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Brough of Birsay (NGR HY239285)

Excavations and survey 1974: Interim Report

Chris Morris

Excavations and survey took place at this site on behalf of the Department of the Environment (Scotland) and Durham University Excavations Committee for a period of 3 weeks, with 10 days post-excavation work immediately following in Durham. The operation was directed by Messrs. C.D. Morris and J.R. Hunter of the Department of Archaeology, Durham University, in conjunction with Mrs. C. Curle, and staff and volunteers were recruited from Durham University.

Excavation took place in two areas, that in House 5 completing work begun in 1973, the other beginning a new phase of excavation on the area to the west of the Cathedral.

House 5 is part of the building complex standing on the cliff edge on the eastern side of the island. This complex is one of the latest phases of the site and the standing walls are clearly visible. The excavations were carried out in order to establish the general stratigraphy of the area and to relate this to the excavations undertaken prior to the war.

Investigation showed that this particular area underwent several phases of occupation. At least four can be defined of which only the latest relates to the standing walls. All four phases were represented by flagged areas. The earliest was noticeably more solid in construction and consisted of massive stone slabs more appropriate to foundations or walling than to a floor, and raise questions as to the nature of the island in this area. At all four levels there was considerable evidence of tumble and often of rebuilding or repair. A stone-capped drain was associated with the third phase. Each of these phases was effectively sealed by a thick band of organic matter and midden material, and these layers yielded the greater majority of the finds. A system using both wet and dry sieving methods was devised for maximum retrieval.

Animal bones, many of which were worked, constituted the majority of the finds. These are currently under examination. The area, however, showed strong signs of metal working. Quantities of moulds, slag and the remains of crucibles were discovered. Judging from the presence of glassy and enamel slag, glass-working may also have been carried out. Other finds included fragments of steatite, glass beads and objects of jet, bronze and iron. There was sufficient charred wood for radiocarbon purposes and suitable organic material for environmental sampling. It is hoped to produce a final report on this area in the coming year.

The area to the west of the Cathedral contains a number of rectangular buildings to the slope with spaces between the buildings. Work was undertaken on these before the war, but

was confined to clearance within the walls. A major object of the renewed excavations is to examine the nature of construction of the buildings, the number of phases involved, and the nature of the areas between the houses. The area excavated in 1974 included House N and areas around it, particularly to the west between it and House L. It was discovered that House N had been cleared inside in previous work to natural sub-soil, but a number of features were noted. The house itself is c. 10.75m long and 6.50m wide externally, with walls 1 – 1.50m thick. Sections across the walls indicated construction of turf or earth with faces of flat slabs on either side. Earlier features were encountered running obliquely below the walls of the house, and will be investigated further in 1975. Also a small area of burning to the west of the building and a larger area of rubble tumble and flagging to the east were encountered. The flagged area is to be traced further in 1975 to determine its relationship to both this house (N) and that to the north-east (E). What appeared to be a shallow gulley filled with pea-gravel was traced around the outside of the walls of the house, but its shallowness indicated that it might simply reflect the eaves-drip from the roof rather than a deliberately-placed gulley.

Up the slope to the west in the open area between this house and House L, some few features were encountered. The end of a stone-constructed gulley running obliquely across the area, and perhaps intended for surface-drainage away from the houses, was excavated for c. 2.5m. It appears from shadow indications to be running across the large open area to the south. A pit with remains of iron slag and a number of stones – perhaps the remains of a clearing of a hearth – and a number of small features, possibly stake-holes related to flimsy temporary structures, were also excavated. At the western extremity, part of what appeared to be a large gulley was encountered. It had large rubble in part of its fill, and ran in a curving shape parallel to the walls of House L. This feature will be fully investigated in 1975 in conjunction with the excavation of House L, but initial examination indicates that 2 or 3 structural phases

can be distinguished in that house, of which this feature may be the first itself, or connected with a phase of the standing walls. Artefacts were few in this area, but a system of dry-sieving ensured that those present of any size will have been recovered. It may be possible to relate the pre-war material, as recorded in the Foreman's daily log-book, to the present work, and to re-establish the find-spots of the artefacts recovered then, but it is clear that such a process will require thorough and slow work. However it is essential that this area is made to yield the maximum information, and continued large-scale area excavation with reference to the pre-war records should do this. Samples for environmental analysis were taken this year, but no material of a large enough size for C14 determination has yet been recovered.

Work began on a new overall site-survey and plan in co-operation with Mr. F. Bettess of Sunderland Polytechnic, which is expected to continue possibly, for two more seasons, and a sub-soil resistivity survey is to begin in 1975 with the co-operation of Dr. A. Aspinall of the University of Bradford. Dr. D.W. Harding of Durham University took a series of air photographs of the excavations and the site as a whole. Small finds were examined on site by Mrs. C. Curle for comparison with previous material, and conservation is in the hands of Miss J. Cronyn of Durham University. Analytical work on the material has been begun by a number of specialists in different institutions.

Objectives for 1975 are:

- 1) The completion of the excavation of Houses L and N, and the areas adjacent to these buildings.
- 2) The start of a campaign of excavation of the houses and adjacent areas to the north of the Cathedral on the cliff-edge gradually being destroyed by natural agencies. House F will be the first objective.
- 3) Continued work on the site-survey.

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- 4) A start to the resistivity survey of the site.

March 1975.

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Excavations and survey took place at this site on behalf of the Department of the Environment (Scotland), and Durham University Excavations Committee, for a period of 3 weeks, with some post-excavation work immediately following in Durham and Bradford Universities. The operation was directed by Mr. C.D. Morris of the Department of Archaeology, Durham University, and Mr. J.R. Hunter of the Undergraduate School of Archaeological Sciences, Bradford University. Staff and volunteers came mainly from these two universities, with individuals also from London and Gothenburg Universities.

Excavation took place in two areas; an area adjacent to that excavated in 1974 to the west of the Cathedral, and an area to the north of the Cathedral on the cliff-edge, which began a new phase of excavation in this area of the site.

The area to the west of the Cathedral.

Within this area, excavation was carried out in House L, and areas to the west and south of it. Also some excavation continued in House N, and an area to the south of it. As with House N, the inside of House L was found to have been largely cleared in the pre-war work. However, it was possible to note one or two features — notably the shadow of the upright slabs of a bench along the north side of the building, and extending eastwards for approximately 3.30 metres from the western wall. No clear evidence was recovered for a similar bench along the south wall, although it should be noted that it was recorded in 1939 by William Henderson, the Foreman. "The Signs of occupation at a slightly lower level" there recorded, unfortun-