

BISHOP'S CASTLE, SCRABSTER, CAITHNESS

An Interim Excavation Report

Eric Talbot

Rescue excavations were carried out at the site of the castle of the bishops of Caithness (ND/106691), on behalf of the Ministry of Public Building and Works, between June 22nd and July 10th, 1971.

The remains, as they exist today, suggest that the castle took the form of a roughly oval enclosure, approximately 45 metres by 30 metres, with buildings ranged around the inside of the enclosure wall. The castle is sited on a promontory, cut off from the mainland by a stream, along the coast between Thurso and Scrabster. Coastal erosion has already resulted in the destruction of part of the seaward side of the castle and may have been the cause of the loss of the tower illustrated (c.1870) in Smythe's Life of Robert Dick. A World War II pill box was constructed where the tower may have stood.

Three areas were investigated by excavation - two in the northwest and one in the north eastern area of the site. They were located to recover walling likely to slip in the near future on to the beach below. The enclosure wall was discovered in the north east and in the north west but in the former area much quarrying had taken place - possibly during the last war. In

the western area a whole kitchen range was identified complete with open hearth, fireplace and oven. All walling was of dry stone. The walls of the kitchen stood in places, when excavated, to a height of more than 2 metres. Disturbance may have taken place since the few finds made were scattered throughout the rubble fill - unless, of course, they came from an upper floor for which, as yet, there is no evidence. The finds from the kitchen area consisted of fragments of bronze cauldrons, window leading and part of a thirteenth (?) century quern stone (cf. late examples from Freswick).

The only pottery finds (except for a few discoveries on the beach) came from the third cut (located in the north west) which revealed a cobbled path which possibly ran from the entrance (in the south east ?) to the tower across the open area inside the enclosure. Except for a very small fragment of S.W. French green-glazed ware (the most northerly example from Britain) the only other sherds of interest were from apparently ring-built cooking pots comparable with a rim from Wyre Castle, Orkney - National Museum of Antiquities, Edinburgh, Acc. No. HX 258.

It would be tempting to identify the castle with the 'borg at Skarabolstad' where Earl Harold of Orkney mutilated Bishop John c.1196 - see Orkneyinga Saga.

The pottery evidence, in the form of the cooking pot sherds may help the identification as far as dating is concerned but no structural remains can be dated on their appearance. The last record of a bishop in residence was in 1566 and by 1726 the castle was 'wholly in ruins'.

Much more excavation needs to be undertaken to determine the complete plan of the castle and the nature of the buildings within it. Excavation in depth is required to obtain an idea of the date range of occupation. The occurrence in the cliff section of middens beneath wall foundations may point to pre-castle occupation. Little has been done archaeologically to gain an idea of contacts between the north of Scotland and the rest of Britain and beyond - Bishop's Castle, Scrabster, could well prove to be of great importance for this.

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