

EXCAVATIONS AT THE BROUGH OF BIRSAY, ORKNEY 1977 (NGR HY 239285). (D.O.E.)

J.R. Hunter 1977 Excavations.

Excavations were continued at the Brough of Birsay, Orkney in September 1977 by the University of Bradford on behalf of the Department of the Environment for Scotland. This was the final season of excavations on the cliff area north of the main settlement where coastal erosion was depleting three visible Norse standing structures known (from north to south) as buildings P, R and F. Previous work had established that the complexity of the occupation below the standing remains necessitated further excavation for a proper understanding of the settlement and the structural sequences.

The results outlined here are based on the full three seasons work and at this stage can only be considered to be preliminary. Artefactual analysis, seed, charcoal and animal bone examination and especially radiocarbon dates are awaited before more definite interpretations can be made. Nevertheless, while emphasising the preliminary nature of this report the following observations may be deduced in as far as date is available.

At the present stage this area of the site can be divided into at least four defined periods, the last of which is associated with the standing walls.

PERIOD 1, the earliest, is the most enigmatic and hence the most difficult to evaluate. The phase is represented by two semi-circular gulleys both of which face the hillside and were presumably for drainage purposes. Apart from a pit and areas of burning there was little evidence of occupation within the limits defined by the gulleys.

PERIOD 2 shows the filling of these gulleys with stones and clay. There was little silting and no rubbish material in the ditch fill and this may indicate a relatively short period of time between the first two periods. The main evidence for this period is the construction of stone-faced and rubble-cored walling along the line of the cliff. This was set on a bank of clay and small rubble to provide an even foundation. Although it is conceivable that the

walling represents the remains of possibly two buildings a more likely interpretation is that of a boundary wall. The construction and uneven line are more appropriate to this than to structures. Furthermore, the places at which the walling did **not** survive were precisely at those points where later buildings had been sited and suggest a continuous line. The proximity of the cliff face to the east of the wall prevented any examination of the 'external' area although a series of postholes on the same alignment may be associated.

PERIOD 3 denotes a time at which this walling had either been destroyed or had deteriorated into a state of delapidation. The area excavated showed evidence of a casual occupation with a series of small hearths, areas of burning and scatter of food debris. Evidence for structures was restricted to several apparently unrelated postholes. This phase was almost certainly Norse with the remains of at least two appropriate hand-made and badly fired pottery vessels from the hearth material. Radiocarbon dates from the area of burning place this phase within the late 9th or early 10th centuries.

PERIOD 4 the final period, relates to the construction of at least three buildings and covers a number of structural alterations and amendments several of which were substantial. The most southerly building (F) was constructed on an east/west alignment and directly across the former 'boundary' wall, parts of which were utilised *in situ* in the doorway and entrance area. The walling was stone-faced with turf core and the building was ultimately extended to the west with walling of a noticeably thinner construction. Little in the way of domestic debris was encountered and in view of the large quantities of iron slag and burnt clay discovered and the proximity of a small bowl hearth to the south-west an area of metal working activity is suggested. The most northerly building (P) was originally constructed on a north/south alignment and defined to the west by a long curved drainage gully. At a later stage the alignment was changed 90 degrees and a new south wall constructed sealing below it a series of hearths belonging to the earlier construction. The central building (R) was probably also the result of a re-alignment with only the south wall of the original structure surviving. The ultimate building lay to the south using this surviving wall as the north wall. Although robbing had completely removed the original wall lines in both buildings P and R their orientation and extent can

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

Taking into account the gully 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 gully.

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.

J.R. Hunter,
University of Bradford.

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.