# THE SETTING FOR THE BROUGH OF DEERNESS, ORKNEY

Christopher D. Morris with Norman Emery (Note 1)

## Introduction

Older readers of this journal will recall two annual reports in *Northern Studies* on archaeological examination of the Brough of Deerness, Orkney (see Morris, 1976; 1978a, repeated as 1978b). A note in the journal *Archaeologia Atlantica* gave an account of the examination and survey of the surface features on this site in 1977 (Morris, 1977). A further note on the results of the excavations carried out there between 1975 and 1977 was accepted for publication in 1982 by the same journal. In view of the delay in achieving publication there, it seemed appropriate to present a Summary Report to an international audience elsewhere, so that the results might be made available with the minimum of further delay (Morris, 1986). A more extended account and a detailed discussion will be contained in the Final Report, which has been accepted for publication in due course by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (Morris & Emery, forthcoming). This article is intended to complement the two Interim accounts – and, eventually, the Final Report which will refer to this paper.

It is fortunate that the archaeological work on this site can now be placed more clearly against its natural background in the Deerness peninsula. Quite coincidentally, during the excavations of 1976, a Geology student from Durham University was engaged upon a study of the geology of the Deerness peninsula, leading to a B.Sc. dissertation in the following year (Heald, 1977). This work has been utilised, along with more general standard works on the geology of the area, for the relevant part of the report below. Also, it was possible to arrange, through the Ancient Monuments Branch, for the specialist services of Mrs. Alison M. Donaldson on another aspect of the natural setting of the area: pollen analysis of a nearby peat bog. This work has a direct relevance not only as background for this site, but also for the sites at Skaill, Deerness, concurrently under excavation by the late Mr.

Peter S. Gelling of Birmingham University (Cruden, 1960; Wilson & Hurst, 1961, 311; Wilson & Hurst, 1965, 207; Wilson & Hurst,1966, 176; Webster & Cherry, 1972, 169-70; Gelling, 1984; Gelling, 1985). Radiocarbon determinations have been received for parts of the column: it is a matter for disappointment that it was not possible to undertake these for those parts most likely to be directly related to the contexts excavated on the Brough of Deerness.

It has also been possible to place the results from the Brough of Deerness more clearly against the archaeological background of the Deerness peninsula. Kenneth A. Steedman, then an undergraduate student in Archaeology, undertook fieldwork in Deerness in 1979, combined with re-examination of existing records, and presented his dissertation in 1980 (Steedman, 1980). An edited version of this work, together with Steedman's gazeteer, will be presented in the Final Report, but some of the major conclusions are anticipated here.

**Topography and Geology of the Deerness Peninsula.**

The Deerness peninsula is a roughly diamond-shaped area of land connected to the rest of Mainland by a narrow stretch of land near Upper Sanday (See Figs 1 & 2). To the north, Deer Sound, with the bays of St Peter's Pool and Suckquoy, separate Deerness from the western half of the parish, that of St Andrews. To the south of Upper Sanday lies the North Sea, whose action has affected the land connection to the peninsula of Deerness by the creation of the bays of Taracliff and Dingieshowe.

Culminating at Mull Head, the north and north-east coasts of the peninsula are bounded by high cliffs, where sea erosion has produced the Brough, stacks such as Moustag, and the "Gloup" (a geo or form of deep inlet, still retaining a land bridge), to the south of the Brough. The coastline at the west, south and south-east is less precipitous, with sandy beaches – St Peter's Pool and the Bay at the west, Dingieshowe and Newark at the south, and Sandside in the east. The entire coastline seems to be subject to erosion, but it is in the less protected areas, to the west and south, that erosion is most pronounced, and several archaeological sites on the coast here are visibly depleted.

The solid and drift geology has influenced the topography and

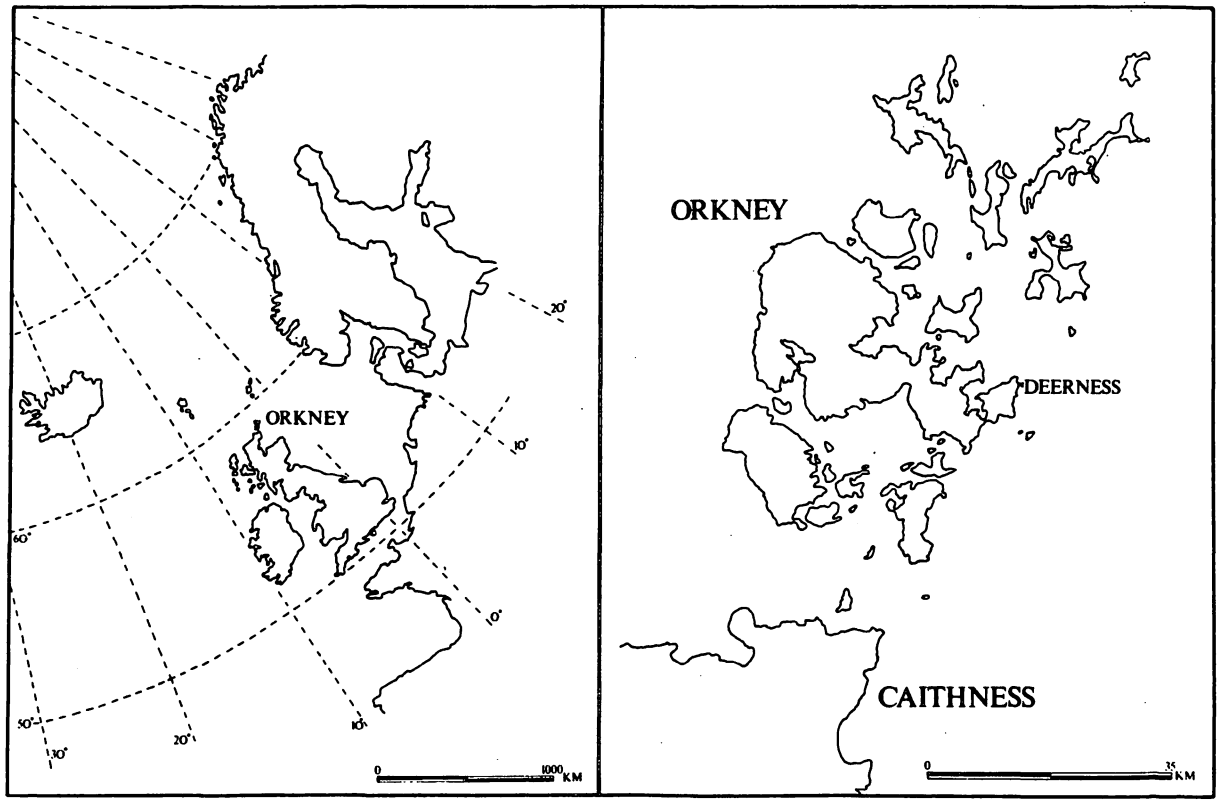


**Figure 1**
Deerness, location. Crown copyright. Drawing: N. Emery.

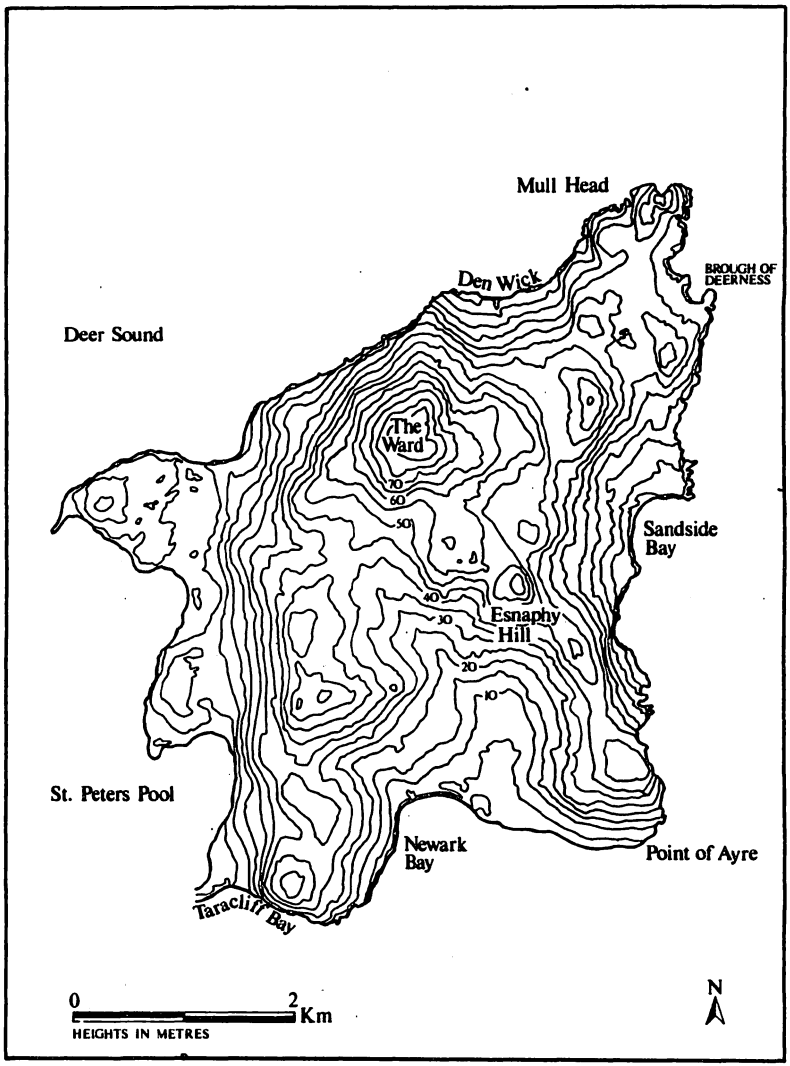


**Figure 2**
The Deerness Peninsula, topography. Crown Copyright. Drawing: N. Emery

created a landscape comprising relatively low-lying land in the southern half of the peninsula, with areas of high ground in the centre: Esnaphy Hill at 62 m above sea level, and the highest point on the peninsula, 87 m, at "The Ward". The northern half of the peninsula, with its area of peat moss and precipitous cliffs, has a maximum height of 48 m at Mull Head. Inland, water is only found in a large pond in the peat area north of Sandside Bay, and in a small number of burns.

Geologically, the peninsula is basically divided into two (see Fig. 3). Rousay and Eday flags dominate the western half, from Dingieshowe towards the centre of the peninsula, spreading round the coast to Den Wick in the north, and Point of Ayre in the south; there is also a section along the east coast from the northern half of Sandside Bay, along the cliff area known as Clu Ber, including within it the "Gloup". The central and north-eastern area of the peninsula is composed of the Lower and Middle Eday Sandstones, the latter being the main constituents of the Brough of Deerness and Mull Head. These sandstones are a major factor in the general absence of terracing, seen in many other parts of the Orkney Island group, as is the presence of Boulder clay. The whole area is covered by boulder clay varying from 1.5 to 5 m in the north and north-west. It is largely a reddish coloured rock flour containing red and yellow sandstone boulders, and fragments of bluish flagstone. The top surface of the natural clay found during excavation on the Brough was white to grey in colour (Mykura et al, 1976, passim; Heald, 1977).

The absence of a rough craggy landscape in this area was an obvious advantage to early settlement, making clearing of the heathland to provide farmland far easier. Orkney generally has been assumed to be virtually treeless in the past, as now, but the results of pollen analysis in Deerness may now perhaps modify that assumption.

**Pollen Analysis:** Alison M. Donaldson

In connection with the excavations at the Brough of Deerness, a survey of the immediate area was undertaken to discover any natural deposits which might throw light upon the environmental history of the peninsula (see Fig. 4). No deep peat or limnic sediments were found. However, in a depression within agricultural land north of Stove, a few square metres of heather-covered peat was discovered (HY 5812

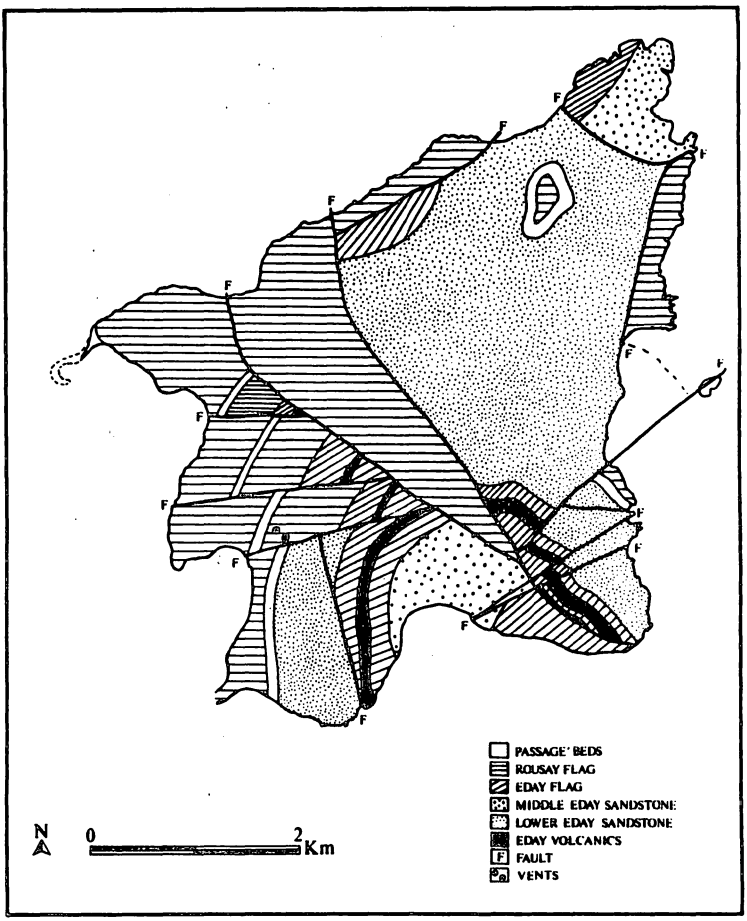


**Figure 3**
The Deerness Peninsula, geology. Drawing: N. Emery after A. Heald – copyright.

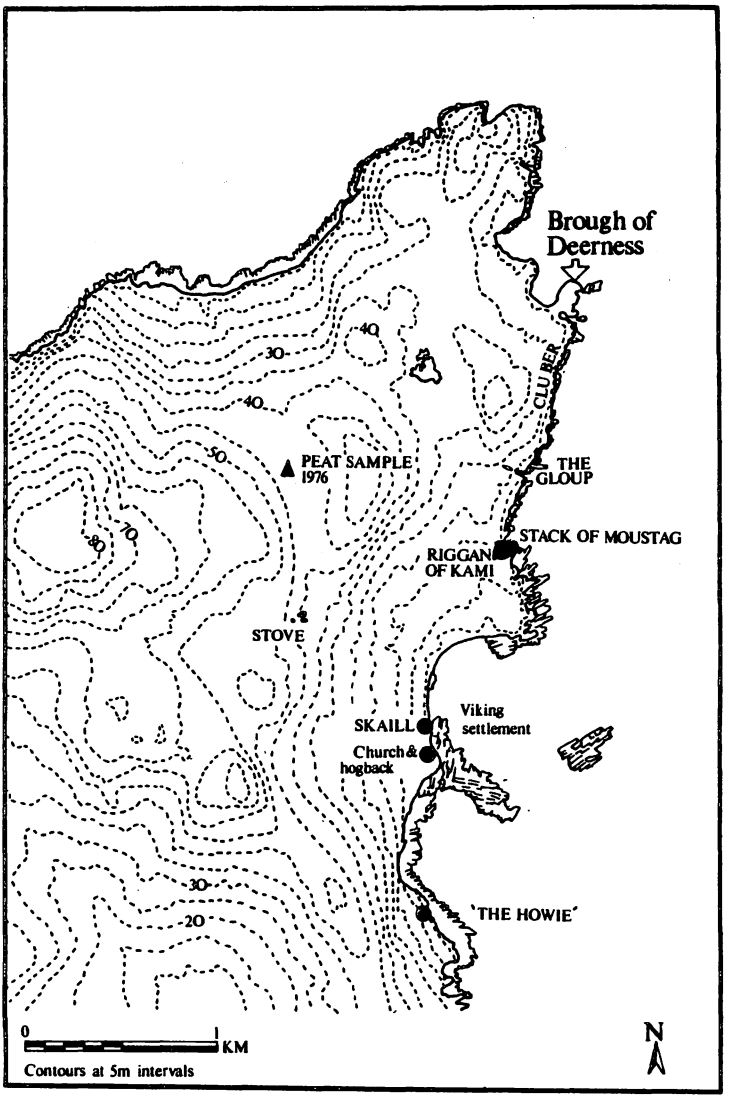


**Figure 4**
The Brough of Deerness, and its environs, with position of peat sample. Crown copyright. Drawing: N. Emery.

0789). The area had been rather trampled by cattle and some cutting or natural erosion had occurred. Nevertheless, a vertical section of some 180 cm depth could be cut. Block samples were collected for pollen analysis and possible radiocarbon dating.

a) Stratigraphy

0–45 cm.
Bog moss-heather peat. Some lateral penetration by modern horsetail rhyzomes.

46–77 cm.
Highly-humified wood peat with fragments of birch bark throughout.

78–180 cm.
Sedge peat.

180 cm.
Grey sand.

Pollen was rather sparse throughout, but reasonable counts of several hundred grains could be made, especially towards the top of the diagram. Samples were subjected to the normal procedures – sodium hydroxide and acetolysis treatment. The pollen diagram is shown in Fig. 5. The standard categories include birch among "trees", growing annually above 5 metres in height, but hazel and willow are classified as shrubs. A separate category of birch and hazel and willow pollen is included as "Orcadian trees".

b) Interpretation of the pollen diagram

Such a small peat deposit is likely to contain a high proportion of pollen from very local vegetation. This would be especially true during any period when trees and shrubs were at all abundant, since they restrict horizontal transport. Periods of open habitat represent a larger area and contain a higher proportion of regional pollen.

The diagram can be divided into three pollen assemblage zones:

(i) Fen Zone. Corresponding to the sedge peat, this zone is

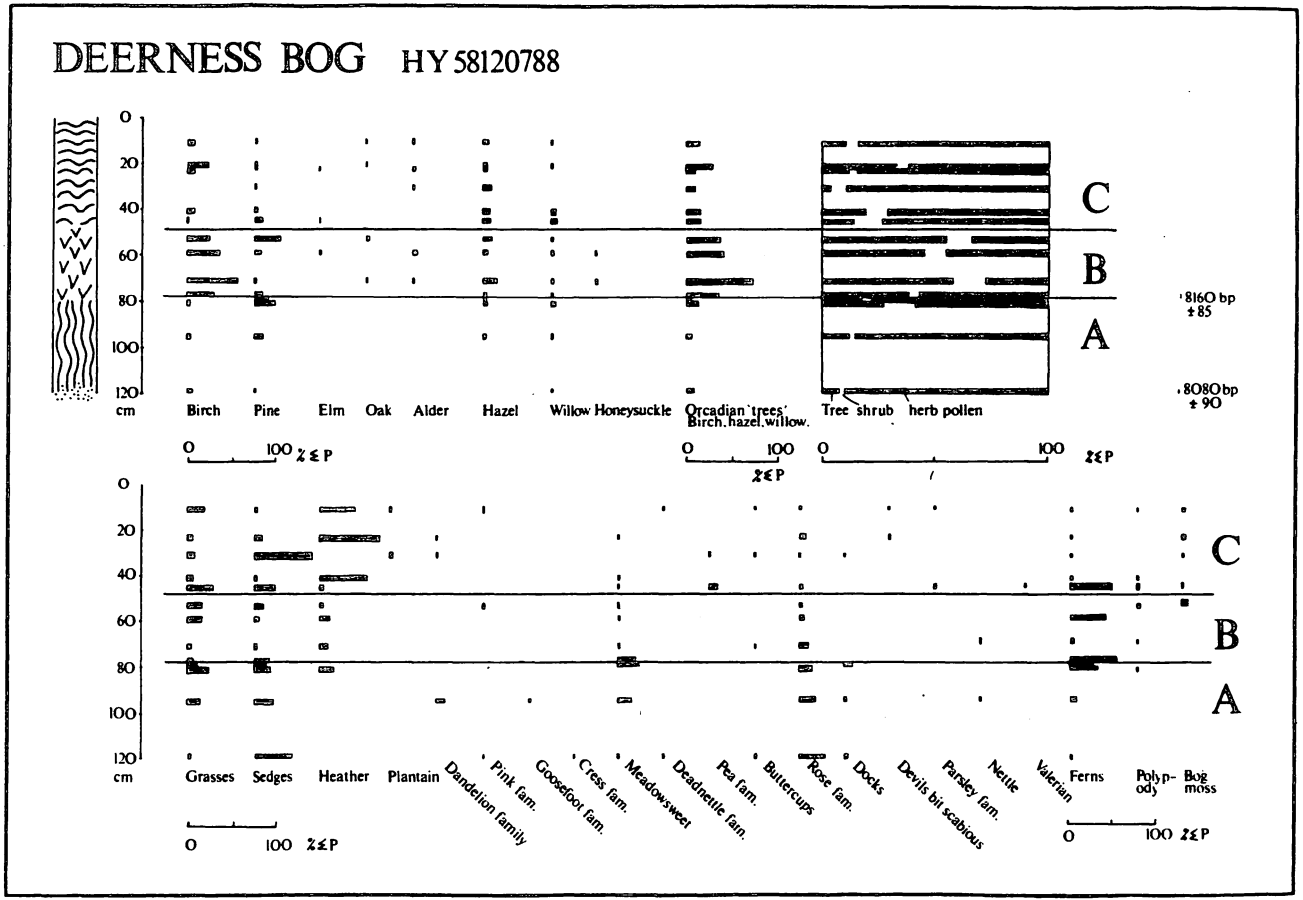


**Figure 5**
Pollen diagram from peat sample. Crown copyright. Drawing N. Emery after A.M. Donaldson

dominated by pollen of sedges, meadowsweet and other Roseaceous plants, and grasses. Tree and shrub pollen is very low indeed and thermophilous (warmth-loving) trees like oak and alder are entirely unrepresented. The appearance of pine pollen at the top of this zone is probably the result of long distance transport from the Scottish mainland. It is unlikely that pine, which has a very high pollen representation, ever grew in the Northern Isles.

This zone would seem to represent a period before the arrival of any trees or shrubs in Orkney. Birch, pine and some shrubs were probably present on the Scottish mainland. The pollen spectrum is very similar to that from modern fen communities near the Loch of Skaill, Pow and Twatt (Keatinge and Dickson, 1979). Comparison with modern surface pollen assemblages may be simplistic as they assume identical environmental and floristic conditions. The modern fen communities represented by this type of pollen spectrum occupy extensive areas within valley mires in Orkney. They include not only sedges and grasses of various types but also meadowsweet, flags, rushes, horsetails, orchids, marsh marigolds, marsh bedstraw, certain mosses and sometimes heather on the higher hummocks. Some of these plants are under-represented or unrepresented in a pollen spectrum. Such treeless, fen conditions probably existed some time in the early Flandrian.

(ii) Birch zone. Birch pollen is predominant throughout and macroscopic remains of birch bark are present in the peat. Hazel, willow and pine are consistently represented and oak, alder and elm occur sporadically. Non-tree pollen has fallen significantly but fen spores are abundant.

Clearly a birch woodland was growing locally and this pollen spectrum is very like those spectra from relict native woodland on Hoy (Keatinge and Dickson, 1979), where birches, willows, rowan, aspen and ferns are the most abundant plants. Aspen, rowan and willow tend to be under-represented, if at all, in pollen spectra.

Earlier pollen diagrams from Orkney (Moar, 1969, Davidson et al, 1976, Keatinge & Dickson, 1979) have suggested that the islands were never extensively wooded, although birch and hazel scrub may have developed locally. These diagrams, usually from large peat bogs,

show low (mostly 10–30%) proportions of tree and shrub pollen. This diagram, with up to 76% tree and shrub pollen, shows how dense this "scrub" could be.

The great importance of this zone is that it demonstrated the status of the various trees and shrubs. This is of interest not only to the palaeobotanist, but also to the archaeologist in the interpretation of charcoal remains from excavations. Birch, willow and hazel are clearly native to Orkney. Honeysuckle pollen which is present in low levels, is unlikely to have travelled from the mainland as this shrub is insect pollinated. Pine, as mentioned before, is usually over-represented in a pollen spectrum and also very buoyant and able to travel long distances by wind. Such percentages as in this zone could well represent long-distance transport. The thermophilous trees, oak, alder and elm occur sporadically and at such low levels (one or two grains per sample in total) that they clearly did not grow locally. These trees grow in Caithness today, but only in sheltered ravines, and are continuously represented, at higher levels, in pollen diagrams covering the mid and late Flandrian. Even so, both Peglar (1979) and Birks (1977) conclude that no extensive closed forest ever existed there.

Any fen or tall herb element in the vegetation seems to be greatly reduced in this period. Grasses and herbs are still present but at reduced levels. Heather increases, however, and may represent the local ground flora as the accumulating peat rises above any calcareous or nutrient-rich ground water. Ferns (including polypody), honeysuckle, certain grasses and sedges would also have represented the ground flora of this woodland.

The period represented probably includes the mid-Flandrian, when woodland reached its maximum extent. By comparison with other diagrams from the islands and Caithness (Peglar, 1979), one would expect the whole period to have begun some time later than 9000 b p, and to have ended by about 5000 b p, so this period may not have been, in fact, very long before the arrival of Man to the islands. Were this so, the presence of woodland could have greatly influenced settlement patterns.

(iii) Grassland zone. As the peat changes from wood peat to bog

moss/heather peat, tree and shrub pollen levels gradually fall and herbaceous pollen becomes dominant. Birch, pine, hazel and willow pollen are still consistently present but at lower proportions and fern spores and pollen of the likely ground flora of the native woodland decease or disappear. It is clear that much woodland has disappeared from the area. Heather and grass pollen increases, as do certain other herbaceous types, including grassland, fen and meadow species. The increase of acid heath species is probably only a very local event and is reflected in the change in peat type. The other herbaceous species probably represent the spread of grassland in this region of Orkney. Pollen of ribwort (plantain), a plant frequently associated with agricultural activity, appears around 30 cm. Unfortunately this zone cannot be radiocarbon-dated as the peat was clearly contaminated with modern rootlets and rhizomes.

The disappearance of scrub woodland further west in Mainland Orkney has been correlated with the beginning of sand-blow around 5000 b p and the influence of Neolithic man and his grazing animals in the next few centuries. Keatinge and Dickson (1979) suggest that scrub woodland may have remained longer further inland and Deerness is certainly furthest from any western influence.

This zone, therefore, seems to represent the removal of woodland and the spread of grassland, due at least in part to human settlement in the area. Unfortunately, it is not possible to say whether this began in the Neolithic or a later period. Once this local woodland disappeared, conditions remain very similar until the top of the diagram. No clear indicators of arable land are present and it is more likely that land use has always been predominantly pastoral.

Unfortunately, it has not been possible to correlate directly any vegetational zone with the period represented at the Brough of Deerness excavations. Nevertheless, the diagram has shown how greatly the local environment of Deerness has changed during the Flandrian, and has demonstrated the presence of localised woodland of a denser nature than has been postulated from diagrams further west. Not only would patches of local woodland affect the settlement and agriculture of an area, but they probably disappeared as a result of these processes. The old idea that Orkney was treeless when the first settlers arrived (and hence the construction of stone buildings), is

proving to be simplistic. It is clear that this type of woodland could not produce very massive timbers, but brushwood, bark and the small diameter timber could have been very important in the construction of roofing, wattle, flooring, fencing etc. It would also have been an important source of fuel.

**Radiocarbon determination for peat column**

Two samples from the column were submitted for radiocarbon determinations to Dr. Michael J. Stenhouse of the Radiocarbon Dating Laboratory at the University of Glasgow. It had been hoped to submit one sample from each of the major zones represented. Unfortunately, due to lateral penetration and contamination by modern rootlets, it was not possible to submit a sample from the Grassland zone, i.e. from the later phases which might correlate with the results of the excavations at the Brough of Deerness or from Skaill. GU–1320 is of wood peat from the Birch zone, and GU–1321 is of fen peat from the Fen zone. Dr. Stenhouse reported as follows:

GU–1320 : 8160 +/– 85 b p; $\delta$13C –28.4%

GU–1321 : 8080 +/– 90 b p; $\delta$13C –29.2%

GU–1320 corresponds to 6210 +/– 85 B C. Using a trend surface curve (Wendland & Donley, 1971), this calibrates to 6503 +/– 127 B C. GU–1321 corresponds to 6130 +/– 90 B C. Using a trend surface curve, this calibrates to 6475 +/– 133 B C. The closeness of the two dates, which both indicate mid-seventh millenium B C dates, is incompatible with the stratigraphy of the column sampled, for the two samples were separated by some 40 cm of peat development. It seems that *in situ* contamination is likely, but without a third determination it is not possible to state which of the zones the mid-seventh millenium date refers to, or indeed which of the determinations is likely to be erroneous.

**Other Evidence for Woodland** with Alison M. Donaldson and Kenneth A. Steedman

As indicated by the pollen analysis, it is clear that there was local native woodland or scrub during some part of the post-Glacial period.

Although there is equally clear evidence for the removal of the woodland or scrub in a later period, of direct importance to the Deerness excavations is the demonstration in the pollen diagram of the status of the various trees and shrubs. Nevertheless, the native species of trees and shrubs represented by the charcoal found at the Brough of Deerness indicate the possible continued presence in the area of pockets of woodland or scrub. The presence of abundant charcoal of native species on a site is most likely to represent collection from a local, living woodland source at a time roughly contemporary with the archaeological layer in which it occurs. However, the presence of non-active species probably represents the collection of driftwood or even importation. Although the collection of material was probably at a similar time, the actual wood may have been considerably older. C–14 analysis of charcoal including non-indigenous species cannot give an accurate date to that archaeological layer. On the Brough of Deerness, the charcoal is mostly from small diameter branches (1–2 cm), which are unlikely to have been used for a major constructional purpose. A few fragments of alder came from a single sample in the Enclosure area. It would seem, from the pollen record, that alder is not native to Orkney, and so its presence probably represents the collection of driftwood from the shore. Otherwise, the material consisted entirely of charcoal fragments of willow, probably a dwarf or shrub species. This is presumed to be native to the islands, and indeed is seen in the Birch zone of the pollen diagram. However, as there were no other fragments of other species present, it would seem likely that the willow wood had not been collected from a birch-dominated woodland. Willows are a constituent of the relict native woodland which remains in sheltered mountain gulleys on Hoy (Prentice & Prentice, 1975) and generally today are seen growing on dry grassland and heath which are not under agriculture, and also on sheltered cliffs and sand dunes. It thus seems likely that the charcoal recovered from the Brough excavations represented the exploitation of a very local source of scrub willow, with very little supplementation from driftwood.

The name Deerness, probably derived from Old Norse *Dýrnes*, as used in the *Orkneyinga Saga*, meaning "animal ness" (Clouston, 1927, 7fn; Marwick, 1952a, 76) along with the tradition of deer antlers being recovered along the coast of Deer Sound and the peat moss at Mirkady (pers comm to K.A. Steedman, Mr. Work, Greentoft, Deerness), could confirm the possible existence of some tree cover used by these

animals, if probably not a deer forest as such (Barry, 1805, 24). The existence of even small areas of woodland would have an effect upon local settlement and economy, and in *c* 1529 "Jo Ben" stated the belief that "This parish was formerly woody, and many wild beasts were here" (Macfarlane, 1908, III, 307 & 318). The account in *The [Old] Statistical Account* refers to a number of trees and branches being found in the peat-moss (Clouston, 1927, 9) and the Reverend George Low confirms this (1879, 56).

**Archaeological and Historical Evidence for Settlement** with Kenneth A. Steedman (Fig. 6)

As an area of Orkney, Deerness has had its fair share of recent excavations, and along with the results of Steedman's survey, they may help to correct the imbalance at present between the West Mainland, with its famous sites such as Skara Brae, the Ring of Brodgar, Maeshowe and the Brough of Birsay, and the East Mainland, including Deerness. Apart from the writer's excavations at the Brough of Deerness, excavations have, in recent years been carried out at Newark Bay (no. 49: church, cemetery and earlier souterrains) by Dr. Don Brothwell (then of the British Museum, Natural History, now Institute of Archaeology, London University), at Skaill (no. 38: Viking, Pictish and earlier settlement sites) by the late Mr. Peter Gelling (Department of Ancient History and Archaeology, University of Birmingham), and at Riggan of Kami (no. 12: Iron Age defensive site) by Mr. Gelling.

The peninsula has probably been settled in all periods since the Neolithic. This early period is represented by the flint arrowheads which have turned up at various times (nos. 64, 65). The fairly large group of mounds in the central area of the peninsula (nos. 14–25 & 27) could date from the Neolithic or Bronze Age, but are obviously undateable from fieldwork alone. The burials at Blowes are probably Bronze Age, and phases at the multi-period site of Skaill (no. 38) have been dated to this period. Eves Howe (no. 31) and Backland (no.50), the defended site at Riggan of Kami (no.12), and the earth-house at South Keigar (no. 28) and those at Newark (no. 49) date in general terms from this period. Only the more modern excavations in the area can provide more precise dating information. There are clear Pictish period phases at Skaill, and the three sites of Skaill, the Brough of

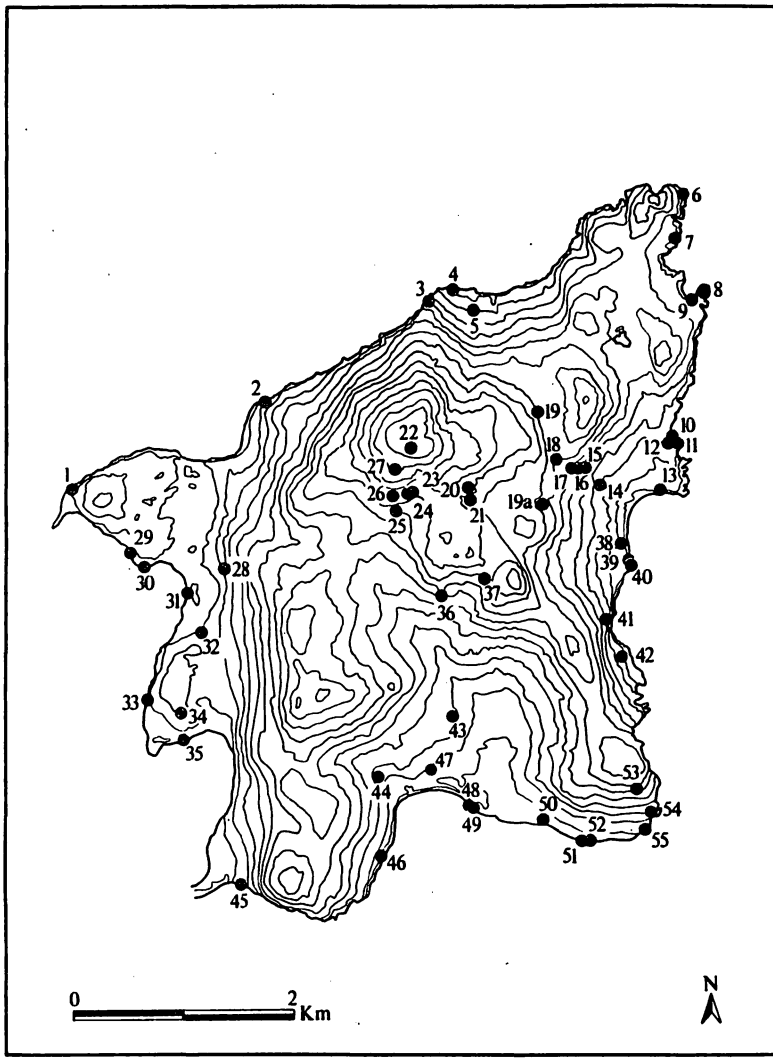


**Figure 6**
Archaeological Sites and Monuments of the Deerness Peninsula. Drawing: N. Emery after K.A. Steedman – copyright.

Deerness and Newark Bay all provide evidence of settlement in the Viking and Late Norse periods in one form or another. "The Howe" (no. 42) may have some connection with this period, and the boat nausts on the west coast (nos. 29-30 & 35) date to either this period or later.

Deerness is mentioned in the *Orkneyinga Saga* and two places which may have been there at the time are named. The first, **Hlaupandanes**, is possibly to be equated with Skaill, but may be elsewhere (see Steedman in Morris et al, forthcoming). The second is **Skeggbjarnarstaðir**, which was apparently situated in north-east Deerness. It is one of the *stadir* farm names, common in western Mainland, but rare in the east (Marwick, 1952a, 80).

The peninsula was a separate parish at one time, but has been joined with the parish of St Andrews which occupies the area of Mainland on the other side of Deer Sound, since at least the 16th Century (Scott, 1871, V, 387; Clouston, 1927, 3). It was skatted, or assessed, as a six-urisland area (Clouston, 1927, 1-3; Marwick, 1952a, 76), and Clouston has suggested (1927,xx & 3) that there would have been a chapel in each urisland, although only two, together with the church at Skaill, were discovered. By the early 16th century, the odal lands only occupied one third of the parish and there were further major changes in landowning by 1653 and 1820 (ibid). There has been a continuing process of smaller land units being lumped together to produce larger, more economic, farms. It is interesting, however, that the decline in population noted in *The [Old] Statistical Account* is put down to the call of the sea through the navy, fishing, and the Hudson's Bay Company since 1741 (Clouston, 1927, 12-13). W.P.L. Thomson, however, has recently suggested that the Deerness account over-estimates the effect of the Company (Thomson, 1978, xxv).

Clearance of heather continues right up to the present day, with the area south of Mull Head, previously the only area not extensively farmed, being slowly ploughed and seeded, mostly for sheep pasture. The clearance at Greentoft, begun in 1860, and others in the south-west earlier last century, brought the vast majority of the peninsula under agriculture. Clearly, improvements had taken place in agriculture since the account in *The [Old] Statistical Account* (Clouston, 1927, 8 & 15). As W.P.L. Thomson has pointed out, little

improvement had taken place in agriculture before 1797, and farming in Orkney had hardly changed over the centuries – except for the introduction of the potato (Thomson, 1978,xiv-xx). George Barry published as an Appendix to his *History of Orkney* an account "of the Husbandry used by the Orchadians" [*sic*], which reinforces this (1805, 447). Most farms practise a mixed farm economy, with crop rotation, and most pastures have been ploughed at some time. Most of the sites inland, then, are subject to the rigours of ploughing (nos. 12, 14-21, 23-28, 36, 38, 41 & 44), some having been discovered while it was taking place. Where the plough has not been, the farm stock probably has, wearing away thin turf, especially on the mounds (nos. 32-34 & 42). As Deerness is now one of the most intensively cultivated districts of Orkney, this hardly augurs well for archaeological sites within it.

Settlement nowadays is of cottages and farms scattered mainly in the central and southern half of the peninsula, and along the main roads, particularly the B 9050. The largest farm is Braebuster on the west side; and the farm at Skaill on the east side lies close to the present Deerness church. The ruins of several old crofts remain standing at various points throughout the area (e.g. Millhill: no. 37), but the majority appear to have been demolished, if a comparison between the 1882 Ordnance Survey 6" sheets and their modern counterparts is reliable. Virtually no trace is left now of the demolished buildings and this could be explained by the observations made during the destruction of Quoys Farm (no. 43). There the foundations were merely stone slabs laid horizontally, protruding some way to either side of the wall. If the foundations were of this type at all of the crofts, then near complete demolition would be a relatively easy matter, and subsequent ploughing would remove any remaining traces. At this site, a number of artefacts that could well be Norse, together with shell middens, were found in clearance.

**The Archaeology of the Norse Church in Deerness**

In the area of the original parish of Deerness, three chapel-sites are known from the Brough of Deerness, Newark Bay, and Sandside Bay. However, this cannot represent the original distribution, if Clouston was correct in saying that there would have been a chapel to each urisland (1927, xx & 3), for, as mentioned above, the area was skatted as a six-urisland area (Clouston, 1927, 1-3;Marwick, 1952a,

76). As is clear from the map of the chapels in Mainland Orkney prepared by Christopher Lowe (Morris, 1985, Fig. 10.6, 236), a parallel situation to that in the Isle of Man can be discerned in Orkney, and is currently being explored (see Cant, 1973, Cant, 1984, Morris, 1985, 235-8; Lowe, forthcoming). Whatever the origins of the relationship between Manx keeill-sites and administrative organisation, this was the system operational in the period when the Norse were Christian (Morris, 1983; Lowe, 1983).

The church at Skaill in Sandside Bay must originally have been one of the most remarkable in Orkney. To the east of the present church, built in 1796, stood a pre-Reformation church dedicated to St Mary. In 1774, the Rev George Low described a building with two steeples or towers, in which the right-hand steeple was entered from the quire, with a turnpike stair giving access to a small vestry from which the other steeple was entered. The illustration eventually published with this description (Low, 1879, 3-5), shows a building with two round towers apparently at the east end, and quite unlike others in Orkney, although sharing with St Magnus, Egilsay the round tower – in this case to the west (R.C.A.H.M.S., 1946, II, no. 611, 228-9). Skaill is usually identified with the *Hlaupandanes* of the *Orkneyinga Saga* (O.S., ch. XIV, Taylor, 1938, 151-2 & 358; Gelling, 1984, 37), and the late Peter Gelling suggested that "the Skaill household may have been one of the earliest in Orkney to be converted" (Gelling, 1984, 37). Certainly, it would seem to have been of sufficient status to have been the potential benefactor for the building of this remarkable church. Mr. Gelling's excavations in this area have demonstrated the importance of Skaill as a settlement-focus in Sandside Bay, and investigation of the church-site must be regarded as the most important *lacuna* in the archaeological study of this area. At present our information extends only to Low's account, and the discovery of a hogback monument in the churchyard (Low, 1879, 53-5; Lang, 1974, 232).

On the south coast of the Deerness Peninsula, human bone has been found since at least 1930 at Newark Bay (see R.C.A.H.M.S., 1946, II, no.654, 248), close to a chapel referred to in Timothy Pont's map of Orkney in Blaeu's 1654 *Atlas* as "Nue work of Deerness" (Blaeu, 1654, vol. 5, 151v). The site (Fig. 6: no. 49) has been excavated by Dr. Don Brothwell, who found several skeletons associated with

the small chapel, dated to the 10th Century on the basis of coin-evidence from below the floor. Over the cemetery and chapel was a 16th or 17th Century fortified house. Two earth-houses were found below the chapel and cemetery, one of which was 10 m long (Brothwell, 1977, 182), and material is still being eroded from the site (Steedman, forthcoming: no. 49). The Final Report on the chapel and cemetery is awaited with considerable interest.

The Brough of Deerness, at the north-east extremity of the peninsula, approximately 2 km from Skaill, was examined as a result of the decision of the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments to consolidate the badly depleted chapel. As consolidation of the walls of the chapel would necessarily involve disturbance of the associated stratigraphy, complete excavation within and around the walls of the chapel took place in September 1975 and September 1976. No area excavation took place beyond the enclosure wall, and, as no buildings either overlay or underlay the wall, it was not possible to establish the relationship between the chapel and its associated churchyard, and the buildings beyond, which were defined in the survey of the site (Morris, 1977). Unfortunately, therefore, excavation did not bear out Dr. Ralegh Radford's suggested chronological sequence here (Radford, 1962a, 9; Radford, 1962b, 180). In July 1977, during the survey of the site, an opportunity was taken for further small-scale excavation below the south wall of the chapel, partially dismantled for consolidation. During the main excavation seasons of 1975 and 1976 it had not been possible to remove or cut through the chapel walls, and, although this small-scale work became possible in 1977, it nevertheless remains the case that it is difficult to demonstrate stratigraphic continuity within and outside the area of the stone chapel. However, it is possible to demonstrate a similar stratigraphic sequence in both areas, and to correlate them. It is inappropriate here to repeat this in detail, since it is available elsewhere, but it can be summarised as follows:

**Timber Phase**

A1 Construction of small timber chapel, with enclosing stone 'cladding', and enclosing gullies.

A2 Use of chapel and gullies; associated post-holes and two infant graves in enclosure; small ditch to east of enclosure.

**Intermediate Phase**

B1 Irregular features, including gully, in chapel area. Silver Anglo-Saxon coin deposited post 959-975 A.D.

B2 General deposition of material, some burnt, both in chapel and enclosure areas. Mammal bone dated by C–14 (GU–1558): 730 +/– 90 a d; steatite, probably Norse, present.

**Stone Phase**

C1 Construction of stone chapel and stone enclosure wall.

C2 Use (1). Pebble floor in chapel; gravel path, clay deposits and four graves in enclosure area (two infant, one adolescent, one adult); infilling of ditch to east. Human bone from grave dated by C–14 (GU–1574): 1030 +/– 65 a d; steatite, probably Norse; pottery fabrics 2 & 3, probably Mediaeval.

C3 Use (2). Flagstone floor in chapel; mixed deposits around chapel.

C4 Use (3). Stone bench against south wall of chapel; general deposits elsewhere.

Steatite, probably Norse and pottery fabric 3, probably Mediaeval from Phases C3-4.

C5 Use (4). Mortar over floor and steps, and on walls of chapel; gravel spread and levelling up outside. Pottery fabric 1, probably later mediaeval.

**Decay and Collapse**

D1 Chapel and enclosure out of use – altar disturbed, general decay and accumulation. Pottery fabrics 1, 2 & 3, probably later Mediaeval and Mediaeval.

D2 Collapse of chapel walls and clay deposition outside.

D3 Extensive stone collapse both in chapel area and enclosure. Copper alloy coins of 17th Century.

D4 Further stone collapse in chapel. Copper alloy coins of 17th-18th Centuries, and also apparently 1740s-1860.

Copper alloy coins of Charles II and late 17th-late 19th Century type of clay-pipe from Phases D3-D4.

**Final Cover**

E Chapel used for target-practice; development of sub-turf and turf around outside of chapel. Copper alloy new penny, 1971.

From the above, it can be seen that there are two quite distinct phases of ecclesiastical usage of the site, separated by an intermediate phase which may or may not be associated with the construction of the later stone chapel, but is certainly not itself ecclesiastical in character. As far as significant dating of artefacts is concerned, there are none to associate with the timber phase, but the Anglo-Saxon coin provides a *terminus post quem* for the Intermediate phase. Unfortunately, material from the Intermediate phase of the Chapel submitted for Radiocarbon determination was insufficient to provide a date (GU–1559), but a date was obtained from mammal bone from this phase in the Enclosure (GU–1558). This date seems at variance with that of the silver coin from the Chapel area, for there is only a 5% chance of a date later than 910 a d. Perhaps it indicates that the site was without a chapel for a considerable period. Without the radiocarbon date, it could be argued that there is no concrete evidence for a pre-Norse date for any phase of the site. With the single date available – and that in itself is unsatisfactory, but is a function of the available material – perhaps the balance of probability is that the Timber phase chapel and enclosure have an origin in the pre-Norse period. The stone phase has associated steatite artefacts which are best paralleled in the purely Norse milieu and taken to betoken a Norse period date. However, the pottery, probably Mediaeval but some conceivably later, would perhaps suggest the stone chapel should be associated with the Late Norse period, rather than the Viking. Certainly there is little to suggest that the stone chapel may have been built before the 12th Century, and it may well have been later. An indication of the range for the Enclosure is given by the radiocarbon date from the slab-covered adult grave (GU–1574).

It may be pointed out that, whatever the dating of these two

phases of ecclesiastical usage, neither is associated with an extensively-used graveyard – in fact, the reverse is the case. If the early, timber, phase is indeed an Early Christian monastic settlement, and if the later, stone, phase is, as Dr. Lamb would prefer (Lamb, 1973, 93-4; Lamb, 1976, 147), a Norse monastic community, then, despite the presence of enclosures for churchyards, the graves of the monks must be sought elsewhere. The alternative explanation, as tentatively advanced previously (Morris, 1977), would be that the surrounding buildings are secular – as at the Brough of Birsay, a site with a similar plan-layout.

The layers associated with the disuse and collapse of the stone chapel on this site demonstrated clearly, from an archaeological angle, the longevity of traditions of sanctity associated with erstwhile chapel-sites, and support the local accounts of pilgrimages being made to the site at a time when access was clearly precarious. It seems reasonable to associate the deposition of the copper coins of the 17th to 19th Centuries with the literary evidence, such as that of Jo Ben from the 16th century for pilgrimages being made to the site. Apparently these pilgrims walked barefoot around the chapel "with many incantations, throwing stones and water behind their backs" (Macfarlane, 1908, III, 307 & 318). In addition to the coins, other objects found from the late phases of the site's history may support this interpretation, for Jo Ben's account refers to stone, and pebbles *were* found in association with the putative path around the chapel, and presumably were brought *up* to the site from the adjacent beach.

As is to be expected, the plan and reconstruction (Figs. 7 & 8) of the surface features of the site must represent, in part at least, the latest features on the site. It is therefore likely that, as with the stone chapel, early features will underlie the buildings outside the Enclosure. Given the presence of a primary timber chapel and enclosure, it would be fascinating to examine whatever primary structure may be associated with it from outside the Enclosure. As at the Brough of Birsay, the assumption has been that there was an Early Christian monastic settlement, but in neither case has evidence yet been forthcoming for the domestic buildings of this settlement. While the Brough of Birsay is far better known than the Brough of Deerness, the excavations have demonstrated that the importance of the latter should not be under-estimated, and that its comparative isolation and difficulty of access

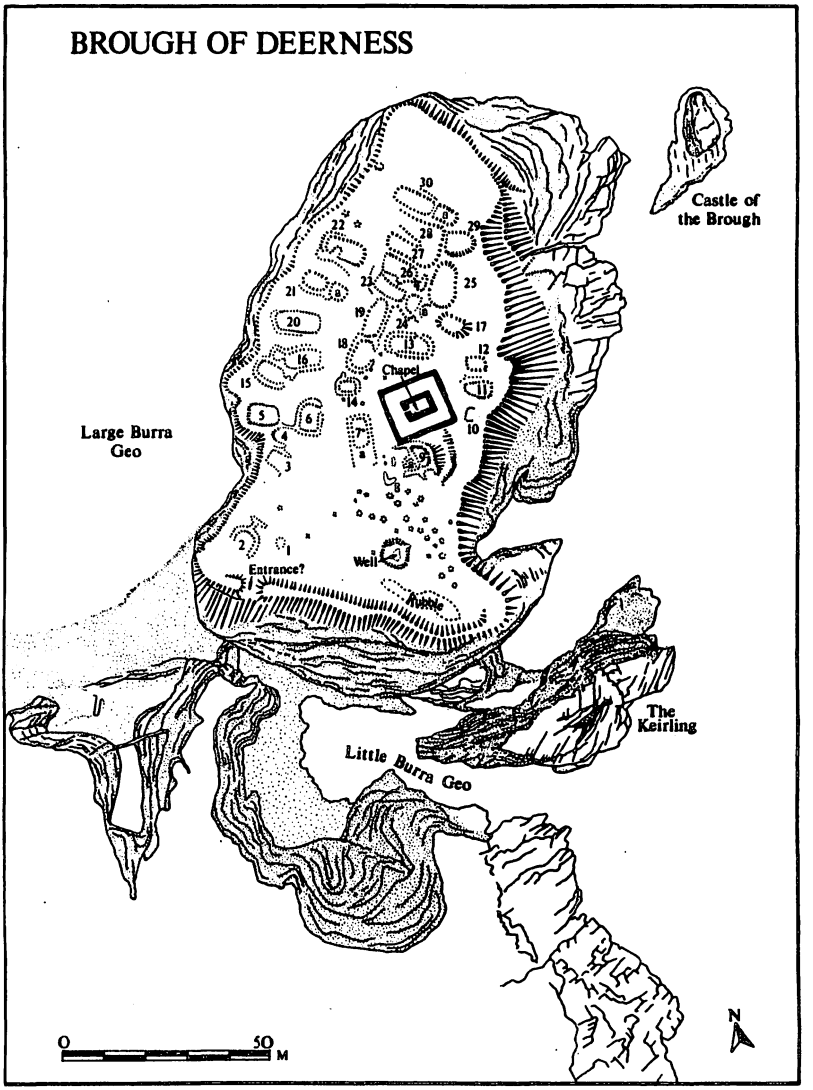


**Figure 7**
Survey of the Brough of Deerness. Crown copyright. Drawing: N. Emery.

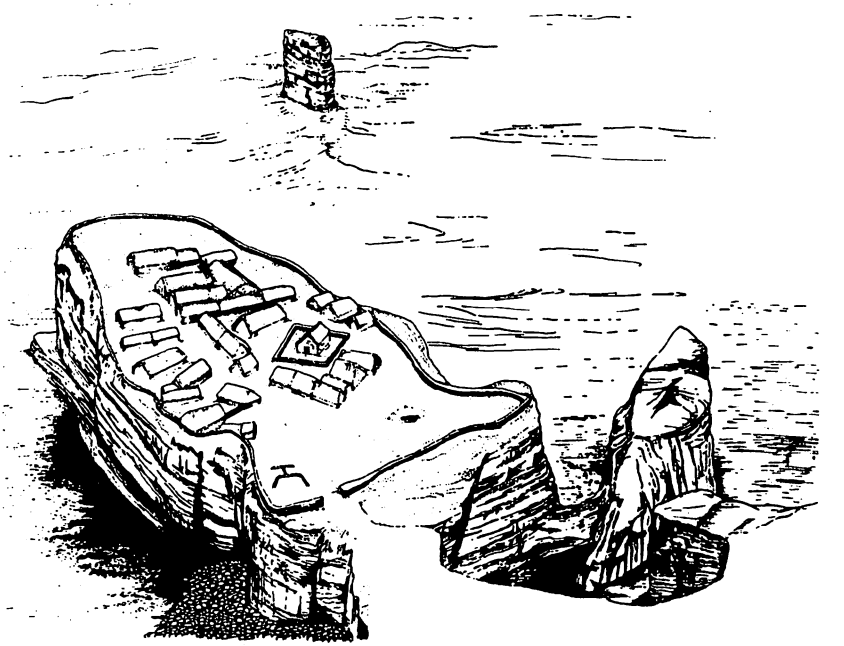

**Figure 8**
Brough of Deerness, reconstruction of site. Crown copyright. Drawing: N. Emery.

has in part contributed to its overshadowing in favour of the former.

## Conclusion

Our understanding of the role of the Brough of Deerness in the past has only begun, and, while briefly considering some of the specific issues raised by the excavation, the main aim of this paper has been to focus upon its place in the wider context of the Deerness peninsula. The issues raised by consideration of these other aspects have themselves been generated by some of the questions raised in undertaking the excavation. There may as yet be more questions than answers, but at least they have now been raised!

## Notes

1. This paper was originally offered to the Society for its publication of papers from the Sanday Conference in 1984. Although not the paper

given by the author to the Conference (for this, see Morris, 1985), it was considered to be an appropriate substitute as it takes up one aspect, and one of the sites referred to at the Conference. Unfortunately, these papers have not been able to be published in Orkney as a monograph, as originally intended, and so the Society invited the author to publish it in this journal. It has been revised for this purpose, with suitable cross-referencing to other publications concerned with the site. The text as finally prepared is the responsibility of the primary author, but the essential contribution in preparing material, at several different stages, of Norman Emery is acknowledged in the authorship of this report.

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