

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF 'THINGS'

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In 1991, at the beginning of winter, excavation began on a supposed Viking boat burial at Scar, in the island of Sanday in Orkney. While work was still in progress the *Orcadian* published an article headlined 'Fear over fate of relics',¹ reporting an Orkney Islands Council meeting at which councillors were told there was no guarantee that finds from the excavation would stay in Orkney. One councillor likened the potential loss of the Scar finds to Greece losing the Elgin marbles, and said that if Orkney did not take a strong line it would have its treasures plundered. Another agreed, but also wanted to 'get back the archaeological treasures Orkney had lost to national museums over the years', adding: 'We have to make do with plaster casts, and all these marvellous things are probably in a drawer somewhere.'

More than 200 years of excavation in Orkney have produced hundreds of thousands of finds, some of them beautiful, intricate and intriguing. Many of those from older excavations are in museums outwith Orkney, which has been a matter of regret in the community. As a result, the modern community has become fiercely determined to keep archaeological finds in the local museum.

Plundered treasures?

But how did the other finds come to be distributed as they are? Has Orkney really had 'its treasures plundered'?

For finds to stay in a community, there must be somewhere to put them, and someone to look after them. Stromness Museum has been run continuously by the Orkney Natural History Society since 1837, with a wonderfully diverse collection including polished stone mace-heads and a selection of artefacts from Skara Brae, but it must have been beyond the scope of any voluntary society to cope with the quantity of material that was becoming available in Orkney from the mid-19th century onwards.

The Skaill hoard of Viking silver was discovered in March 1858, and gathered together from the various finders by George Petrie. He had a double role, being a very active and able local antiquarian, and sheriff clerk of the county. Petrie rewarded the finders and sent the silver to Edinburgh, where it was donated to the National Museum (Graham-Campbell 1995: 124-7). In many ways it is sad when objects are not kept close to the place where they were found, but it is difficult to say what might have happened to the Skaill hoard if it had been

1. *Orcadian*, 19 December 1991.

kept in Orkney. Stromness Museum has survived for more than 150 years, but at least three other Orkney collections have been ‘dispersed’ in that time.

In 1863 the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland received, from David Balfour of Balfour and Trenabie, ‘Various articles purchased . . . at the sale of Kirkwall Museum’ (*PSAS* 5, 1862-4: 15-19). George Petrie himself was said to have ‘. . . the most extensive collection in connection with these islands that exists, and (he) is a good authority on all these subjects . . .’,² but he died in 1875 and his collection was sold and scattered; his widow and children were probably in no position to look after it (Watters and Cormack 1995). In the 20th century J. W. Cursiter gave his collection to the Hunterian Museum when he could find no one in Orkney who would take over from him; Orkney is indebted to Euan MacKie for recently tracing much of the Cursiter material in that collection.

Orkney did not have a publicly funded museum until the opening in 1968 of Tankerness House Museum (now The Orkney Museum), under the energetic curatorship of the then Chief Librarian, Evan MacGillivray. The first full-time curator was appointed in 1976. With that appointment, the museum began to receive finds from excavations sponsored by Historic Scotland, beginning with the collections from the burnt mounds at Liddle and Beaquoy (Hedges 1975) and the Pictish/Viking finds from Buckquoy in Birsay (Ritchie 1977). Since 1968, almost 100 archaeological excavations have been undertaken in Orkney. Some 70 of the collections from these have been allocated to museums. The Orkney Museum has received 60, including almost all those from work that began after 1976 — and including the finds from the Viking boat grave at Scar. From beginning with 618 objects in 1968, the Orkney Museum now has an estimated 80,000 objects, of which about 80% are archaeological finds from recent excavations.

Orkney’s archaeological treasures thus cannot be said to have been ‘plundered’. But what are they, and what is done with them?

Museum collections

Museums across Britain are at the less-loved end of archaeology. No television programmes are made about the processes of accessioning, cataloguing and display. It seems as though discovery and excavation have a glamour with which existing collections cannot compete, however good the collections are.

Even academics make remarkably little use of museum collections, for collections are now spread to many institutions, and travel to see comparative material is more than the post-excavation budget can afford. Museum catalogues are still not widely published. Instead, great dependence is placed on the finds catalogues of previous excavation reports.

Every excavation report represents a significant achievement by its authors, not least because all reports are produced under constraints of time and

2. *Orcadian*, 15 March 1873.

money. In the past, this has sometimes meant that fragmentary or incomplete objects were omitted from reports or, at least, not illustrated, and so knowledge of them can disappear from archaeological literature. For instance, there is a fine whale-bone object, possibly a weaving batten, from the eroding settlement at St Boniface Kirk, Papa Westray, published in detail in the report on the site (Lowe 1998). The object dates from the last centuries BC, and has a distinctive fine wear pattern on both edges of the blade. After studying this object, a researcher was able to identify the same wear on a later and much less elegant piece from Site 2 at Skail in Deerness (Vicki Szabo, personal comment; Buteux 1997: 9.2.36, no. 555). The comparison had not been available to the authors of the excellent Skail report and their whale-bone object, being obscure, was not illustrated. Thus, the only way now to compare both objects is to come to The Orkney Museum and look.

The best way to study objects will always be by looking at them, but travel is expensive for researchers who live far from the museums that hold the objects. The alternative is for curators and specialists to make catalogues and object-studies as widely available as possible, either as books or on-line. James Graham-Campbell's massive study of Scotland's Viking Age silver and gold shows what can be achieved (Graham-Campbell 1995), but such detailed studies and high-quality publications are beyond the scope of most museums. On-line 'publication' is easier, especially on SCRAN, but museums must still do more to share the intimacies and delights of individual items such as pointed bone tools worn smooth with years of handling, the spindle-whorl from Buckquoy with its delicately-carved ogham inscription praying for the soul of 'L', the magnificent spiral-carved stone from Westray or the whale-bone plaque from the grave at Scar.

There is no obvious way to make access easier, except with that most scarce commodity, money; but funding for the continuing study, publication and sharing of artefact collections will only become available when the archaeological profession, or society as a whole, realises that it needs to have the information. Until then, curators and object specialists must continue with the long slow process of reminding the profession and the public how informative and exciting objects or 'things' can be.

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