

mostly be interpreted from gulley sequences which protected each successive phase from water draining down the hillside.

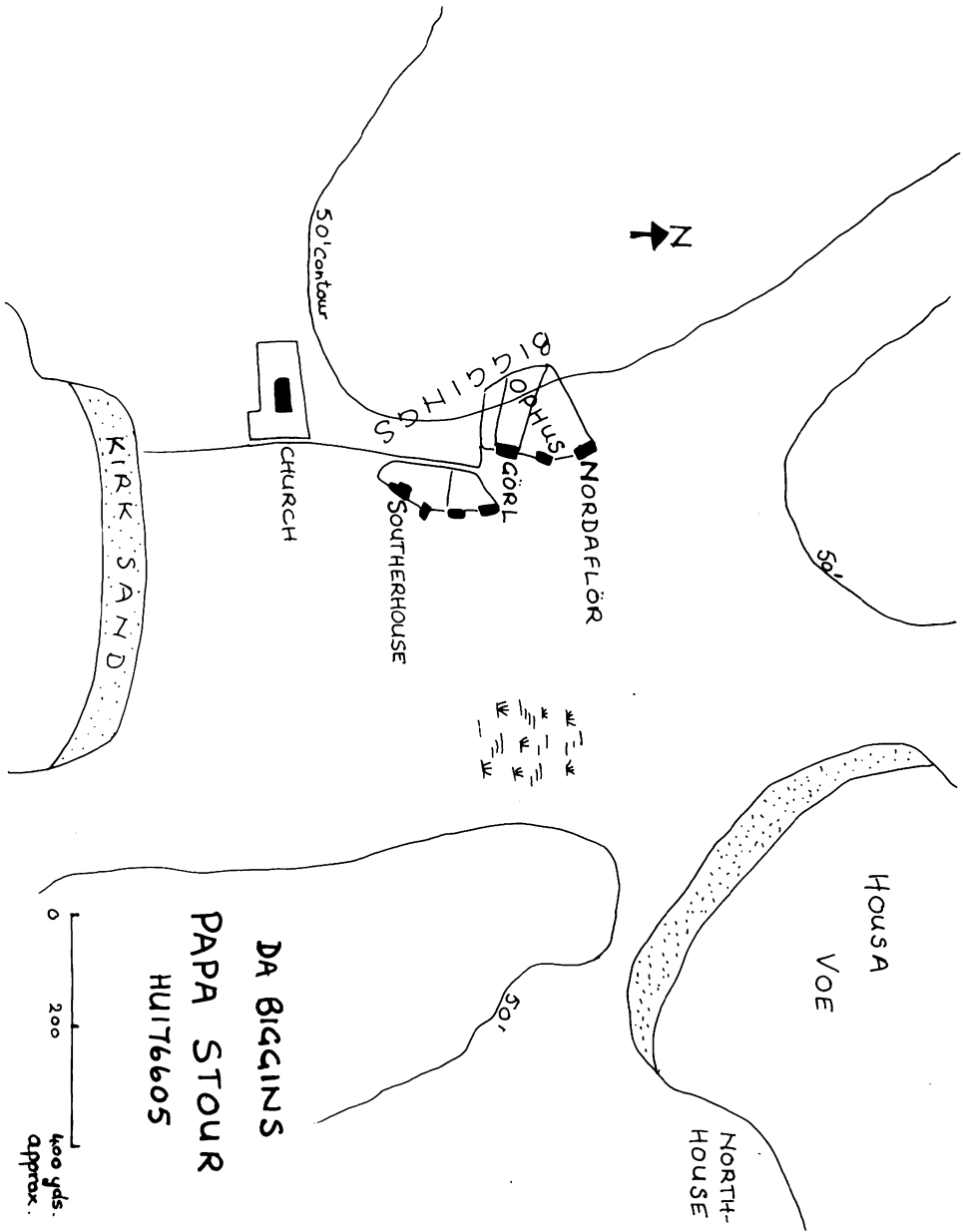
Taking into account the gulley sequences and by association of alignment it would seem that building F was the last to be constructed by which time buildings P and R had already been re-aligned for drainage purposes. The evidence suggests that all three buildings were in use at the same time, were aligned east/west and were defined as a 'unit' being encompassed by a single drainage gulley.

The function of the buildings is difficult to establish in view of the sparsity of the material remains of P and R. As far as can be seen the metal-working activity of F belongs to the latest phase and therefore may not necessarily be typical, and this is supported by the general absence of metalworking artefacts from P and R. It is anticipated that final interpretation of this area of settlement will be made with the receipt of specialist reports and that publication will occur as soon as possible thereafter.

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A progress report of the first season's excavation at 'Da Biggins', Papa Stour, Shetland.

It has always interested me, as a historian of the Scandinavian settlements in Scotland, that the oldest document we know to have been written in Shetland, in the year 1299, was concerned with the rents owed to a Norwegian duke from a comparatively small and remote island off the west side of Shetland, Papa Stour. Considering the paucity of documentary evidence from the Scandinavian period in Shetland it is surprising that so little attention has been paid to a document that holds a very important place in Shetland's history, and one which gives us a remarkable picture of many facets of life in the islands under Norwegian rule. The function of the lawthing; the workings of the tax and rent system (as yet exceedingly obscure); the place of women in Norse society; precious glimpses of the characters and passions of individuals from a remote period. But there is, above all, one unique reference in this document; and that is to the house of Håkon, a Norwegian duke, in which one of the incidents on the island took place.



Duke Håkon, (son of the famous King Magnus Lagabøter, or Lawmender) held Shetland as part of his ducal appanage, from 1280—1299 when he succeeded his brother to the throne of Norway. His possessions at that time were therefore royal lands and rights which had been granted to him, which tells us that his lands and house on the island of Papa Stour were in fact royal domain. We therefore have a historical reference to a house of the kings of Norway on a small island where it might be traced; the only place in the Scandinavian settlements round the coast of Britain where this is so. Since appreciating the significance of this reference it has been my ambition to locate the site of this house on Papa Stour and excavate it. After many years of discussion and planning, last July saw a team from St. Andrews University, with Chris Harris from Bergen as Field Director, spend three weeks digging in an attempt to find the site. It is no doubt dangerous archaeological practice to look for a site known from historical evidence; it is also an exceedingly chancy business. Our first trench was only a few feet away from where we eventually found a mediaeval house site. But in the meanwhile we spent many days digging through exceedingly tough turf in the area round about and coming upon nothing more ancient than 18th.—20th. cent. remains. However, the combination of historical evidence and archaeological possibility, together with some fascinating place-name material to guide us, has made this multi-disciplinary approach a most rewarding search.

The site chosen lies in the middle of the cultivable part of the island which faces east across the Sound of Papa to Sandness and Melby on the Mainland of Shetland. It is situated between two bays, both of them forming excellent shelter for shipping with shelving sand for beaching boats. The church, on a mediaeval site, is nearby. The two remaining crofts in this part of the island are the remnants of a once-extensive crofting township, known as 'Da Biggins' (probably a scotticised form of ON *bygdirnir*, *bygd*, a village). To my mind there was no doubting that this was the central settlement of the island, but in deciding on this site we were not going along with local tradition, which pointed to Northhouse on the other side of Housa Voe as the most important house in the island. This was the home of the Mowats (whose heraldic stone still remains at the site), certainly the family of influence in the Scottish period. But the more

central site at the Biggins seemed to be the area of primary Norse settlement. Within that area one can still discern the fragmented parts of the original central farm; Sutherhouse is a yet inhabited croft; Ophouse remains only in the memory of the oldest inhabitants; Nordaflör (northern byre) is also inhabited. The division into these three parts (a not uncommon Shetland settlement development) must have taken place prior to the year 1299 for 'Ophus' is named in the document of that year. It was therefore in the yard where the croft of Ophouse had once stood that we decided to look for the Duke's house.

In the second week a fine piece of yellow/brown glazed pot (of late mediaeval type) told us that we were at last near something of interest. This came from the southern corner of the enclosure and in the same trench — the fifth! — structures started to appear not far below the surface which were of quite different stone and building technique from the rubble walls of houses uncovered in the earlier trenches. Built of more regular flagstone, this walling appears to be about 1.5 m. wide, with a carefully placed internal face, and a less regular external course. The latter may be due to the use of turf on the outside of the building, a common practice in Norse houses in the Atlantic islands. A notable and interesting feature is a stone channel (c. 20 cm. wide) which runs along the internal face of the wall and parallel to it. As this was not fully cleared in the time left to us it is uncertain yet what use it served, whether as a drain or flue — both of which are found in the Viking Age house at Underhoull in Unst. This channel was choked with peat, which occurs in large quantity in this and another trench which we opened nearby. This has straightway provided us with another problematical feature, for this peat is of good quality and the form of the turves is still quite clear. But amongst it is a quantity of birch bark, some pieces of which are large enough to show the size of the tree trunk or branches. From this size it does not appear that it could ever have come from Shetland itself. Our hypothesis at the moment is that this may be the remains of a turf roof which had been lined with birch bark, a feature of Norwegian turf-roofed houses. If the pieces of bark are indeed too big to have been derived locally then Norway would seem to be the obvious source. This peat layer forms an excellent preservative cover which means that organic material survives in quite good condition; some good-sized pieces of wood appear to be lying beneath it.

Only one corner of this building is included in the trench at the moment; outside it there is a layer of burnt earth. From the rest of the trench have come fragments of late mediaeval pottery and soapstone vessels with many stone implements — pieces of quern, line-sinkers or loom weights, a whetstone — of indeterminate age. The two most interesting small finds, an amber bead and a stone mould for a buckle and pin were found immediately adjacent to the stone structure. A member of the team has detected remains of resin on the mould, evidently a deposit associated with the process of casting. He has also examined the residue of a porridge or gruel inside one of the steatitic vessel, containing seed-husks, apparently of Corn Spurrey (*spargula arvensis*), a weed of arable land. The Shetland name for this plant is, interestingly enough, the ‘meal plant’, and its use for food in Shetland has been noted in historical accounts. It also formed part of the last meals of some of the Danish bog people. These finds alone tell us that we are on a mediaeval settlement site and one which appears to have been of some substance, from the size of the walling and a find like a mould which indicates some industrial activity of, perhaps, an aristocratic kind. One striking feature of the building, and all the buildings uncovered throughout the yard is their changed alignment from the existing croft houses and outbuildings. The older alignment is roughly E–W and the building uncovered is running at an angle towards a ruined croft house (built in the mid-19th century) known locally as ‘Da Görl’. This would appear to be the same as ‘de Gorhul’ which Jakobsen (*The Place-Names of Shetland*, p. 139) derives from O.N. *gyghar-holl*, troll-hill — a suggestive name indeed! When it is realised that the actual part of the yard where we found these remains is called ‘Da Porrie’, the suggested derivation of which may be O.N. *borg*, fortified place, and used in Shetland for structures of importance, then the place-name evidence would indicate that we are indeed on a very interesting site. Whether this will prove to be Duke Håkon’s house is not yet clear, and may never be. But if continued excavation helps to give us more information about the period of Norwegian rule in Shetland, that will be reason enough for pursuing it.