

# THE LATE NORSE SITE OF FRESWICK

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## THE LOCATION

Freswick Links is situated at the head of Freswick Bay in the parish of Canisbay, far north on the east coast of Caithness [Fig. 3.1]. It is an area of shifting sand dunes rising twenty to thirty feet (6m - 9m) to the general land level, of gullies inscribed by the wind and now the home of countless rabbits. The area is delimited on the south side by Freswick Burn and on the north side by the road to Skirza Head; in all, an area of half a mile from north to south, by a quarter of a mile from east to west. In some places the wind has swept away large amounts of sand to reveal the old land surface and traces of masonry. The site today is characterised by large amounts of stones, reddened by fire and shattered by heat; and by extensive traces of kitchen midden (most commonly limpet shells, animal and fish bones), the debris from the occupation of the site and including remains from the prehistoric period to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Settlement has been traced here both by the discovery of stray finds by local people and through the excavations of A.J.H. Edwards, F. Tress Barry, A.O. Curle and V.G. Childe.

## PRE-NORSE OCCUPATION

The earliest evidence from the locality is in the form of 'small truncated blades with batter-trimmed edges' of the microlithic industry and considered to be Mesolithic (Lacaille 1937.56, 63). It is described only as 'in the neighbourhood of Freswick Bay', but is of importance because of its early dating. However, whether microlithic flint is Mesolithic or Bronze Age is a moot point.

Excavations by Edwards in the 1920s (Edwards 1925. 89-94) in a gully some six hundred yards (550m) north of Freswick House, produced an oval-shaped construction of single boulders with a gap to the south-west side, interpreted as a doorway. Edwards considered this to be a prehistoric hut circle although, despite the proximity of a midden deposit, the only find was a sandstone sinker with longitudinal groove — a find common to other periods. Further work by Edwards in 1926 (1927. 200-2) revealed walls of single boulders forming three structures interpreted as earth houses. One, for example, comprised two chambers and a paved entrance passage. An adjacent structure took a similar pear-shaped form, but was larger; and an interesting feature of the third was clay plastering on the interior of the walls. There was a curious lack of internal finds, but the adjacent midden produced fish bones and some fragments of plain, hand-made pottery. The asserted pre-Norse evidence for these structures relies

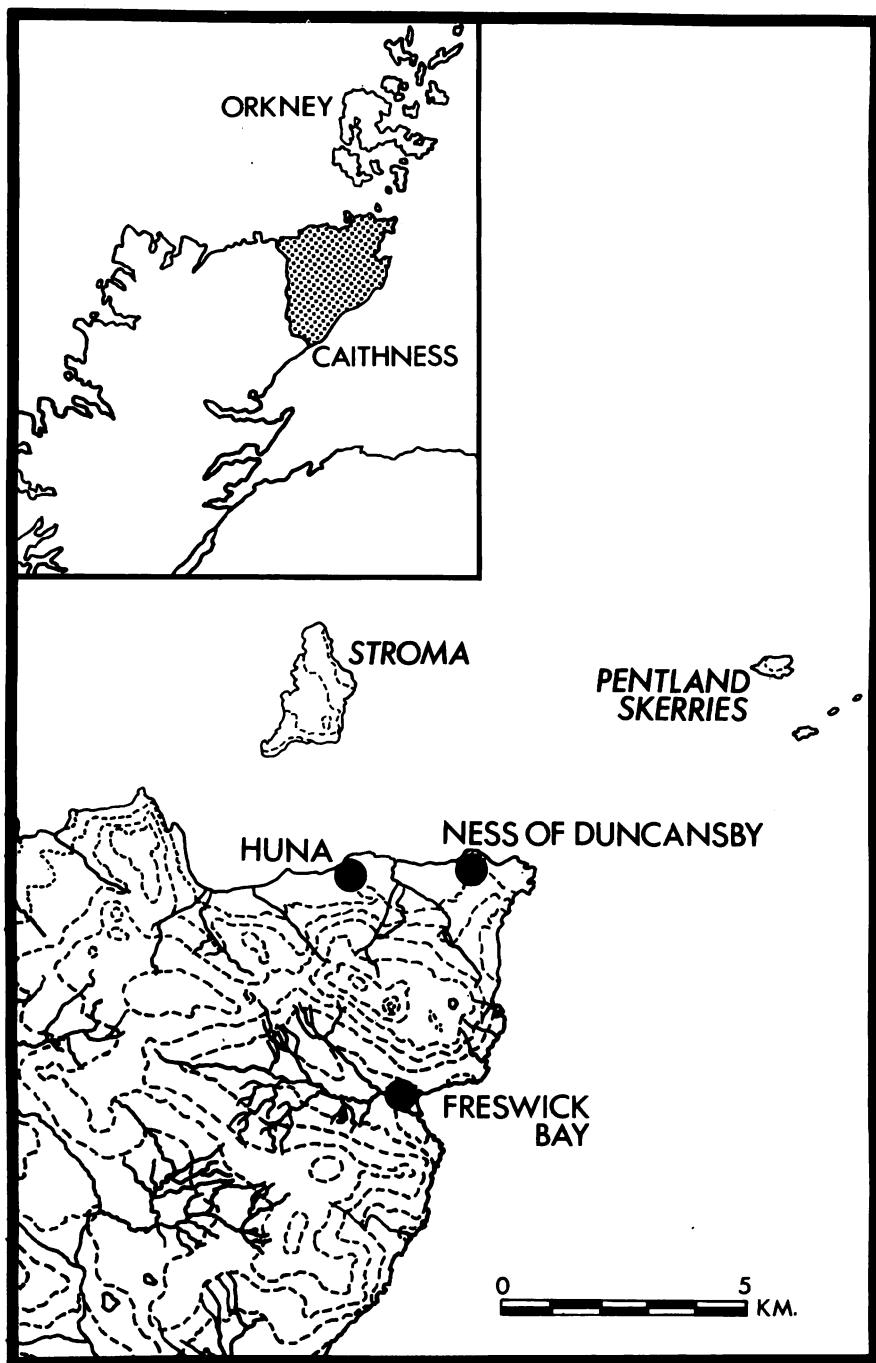


Fig. 3.1. Location Map of Freswick.

on the presence of a saddle quern of an apparently prehistoric type, a flint scraper from the midden and also a spindle-whorl of a femur-head animal bone. Each of these are common types and could be dated up to and including the Norse period.

The work of Tress Barry at the turn of the century on the brochs of Caithness indicated that the sandhills on the margin of the bay to the north of Freswick House concealed a large structure with walls seven feet (2.1m) high and eleven and a half feet (3.5m) wide (Anderson 1900. 143-4). Within the walls, fourteen steps remained and also a chamber within the thickness of the wall; this was reasonably interpreted as a broch. The finds ranged from two bones of the Great Auk to bone pins and a borer, half a bone whorl and two double-edged bone combs with bronze rivets. Here there are apparently prehistoric and Norse finds mixed together, but since neither the stratigraphy nor the spatial distribution of the finds is detailed in the report, the nature of the re-use of the site must remain conjecture.

## NORSE OCCUPATION

Despite the presence of place-names of Scandinavian origin in Caithness, structural remains are remarkably few. Indeed the 1911 Royal Commission survey failed to detect any at all (R.C.A.H.M.S. 1911). More recent fieldwork is, however, rectifying this situation; for instance, surface finds have been made in bays on the north coast of Caithness and are mentioned below. The best known site, however, is Freswick on the east coast.

In the two sagas, *Njal's Saga* and *Orkneyinga Saga*, the site of *Þrasvík* is mentioned: this is commonly identified with Freswick (Taylor 1938. 397 footnote 3). In *Njal's Saga*, Earl Sigurd's brother-in-law is described as Havard of Freswick (ch. LXXXV Magnusson & Pálsson 1960. 183) and later Kari Solmundson and his crew sailed to Caithness and 'went ashore at Freswick to the home of a worthy man called Skeggi...' (ibid. ch.CLV. 344). In *Orkneyinga Saga*, 'Svein Asleifarson was at Freswick in Caithness..... looking after the estate of his stepsons' (ch. XCII Pálsson & Edwards 1978. 165).

## EXCAVATIONS AT FRESWICK : 1937-1938

### The Buildings

The first excavations on Freswick Links to produce Norse remains were by Curle in 1937. These were undertaken as a result of rapid wind erosion and sand quarrying revealing traces of buildings, midden and burnt stones, and the discovery of large amounts of coarse unglazed pottery with grass markings. The buildings uncovered he divided into three groups, A, B and C [Fig. 3.2]. Buildings 1 to 5 form Group A; Building 6 forms Group B; Building 7 forms Group C, with A being the first uncovered and consequently theoretically the latest (Curle 1939).

# FRESWICK: GENERAL PLAN

showing remains of  
buildings  
discovered

 BUILDINGS ON HIGHER LEVEL

 .. .. LOWER ..

after Curle. P.S.A.S. lxxiii (1939)

0 50FT.  
0 15M.

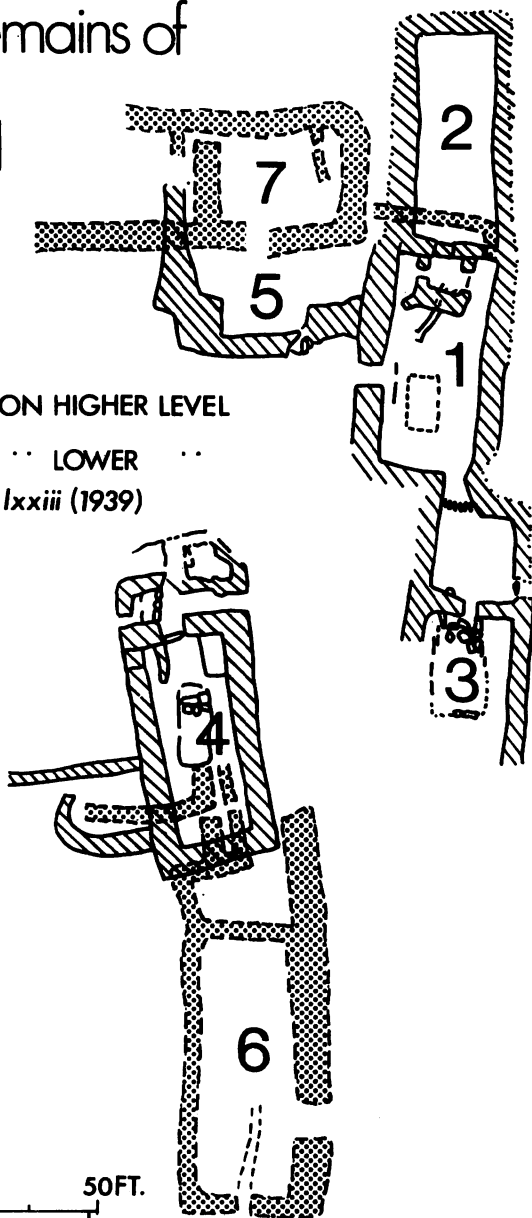


Fig. 3.2. Freswick: remains of buildings discovered by Curle in 1937.

Group A consisted of four buildings and a suggested boat naust (Building 5). Building 1 had walls of sandwich construction, that is an outer stone shell with inner earth core; it measured internally thirty feet by fourteen (9m x 4.5m). The interior was filled with midden material which yielded both fragments of mediaeval glazed and unglazed pottery, and sherds of coarse pottery which Curle interpreted as Viking. Dominating the central axis of the house was the traditional long fire of eleven feet (3.4m) in length. A drain in the house was covered by heavy flagstones and led into a small interior chamber with a hearth of burnt stones and peat ash. A blocked-off doorway at the back of this chamber and possible benches along the wall, have led to the interpretation that in a secondary use this was a Viking bathhouse. A pile of levigated clay there may indicate a subsequent amendment to a potter's working area.

Building 2 lay immediately adjacent to this building, separated by a mutual wall. It was thirty feet (9m) long and, as it lacked all traces of a central hearth, could possibly have been a storehouse. Once again, there was midden on the floor surface.

Building 3 was a range of badly-damaged rooms at the south west corner of Building 1. One room had five superimposed floor levels of flat stones, the uppermost very carefully fitted together and rising slightly in the centre. Finds seem to indicate that this was a smithing area — for instance slag, residue of bog iron ore and six haunched bones. Non-industrial finds came from the extreme west end, which was badly damaged and could therefore have been from a different phase of occupation. These include a hammer-headed bronze pin and a small-toothed, single-sided comb.

Building 4, twenty-nine feet by twelve and a half (8.8m x 3.8m), with walls two and a half feet (.8m) wide, lay to the north of these buildings, where the walls were reduced to foundation level. Although it is on a different alignment, it has been taken as contemporary with the others. A curious feature was found north of the doorway, being a box-like enclosure five by four feet (1.5m x 1.2m), divided lengthwise into two areas with one paved; it may have been for animals or for storage, but there is no conclusive evidence. Once again, in the house a long fire dominated the central axis, and other features noted include a possible bed in the form of a slightly raised area in the south-east corner, outlined by a setting of flagstones. Part of the building wall may originally have been constructed of turf, as no traces of an outer shell are indicated.

The so-called 'naust' was an irregular U-shaped construction with foundations of large, heavy boulders. However [see Fig. 3.2], this interpretation may possibly be revised to take account of traces of buildings of different phases.

These Group A buildings were dated by Curle to the thirteenth century on the basis of one sherd of mediaeval pottery paralleled in Essex at a site with occupation ending in the mid-thirteenth century. He thus associated the end of the occupation of Freswick with the levying of fines by Alexander III in 1264 on Caithness for the rendering of assistance to Haakon of Norway (Curle 1939. 86-7). Such precision in dating on the basis of pottery might however be challenged today.

A brief summary of Group A would therefore be:

a) two rectangular buildings, one later with a bathhouse and the other possibly a storehouse with finds of pottery ranging up to the end of the thirteenth century. A more precise date for the other finds is rather difficult because they are types common throughout the Norse period, e.g. perforated femur-head whorls and 'Viking' cooking vessel fragments. Earlier finds, possibly including the small-toothed single-sided comb, may be from earlier phases at the damaged western end of the building.

b) the smithy with associated material, slag and hones for example.

c) the isolated Building 4, possibly of earlier construction because of its different alignment — although this is difficult to tell from the finds which include a tapered pennanular ring and part of a haunched hone.

d) the possible 'naust' of larger boulder walls and irregular U-shape.

If the isolated Building 4 is contemporary with the rest of Group A, the plan would have resembled a courtyard type of farm, the bath and smithy being on the southern wing because of the danger from fire. Other farm buildings one might have expected to find, such as stables and byres, are not represented, but may possibly have been on the north side, and at the time of excavation they were buried under very deep sand.

Group B was located partially underlying Building 4 of Group A, although this relationship is far from clear on the published plan. Building 6 to the west was embedded in the wall, eighty-one feet long by five wide (24m x 1.5m), of a larger 'structure' and which appears to represent an earlier phase. The walls were on average three feet (.9m) thick, with the interior length being thirty-six and a half feet (11.1m) with a long hearth. Five postholes to the south and four to the north indicate the method of construction of the roof, being an aisled support of upright and cross timbers. The eastern end of the house was covered by midden which produced, for example, a comb, an iron knife-blade and a large piece of steatite vessel.

Only fragments of buildings from the rest of this group remained, possibly representing store-houses. Midden deposits here produced the portion of a pennanular brooch with zoomorphic terminal.

Group C was found to underlie the main block of Group A, with a north-south orientation and, although badly-damaged, the walls could be seen to be up to four feet (1.2m) across, and of sandwich construction as with Group A. In the west wall, the skull of a small whale had been incorporated. The southern part of the building of Group C was possibly a barn, as it had a very hard floor of clay and peat ash, and no certain central hearth remains. In the south-east corner was a kiln for drying corn or fodder apparently built into the original structure. Beyond the partition wall a second kiln was located. The finds from here include hand-made pottery fragments, a partially-worked bone pin and a bronze piece

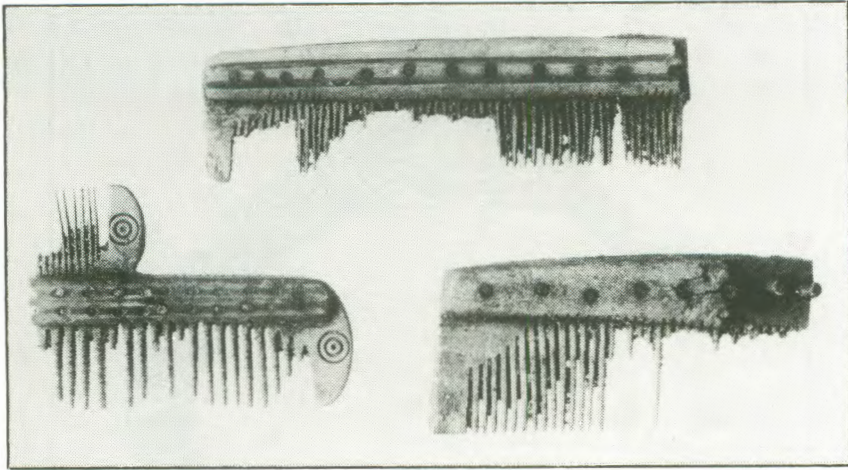


Fig. 3.3. Combs from the 1937 excavations, showing the distinctive 'butterfly' type.

interpreted as a cauldron patch: all are generally attributable to the Norse period.

Beneath this building, traces of a carbonised wattle-and-daub structure were located, on a bed of clay.

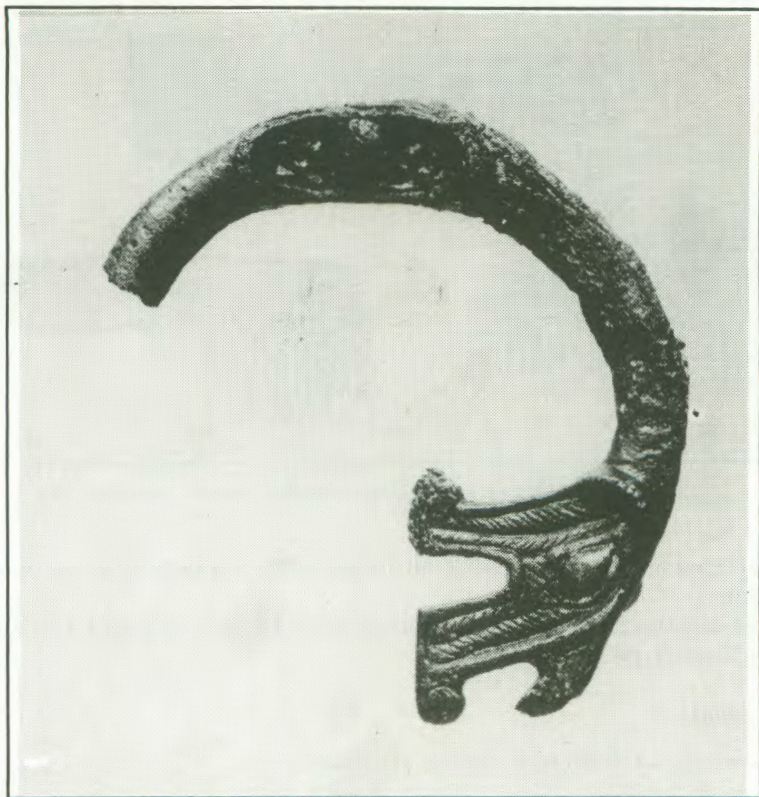
### The Finds

A summary of finds from the excavations:

*Bone:* many objects of bone were found, and some have been collected from the site since the excavations. Bone combs of both single and double type were found, including the distinctive 'butterfly' type [Fig. 3.3] found widely in Scandinavia and generally there of twelfth to thirteenth century date, e.g. at the Bryggen, Bergen (Greig 1933. 232), and very similar at Lund (Mårtensson 1976. 330). A fine comb case of four perforated tapered strips was also uncovered. Many examples of so-called dress-fasteners of pig metacarpals with a single central perforation were found, also found widely in Scandinavia e.g. Birka (Svarta Jorden catalogue, Statens Historiska Museum, Stockholm) and possibly being some kind of game. Additionally, there are two so-called door-snecks of bone, planed off to swivel freely and again with parallels at Birka (ibid.); many bone pins and piercers; hemispherical whorls of ox-femur heads. All are directly comparable to Scandinavian material of the Viking and early Mediaeval periods in Scandinavia.

*Bronze:* finds include three-quarters of a pennanular brooch of 'Irish-Celtic' design [Fig. 3.4] — possibly of the eighth century (E. Bakka, Bergen University, pers. comm.) but presumably deposited at a date considerably later than this; a possible zoomorphic strap-end; finger-rings and bracelets of types common in Scandinavia [ Fig 3.5] (Svarta Jorden Catalogue,





*Fig. 3.4. Part of an 'Irish-Celtic' design pennanular brooch, dated to the 8th century.*

Stockholm). These finds, although extremely interesting, provide only limited aid in dating the structures with which they are associated.

*Iron:* objects from the site are of a great variety and include knives of pronounced hogback type, keys, padlocks and shears.

*Pottery:* this ranges from a reddish-brown fabric mediaeval ware to 'Viking' handmade wares with grass-markings. This latter type is often encrusted with carbon on the outside and of hard, well-fired fabric of buff to grey-black in colour. Shapes characteristic of the ware include the globular with a flat base and everted rim — the variety usually being achieved by the treatment of the rims with for example, finger impressions or oblique cuts. Curle suggested (1939. 106) that the more sophisticated rim treatment may be of a later date. The same pottery was found at Jarlshof (Hamilton 1956) and recent finds have been made at Huna and a site near John O'Groats at the Ness of Duncansby (J. Clòse-Brooks, National Museum of Antiquities, Edinburgh, pers. comm.); the Pentland Skerries; Birsay, Orkney; and possibly at Papa Stour, Shetland.



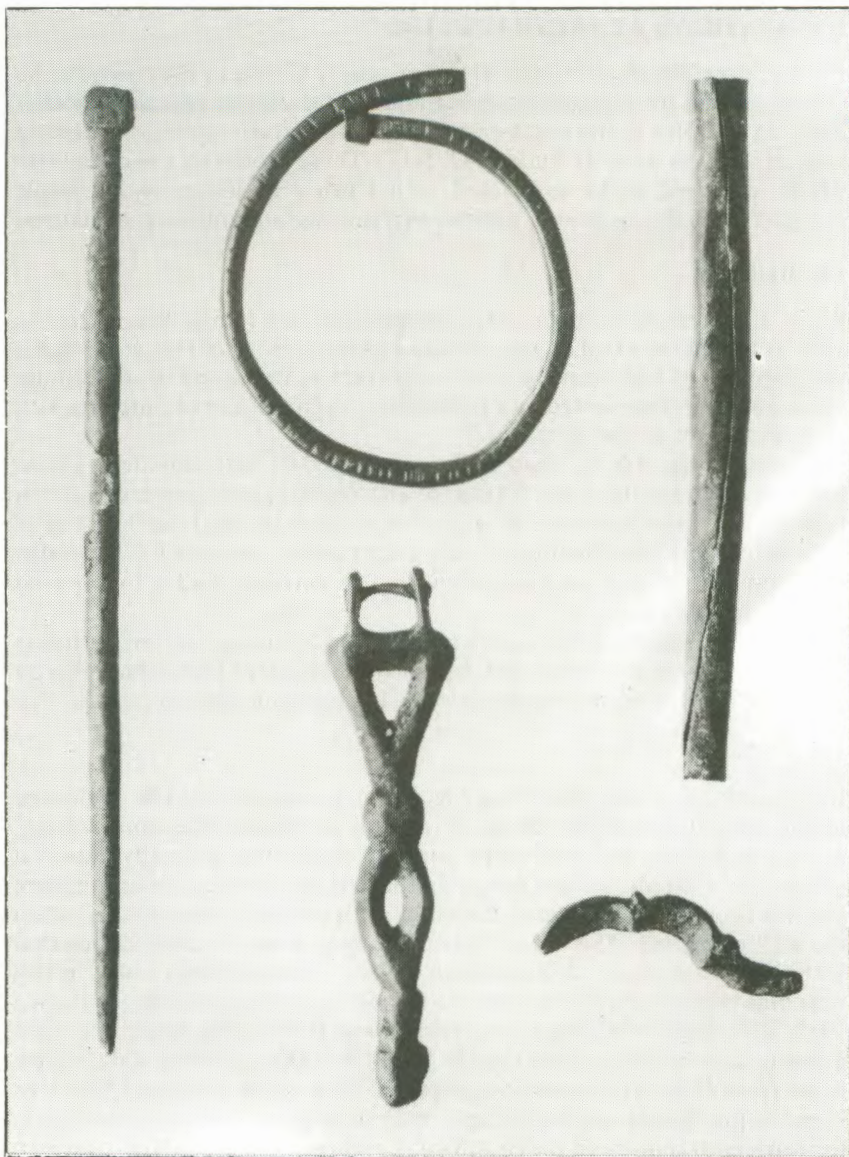


Fig. 3.5. Bronze bracelet, 'hammer-headed' pin and ?zoomorphic strap-end.

*Stone:* many hones were found during the excavations, especially in the area interpreted as a smithy; also querns and net-sinkers. Steatite vessel fragments of a very fine quality indicate large and well-hewn vessels. All such finds are very difficult to date precisely because the forms were often functional rather than aesthetically pleasing, and consequently tended to continue in an unchanged form for long periods at a time.

## EXCAVATIONS AT FRESWICK : 1942

Further excavations at the site were directed by Childe in 1942 because the combined action of sand quarrying and winter storms revealed another building complex to the north-east of Curle's excavations, 'on the seaward edge of the high dune' (Childe 1942. 5-17). These produced a midden layer which appeared to be associated with Curle's buildings and a single complex of building phases with no evidence for surrounding structures.

### The Buildings

Phase 1 comprised a long house, twenty-eight feet (8.5m) long, with the walls founded on a bed of grey clay and a basal course of thin stone slabs; the eastern part had been lost because of erosion. In the centre of the house was a long fire represented by a bed of peat ash fifteen feet (4.6m) long with an oval fire pit at the west end.

Phase 2 [Figs. 3.6; 3.7] had walls constructed of large boulders, and in the west room the floor was formed of an irregular pavement covered with midden. This was bounded by a groove roughly marked out by pairs of thin slates sunk into the floor, and interpreted as a groove for a wooden partition with a gap for the doorway. The entrance had a long paved passage in this phase.

Phase 3 was a new construction built on top of the east part of the house incorporating some of the walls, but mostly separated from phase two by one foot (.3m) of sand accumulation. This building had no hearth.

### The Finds

In the finds recovered, there was a lack of items which could be attributed to the second and third phases. There was in general the same 'Viking' pottery as before, but with more 'sophisticated' rims, generally flattened and with almost an internal flange. In the first phase, one almost complete pot was found in the corner of the building, which had been crushed when the wall collapsed. This was a flat-based open bowl, in close association with a whalebone draughtsman. This draughtsman has many Scandinavian parallels, especially from the Tyskebryggen, Bergen (Grieg 1932. 260, Fig. 233), which was found in a deposit predating the 1248 burning layer and considered to be post 1200. Other close parallels have come from Oslo, Trondheim and Sigtuna. Dating the structures therefore is rather problematical: the draughtsman from phase one could date from the thirteenth century (if the continental analogy is reliable in this context), and consequently phases two and three are later on stratigraphical grounds. However, the gap between these phases cannot be judged because in a single winter storm, for instance, one foot (.3m) of sand could have covered the site. The remaining finds from these excavations comprised stone weights and femur-head whorls amongst other items: all things which are insufficient to date individual phases.

The excavations of Curle and Childe revealed substantial building-remains and many valuable artefacts; a rich group of finds rather than



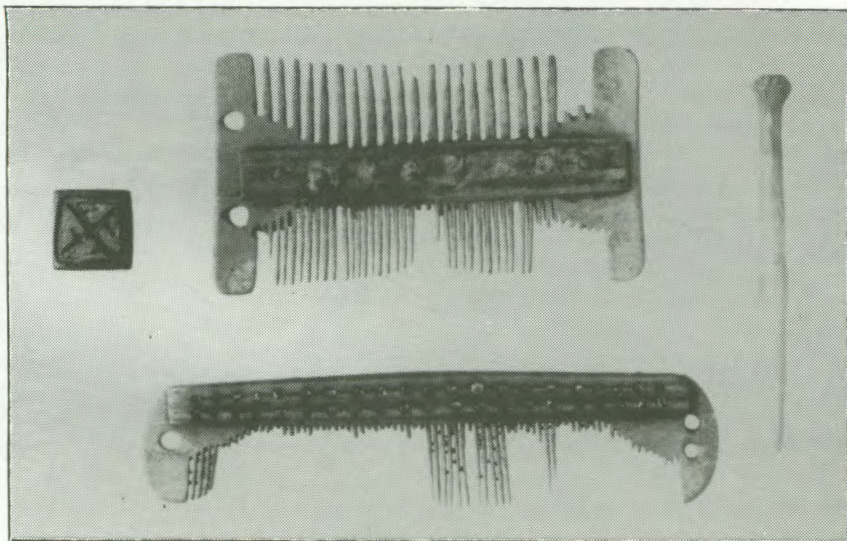


*Fig. 3.6.* Childe's excavation of the phase two buildings, with phase three to the left of the photograph. Looking south.



*Fig. 3.7.* Childe's excavation, showing all three phases in the structure  
— I centre of picture;  
II to right of picture; III in background.





*Fig. 3.8. Finds from Freswick Links since the period of excavations. To the left is an interesting enamelled mount of the Early Christian period.*

isolated examples, serving to give some indication of the calibre of the site. More detailed work on the middens, in relation to the structures, might have yielded further information, but this was not possible in the war-time situation.

## THE PRESENT SITUATION

The combination of erosion from the elements and from rabbits has resulted in an area now largely devoid of its vegetation and from which sand is easily removed. This erosion has clearly indicated the site as larger than the previous excavation reports suggest, and random collections of artefacts (e.g. pottery) and other material have been gathered from the whole area of Freswick Links [Fig. 3.8]. While the collections of material in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland are very important, the systematic study of material in other collections, already begun, has confirmed the outstanding importance of this site. Moreover the winter storms of 1978-9, which removed a further bite from the coastline in the bay, have revealed yet more walls and midden material consisting of animal and fish bone, burnt stones and pottery. Almost each time the wind blows something new is revealed! [Fig. 3.9].

In an attempt to underline the need for a systematic large-scale investigation, to include a study of the whole area of Freswick Bay (c.f. Birsay, Orkney — Morris 1979), a short survey sponsored by the Scottish Development Department was undertaken at Freswick in September 1979





*Fig. 3.9. Eroding midden at Viking Freswick. 1979.*

by Christopher D. Morris, D. James Rackham and the writer. A more immediate objective was to ascertain the amount of damage and loss of material due to erosion, and also to gain an idea of the extent of the site. A comparison of the modern coastline with that of the 25 inch OS map of the 1940s indicates that in some places up to forty metres have been lost — partly the result of sand quarrying before and during the Second World War, but more regularly and recently as a result of erosion. The present coastline has receded virtually to the back of these quarries, in some cases beyond, and very extensive tracts of sand slip are littered with eroded-out midden deposits. Some areas are regressed but in these cases erosion continues at the top of the slope! Areas of erosion further inland are, in addition, subject to severe rabbit disturbance.

A zonal analysis of the site has been made including a full photographic record and systematic collection of material eroding down the sand slopes. In selected areas, columns were taken for environmental analysis. With the aid of augers, this survey has indicated that the midden deposits extend at least 300m x 100m and are therefore unique for the period in this country.

The material collected was mainly Freswick pottery, i.e. grass-tempered, often pinkish externally and grey/buff internally; but also a small number of iron objects and fragments of a steatite bowl.

Information available from preliminary analysis indicates four distinct midden layers. The uppermost layers produced many burnt stones, limpet shells, fish and animal bones; a lower midden layer, however, was characterised by a very dense layer of fish bones — so dense in fact that the



layer could almost be removed in a single plate. Species identified from the columns and eroding spread of material include: ox, sheep and pig; cod, haddock, ling, crab and various types of shell-fish; cereals including oats and barley; and various grasses and sedges consistent with a heathland and dune environment. However, perhaps the most interesting fact to emerge from the preliminary analysis is that virtually all the fish bone collected both in the sample and randomly from the beach midden is from fish over a metre long.

Our understanding of Freswick is still based primarily on that of the excavators of 1937 and 1942. Questions remain, however, about the relationships of the structures and their artefacts — questions that have only multiplied following the very brief investigation of 1979 and the multiplicity of random finds.

The scale of the problem is indicated by the area of the known site ( $\frac{1}{2}$  mile x  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile) (.8km x .4km) most of which suffers from continuing erosion. And the known site itself continues to grow so that now it extends south of the burn. Alterations in the cellars of the Castle, which led to further archaeological investigation in the autumn of 1979, revealed midden material with large concentrations of Freswick pottery possibly related to a structure underlying the present Castle.

This re-emphasises the need to study the whole area of Freswick as a context for the known site. For at Freswick there is undoubtedly an unparalleled opportunity to study settlement in relation to its environment in the Late Norse Period.

### *Acknowledgement*

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