

BROUGH OF BIRSAY, ORKNEY

(NGR HY 239285 [Guardianship area] ; HY 237284 [southern area])

Excavations and survey 1979: Interim Report on work by Durham University¹.

Excavations and survey took place in Birsay at a number of sites in 1979 as part of the work of the Viking and Early Settlement Archaeological Research Project, on behalf of S.D.D. (Ancient Monuments) and Durham University Excavations Committee. Work on the Brough of Birsay, under the direction of Christopher D. Morris, was re-commenced for four and a half weeks in July and early August. Staff and volunteers were recruited through Durham University.

Survey

F. and G. Bettess completed the extension of the site survey to both north and south. They also extended the site grid to include the new areas of excavation to the south-west towards and including the 'Peerie Brough'.

Excavations (See Map)

Work took place in three main areas, together with a trial trench. One area (IV) is within the Guardianship area where previous excavations have taken place; the others are to the south-west, where erosion by natural agencies is threatening a series of buildings along the cliff edge, and mark a new phase in the excavation of the Brough of Birsay.

Area IV (See Plan)

Excavation continued in 1979 within the area opened in 1976 and 1977. Work in previous years had established that Site S (Area IV N) was largely of structural features earlier than those in Site E and the area between Sites E and S (Area IV S); hence it will not be re-opened for large-scale excavation until 1980.

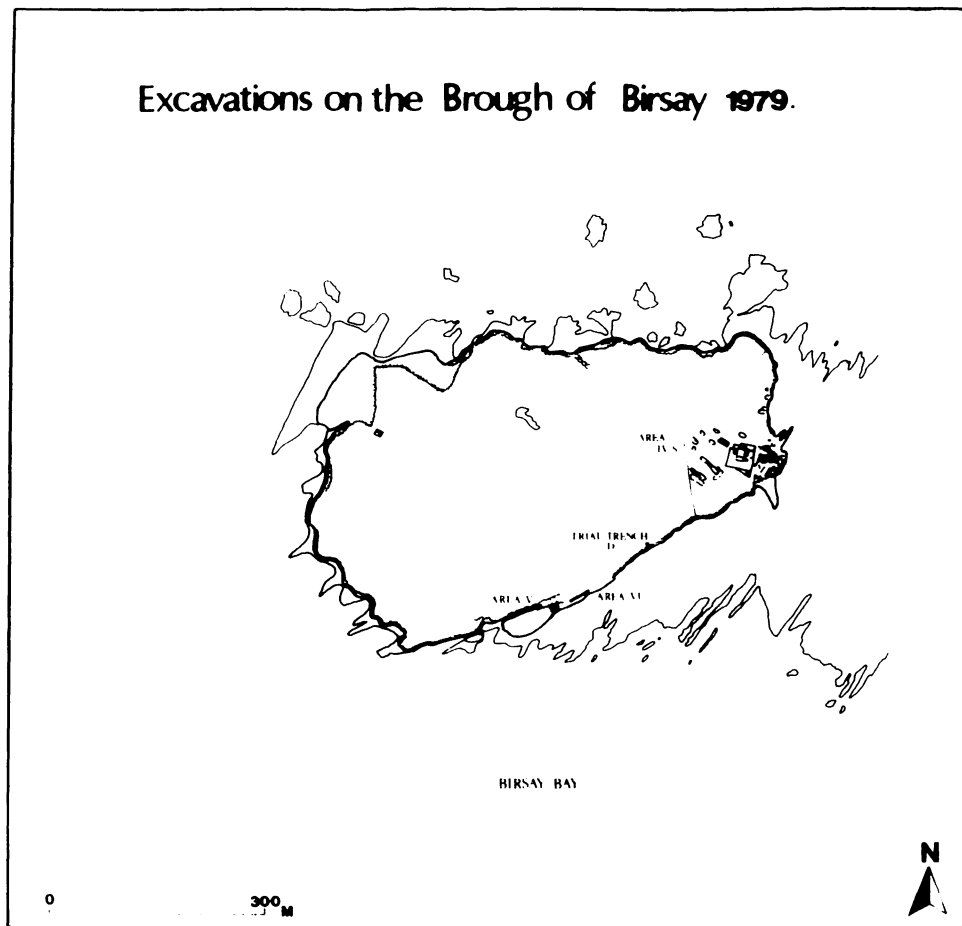


FIG. 1: Map of Brough of Birsay, Orkney, indicating areas of excavations.

Site E

Attention this year was concentrated on completing the excavation of "House E" and a series of outbuildings to the east, and examination of the layers below. In the event, yet more structural remains have been located and partially excavated below, and therefore excavation will continue, and hopefully be concluded, in 1980.

Stratigraphically, it became evident that Building E and the annexes to the east had probably co-existed. The walls of the annexes had been so badly depleted that few outer facing stones remained, and they largely existed as heaps of rubble. Thus few structural details concerning these walls could be recovered, apart from the observation that a wall linking Building E and the annexes was largely formed of upright slabs, in contrast to the remnants of the other walls. There was little, if any, clear indication of floor levels within the annexes, and the entrances were equally difficult to distinguish. The annexe walls were removed (but will be replaced for the laying out of the site), and in the core of the westernmost annexe was found a silver coin, probably Eleventh century Anglo-Saxon, in two pieces and in a very poor state of preservation. This at least gives a *terminus post quem* for these buildings.

Building E was also removed archaeologically (pending layout later) and the north wall, as with part of the south wall in 1977, shown to have a line of facing stones within the wall fabric. Unlike that of the south wall (which appears to be remains of an earlier phase building), this line in the north wall may well represent the original wall-line, later thickened on the inside: there was no turn at either end to suggest an earlier building phase. The walls of the building were shown, on removal, to be constructed of stone facing internally and externally, and a core of clay and rubble. The clay may very well have been derived (as appeared to be the case with Building L excavated in Area III in 1975) from the large gully cut into natural clay encircling the western end of the building. This gully was excavated further, but not completed due to the existence of other features on and in the natural clay. In

particular a feature to the south of the building will have to be examined and the area of excavation extended a short distance to the south to elucidate the sequence and possible relationship to features excavated previously in Site N (Area I).

A thick deposit of rubble, clay and loam lay beneath the walls of Building E and the annexes, and on removal proved to overlie to the west several features cutting into natural clay, such as post-holes and slots. Excavation of these in full awaits clearance of the whole area to the same level, for, to the east, below the annexes, are more dumps of material overlying natural clay and a series of structural elements, only partially uncovered this year.

Finds in this area this year included vitrified fuel ash, steatite fragments, and a spindle whorl.

Area between Sites E and S

This area in 1977 had proved the existence of mixed layers of rubble, loam and clay, with midden-like material. This was shown to relate to the material below the walls of Building E and the annexes (as described above) and thus was removed in sequence with it in 1979. Several metal artefacts were recovered, together with a large amount of mammal bone in very poor condition. The acidic nature of the soil on this site has unfortunately destroyed much organic material, and largely prevented the viable application of techniques of environmental processing for recovery of biological material. Again, as with the area to the south (Site E), earlier structural features were evident below this layer, and await excavation in 1980. Towards Site S, spreads of clay, burning and charcoal were found within the dump of assorted material, and some bone comb fragments appeared in a layer immediately above a drain-like feature cut into compact clay layers.

Site S (Area IV N)

Only very limited work took place in the south-western corner of the area in order to link up stratigraphically this area

with Area IV S, preparatory to excavation in 1980. Spreads of burning, a gully and other dumps are related to those to the south, and are demarcated by a series of drains to north and south. A large curving wall was found to extend further westwards, and its foundation stones seem to be below the layers of mixed material. A quantity of large stones protruding from the western section appear to represent the end of a wall running west-east, and possibly the same as that noted in 1977 in a trial trench to the west, up the slope. This area will be re-opened in 1980 for large-scale area excavation.

Area V

Following aerial observation and photography, and survey work, an area was opened on the 'Peerie Brough', approximately 300 metres to the south-west of the Guardianship area. It appeared that there was a building, possibly with an internal division, and also some evidence in the eroding southern cliff-face of stone structures along the edge. In the event, it appears that there are the remains of at least two buildings partially superimposed here, with the possibility of further structural remains nearby.

Excavation took place in an area basically 15m x 7m, but with irregular edges due to the need for safety measures when working on a cliff-top site! Below the turf and topsoil was a sequence of layers of loam and clay with stones and rubble protruding from the buildings below. A number of iron rivets and plates, and a possible knife-blade, were recovered from these layers, but otherwise only one unworked piece of flint: there is, therefore, no clear indication of date-range from artefacts yet. The emphasis in the excavation was placed on the clearance of the walls and the relationships as established at the junctions; the floor levels have not yet been reached. The plan of a building approximately 10 metres long, with walls of large sandstone blocks and a clay core, has emerged, although there is no clear evidence for a southern wall, and further excavation will determine on which axis the building is lying, whether side-on or end-on to the cliff-edge. The walls are substantial, well over a metre in width, and there was a blocked entrance at the east

end, approximately a metre in width. Internally the building has sharp right-angles at the corners, but externally the walls are curved. The building had a partition wall added, probably in a second phase, also of large sandstone blocks, and a third phase involved the robbing of part of the internal face of the north wall. Whether this robbing is contemporary with the erection of another curving wall, partially on top of the partition wall and partially on top of the eastern end of the north wall, cannot yet be confidently asserted. This later curving wall is of irregular width, but clearly utilising the same large sandstone blocks as the other walls. At this stage, it appears to represent the end of a later building which extends into the area (as yet unexcavated) to the east, and will require excavation in 1980 before the earlier building exposed in 1979. A final phase represented by the erection of a wall, again of large sandstone blocks, but without a clay core, running along the cliff-edge to the south, and apparently cutting, or at least abutting, the north-south walls of the earlier building. This wall in turn rests on an earlier wall (rather than an offset foundation course), whose relationship to the walls of the earlier building has not yet been examined.

It is fairly clear that this southern wall is a later feature; the observation that there was tumble to the east, and probably the remains of a wall, now falling out of the cliff face, indicates that there is a possibility of a boundary/perimeter wall along the cliff-edge. Certainly, to the west, a small trial-trench uncovered part of a wall on a similar alignment under a rise against the cliff edge along the southern edge of the 'Peerie Brough', but as yet it is not possible to be certain whether this represents a boundary wall, or the wall of another building.

Excavation in 1980 will be extended to the east, and possibly also the west, of the present area under examination.

Area VI

This area was newly-opened in 1979, and originally consisted of a 32m long trial trench, 1m wide. It was placed to investigate an area to the (north-) west of the landslip between

the main island and the 'Peerie Brough'. In the cliff-edges there are clearly visible eroding structural features, but no surface indications are apparent across this 32m long area. To the (north-) west of this area is a clear series of buildings running along the cliff-edge towards the Guardianship area. After initial investigation of features in this trench, an area 7m x 4m, with two small extensions, was opened up.

The trial trench revealed a series of structural features in the eastern section (Area VI a) below turf, peaty topsoil and a light brown/ochre clay. The latest feature within and below the clay is a group of ten large, rough blocks of flagstone protruding from the northern trench edge and turning through a right-angle to the south. It survives only to a height of one course, and could not be investigated fully within the confines of a small trench, but clearly overlies a dark brown humus-rich gritty layer of many shattered small stone fragments. This layer appears to represent the weathered top of two walls below, further broken up by root action. The westernmost 'wall' consists of a sequence of relatively large natural flagstones running across the trench, and which appear to be related to other stones appearing in the eroded cliff-section. The eastern 'wall' also consisted of a mass of fairly large sub-angular flags running across the trench at an acute angle. Two courses are visible at present, but no extensive excavation took place this year to investigate the relationship of these two walls to each other. It is hoped to carry out area excavation here in 1980 or 1981.

The 12m long trench to the east (Area VI b) revealed few features of structural significance, but rather a sequence of sub-soil and clay layers, which at the extreme eastern end overlay a light brown gritty layer with small sandstone fragments. This may represent the weathered top of a structural feature, but no further work was carried out on it in 1979.

The central 7m of the trench revealed, below topsoil and light brown/ochre clay, two lengths of wall at right-angles to each other, an upper layer of shattered stone fragments, and the

indications of a second right-angle junction. Therefore it was decided to open up an area 7m x 4m, which in the event enclosed what appeared to be a small building, together with a 3m x 1m extension to the north over a separate length of walling. This length of walling appears to be the latest structural feature in this area, consisting of one course of very decayed sandstone, *circa* 50 cm. in width, and as yet no termination to east or west. It is set on what appears to be natural clay to the north, but tumble to the south from the small building. This building has a small entrance to the north, approximately 70 cm. in width, and walls approximately 1m in width. The walls utilise both beach material and what appear to be quarried blocks for the faces; there are, in places, smaller blocks bonding the two faces together, and, at others, a possible rubble core. Although there are differences in the construction of the eastern and western walls, the stratigraphic evidence at present indicates contemporaneity with each other and the northern wall. These walls have a curved outer face at the corners, but a right-angled inner face. There is a surprising lack of tumble both inside and outside the building, particularly towards the western end, and it is far from clear yet whether the present walls represent the truncated end of a large building, or are linked up with a southern wall, as yet undiscovered. There certainly is a stretch of walling running east-west, much disturbed by rabbits, and covered by a gritty layer with shattered stones, but it cuts the eastern and western walls, and is therefore later in date. It overlies an earlier wall, which may turn out to be associated with these walls, but excavation in 1979 terminated before this could be examined.

Within the building represented by the north, east and west walls, below the light brown/ochre clay near the walls, were gritty layers and mixed stoney and clayey layers elsewhere. Some small stake-holes were encountered, but no regular pattern has yet emerged, and a floor-level has not been established yet. Finds were few, but included a number of iron rivets and a piece of unworked soapstone: no clear indication of date-range has, therefore, yet emerged. It is hoped to continue work here in 1980 or 1981.

Trial Trench D

A small 1m x 4m trench was opened up approximately at right-angles to the cliff-section at a point where considerable erosion has taken place over the past 3 years, revealing stones in the cliff-section. As with Area VI, no clear features could be discerned on the surface, and the aim was to see if there were structural features below the turf, in an area to the north-east of the series of buildings to the east of Area VI.

Immediately below turf and topsoil was a layer of greyish-white clay and a line of tumbled stones. These stones, the remains of a wall, were set in the clay. From the clay three fragments of a steatite bowl and a piece of ? burnt clay were recovered. A further possible structural feature was also encountered below the clay, but could not be fully understood in the confines of this small trench. Below the wall and the structural feature, a dark earth feature producing pumice and burnt material, and grey clay were exposed, but not significantly excavated. This clay is slightly overlapping an earlier wall nearer to the cliff-edge, and there may be evidence of collapse due to the use of turf in the construction of the wall, because the visible face has stones which are sharply canted. Clay, with a find of chert and half a glass bead, and a pit with half a whetstone and 'middeny' material, are apparently the earliest features so far excavated in the area of this trial trench.

The excavations on this site in 1979 have proved that its history is more complicated than has been realised before. Excavations within the Guardianship area in Area IV are demonstrating that on parts at least of this site, a complex succession of building phases is discernible, given a large team, area-excavation technique, and an extended period of excavation. The new series of excavations begun to the south show that either there were two 'foci' or clusters of buildings on the Brough, or that the site extends far beyond the limits of present Guardianship area. Since these buildings to the south are being depleted by every storm, the emphasis in the excavations on this

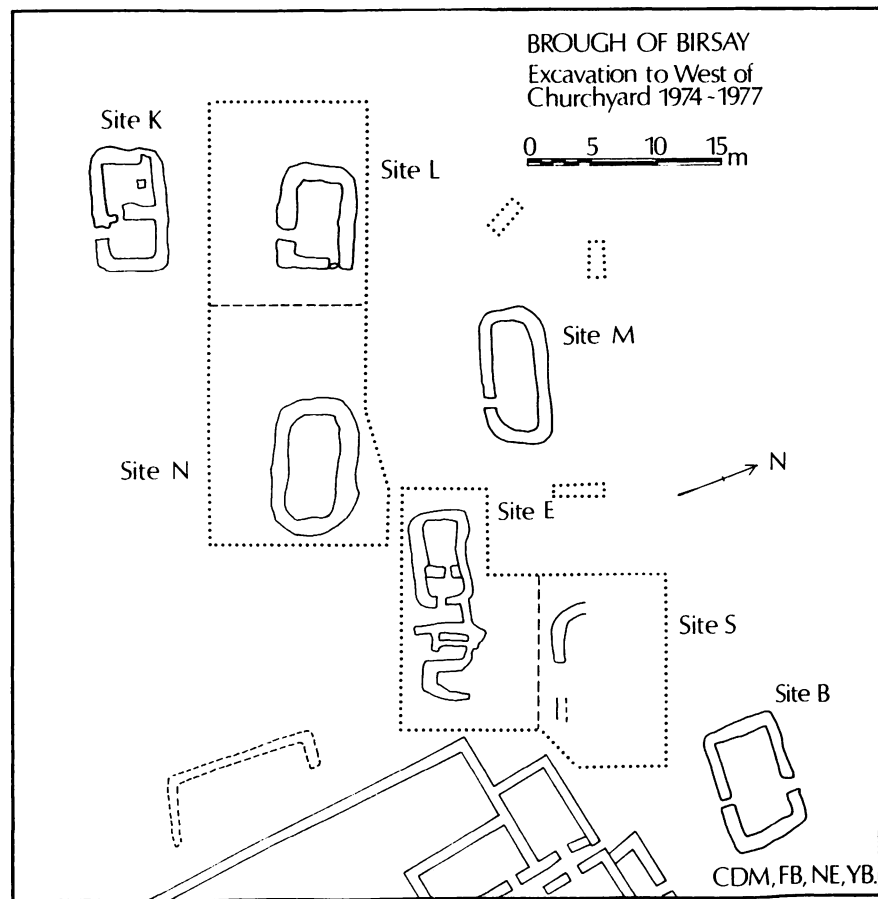


FIG. 2: Plan of Excavation Areas to West of Churchyard, Brough of Birsay, Orkney.

site will now be upon this area to the south-west. It is hoped to work for 8 weeks on this site in 1980 in order both to respond to the 'threat' to the new sites, and to achieve some understanding of the earliest phases of the complex area to the west of the churchyard. Hopefully, also, some indication will emerge of the temporal relationship of these sites to those excavated elsewhere in the Bay.²

Acknowledgements

Grateful thanks are due to:

The Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments, Scottish Development Department, through Mr. P.J. Ashmore, for financial support and material assistance by the Orkney squad (through Mr. J. Drever).

Durham University Excavations Committee, and Vacation Grants Fund, for financial support to students fulfilling course requirements.

Ken King, then General Manager of North of Scotland Archaeological Services, Finstown, for material assistance.

The landowners: Mr. D.S. Wallace, and Mr. W. Moar.

Nicholas Pearson, the Assistant Supervisor for the excavations on the Brough, and general manager for the Birsay excavations.

Norman Emery, financial assistant for the Birsay excavations.

Specialists: Fred and Gladys Bettess (consultant surveyors); James Rackham and Penny Spencer (environmental consultants).

Site assistants: Colleen Batey, Susan Halliday, Pamela Lowther, Jacqueline Medley, Olwyn Owen, Bryan Alvey, Trevor Halliday, Michael Rains, and Kenneth Steedman.

Volunteers are too numerous to list, but were mainly from Durham University, together with individuals from Exeter, Lund, and Göttingen Universities, and Plymouth Polytechnic, and other places, including Orkney and Durham.

FOOTNOTES

1. For previous report, see *Northern Studies*, 11 1978, 19–22; and University of Durham, *Archaeological Reports for 1977*, Durham 1978, 22–5.
2. See *Northern Studies*, 13 1979, 3–19; and Universities of Durham and Newcastle Upon Tyne, *Archaeological Reports for 1978*, Durham 1979, 11–19.

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September 1979.