BROUGH OF BIRSAY, ORKNEY (NGR HY 239285)

Excavations by the University of Bradford

J.R. Hunter

Excavations took place on part of the site on behalf of the Department of the Environment (Scotland) for a period of four weeks. The investigations were directed by Mr J.R. Hunter from the School of Archaeological Sciences, University of Bradford.

House F

Work continued on the cliff area to the North of the Cathedral where continual coastal erosion had removed large sections of the standing structures. The building known as House F which had been examined last season was totally removed course by course. This enabled the building phasing and alterations to be determined. By using comprehensive recording methods it will be possible to rebuild the structure in situ with the same masonry when the excavation is completed. It became clear that at least three stages of alteration took place, the most fundamental being the strengthening of the walls at the east by a new turf-filled construction in contrast to the narrower walls at the west. A new doorway of somewhat elaborate form was part of this alteration. Associated with these phases were

a series of external hearths, areas of burning and a rubble spread containing a considerable quantity of iron slag and fired clay. Inside was a large hearth defined by upright slabs typical of those on the rest of the site. The inside of the building had been excavated in 1938/9 and had been completely cleared of other features.

The complete removal of House 5 showed the remains of a large structure beneath. This lay at a completely different alignment to House F. Only the foundation course of one faced wall and the remains of what appears to be a type of partition wall survived. The former had been utilised in the doorway of House F and the remainder of the structure had been removed when the later house was built. Relating to this early building was a smithing hearth lying to the west which still contained a residue of slag and showed the position of the bellows and stone supports. A series of post-holes and post-sockets were also revealed together with a large oblong stone-filled pit the purpose of which is unknown at this stage. House F had a small out-building to the north hitherto considered to have been of 'lean to' construction. With the removal of the main house this now appears to be part of the earlier building although its relationship to the single surviving main wall has been lost. The probable dimensions and surprising alignment of this earlier building may require the history of the site to be seriously considered.

The removal of this building revealed a spread of general disturbance and rubble suggesting an area of external activity. Open peat hearths, small pits, compressed rubble patches and areas of hardened earth all point towards this conclusion. Large deposits of midden material, notably animal bone, suggest an area of domestic habitation in contrast to the more industrial nature of the site in the later phases. The presence of pottery rather than steatite for the first time in the long history of the excavations confirms this domestic period. At least three pottery vessels were discovered. One almost complete vessel lay amid a hearth where it had been used for cooking. All the vessels were hand-made, badly fired and of course fabric.

The removal of these features and the general layers associated with this habitation brought the excavation to an amorphous layer consisting mostly of natural grey clay but containing also a series of remarkable gulleys. At least two have so far been recorded. Both were semi-circular in form and contained a compact fill of small stones and redeposited grey clay. These clearly belong to a phase and type of settlement unknown here. They appear not to be for drainage purposes and at this stage there appears to be no structures with which they can be associated. In view of their possible relationship to features outside the excavated area it was decided to study them in detail next season.

HOUSES P. and R.

Houses P and R represent the most northerly standing structures on the site and lie in an area where natural erosion is most savage. In keeping with the general policy of the excavation large areas outside the houses were opened and this again proved to be invaluable to the understanding of the site. Both buildings had been excavated in 1938/9 but the investigations have been concerned solely with internal features. House P, the most northerly, now appears to be no more than a later shortening of an earlier and larger building. The earlier building lay at a different alignment and its general length can be determined by a defining gulley on the western side. The robbing of part of the west wall and the building of a south wall not only drastically reduced the internal area but also altered the alignment of the building by ninety degrees in the same manner as in the House F complex. Evidence of an even earlier phase is given by the presence of a gulley within the house itself underlying the south wall. At least one surviving wall was of stone-faced construction with turf fill. The north wall was partially dismantled and evidence of post-holes were discovered within the walling.

House R is less easy to evaluate at this stage. It appears not to be a single building but rather the random survival of a series of apparently unrelated walls and features. It is hoped that further excavation will clarify the situation.

The area between the two excavated parts of the site is relatively small and it is anticipated that the investigation of this region next season will solve many of the problems encountered and tie together the settlement patterns in this area of the site.