning abruptly south, passing through a wide and handsomely built flagged entrance and threshold, crossing a paved yard (with a network of drains underneath the paving), and connecting with a stone staircase leading up six steps to the upper building sequence already investigated. The passageway was kerbed by larger stones with square sockets cut into them, evidently for supporting part of a now-vanished wooden roof superstructure.

So thick and dense was the blanketing layer of wind-blown sand which had concealed these buildings since their abandonment, that preservation is unusually good.



FIGURE 16.2 'East Mound' excavation, August 2010, overhead view from west. The main longhouse building is oriented east–west. The domestic area (with wide side benches) is in the foreground; the central hall (with narrow side benches) and byre (with a central stone passageway) are towards the eastern end; the entrance yard, metalworking area and ancillary structures are to the south (on the right of the excavation trench in photograph)
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In the 'byre' area of the major building, as the sand was peeled back during excavation, we revealed the hoof-prints of animals in the dark trampled floor surface. Some wall masonry had collapsed under the weight of the sand, undermined in part by rabbit burrows. Nevertheless, so deeply buried were these remains that they escaped the extensive later stone robbing witnessed on the roughly contemporary structures in the neighbouring mound. Radiocarbon determinations taken predominantly from charred grain and short-lived wood date this complex of buildings to between AD 980 and 1230, suggesting it flourished somewhat later than its neighbour on Snusgar, although there is an overlap in the late 10th/early 11th centuries.

ARTEFACT AND ECONOMY AT THE BAY OF SKAILL

The structures outlined above are rich in finds.⁸ These come both from 'abandonment' layers associated with the final silting and presumably de-roofing of the structures, and also from active occupation layers including those sealed by later superimpositions. Surrounding the building complex are extensive midden deposits

which were used in conjunction with spreads of stone to stabilize exterior ground surfaces. The finds, which almost all fall within the material culture repertoire characteristic of the Viking Age and medieval period, provide a parallel chronology to the radiocarbon dates. Amongst the earliest independently datable objects are three beads (Hoffmann, in Griffiths *et al* 2009). A biconical blue glass bead (Callmer type A176) is paralleled in Scandinavian contexts dating to AD 790–860. Even earlier is a white opaque glass bead with crossing blue swags. Scandinavian white beads of the period AD 800–1000 usually have red or brown swags, whereas an earlier type of white glass bead which does have blue swags, known from Anglo-Saxon England but commoner in the Rhineland and northern France (Guido Group 311a, or alternatively Koch 34 blue), dates to the period AD 580–650. An incomplete flat concentric reddish amber bead from an occupation layer within the domestic area of the ‘East Mound’ major building is paralleled by an example from a child’s grave in a small Viking cemetery at Cnip, Lewis (Dunwell *et al* 1995, 726, fig 725, 721). It is of likely Baltic provenance and probably dates to the 9th or 10th century.

Bracketing the date range of finds at the later end of the life of the longhouse complex is a series of sherds of amber-brown-glazed redware pottery, some of which has decorative orange appliqué pads. Derek Hall and the late Alan Vince have both examined the pottery to facilitate comparison with existing European data, and plasma spectrometry analysis (ICP) has indicated that they are a whiteware from Normandy, a type series which is normally dated to the 12th century at the earliest. Apart from these decorated glazed sherds, very little other pottery has been found at either Snusgar or East Mound; four grey ware sherds show ICP readings consistent with an Ulster origin, and a clay spindle whorl is possibly a residual Iron Age find. The predominant material used for vessels and containers here was steatite, of which over 50 examples have been found to date. The majority of the steatite objects have been identified by Amanda Forster as of Shetland provenance (Forster, in Griffiths *et al* 2006), although one probable Norwegian hemispherical bowl sherd was found. Many are charred with residues; the majority come from thick sub-rectangular vessels, whereas some have been adapted for secondary use such as line sinkers.

Small bone pins and needles, and decorated antler-comb fragments, fall into type groups of the 10th to 12th centuries associated with Viking Age and medieval sites elsewhere in Orkney and the western Viking world. The combs are exclusively of iron-riveted rather than copper-riveted types, strengthening their date attribution to the earlier phase of the Viking comb tradition (see Chapter 18). The majority were broken and discarded and some are so fragmentary that they were retrieved in flotation, although one large decorated antler comb found in 2007 was complete (measuring 200 × 35mm) and apparently carefully laid in a soft fill layer underneath a flagged floor in the ‘East Mound’ complex of buildings. Other bone finds include a pierced hollow cylindrical needle case (with needles still inside), a pierced polished strip, an unfinished bone spindle whorl made from a hip ball-joint, and two small rectilinear worked whalebone objects, one of which may be a gaming piece.

Metal finds have predominantly been small iron objects such as ties and nails, many of which arguably formed part of the wooden superstructure. Non-ferrous metal artefacts are rarer, but include several small copper-alloy clasps, strips and wires.

There is a walled smithing area with four bowl hearths, ferrous residues and charcoal which strongly suggest that metalworking was a significant part of the Norse economy here, and five fine small whetstones (two pierced) contribute to the picture. Several more whetstone fragments also exist. One of the complete whetstones, a tiny green/brown banded and pierced (or 'pendant') example measuring only $45 \times 8 \times 8$ mm in length (Figure 16.3), is closely paralleled at the major Viking Age settlement complex at Borg, Lofoten, Norway (Johansen *et al* 2003, 153) and Hedeby (Resi 1990). A complete copper-alloy ringed pin (Figure 16.3), 113 mm in length, of Fanning's stirrup-ringed, crutch-headed type was found in 2006, which by analogy with excavated examples from stratified contexts in Dublin, may be dated to the 11th or early 12th century (Fanning 1994, 41–46). Very few ringed pins of this type have been found in Scotland, with just one other example from Jarlshof, Shetland (Hamilton 1956, 127); the closely related crutch-headed stick pin type has also been found at Jarlshof and the Udal, North Uist (Graham-Campbell 1974).

A fragment of a rotary quernstone with hand-hold of diameter 45.6 cm found within the East Mound major building in 2008 is an indicator of the importance of cereal production in the surrounding landscape. Environmental archaeological sampling has involved both hand collection for larger items, and flotation through 5 mm, 1 mm, 500 µm, 300 µm and 100 µm meshes. Archaeobotanical evidence from trenches on both Snusgar and East Mound (Alldritt, in Griffiths *et al* 2005; 2006; 2007; 2008; 2009) points towards the improvement of soil by the admixture of seaweed and burnt peat, and the predominance of oat and barley cultivation. Dryland weeds such as corn spurrey and chickweed suggest that the surrounding sandy arable land was in use for cultivation crops, perhaps not predominantly for direct human

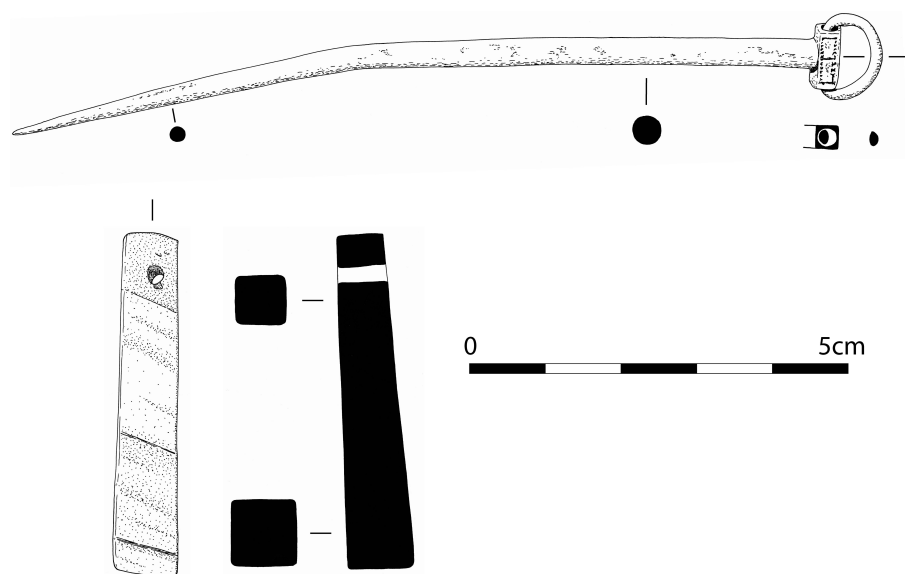


FIGURE 16.3 Copper-alloy ringed pin (top) and green/brown banded 'pendant' whetstone (© University of Oxford, drawn by AOC Scotland)

consumption, but for animal fodder. Flax was also grown and retted nearby, probably in the extensive dune slack system within the Links of Skaill, from which wetland weed flora such as sedge, club-rushes and crowberry are also represented. The archaeozoological material favours cattle, sheep/goat and pig (with in many cases evidence of butchery), together with lower incidences of red deer, cat, dog, horse and seal. The bird bone is predominantly from marine species, such as the gannet, and the presence of a large number of fractured gannet humeri in a particular midden layer (context 1504, radiocarbon dated to AD 940–1050 at 95.4% probability) has led Ingrid Mainland to suggest that systematic seabird exploitation was occurring. Exploitation of the marine environment, to be expected at such a coastal location, is further underlined by the general occurrence in midden layers, but also in some discrete specialized deposits, of marine molluscan shell dominated by limpet and periwinkle (Mainland, in Griffiths *et al* 2005; 2006; 2007; 2008; 2009). Fish remains occur in most midden and occupation deposits but are not disproportionately abundant. They are dominated by gadids (particularly cod, with larger size most numerous but smaller sizes also represented; and saithe, pollack, ling, hake and torsk), together with smaller amounts of herring, garfish, halibut, mackerel, eel, dogfish, snake blenny, ray and salmon or trout. Layers dated to earlier in the excavated sequence, particularly on Snusgar where their chronology begins earlier in the 10th century, are less dominated by gadids than those of the 11th and 12th centuries (Nicholson, in Griffiths *et al* 2006; 2007; 2008; 2009). This picture is consonant with studies on data from elsewhere (eg Barrett 2005) which chart the rise of cod fishing as a North Atlantic commodity in the 11th century. No fish-processing type middens such as those at Freswick, Robert's Haven, St Boniface and Quoygrewe have been exposed here, although Nicholson notes that cod head bones are common in the assemblage, suggesting the possible preparation of a storable product such as stockfish, albeit on a less ambitious scale than at these other sites.

CONSUMPTION AND MATERIALITY

The broad range of archaeobotanical, archaeozoological and artefactual evidence found at the Bay of Skaill sites, but with no 'specialized' group, mark them out predominantly as 'consumer' rather than single-purpose 'producer' settlements, although there was production here in metalworking, infield cultivation and animal husbandry, and some evidence of systematic exploitation of marine resources. The scale of these suggest they were probably for domestic consumption and local redistribution rather than export. The evidence compares well in broad terms with that from Beachview (Morris 1996), although proportionately more extra-mural midden layers have been investigated here. The strong representation of butchered cow and pig bones suggests that some of the inhabitants at least enjoyed a meat-rich diet in the 10th, 11th and 12th centuries, and perhaps hints at a feasting culture.

The artefacts from the clusters of Norse structures exposed here are broadly comparable in scale and type to assemblages from other well-known Viking Age and medieval settlements in Atlantic Scotland, such as the Brough of Birsay (Curle 1982), Skaill, Deerness (Buteux 1997), Pool, Sanday (Hunter 2007), Quoygrewe, Westray

(Barrett 2012), Jarlshof, Shetland (Hamilton 1956) and the South Uist machair sites of Bornais (Sharples 2005) and Cille Pheadair (Parker Pearson *et al* 2004a). Unlike many of these sites, the Bay of Skaill settlements described here do not (or have not yet been demonstrated to), overlie or re-use significant remains of the immediate pre-Norse/Pictish period. Hence continued or re-use of objects found *in situ* by the Norse settlers, such as those found by Ritchie (1977) at Buckquoy, does not appear to be a major factor here. Objects which suggest a pre-Viking date, such as the biconical and white swag beads, may equally well be curated objects or 'heirlooms' imported to the site during the Viking period. The majority of objects found are of relatively mundane raw materials which for the most part were probably sourced by local trade within the area of the Norse earldom of Orkney (including Shetland and Caithness), such as bone, antler and steatite, although many of the bone and antler objects are well made and decorated with simple but recognizable motifs such as symmetrical cross-hatching, herringbone and linked ring-and-dot patterns.

Archaeologists are becoming increasingly sensitized to the active role of material culture as 'agency' in the shaping of human status and identity (eg Edgeworth 2006; Hodder 1993; Jones 1997; Kopytoff 2006). Objects may be seen as having 'lives' in that their materials, geographic origins, past and current patterns of possession, ownership, value, use and deposition are embodied within them; they act as a tactile and visual mnemonic, the acknowledging and understanding of which is equivalent to a biography of their unwritten history of human/personal associations. In some contexts, such as 'pagan' graves, weapons seem to have a particularly dynamic place within an inherited and mythologized Viking past. Imported 'exotica' or finer items intended for display, such as those represented here, may also be regarded as having enhanced importance in promoting notions of inherited and aspired identity. Objects such as the amber bead, the steatite hemispherical bowl sherd and the green/brown banded whetstone carry Norwegian cultural associations, yet in this respect seem to be in something of a numerical minority. The decorated pottery, amongst the latest of the material represented, is a form of fine tableware and appears to suggest an element of display associated with eating and drinking. Its presence as an apparently unusual and isolated example in Norse Orkney is perhaps best seen as evidence of indirect trade links with the north-west European continent, perhaps via Norway or England. Other objects betray an appetite for a more eclectic and hybrid material culture, redolent of the new links established by Norse settlers in Britain and Ireland.

Perhaps most striking are a group of objects which point towards the Irish Sea zone as a source of cultural reference. The attribution of the crutch-headed ringed pin to a Dublin provenance is near certain, as the city accounts for by far the predominant number of ringed pins found, coupled with the only archaeologically demonstrable evidence for their manufacture. The grey-ware sherds referred to above also have a likely Irish or Irish Sea provenance. Several of the combs have Irish parallels (S. Ashby, in Griffiths forthcoming). More spectacular as a signifier of Irish Sea and more particularly Manx links are some of the more elaborate silver ornaments within the Skaill Hoard. This includes ten complete or semi-complete penannular brooches together with other fragments. Of these, the majority — seven — have 'ball-type' terminals, with three more having stamp-decorated polygonal terminals and one with

flat terminals. The ball terminals of three are ingeniously decorated on their spherical field with double-bordered ribbon beasts with oval eyes, backward-turned heads and spiral hips, which Graham-Campbell attributed to the Mammen style of 10th-century art (Graham-Campbell 1995, 108–127). One has a human figure struggling to escape the embrace of a serpent, and the other ball-brooches have plain or brambled terminals. One, which only joined the rest of the hoard in 1981, has an incised quatrefoil design within concentric circles on the ball terminal, an almost identical piece to one found in the 1894 Ballaquayle Hoard from the Isle of Man, the deposition of which is dated to AD c970, making it virtually contemporary with the Skaill Hoard. On the basis of the art styles and motifs represented on the Skaill brooches (which are paralleled not only in silver, but on stone crosses in the Isle of Man), Graham-Campbell made an assertive case that some, if not all, of the Skaill Hoard was of Manx provenance (Graham-Campbell 1983, 70–71). The ring money, twisted arm rings, kufic and Anglo-Saxon coins in the Skaill Hoard could also have been assembled in the Irish Sea zone.

The Skaill Hoard is so vast and rich in content that it is difficult to argue with the (apparently universally accepted) notion that this is an example of a ‘chiefly treasury’ (a description used by Barrett *et al* 2000, 4). Its juxtaposition with newly discovered Viking Age and medieval settlement clusters, the nearest of which having now been shown to have come into existence by AD 950–970, is surely no coincidence. Its date coincides with the period of Christian conversion and the move towards establishing permanent, settled lordship in the Orcadian landscape. The mounds themselves, and the substantial stone structures within them, also arguably represent an ‘active’ statement of wealth and power in the landscape. Mounded settlement and complex masonry are interlinked as expressions of permanence and visibility. The evidence from the Snusgar midden layers suggests that these were not simply cast out from a domestic core as a series of random dumps, but were carefully structured and laid with stones, apparently deliberately raising up the height of occupation surfaces in successive ‘managed’ events. These were further inflated by layers of wind-blown sand. ‘Farm Mounds’, a type of settlement expression well known in Norse and medieval Orkney and Norway (Bertelsen and Lamb 1993; Harrison 2013), have mostly been discussed in functional terms as a natural outcome of settlement accumulation in one location over several generations. Their phenomenological presence in the landscape, as deliberately construed territorial and settlement markers, has been less coherently addressed. The evidence from Snusgar and East Mound at the Bay of Skaill suggests the accumulation of these mounds was not a long, unplanned incremental process but a more rapid and deliberate series of constructional episodes.

STATUS IN THE LANDSCAPE

Snusgar and its neighbouring mounds present a dominant phalanx of past occupation traces on the north side of the Bay of Skaill. Rather more extensive than the smaller mound cluster on the south side of the bay within which Skara Brae was discovered, they nevertheless share with these a position partly sheltered from the open sea by the presence of higher ground to the rear, and stand in immediate

proximity to a supply of fresh water. At the centre of the bay, facing the open sea, is low-lying and boggy ground; a 'tumulus' in this area opened in or before 1772 by Sir Joseph Banks contained three stone cists and a bead necklace, possibly of jet (Lysaght 1974). So far characterized by ancient funerary rather than settlement remains, this poorer land in the middle seems to have divided the bay landscape into separate north and south foci. A further hint of early historic importance on the north side of the Bay is the (now redundant) parish kirk of St Peter, which is located 300m north-west of Snusgar. The present building dates from 1836, and its predecessor was built in 1670. However, the Petrine dedication may imply a much earlier origin (Lamb 1993, 262; but cf Gibbon 2006). Churches with this dedication occur elsewhere in Orkney in close proximity to powerful farms, including those which bear the Norse place name Skaill (ON *Skáli*) which (although sometimes having humble associations elsewhere) denotes the presence of a significant farmstead in an Orcadian context.⁹ Thomson (1995a, 55–57) stated:

These ... occupy high-status coastal sites in arable districts. ... these features are consistent with a special type of high-status hall appearing on already-settled prime sites. 'Skaills' are often found in close association with a church or a district chapel, suggesting that they flourished at a time when church organisation was being consolidated, perhaps in the eleventh or twelfth centuries.

The 'Castle of Snusgar' is a name of uncertain antiquity. Norse castles are a well-known phenomenon in Orkney. Three are mentioned as *kastali* in *Orkneyinga saga* (Cubbie Roo's Castle, Wyre; Damsay, on the Bay of Firth; and *Kjarrekstaðir*, probably Cairston near Stromness). These were studied, and in the case of Cairston excavated, by J Storer Clouston (Clouston 1929; 1931; Grieve 1999). Other significant and probably semi-fortified Late Norse aristocratic residences include Tuquoy on Westray and 'The Wirk' at Westness on Rousay. All of these sites have significant proximate relationships with churches.

Could 'East Mound' or Snusgar, not mentioned in *Orkneyinga saga*, have originally been *Skáli* sites? The likelihood of an association of the [Bay of] *Skáli* name with the settlement remains exposed on Snusgar or East Mound is not entirely unproblematic. On the south side of the bay stands Skaill House, a substantial baronial residence and seat of the Laird of Breckness. The earliest phase of the building dates to 1628, and it was apparently a wholly new structure at that time. However, two runic inscriptions on stone slabs, neither of which were found in their original context, were discovered during construction work nearby. Moreover, a medieval cemetery bordering a field known as the 'chapel field' next to Skaill House was excavated in 1996 when new drainage was installed (James 1999). Twelve adult and 15 infant burials were discovered, buried under up to 1.3m of wind-blown sand, and radio-carbon dated to between the 11th and 14th centuries. This, perhaps more than the status of the present house itself, hints at an early historic focus here. Nevertheless, this in itself does not reduce the claim of Snusgar or its neighbours, as there may have been more than one such centre around the bay.

Further evidence suggesting the north side of the bay was once at least as important as the south side is to be found in the history of township development and

medieval tax ('skat') rentals. The earliest rentals to survive intact are the Sinclair assessments of 1492 and 1500, compiled just after the transfer of Orkney and Shetland from Denmark–Norway to the Scottish Crown in 1468 (Peterkin 1820). Pennylands, which approximated to one farm, formed the basic unit of land assessment, 18 of which counted as an Ounceland ('Urisland'). Townships were sub-parish units, fundamental to the distribution of agricultural land types between households, which occurred with varying multiples of pennyland values. It is, however, less clear how far back these land apportionments may be taken chronologically. The view popular amongst an earlier generation of historians, that as a whole they represent an unchanged inheritance from the Viking period, has been refuted in more recent years. Thomson (2001, 218) prefers the 12th century as the period when this system crystallized across Orkney. Their documented form is clearly later medieval in character, but there are hints in the values of different townships of older land divisions being maintained within this system. These concern those townships which reproduce within their values clear whole or half multiples of the 18-pennyland ounce-land (Clouston 1923; Marwick 1952).

Most Orkney townships are far too small even to include one whole ounce-land. The Bay of Skail, however, is characterized by larger values. Snusgar lies within the township of Scarwell, which was rated in 1492/1500 as 45 pennylands or 2.5 ounce-lands. The neighbouring township to the north-west, Northdyke, is also a 45 pennyland/2.5 ounce-land township. These may in fact represent equal divisions of an original five-ounce-land township,¹⁰ which would certainly have been the dominant land unit bordering the bay. Southerquoy, which includes Skail House, was rated at 24 pennylands, a less obvious multiple of the basic unit of 18. To equate multiple values of 18 with relict Norse estates will invite scepticism. Nevertheless, not only were Scarwell and Northdyke together equal in value to five ounce-lands, but, if combined, both St Peter's Kirk and the Snusgar mound complex stand at their geographic centre. The relatively high value of Scarwell in particular seems curious today, as, unlike Northdyke, a large part of the south of the township bordering the bay is now very poor-quality agricultural land. A thin veneer of grassed topsoil, which only provides rough grazing, covers deep deposits of wind-blown sand. Much of this sand inundation is, however, most likely to be later medieval in date, and possibly associated with the end of the 'Medieval Warm Period' (also known as the Medieval Climate Anomaly) and the transition into the 'Little Ice Age' in the North Atlantic (Lamb 1982, 171ff; Dawson *et al* 2011). The skat value of Scarwell township may therefore suggest that a richer and more productive landscape around the Bay of Skail, which was apparently agriculturally viable in the Viking Age and a few centuries thereafter, was being covered up and lost to wind-blown sand by the 15th century at the latest.¹¹ Moreover, an OSL date taken from the wind-blown sand overlying the buildings in East Mound was determined at 620 ± 125 BP, centres on the 14th century, confirming that by then the sand covered the abandoned settlement remains.

The abandonment of the buildings on Snusgar and East Mound points towards a process of settlement shift around the Bay of Skail. The principal farmsteads of the medieval and post-medieval periods are located away from the shore frontage, and are associated with localized spreads of augmented 'plaggen' soils that indicate

the locations of infields (cf Simpson 1997). Quoyloo contains the important farm of Stove and its satellites Midstove and Netherstove, which overlook the links from the edge of the arable land to the north. These, arguably, are the successor settlements to Snusgar and its neighbour. Similar patterns of retreat from the shore are evident in Birsay and Marwick Bays, also on the west coast of Orkney's Mainland (eg Simpson 1997; Thomson 1995b). Aristocratic settlement seems also to have developed inland in north-west Mainland, with the important farm of Housebay by Sabiston Loch (Crawford 2006) perhaps taking on enhanced significance as the focus of dues and obligations. Unlike situations further east in Orkney, such as Skaill in Deerness, late medieval successor settlements did not occur in close proximity to the Viking Age focus at the Bay of Skaill. This may be due to the particularly intractable nature of the wind-blown sand regime on the west Mainland, facing the full force of the North Atlantic. It is apparently this reason why the historic importance of the coastal zone was lost to later generations. Only the seemingly isolated parish kirk and the cluster of grassy mounds concealing deeply buried abandoned settlements were left to denote its former significance. In this respect it has parallels elsewhere in Atlantic Scotland, notably in the shift away from the machair on to the blacklands in the Uists of the Outer Hebrides (Parker Pearson *et al* 2004b, 161–168; see Chapter 17).

POWER AND IDENTITY

The Bay of Skaill has been subjected to the most sustained inquiry within the remit of the Birsay-Skaill Landscape Archaeology Project. At least two major mounded settlement foci prospered near each other in the period AD 950–1200, with an overlap of perhaps up to 100 years in the later 10th and 11th centuries. Stone buildings, middens, metalworking and evidence of landscape and marine exploitation tell the story of the establishment and development of a mature, landed, and very probably Christian, Norse presence. The building forms are similar to those observed elsewhere in the northern world, but the material culture of the settlements is far from dominated by Scandinavian traits. Outside local intra-earldom trading dependencies, contacts with the southern North Sea, and with Dublin and the Irish Sea, are perhaps the most persistently visible amongst the finds. The activities in Ireland of the 11th-century Orkney earls are well known, including most famously Sigurd the Stout who is said to have died carrying a Raven banner at the Battle of Clontarf in 1014. Hiberno-Norse influences may have acted in Orkney itself to distance the self-perception of the settled population from the Viking ancestral homeland in Norway in the 11th and 12th centuries, and in so doing perhaps helped to establish a genuinely distinctive Orcadian identity.

NOTES

¹ Project website: <http://www.conted.ox.ac.uk/research/projects/birsay-skaill>.

² The 'Castle' appellation is an interesting hint of former status (see below), but lacks the antiquity of a saga or medieval reference. The OSA refers to 'the ruins or remains of a large building,

which yet bears the name of Castle of Snusgar'. 'Snu' or 'Snoo' refer elsewhere in Orkney to nose-like headlands and promontories (eg the point of Snooshan, Birsay), possibly coupled with ON *Garðr* (enclosure) (see also Fraser 1923).

- ³ Seaweed gathering and reduction by burning in stone-lined pits to ash, for export to industrial centres in Scotland and England for iodine extraction, was common amongst the poor in coastal communities of Orkney from the 18th century to the 1930s (Thomson 1983).
- ⁴ Two more items in private ownership were re-united with the rest of the hoard as recently as 1981.
- ⁵ Accelerated Mass Spectrometry carried out by the Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre (SUERC).
- ⁶ Optically Stimulated Luminescence sampling and dating and carried out by the Research Laboratory for Archaeology, Oxford University (RLAHA).
- ⁷ 1710 ± 35 BP calibrated with Marine 13 using a ΔR value of -47 ± 52 .
- ⁸ Images of the finds may be viewed at <http://www.conted.ox.ac.uk/research/projects/birsay-skaill>.
- ⁹ For extensive and informative discussions of Skaill names in relation to the topography of Norse settlements, see Lamb (1997) and Thomson (2012).
- ¹⁰ I am grateful to Barbara Crawford for this suggestion — she also pointed out that both Scarwell and Northdyke are late names of secondary character, the latter being of Scots rather than Scandinavian origin. The name of the putative earlier 5-ounceland unit is not known, but 'Sandwick' itself is a possibility (see also Marwick 1952, 147).
- ¹¹ There are intriguing (if chronologically hazy) hints of wind-blown sand covering up settlements around the Bay of Skaill in Orcadian folklore, in particular a tale called the 'Fin King' collected by the folklorist George Marwick and recently retold by Tom Muir (1998).

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