

EXCAVATIONS AT ORPHIR, ORKNEY 1979 (NGR NY 334045)

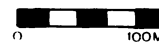
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Orphir is known best for the site of the Earl's Bu, the dwelling of Earls Paul and Harald in the Twelfth Century, and mentioned in the *Orkneyinga Saga* (written in the Thirteenth Century). 'There was a great drinking hall at Orphir with a door in the south wall near the East gable, in front of the hall just a few paces down from it, stood a fine church'. (*Orkneyinga Saga* Chapter 66, Palsson & Edwards, 1978). The church of this passage is the famous Round Church of Orphir (Petrie, 1861 and Johnston, 1902), which is reputed to have been built circa 1172, inspired by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and built at Orphir by Hakon on his return from Crusade. Previous excavations were undertaken at the beginning of the century and in 1939 when the site was laid out for Guardianship. (Johnston, 1902). The remaining reports are rather unclear on some aspects and only two finds are known from the site: a plain worked bone knife handle and parts of a bone comb. (Grieg, 1940 pages 148–149). The comb decoration is distinctive and parallels can be quoted for instance, from Sigtuna, Sweden dated to the Twelfth Century.

This information formed the background to the excavations undertaken in 1978 and 1979. Preliminary work in the field adjacent to the Guardianship area in the summer of 1978 was suggested by Mr. Stephenson of Bu Farm and on whose land all our work was undertaken. In 1956 whilst digging the foundations for a new barn, a stone drain or tunnel was encountered. Having an interest in archaeology, Mr. Stephenson left this site and placed the barn in another field; the tunnel was then covered again until 1978 when Mr. Stephenson opened-up the tunnel again for a visiting group. Our brief work in 1978 demonstrated that this tunnel (or drain) comprised two substantial walls of up to six courses of dry-stone construction. It was capped with large flagstone lintels and the eastern part was damaged with the roofing stones collapsed inwards.

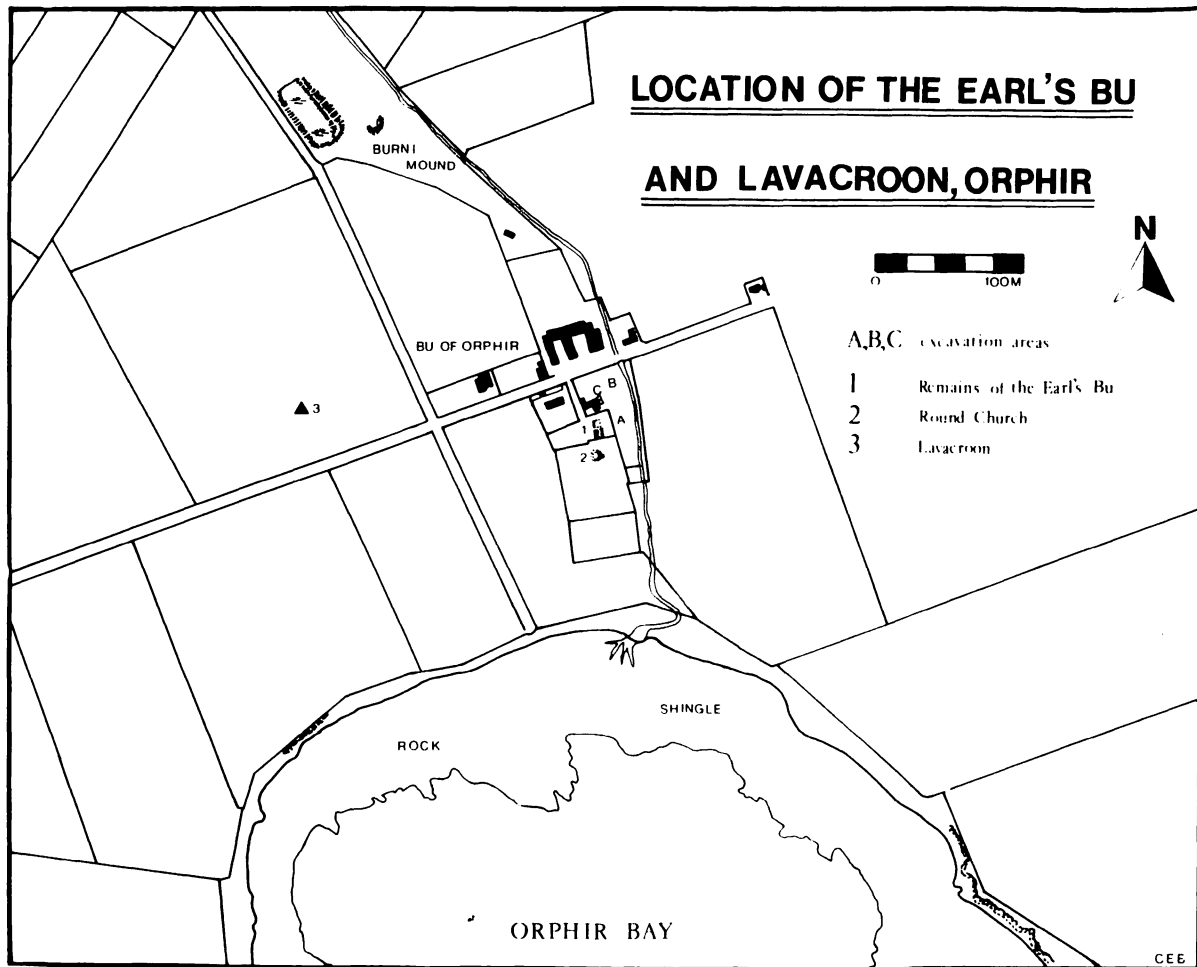
Subsequent work at Easter 1979 was financed by Durham

LOCATION OF THE EARL'S BU AND LAVACROON, ORPHIR



A,B,C excavation areas

- 1 Remains of the Earl's Bu
- 2 Round Church
- 3 Lavacroon



University Excavation Committee with staff and volunteers recruited through Durham University. An area of approximately 100 square metres in the vicinity of the initial trench was surveyed with resistivity meters. An initial investigation of the results shows no clear trace of the tunnel or neighbouring features, possibly due to geophysical properties peculiar to Orkney or Orphir, but further computer analysis might phase out some of the 'background noise'.

In the summer session, work concentrated on the extension of the original trench (B) and on a smaller area (C) opened along the projected line of the tunnel to the west. An area was examined in the south of the field (A), to test the possibility that buildings connected with the Earl's Bu in the Guardianship area may extend eastwards towards the burn.

1. Excavations around the tunnel.

Area B.

The extension of the original trench to both north and south of the tunnel indicated uniform deposits with the exception of a group of three large stones to the south uncovered on the final day of excavation. The most interesting information to emerge from the excavation was a feature of rich organic material and small burnt stones, cutting across the east of the area. This crosses the tunnel at the point where there is collapse and could explain the damage. No direct dating evidence is at present available, but samples including burnt material, are awaiting analysis. Work on the tunnel itself was limited because it was already at a more advanced stage than the surrounding layers.

Area C.

The second area of investigation provided interesting, if unexpected, results regarding the possible dating of the tunnel. The trench, immediately adjacent to a pig-sty, was two x three metres. A rich midden deposit was uncovered only about ten centimetres from the present ground surface. Samples were collected and during this process a small complete bronze annular brooch which is possibly gilded, was found and also a

small iron object which may be a knife blade. A section was taken across the trench to ascertain the relationship of the various tip layers of the midden, during which a small pit was located in the north-eastern corner of the trench, containing large fish bones, many of which were articulated. This was sealed by the deposit containing the brooch and knife fragment.

The midden deposits gave no indication of having been disturbed or cut through and are overlying the tunnel at a depth of over fifty centimetres. The potential of the midden deposits will repay further work, but the present samples have yet to be analysed.

2. *East of the Guardianship Area.*

Area A.

A traverse fifteen metres x one metre was placed to establish the presence or absence of further buildings to the east associated with the Bu. In the south of the trench a wall very close to the surface, with finds of a modern nature, might be interpreted as the remains of a farm building known on the site from a Nineteenth Century Parish map. However, immediately adjacent to this and underlying a deep layer of sandy gravel, two stone lines with a dark filling were uncovered. Initially thought of as a double-sided wall, it seems increasingly likely to be a drain, as many large animal bones were found in the fill. A sherd of finely smoothed steatite vessel of high quality possibly consistent with the status of the Bu site, was found within this feature. Very tentatively this is ascribed to the period of the Earl's Bu, the Twelfth Century. In the north of this trench an area of heavy burning was located, defined by a group of large stones. Samples were taken for Environmental analysis and Radio-carbon dating.

3. *Lavacroon.*

Whilst working at the Bu at Easter, the farmer drew our attention to another field he was ploughing for the first time in many years. After ploughing, large slabs of both dressed and undressed stones had been dislodged and scattered on the

surface of a large mound in the field, also small shelly midden deposits and heavy iron slag were visible. This mound corresponded to the site of *Lavacroon* a tumulus indicated on the Parish map previously mentioned. After walking over the area in a grid 100m x 80m, a distribution plan drawn up indicated both the stone spread and the artefact distribution. The artefacts recovered include half a poly-chrome glass bead with its nearest parallel at Ribe, Denmark dated circa 800 AD and a worked steatite fragment; other finds include a small copper-alloy rod, a possible part of a crucible; VFA/glassy slag and metallic slag in large quantities and noticable concentrations. Also flint flakes, Prehistoric pottery (possibly Bronze Age) and Post-Medieval pottery were recovered.

There is obviously a considerable date range represented at this site but solely on the evidence of field walking one cannot be sure to which period the ploughed-out structure belongs. The field will be ploughed again next year.

Acknowledgements:

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