

Late Norse high-status sites around the Bay of Skail, Sandwick, Orkney

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THE immediate hinterland of the Bay of Skail in Orkney's west Mainland is best known for the Neolithic village of Skara Brae, but it has a wealth of other early settlement and funerary sites, including at least two Iron Age brochs, while its Norse burial sites and ubiquitous place-names testify to its occupation during this period as well. Alas, the area was not mentioned in 'Orkneyinga Saga', and until recently no Norse settlement sites had been found, nor had much local history been published. However, there is now a growing corpus of multi-disciplinary research, notably two theses by Sarah Jane Gibbon née Grieve (1999, 2006), my own work on the Breckness estate (Irvine 2009a), and the major, on-going Birsay-Skail Landscape Archaeology Project directed by David Griffiths of Oxford University (2005, 2006, 2011), coupled with the stimulus of the Research Agenda of The Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site (Historic Scotland 2008). This prompts consideration of when and why four high-status sites in this area, shown in Figure 1 – St. Peter's Kirk, the Castle of Snusgar, Stove, and Skail House – may have developed and interacted during the late Norse period.¹ The objective of this paper is not to pre-empt the important archaeological findings of Griffiths and his colleagues, but to introduce some hypotheses that will hopefully help stimulate further historical research and discussion on this important area and period.

St. Peter's Kirk

This building has been restored by the Scottish Redundant Churches Trust and its modern history recorded (Irvine 2003), but little is known of the early history of the site, and no archaeological work has been undertaken.

St. Peter's was the parish church of Sandwick until regular services there ceased in the 1970s, as it had probably been since the parish was first

1 'Late Norse' is taken as post c.1050 (Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998: 2).

established. The present building dates from 1836, occupying the same site as earlier structures erected in 1767 and the 1670s. The earliest surviving gravestone is 1623, and the earliest record of a parish church of Sandwick is 1458 (Kirk 1997: 192). Annates were paid on the vacant benefice of Sandwick in 1327 (Cowan 1989: 123).



Figure 1. The hinterland of the Bay of Skail in Norse times.

The site is 200 metres from the north shore of the Bay of Skail and 350 metres east of the Broch of Verron. It stands at the foot of the fertile slopes of the townships of Northdyke and Scarwell,² each of which was given a skat

² A township denotes a community of farmers (Thomson 2001: 316-31).

valuation in the early rentals of forty-five pennylands, much more than the twenty-four pennyland value of the township of Sutherquoy that overlooks the south side of the bay.³ Although there were brochs on both sides of the bay,⁴ and today the lands of Sutherquoy appear as fertile as those of Northdyke and Scarwell, the greater natural productivity of south-facing slopes no doubt made the north side of the bay the logical focus for settlement and high status sites during the early Norse period.⁵

A detailed study of the archaeological, historical and landscape features of Orkney's chapels, parishes and parish churches has been made by Gibbon (2006: 177–8, 296). She agrees with Storer Clouston that Orkney's parish churches were upgraded from chapels and were often located on earldom land within settlement areas. She also found that most are located on fertile land and close to the coast and/or a broch or other Iron Age site, but that many are not centrally located with respect to the parish boundaries.⁶ It is apparent that the location of St. Peter's is compatible with all of these features except that the ownership of the land is unknown.

The dating of this church site is still unclear. Storer Clouston (1932: 154) believed Orkney's parishes to be pre-Christian in origin, and Raymond Lamb (1989: 260–71; 1995: 9–27) suggested that Orkney's Petrine dedications were pre-Norse, but Willie Thomson (2001: 19) has questioned these theories, and Gibbon (2006: 243) has found no firm evidence, historical or archaeological, of specific chapel sites in Orkney earlier than 1050. She has also shown that Orkney's parochial system and parish churches probably date from the mid- or late twelfth century.

Castle of Snusgar

To the south east of St. Peter's Kirk lie several grass-covered sand mounds, the most prominent of which is associated with the Castle of Snusgar. Few

3 Skat was a Norse land tax. Pennyland was a land valuation unit for levying skat. For the background to these and other medieval Orcadian terms, and to the early earldom and bishopric rentals of Orkney, see the introduction to Thomson, 1996.

4 A broch site has recently been discovered 250 metres south east of where Skaill House now stands, at the location marked Loupandessness (Ordnance Survey 6":1 mile map, 1900; Irvine 2009b).

5 The lack of a sheltered anchorage on the north side of the bay (assuming no significant geomorphological change) would not have been relevant, as Viking longships could be hauled up into nousts.

6 The location of Sandwick's parish church, so far removed from the townships that border the Lochs of Harray and Stenness, became particularly controversial in the 1830s (Irvine, 2003).

records refer to this site, no traditions associated with it have been handed down, and most commentators have been dismissive of its significance. The earliest reference was in 1794 when Rev. William Clouston noted (1794: 262) 'the ruins or remains of a large building which yet bears the name Castle of Snusgar'. However in 1923 John Fraser reported (1923: 22, 24) that 'nothing now remains to indicate what sort of building it was'.⁷ He suspected it had been a broch, and subsequently only Hugh Marwick (1952: 155) and Heather James (1999: 271) have questioned this interpretation. Even the name seems neither significant nor original: Orkney abounds with 'Castle' place-names – Grieve identified 104 such sites (1999: 120-6) – while Snusgar may come from the Old Norse *snus*, a 'rock or projection', and *ger*, a 'dyke' (Barbara Crawford, personal advice).⁸

Neither Clouston (1931) nor Grieve (1999) included Snusgar in their lists of Norse castles, despite the discovery in 1858 of the 'Skail Hoard' at the foot of the mound on its south east side (Graham-Campbell 1995: 34, 123-7). At eight kg. this is still the largest silver hoard ever found in Scotland; it comprised over one hundred items, including jewellery, hack-silver, and coins minted in A.D. 887-945. Graham-Campbell has dated the hoard A.D. 950-70, and suggested that it may have represented the capital of a local chieftain who buried it before setting out on a raid from which he never returned (1998: 243, 246). But of course this find does not prove the existence of a high status settlement site in the immediate vicinity.⁹

Following extensive geophysical surveys, Griffiths's team excavated part of the top of the mound of Snusgar in 2004-5 (Griffiths 2005; 2006; 2011: 16-19; Griffiths and Harrison 2011: 12-15). Amongst much else, they uncovered a wall up to about 1.3m thick and several small finds from the Norse period. It thus now seems likely that we do have a high-status building here after all, with occupancy spanning the period mid tenth to twelfth centuries. Griffiths and his colleagues will be publishing full analyses of their findings in due course, but meanwhile it is illuminating to consider this site in the wider context of other work on Orkney's Norse castles, notably that of Grieve (1999):¹⁰

7 The reason that these two reports differ may be because the remaining masonry had been used to build nearby dykes (stone walls) during the enclosures of the mid nineteenth century.

8 Another reason to suspect the present name may not be original is the absence of any record of a 'bu' name in the area. A 'bu' was a large farmstead or estate (Marwick 1952: 240-3). The term 'Bu off Skeall' was used, uniquely, in the 1614 rental (Peterkin 1820: 135), but this reflects its temporary use by Earl Patrick Stewart (Clouston 1927: 41, 47).

9 Indeed, Crawford finds it strange for a hoard to have been buried so close to a place of residence.

10 Taylor 1938: 242, 244, 275, 380, 384 (site numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5); Marwick 1928: 9 (number 1); Clouston 1925: 281 (number 13); Clouston 1929: 57 (number 2); Clouston 1931: 17, 24, 27, 33, 35 (numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 13); Clouston 1932 (161, 171 (numbers 1, 3, 4, 5); RCAHMS 1946 nos. 240, 241, 361, 485, 550, 619, 743, 918 (numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 13); Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998L 195, 258, 259, 260 (numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 13); Grieve 1999: 53, 58, 64, 67, 70, 84, 87, 88 (numbers 1-13); however number 13 is dismissed in Gibbon 2006: 898.

#	Site Castle or Defensive Farmstead (Grieve 1999)	Parish	Internal dimensions		Wall thickness m	Approximate distance from			On a mound ?	Date (Grieve 1999)
			m	x m		the sea	parish church	nearby chapel		
1	C Cubbie Roo	Wyre	6	6	1.7	320m	-	200m	Y	1150x80
2	C Cairston	Stromness	19	19	1.3	20m	<100m		N	1130s
3	C Castlehowe	Paplay	9	6	2.1	40m	500m		Y	?late 1100s
4	C Damsay	Firth	9	9	?	300m	-	350m	N	?a. 1136
-	? Snusgar	Sandwick	?	?	1.3	100m	300m		Y	???
5	DF Wirk	Rousay	3	3	2.1	50m	130m		N	?1100s
6	DF Skaill	Deerness	6	5	2.0	20m	<100m		N	
7	DF Tuquoy	Westray	7	4	1.2	20m	700m		N	a.c. 1130
8	DF Bu	Orphir				150m	<50m		N	
9	DF Backaskaill	Sanday				20m	<50m		N	
10	DF Langskaill, Braes of Kalston	Birsay				500m	3500m	600m	N	
11	DF Castle of Stackalbrae	Eday				20m	4200m	800m	N	
12	DF Castle, Sealskerry	Eday				20m	4000m		N	
13	DF Clouston Castle, Germaness	Stennes				20m	2200m	close	N	1120x50

Figure 2. Orkney's Norse Castles and Defensive Farmsteads.

It is apparent from Figure 2 that most of these defensive sites were located close to the sea and the parish church or, if on a small island, close to a chapel.¹¹ I will return to the possible significance of these features shortly. Meanwhile several questions arise: was the land to the south of Snusgar (between the Burns of Snusgar and Skaill, known as 'the Links of Sandwick'), and to the southeast (the western slopes of the Hill of Sandfield) as infertile when this site was in use as it is now? And if not, when and why was this land abandoned?

Today this area is a rabbit warren, covered with bent grass and machair, unsuitable for pasture, and only of use for quarrying sand. The sites of its existing buildings all date from the 19th or 20th centuries.¹² The early rents and teind burdens of this area suggest it has been as unproductive since the late fifteenth century as it is today: the teinds of the 'links of Sandwick', together with the hill of Keirfield and twenty-four pennylands of Sutherquoy, totalled just twelve shillings scots *per annum* when they were leased out by the bishopric in 1628 (NRS GD217/1045), and these lands may have borne this liability since teinds were first introduced (see below). The later earldom and bishopric rentals make no reference to this land, but the earldom charged an annual rent of sixty rabbits and 120 skins for the links of Sandwick in 1503, and forty rabbits and a hundred skins in 1492

11 Grieve also noted (1999: 109) that all but two of these sites were associated with bu or skaill names. This suggests that Snusgar may not have been the original name of this site. If Griffiths's recently discovered East Mound building complex nearby (see below) was a bu (Clouston 1927; Clouston 1932: 169–81) we would have a chapel/parish church, a castle and a bu in close proximity, as in Paplay and in Wyre (Clouston 1927: 47; Gibbon 2006: 555, 682).

12 Grahamsha', Millcroft, Morven, Seaview and Skaravoe.

(Peterkin 1820: 62; Thomson 1996: 57).¹³ Until the early twentieth century, rabbits remained the links' principal economic asset (Irvine 2009a). At best rabbits were always a mixed blessing: 'the profit made by [their] flesh and skins is by no means compensated by the damage they do in boring the sandy grounds and subjecting them to [sand] blowing' (Low 1879: 42). When rabbits first arrived in Orkney is still unclear (Thomson 1996: xiv), but was possibly between the mid twelfth and mid fifteenth centuries.¹⁴

So although the links of Sandwick were probably infertile in the late fifteenth century, this had not necessarily always been so. Marwick (1952: 147) suggested that this land might have been a township named 'Sandwick', from the Old Norse *sand-vik*, 'sand-bay'. Although his motive for this suggestion seems to have been simply to enable him to include Sandwick along with Firth, Orphir and Stenness as a parish that took its name from the earlier name of a prominent township (Marwick 1952: 155; Gibbon 2006: 238), his choice of name for this township was quite plausible given the precedents in Deerness and Shetland. Several settlement and funerary mounds provide further indicators of the former fertility of this area. One of the former, some 200 metres east of Snusgar, has recently been excavated Griffiths's team,

13 These annual rents were listed in North Sandwick in 1503 and in South Sandwick in 1492, but they clearly relate to the same links. They may be compared with those in Deerness (thirty rabbits, thirty skins), Papa Westray (140 skins), Burray (formerly 360 skins), Cross and Burness, Sanday (formerly 600 and 400 skins) (Peterkin 1820 i: 8, 87, 19, 92, 96). Links in S. Ronaldsay had been liable to rent until 1483, but the amount is not given (Thomson 1996: 37).

14 The Orkneyinga Saga recorded hares c.1154 (Taylor 1938: 323), but made no mention of rabbits. Sheail (1971: 17) believed there were 'plenty of records of rabbit warrens in the offshore islands of ... Scotland by the late twelfth century'. Watson (1979: 151) was more explicit: 'It is generally accepted that rabbits were introduced to Britain at the Norman Conquest. At first they were carefully contained in specially built warrens and used as a source of meat and fur. The few animals which escaped were quickly taken by poachers or other predators. Rabbits cannot thrive in wet land and although they can swim they will not usually cross even small streams. In the days before agricultural improvement, when undrained land was the norm, rabbits did not spread far from their original warrens and the wild population was effectively controlled by natural predators' (which in Orkney would have included eagles and hawks). Parts of Scotland, for example, Kincardineshire, did not have rabbits until the early nineteenth century (Ritchie 1920: 252). Early site-specific references suggest the establishment of Scotland's warrens progressed northwards, albeit erratically:

1153×61-2: Berwickshire (Gilbert 1979: 208)

Post 1124, probably 1318: Isle of May, in the Firth of Forth (Watson, 1979: 150)

1264: Fifeshire (Ritchie 1920: 249)

1325: Arbroath (Gilbert 1979: 214)

1431: Wick (Gilbert 1979: 214)

1474: Cupar (Ritchie 1920: 250)

Early C16: Aberdeen (Brown 1956: 63)

It seems unlikely that rabbits appeared in Orkney, or at least in the links in the parishes of Deerness and S. Ronaldsay, (Peterkin 1820 i: 8, 22) before the introduction of pennylands, derived below as mid-twelfth century.

revealing a large stone building complex that was in use during the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Griffiths and Harrison 2011: 15-19). However, if there was a fertile township of 'Sandwick' some time before 1492, why have no traditions of such a township survived? When and why was this township abandoned and allowed to degenerate into a links?

It may be significant that the early rentals imply that these links were not liable to skat. The reason is unclear: it was not because of their sandy soil per se; nor, apparently, because they were links.¹⁵ It could have been because the township was originally 'bordland', that is, owned by the earls and had never been liable for skat;¹⁶ or perhaps it was simply because the township had been ley (uncultivated) for a long time. Although the early rentals do not actually say so,¹⁷ the area obviously suffered from 'sandblow', the aeolian deposition of sand and subsequent loss of fertility.¹⁸ Thomson (2001: 328) has identified several factors that caused, aggravated or resulted from this process: in addition to the impact of rabbits, already discussed, the climate was cooling after the twelfth century, leading to more frequent south-westerly gales, to greater exposure to seagust (salt spray), and to an increased likelihood of harvest failures. Orkney's population was already falling before the Black Death of 1349 (Thomson 2001: 169, 187, 190). The economic depression of the late medieval period, which probably reached a low point in the 1460s, was manifested locally by a catastrophic decline in the value of many of Sandwick's townships, probably before this time (Thomson 1996: xiv, xvi; 2001, 328).

These observations offer a superficial explanation of why, by the end of the fifteenth century, the Castle of Snusgar, Griffiths's East Mound building

- 15 Much of the sandy land in the North Isles was subject to high rates of skat, indicative of intense agriculture by the Norse, presumably as they found the sandy soil easier to till than heavier soils, and capable of being made very productive after the application of dung and ware (seaweed) as fertilisers. Although the links of Sandwick, like those of Burray, Papa Westray and Cross and Burness in Sanday, had no pennyland valuation and were not liable for skat, the links of Deerness had a pennyland value and were liable (Peterkin 1820 i: 19, 87, 92, 96, 8).
- 16 This may have been the reason the links pertaining to the kingsland in the township of Akeris and Lythis in S. Ronaldsay were not liable for skat, even though this land had a valuation of seven farthings (Peterkin 1820 i: 22).
- 17 Unlike references in the early rentals to some of the lands of Papa Westray, Burness and Lady in Sanday, and Westray having been [sand]blown (e.g. Peterkin 1820 i: 87, 96, 100, 85).
- 18 'Sandblow' is a complex process thought to be caused by intermittent periods of storms, after which vegetation could slowly recover unless regrowth was destabilised by rabbits making the land unsuitable for grazing livestock (Griffiths 2011: 5). Infertility attributed to sandblow was widespread in the North Isles in 1492 (Thomson 1996: xiii). Although the remains of the Castle of Snusgar are still close to the current level of the top of the mound, Griffiths's East Mound building complex now lies under 1–2m of sand, the bronze age cist of Sandfield under about 5m of sand, and of course Skara Brae was believed to have been buried in sand from the Neolithic until 1850 (although in fact before this date two visitors to Orkney had reported sighting remains that were probably those of Skara Brae: James Robertson in 1769 (Henderson 1994: 123 and Thomas Stewart Traill in 1833 (NLS MS19396 f.23v, transcribed in Irvine 2009b)).

complex, and Marwick's township of 'Sandwick' had apparently all been abandoned, possibly over an extended period of time. Fortunately, this important issue is the subject of extensive on-going research of which the Birsay-Skail Archaeology Project is part (Griffiths, forthcoming).

Stove

When Snusgar was abandoned it might well have been replaced by a substitute settlement site nearby, clear of the sandblow area, but not too far from the sea. A sheltered location in the township of Scarwell would meet these requirements, and it so happens that 1.6 km to the north east of Snusgar, in the middle of the modern village of Quoyloo, there is a farmstead named Stove.¹⁹ This name derives from the Old Norse *stofa*, 'a heated room', and implies a prestigious, timber-built structure that was typically associated with a chieftain family of the late Norse period (Crawford 1999: 58–61; 2002).²⁰ The present buildings of Stove include a classic linear, single-storey vernacular stone dwelling, probably a few centuries old, and a former mill, but no archaeology has been attempted. The rentals of 1492 and 1503 refer to Quystofe (that is, Quoystove) which was valued as one pennyland and had been conquest (that is, acquired from a udaller, a private landowner) by Earl William in the mid fifteenth century (Thomson 1996: 43; Peterkin 1820: 60). The family of Kirkness lived at Stove from before 1694 until 1877 (Irvine 2009a: 238), paid teinds in Scarwell in 1565, owned land in nearby Northdyke in 1492, and was already prominent in Orkney in 1391 (Clouston 1914: 27, 372, 456; 1932: 277–8).²¹

Skail House²²

Moving to the other end of the Bay of Skail, Skail House stands a kilometre south of Snusgar. Together with its home farm nearby, this is clearly the dominant surviving high status site in the area. Its development post 1620 is now well documented (Irvine 2009a), but little is known of its earlier history. It did not appear in 'Orkneyinga Saga'; the earliest surviving contemporary reference to a building is in 1592 ('Skel' in Blaeu 1654; Irvine

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- 19 Although the names of Netherstove, Midstove and West Stove, in the township of Scarwell between Stove and Snusgar, are suggestive of this land having been 'divisions' of the early farm of Stove, rentals and eighteenth-century maps show all three to be modern sites.
- 20 Thomson has kindly drawn my attention to a clearer example of a Stove place-name superseding an earlier high status name, the Bu of Hackness in Sanday (Marwick 1952: 9).
- 21 A tradition, attested in the 1740s rentals, claims that John Kirkness of Stove was knighted by James V (Irvine 2009a: 238). Curiously the present owner of Stove has even inherited some of the land of the mound of Snusgar, including the spot where the hoard is thought to have been found in 1858, although this land was then owned by an unrelated family.
- 22 Until recently this site was simply known as Skail, but the modern usage distinguishes it from other skail sites.

2006: 30), and to the site is in 1492, when 'the bishop has the skats of Scalle 8d terrae' (Thomson 1996: 58). The only archaeological investigation undertaken has been of skeletal remains found in 1997 (James 1999).

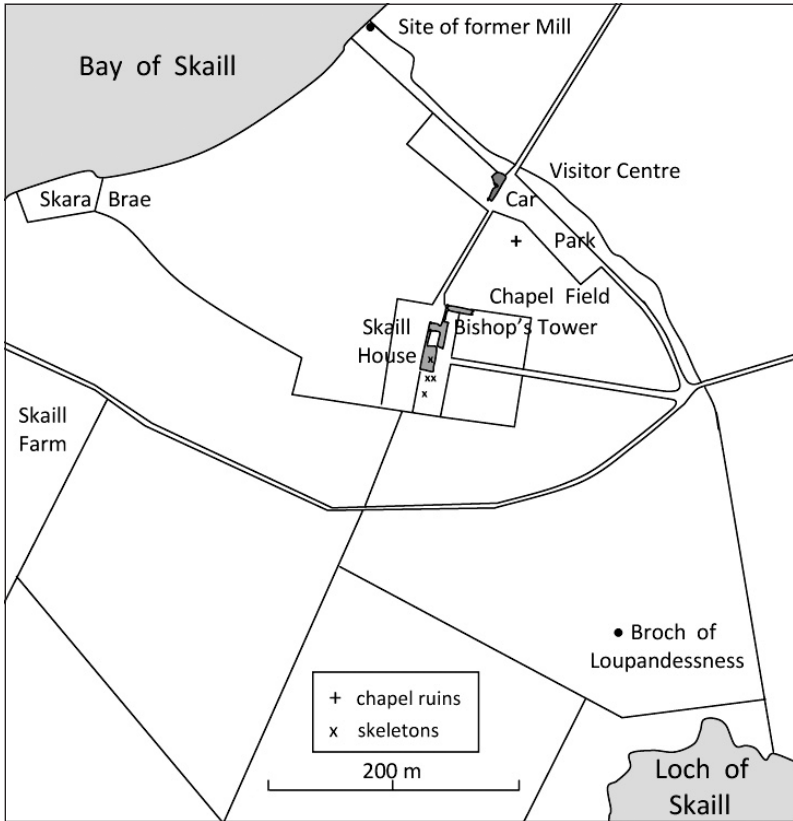


Figure 3. Skail House with its burial ground and chapel ruins.

The existing buildings of Skail House, now restored and open to the public, date from between the mid 1620s, shortly after Bishop Graham acquired the site, and the 1950s. There was an 'Old Hall' referred to in 1790 (SH55/2) that I believe stood on the north side of the present courtyard and preceded the present structure, though little if any pre-1620s fabric survives (RCAHMS 1946: ii, 251, updated by Irvine 1997: 8; 2009a: 125). Nothing now remains of the associated chapel that was in use as a circuit court in 1679, as a store in 1719, and was in ruins in 1775.²³ In 1895 its foundations were said

23 OAD20/6/4/6, D3/63/14; NRS GD217/650; OAS11/54/5.

to lie 'within 100 yards [from the square tower at the north east corner of the courtyard of Skail House], in the field called to this day the Chapel Park',²⁴ and the tenant farmer Peter Davidson remembers ploughing this field and finding stonework on the slight rise close to the south of the Visitor Centre car park, a hundred metres north east of the tower (see Figure 3).²⁵ In the 1640s a Presbyterian minister Walter Stewart referred to 'a chapel, built from the base up at the expense of its Priest' (Irvine 2006: 22), implying perhaps that it had been built by Bishop Graham, presumably in the 1620s.²⁶

I think it unlikely that this chapel was connected with the graves that lie 150 metres to the south west that were discovered in the garden immediately south of the south wing of Skail House in the early 1900s, under the floor of the central hall (built 1792–4) in the 1930s, and between these two locations and immediately to the east of the south wing in 1997. On the latter occasion eleven articulated skeletons were excavated and subsequently dated as belonging to the mid eleventh to late fourteenth centuries (James 1999: 762). The close proximity of these three discoveries of skeletal material suggests there had been a cemetery of some size in use during the mid-late Norse period. Although it seems strange that a dwelling should have been built on top of such a cemetery, it transpires this feature has been recognised elsewhere in Orkney: skeletons have also been found under the dwellings of Newark in Deerness, Graemeshall in Holm, Noltland Castle and Skail in Westray, and possibly Tankerness in St. Andrews and Houseby in Stronsay (Sutherland-Graeme 1936: 53, 54; Gibbon 2006: 1034, 1028, 689, 692, 934). How might this macabre practice be explained?

From her extensive review of archaeological evidence and the Orkneyinga saga, Gibbon (2006: 229, 296, 304) has shown that many high-status Norse dwellings in Orkney had a chapel close by, probably built between 1050 and 1150, and nearly all of these had an associated burial ground. It is unlikely that a dwelling would be built intentionally on top of a burial ground still in use, but the Reformation accelerated the abandonment of private chapels and their associated cemeteries, while over the centuries large homesteads were rebuilt and extended, so later 'accidental' building on top of a disused cemetery became almost inevitable. At Skail House this hypothesis is consistent with the medieval dwelling having stood on the north side of the present

24 SH 36: 95. This was possibly written for Craven, whose published text (1897: 175) added the words "further east" after "100 yards". The maps of 1750 and 1772 imply the chapel was north of the nearby burn, though this seems unlikely.

25 Irvine 2009a: 30, 125, 214, 220.

26 The square tower, built in 1895 and extended to its present three stories in the 1950s, used to be known as the Bishop's Tower, possibly because masonry from the nearby chapel ruins were used in its construction, and some still associated this chapel with Bishop Graham.

courtyard, with an associated chapel in the vicinity of, say, the present south wing, surrounded by a cemetery that had fallen into disuse before 1623.²⁷ If this chapel was in ruins by Bishop Graham's time – indeed its masonry might have been used for building the 1620s homestead – then this could explain why the bishop found it preferable to build a new chapel nearby 'from the base up', rather than to rebuild the ruins of an abandoned 'popish' chapel.

Skaill House is one of over forty 'skaill' sites in Orkney that Thomson interprets as 'a high status name denoting a hall', from the Old Norse *skáli*, 'a hall'. Although he has challenged much of Marwick's chronology of Orcadian place names, Thomson has also shown that most skaill sites are on relatively low-valued land, and this led him to believe they probably dated from after the Viking period. He suggested 'they flourished at a time when church organisation was being consolidated, perhaps in the eleventh or twelfth centuries, and their use for name-forming may not have survived beyond the saga period', that is, after *c.*1200 (1995: 55–7; 2001: 54; 2008: 15–17).

So if we tentatively accept the arguments that this skaill site is contemporary with others so named, and had a contemporaneous chapel and cemetery, then we now have three modern but independent dating estimates:

- site name (Thomson): eleventh or twelfth centuries
- chapel (Gibbon): mid-eleventh to mid-twelfth centuries
- cemetery (James): mid-eleventh to late fourteenth centuries

From the compatibility of these estimates it now seems plausible to tentatively date this settlement site from between *c.*1050 and *c.*1150. But why was it located on the south side of the bay rather than the north, nearer to St. Peter's Kirk and Snusgar? Contributory factors no doubt included the nearby fertile slopes of Sutherquoy, the ready availability of masonry from the broch of Loupandessness, and the proximity of a sheltered anchorage. Although no early, large-scale maps of the area survive (and probably never existed), Mackenzie's accurate survey of 1750 and a sketch of the Links of Sandwick made for Joseph Banks in 1772 (BL Add. Ms.15511, f.11) both suggest that the shoreline of the Bay of Skaill was then much less symmetrical than it is today, with its southern headland, north east of the modern Hole o'Row, extending further north into the bay, and perhaps even being surmounted by a hillock.²⁸

27 Bishop Graham's daughter Jane was buried in St.Peter's kirkyard in 1623.

28 The subsequent erosion of this headland may have contributed to the exposure of peat in the bay in 1817, and accelerated the exposure of Skara Brae in 1850 and the loss of the Mill of Skaill in the 1980s (Irvine 2009a: 14).

The relatively sheltered anchorage so formed in the south of the bay, allegedly sought by the Master of the sloop 'Jupiter' in 1790 (SH B6/16/4: 10–11) and still today referred to as *The Haap* (from the Old Norse *hóp*, 'a small landlocked bay or inlet'), would have been a strong 'pull' factor in the siting of Skail at the southern end of the bay at a time when the climate was deteriorating and freight was sea-borne rather than overland.

Twin high status settlement sites

Having considered the high-status sites of St. Peter's, the Castle of Snusgar and Skail House individually and found it likely that they were contemporaneous, it is instructive to address their possible inter-relationships. Following Griffiths's excavation and Gibbon's work on Orkney's parishes we can now entertain the possibility of the parish kirk of St. Peter's having originally been the private chapel to the Castle of Snusgar, but the relationship between Snusgar and Skail is more problematic. What are the implications and significance of two high-status settlement sites in such close proximity? The parishes of Deerness and Rousay both have a parish church which had earlier been the chapel of a skail site. However, Sandwick is not alone in having a skail site with another high status site nearby, but with the parish church closer to the latter; Gibbon (2006: 728) found it noteworthy that the parish church of Burness in Sanday was not found nearer to the large farm of Skail, and her data shows four such examples:

Parish	High status skail site	Distance from shoreline	Skail site from parish church	Same ownership?	Own chapel?	High status building closer to parish church
Holm & Paplay	Bu of Skail	900m	1000m	No	No	Castlehowe
Sanday, Burness	North Skail	200m	1100m	No	No	Sand/Scar
Sanday, Cross	Backaskail	100m	1400m	No	No	How
Sandwick	Skail House	300m	1300m	No	Yes	Castle of Snusgar

Figure 4. Skail sites with adjacent high status sites.

The only feature in Figure 4 unique to Sandwick is that this Skail had its own chapel, but even this detail may not be significant if the other three

skail sites had chapels that have remained undetected.²⁹ A feature common to all these examples is that the areas were sufficiently fertile to support two neighbouring high-status farms.³⁰

Orkney's Parishes

From the hypotheses developed above it seems likely that the Castle of Snusgar was occupied before Skaill, but that the two buildings may have existed contemporaneously for at least a century.³¹ What circumstances might have enabled this scenario? Clues to this question emerge from Gibbon's picture of the evolution of Orkney's parishes. Her proposed sequence and chronology for local developments (2006: 245) is summarised in Figure 5:

mid C11	Formal acceptance of Christianity by Earl Thorfinn Creation of a permanent Bishop's seat Chapels are built by nobility and bondi Several churches overseeing administration of proto-parishes Possible establishment of monasteries
early C12	Power shift from Birsay to Kirkwall Foundation of St Magnus Cathedral More chapels built by nobility and bondi, some go out of use, some continue in use Parish churches created out of existing chapels on land of Earls and chieftains Division of land into parishes based on townships, due to compulsory exaction of tithes Urislands and pennylands used with the parishes to exact tax based on land
early C13 to C14/15	Chapels enlarged to accommodate 'parishioners' Continued consolidation of parish boundaries as land brought in and out of use More chapels built by nobility and bondi, most go out of use

Figure 5. Gibbon's proposed chronology.

The terms of reference of Gibbon's thesis restricted the scope of her conclusions, but the scope of her fieldwork makes it easy to develop further

29 The absence of chapel sites associated with these three skail sites is surprising: Gibbon (2006: 260) found that 85% of the known skail sites had associated chapels, more than any other place-name type.

30 Thomson has advised that Castlehow may be pre-Norse, and North Skaill and Backaskaill are not typical skail-names. These interpretations clearly weaken my argument, but they remain examples of other twin high-status settlement sites.

31 This seems more likely than two other possible hypotheses: first, James's suggestion (1999: 771) that an early chapel near Skaill was designated as the parish church but this had later to be relocated to St.Peter's because of sandblow; and second, the possibility that, when he abandoned Snusgar, its owner chose Skaill as his residence rather than Stove.

her main findings. The costs of building St. Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall after 1137 would have involved commitments not needed on such a scale since Neolithic times. Such commitments would only have been possible within the period of prosperity consequential to the agreement between Earls Rognvald and Harald that the former should effectively be the sole earl for his lifetime (Taylor 1938: 262), with the vision and drive of Bishop William, and with close co-operation between earl and bishop in collecting the revenues necessary for remunerating the many craftsmen and labourers involved.³² While 'Orkneyinga Saga' claims the initial impetus and, by implication, funding came from the new earl, the experienced bishop was also well placed to generate annual income, by the collection of teinds. Although the earliest surviving evidence of teinds in Orkney is not till 1327, they were introduced in Iceland in 1096 or 1097, were in use in Scotland in 1124, were introduced in Norway before 1130, and were in use in Denmark by 1135 (Cowan 1989: 122; Thomson 2001: 130, 208; Watt 1988: 25; Sawyer 1988: 40). Watt (1988: 27) and Sawyer (1988: 41) believed that it was teinds which created the need for parish boundaries, and Gibbon (2006: 42) saw the introduction of parishes as a direct result of the imposition of teinds. It thus seems both logical and compatible with the available evidence that the cost of building the cathedral may have been the stimulus for Bishop William to introduce parishes and teinds.

Although some cash payments may have been made, most of the renderings of these teinds were probably in kind, primarily grain, and organising the transport of the large amounts of grain that were needed in Kirkwall would have presented a novel and massive logistical challenge.³³ Wherever possible shipment would have been by the large Norse longships known as *knarrs*. Each cargo would need to be consolidated near to a suitable loading point in each parish or island to await the arrival of the next *knarr*.³⁴ As the Viking lifestyle of Sweyn Asleifson was still prevalent, accumulations of grain in such unprecedented quantities would present a temptation for pillage, so secure defensive sites for the storage of grain awaiting shipment

32 Much of this remuneration would have been in kind, that is, victuals, a practice still common in Orkney centuries later.

33 This requirement for transporting large quantities of grain to Kirkwall would have arisen even if the bishop's contribution only came from the rents from his new endowment (Thomson 2001: 105).

34 This might be several months, because of both the shipment of *knarr* cargoes being dependent on fair weather, and the apparent lack, possibly reflecting a deliberate policy, of a defensive storage site in Kirkwall (Grieve 1999: 113).

would become essential.³⁵ Perhaps an early feature of the alliance between Earl Rognvald and Bishop William was the designation of a *gøding* or eminent *bóndi*³⁶ in each parish to be responsible for the collection and safe storage of these renders somewhere close to a beach from which a *knarr* could safely load. These new responsibilities would be the pretext to encourage these local tax collectors to enhance the defensive features of their homesteads, or even rebuild them as castles, a practice previous earls would have discouraged. The bishop could reward the efficient tax collector for compliance with his new responsibilities by designating his private chapel nearby as the new parish church.³⁷

However, Earl Rognvald was soon struggling for funds. Considering the introduction of some form of payment from udallers to redeem their lands, I think it unlikely that his 'one-off' redemption offer to udallers c.1144 (Taylor 1938: 260–1) could alone have been both affordable by udallers and at the same time been sufficient for there to be 'thenceforward ... no lack of money for the building of the church'.³⁸ So the success of Bishop William's introduction of teinds together with the prosperous local economy (Clouston 1932: 181; Gibbon 2007: 246) may have prompted Rognvald to introduce a further annual levy on land, in the form of skat. This tax was dependant on pennyland valuations. Early forms of pennylands had already been introduced elsewhere on the basis of twenty pence to the ounce, but within the Orkney earldom (including Shetland and Caithness) they were based on the later basis of eighteen pence to the ounce. In Orkney at least pennylands came after the introduction of parish boundaries (Thomson 2001: 208, 278; Gibbon 2007: 238, 242–3),³⁹ but possibly before 1150 (Crawford 1993: 132). This leads to the

35 This concept contrasts with the non-defensively designed teind barn at Kebister in Shetland; although the Kebister site is Norse or even earlier, the excavated remains of its barn are of a later date (Owen 1999).

36 A *gøding* was a Norse noble or chieftain (Clouston 1932: 157; Crawford 1987: 198; Thomson 2001: 106). A *bóndi* was a farmer (Clouston 1932: 157; Crawford 1987: 198).

37 Thomson 2001: 108. Of Gibbon's thirteen defensive sites (2006: 37), four (Cairston, Castlehowe, Bu of Orphir and Backaskaill) were on earldom land, three (Wirk, Skail, Deerness and Clouston, Stenness) were on udal land, and six were land whose ownership remains unclear; and of her thirty-five parish church sites, eleven were on earldom land, nine on bishopric land, three on udal land and twelve on land whose ownership remains unclear. Further work on this subject is needed.

38 This seems so whether the payment was in marks of gold or of silver, or was per ploughland or per pennyland (Taylor 1938: 387; see also Clouston 1932: 90; Crawford 1987: 88, 201; Andersen 1991: 80; Thomson 2001: 104–8, 210).

39 This is contrary to the earlier thinking of Clouston and Marwick.

tentative hypothesis that Rognvald introduced skat and pennylands c.1144 or soon after, before he embarked on his crusade in 1151 (Thomson 2001: 108).⁴⁰

The chronology of these hypotheses is shown in Figure 6:

c.1050-c.1150	Most chapels founded, close to a high status settlement site.
1137	Building of St.Magnus Cathedral begun.
1137-c.1140	Parishes identified and teinds introduced by Bishop William.
c.1140-c.1150	Defensive features of adjacent farmsteads encouraged; selected chapels designated as parish churches.
c.1144-1151	Pennyland valuations and skat introduced by Earl Rognvald.

Figure 6. Suggested chronology of the introduction in Orkney of chapels, parishes, pennylands, teinds and skat.

These suggested dates for when parishes, pennylands, teinds and skat may have first been introduced in Orkney are also compatible with the dates of the defensive sites and chapels developed by Gibbon.⁴¹

The parish of Sandwick

Against this background, how were the new parishes in the west Mainland selected? How were their boundaries determined? Birsay and Stromness seem relatively straightforward. Prima facie the intervening settlement areas that border the Atlantic in what is now west Sandwick (Yesnaby and around the Bay and Loch of Skail) would form another parish. And one or two further parishes would logically be formed from the settlement areas bordering the east and west shores of the lochs of Stenness and Harray, including what is now east Sandwick, for the narrow north-south strip of commonty would have been a natural division between the west and east settlement areas of

40 This is compatible with Thomson's expectation (2001: 219) that pennylands originated in the period 1137-94, and Andersen's belief (1991: 81) that urislands and pennylands were introduced after 1140, even if he expected the date to be late twelfth or early thirteenth century. Even if pennylands and skat were not introduced in Orkney until between 1150 and 1194 (for example, in 1153 (Crawford 1993: 139), or when work on the cathedral was resumed in the late 1180s), such a later date would not invalidate the other hypotheses in this paper.

41 The suggested dates are slightly earlier than Andersen, Gibbon and others have implied, perhaps because first, they are dates of policy decisions rather than of implementation which, as noted by Andersen (1988: 66), Thomson (2001: 208) and Gibbon (2006: 243, 299), would have varied from place to place and extended over a period of time, and second, the dating of the little physical evidence of castles and other defensive structures that has survived may reflect dates of occupation rather than dates of construction.

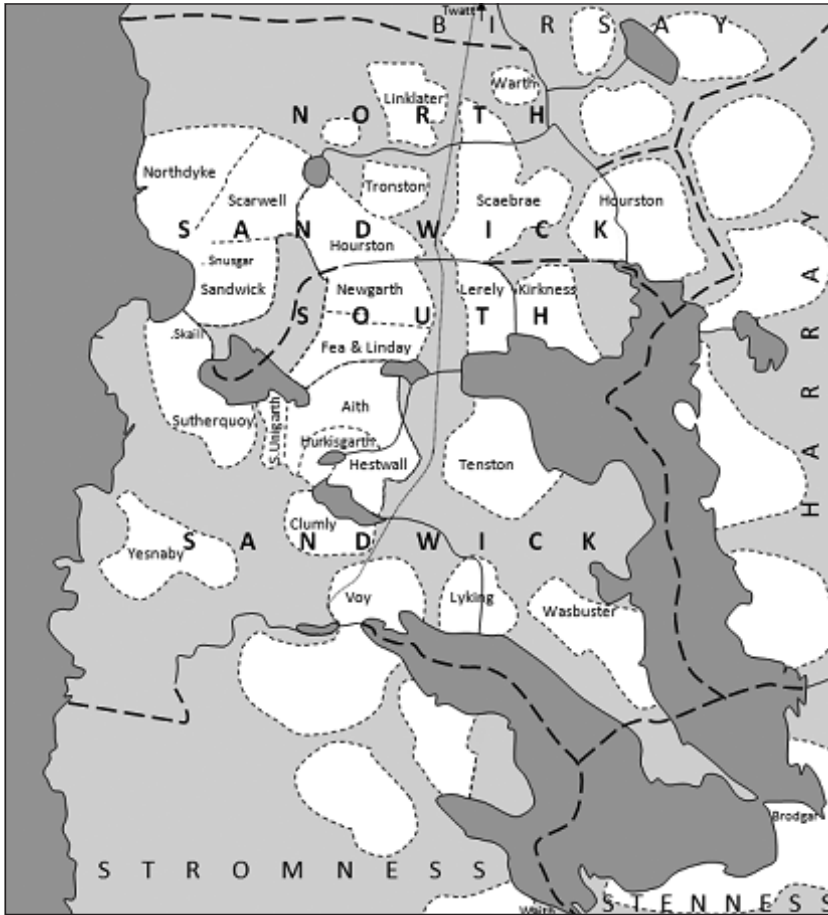


Figure 7. The boundaries and old townships of the parish of Sandwick⁴²

Sandwick (see Figure 7). This strip survived as a prominent feature even after the division of this community in the 1850s (OA SC11/58/87).⁴³ On the other hand Crawford (2006: 38) believed that Hourston was one of several townships north of the Loch of Harry that formed part of an earlier and

42 From Mackenzie 1750, OA D23/1/8 and SC 11/58/87. The existence and boundaries of the township of Sandwick are assumptions. Note the location of the modern road from Twatt to Voy.

43 The location of this strip is still marked today by the straight stretches of the north-south road from Twatt to Voy that was built c.1868 (OA CO2/1/1, /2/2) after this community was divided, but before its enclosure was begun. Some of this former community land remained unenclosed until the Second World War (Ordnance Survey 1932).

larger administrative area whose renders would have been transported north to Birsay, an example perhaps of pre-parochial secular divisions. However, curiously the boundaries that were actually adopted for the parish of Sandwick followed neither of these theories, but instead encompassed a large area that formed the most highly valued parish on the Mainland and included, perversely, the township of Hourston, most or all of which might more logically have been in the parish of Harray.⁴⁴ So the question arises of why Sandwick included Hourston and the other townships bordering the west shores of the Lochs of Stenness and Harray. These townships had obviously been settled first by Vikings who gained access to these lochs from the south via Waith and Brodgar, the same townships whose renders of grain in the twelfth century had, I hypothesise, to be laboriously carried overland west to the Bay of Skail for storage and eventual loading into a *knarr*. I suggest that this apparent change in preferred transport routes serving east Sandwick (that is, formerly via the Loch of Stenness, but now via the Bay of Skail) arose because the relatively shallow-draught longships used by Viking settlers in the ninth century were able to enter the lochs of Stenness and Harray, perhaps with lightening or even portage (in 'Tarbert' style) at the shallows at Waith and Brodgar; however in the twelfth century these same shallows prevented the larger and deeper-draught *knarrs* from passing safely out of these lochs when laden with grain.⁴⁵ I suggest that these nautical and logistic considerations

44 Orkney's parish boundaries seem to have changed very little since they were first created. The only evidence Gibbon found was of minor changes along the borders of St. Andrews and Deerness, and of Evie and Rendall (personal advice).

45 In advancing this hypothesis I am consciously dismissing concerns that grain could not be safely loaded into a *knarr* at the Bay of Skail and shipped from there. This I justify on the evidence of the high pennyland values of the west Sandwick townships, and absence of roads and carts in medieval Orkney, the undoubted skills of the local seafarers, the availability of *The Haap* as a safe anchorage enabling departure to be delayed until wind and tide were favourable, and the documented use of Skail Bay for shipping freight in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Whether the laden *knarrs* were sailed to Kirkwall via the Westray Firth, Eynhallow Sound or Hoy Sound (to Scapa?) would have been then, as today, determined by prevailing conditions, and is not relevant to my hypothesis. I am also dismissing the possibility that sea-transport access to and from east Sandwick via the Loch of Stenness would have been affected the mean sea-level around Orkney having been 1-2 metres higher in Norse times than it is today (John Flett Brown 2003: 12, 21). Such a change is less than the three metres of tidal range (that is, the difference between the heights of high water and low water at spring tides) in Orkney waters, and anyway Caroline Wickham-Jones believes sea-levels in the area a millennium ago were not dissimilar to those today (personal communication). However both Flett Brown's evidence of raised beaches and the recent preliminary determination that the Loch of Stenness was fresh water until c.1400 B.C. (Wickham-Jones and Dawson 2008: 19) challenge the suggestion that in Norse times the sea level was high enough to enable *knarrs* to reach Knarston in southeast Birsay (Crawford 2006: 37). As this area is c.15 metres above sea-level, perhaps Knarston was originally a local collection point for renders before carriage overland, at least as far as the Loch of Boardhouse, for storage in a defensive farmstead near the Bay of Birsay, before eventual loading there into a *knarr*.

would have had implications for the delineation of new administrative areas for the collection, storage and shipment of teinds and skat that in turn dictated the new parish boundaries.⁴⁶

One further conundrum can be addressed. All the early surviving rentals from 1492 until 1612 list North Sandwick and South Sandwick separately. Hitherto only Gibbon (2007: 240–3) has attempted to explain this feature.⁴⁷ From the arguments developed above, the division of the parish into these two administrative districts would not have been made until after the whole parish had been established and named. Indeed, I suggest the division was made soon afterwards, either when the pennyland valuations were instituted (given the valuations of the two halves of the parish are roughly equal),⁴⁸ or perhaps when St. Magnus Cathedral was extended in the 1180s, when defensive storage was less of an issue (Thomson 2001: 120). As the new parish of Sandwick was accountable for more renders of skat than any other Mainland parish (and presumably of teinds also, though no records survive), perhaps the local administration of their collection proved more than the tax collector of Snusgar was able to manage reliably on his own. In these circumstances it would be logical to divide Sandwick parish into two administrative districts, north and south, leaving Snusgar as the collection and storage point for North Sandwick, and building or enhancing Skaill as the collection and storage point for South Sandwick.⁴⁹ This new north/south sub-division of the area comprising the parish of Sandwick contrasts sharply with the earlier and more natural east/

46 Subsequent to developing this hypothesis, I learnt of Doreen Waugh's work on associating portages with the place-name Aith (Old Norse *eið*, 'an isthmus') (Waugh 2006). Although this work does not necessarily justify the chronology I am proposing, my advocacy of the view that renders had to be carried from east Sandwick to the Bay of Skaill is a good example of Waugh's argument, and also a possible explanation of why the large township of Aith was so named.

47 Marwick (1952: 147, 155) accepted that this division, like those in Birsay and Marwick and Holm and Paplay, was not justified on ecclesiastical grounds (1952: 131, 89), and that like Holm and Marwick, South Sandwick never had its own parish church. However, he did believe that these three parishes had been divided, whereas Gibbon (2006: 238; 2007: 243) suspected there were originally six parishes that were later combined to form three. (There is no disagreement that the combinations of Birsay and Harray, St. Andrews and Deerness, and Sandwick and Stromness were originally separate parishes that were later conjoined, possibly due to shortage of ministers.)

48 Clouston (1928: 91–2) valued North Sandwick at a little over 150 pennylands and South Sandwick at a little under 170 pennylands. The former would have been more if the hypothesised township of Sandwick was liable to skat.

49 This is consistent with the belief of R.G. Lamb (1997: 14) that "Skaills' appear to have been settlement sites with a particular focus on the collection of renders and the provision of hospitality'.

west sub-division that reflected the original east and west settlement areas of the Viking Age that had recently been combined to form the new parish.⁵⁰

One test of the plausibility of this hypothesis is its compatibility with the two other parishes that were sub-divided in the early Orkney rentals: first in Birsay and Marwick, where it seems likely that some building replaced later by the Earl's Palace would have been the collection point for The Barony, with Langskail the collection point for Marwick; and second in Holm and Paplay, where Castlehowe would have been for a natural collection point for Paplay, with perhaps Skeall the collection point for Holm (though this was evidently replaced later by the surviving girnle in St. Marys). In other words all three of the divided parishes in the early rentals incorporated two high-status settlement sites, each of which could have logically served as the collection point for the renders of skat and rents from their respective adjacent settlement areas. But no other Orkney parish was sub-divided on a basis that was apparently as arbitrary as that of the north and south districts of Sandwick.

With the apparent later abandonment of Snusgar as a collection point for renders, the need for defensive storage declining, and the recognition of the advantages of *The Haap* as an anchorage for visiting *knarrs* as the climate deteriorated and autumn storms became more frequent, it would be logical for Skail House to become the sole collection point for both North and South Sandwick, and the dominant high status dwelling of the Bay area.

Conclusion

This paper has proposed some hypothetical interpretations arising from recent multi-disciplinary research. It suggests there are now tangible arguments to support Marwick's 'lost' township of Sandwick, to explain the contemporaneous existence of two high-status settlement sites, Snusgar and Skail, around the Bay of Skail for much of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and to explain why Skail House probably had two chapel sites. It shows how logistic, nautical and security considerations may explain why the parish of Sandwick was made so large, why it was later sub-divided into north and south administrative districts rather than into its earlier and more natural

50 The twin sites for collection and storage of renders would also enable a greater degree of mutual visual warning of the approach of a seaborne raid, for, despite the height of Snusgar, a lookout there could not sight a sea-borne approach from the north, nor could one at Skail sight such an approach from the south (Grieve 1999: 75; Gibbon 2006: 165). However the Ward Hill just 800 metres west of Skail commands a remarkable view to the north, south and inland.

east and west settlement areas, and why sandblow and a sheltered anchorage led to Snusgar yielding its primacy as the local administrative centre to Skail House. More generally the paper proposes the pretext for Gibbon's defensive farmsteads may have been for the safe storage of renders of skat and teinds, and also suggests that parishes, pennylands, skat and teinds were all first introduced in Orkney between 1137 and 1151.

These hypotheses have a superficial compatibility with each other and with the evidence that is now available. On the other hand many of the supporting arguments are obviously very tentative, and clearly more historical and archaeological research is needed, in particular on the collection, storage and transporting of the early renders of skat and teinds in Orkney. Hopefully this paper will provoke research and discussion that eventually lead to further insights into the late Norse history of this area and of Orkney as a whole. A fuller understanding of this historical context will complement the eagerly awaited archaeological and scientific results of the Birsay-Skaill Archaeology Project.⁵¹

Abbreviations

BL	British Library, London.
NLS	National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh.
NRS	National Records of Scotland, Edinburgh.
OA	Orkney Archive, Kirkwall.
RCAHMS	Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments and Constructions of Scotland, Edinburgh.
SH	Skaill Papers, c/o Major Malcolm Macrae, Binscarth, Finstown, Orkney.

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- 51 As an amateur historian I am most indebted to four experienced scholars – Barbara Crawford, Sarah Jane Gibbon, David Griffiths and Willie Thomson – who have sighted drafts of this paper and kindly offered comments that have enhanced its content, even if they do not necessarily accept my hypotheses. I am also grateful to Patrick Ashmore for first raising my interest in this subject many years ago, to John Flett Brown, Peter Davidson, Brian Smith, Tom Stevenson and Caroline Wickham-Jones for their advice on specific issues, and to the British Library, Malcolm Macrae, the National Archives of Scotland and the Orkney Archive for access to their records.
- 52 This bibliography does not attempt to include all the copious archaeological material relevant to this small area.

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