

Evangelists of Stone: Chapels within Landscapes of Conversion in Viking Age and Late Norse Shetland

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Introduction and background

THE NORTH Isles of Shetland -Yell, Unst and Fetlar (Figure 1) - have long been known for their abundance of Norse archaeological remains, with still visible Viking Age and Late Norse longhouses and nousts¹ scattered throughout the landscape. What is less well known about these islands is that they possess a significant number of likely Viking Age and Late Norse chapel sites, with an intriguing density that demonstrates the presence of thriving Christian landscapes throughout these islands during this period. This archaeological evidence provides an opportunity to say something significant about the processes and mechanisms of Christianisation and conversion of the Norse population in Shetland during the Viking Age and Late Norse period. Furthermore, clear trends are demonstrated in the positioning of these chapel sites within the landscape, which can also be seen in their interactions with the contemporary built environment, highlighting shared concerns and intentions by those who built these structures.

The examination of Christianising influences and official conversions to Christianity is a particularly well-studied area for Viking Age mainland Scandinavia.² However, the investigation of the potentially more complex and piecemeal situation in the Western Norse colonies, including Shetland, has suffered from a lack of sustained study, therefore, this period of cultural and religious contact is not well understood. The Shetland Chapel-Sites project, under the umbrella of the Viking and Early Settlement Archaeological Research Project (VESARP), attempted to start a process of sustained investigation into the chapels of the North Isles of Shetland to address this gap within academic

1 Nousts are unroofed boat-shaped structures of stone and/or turf, with one end open to the sea, that sit above the high water mark, allowing boats to be dragged into them for shelter.
2 Abrams 1998; Janson 2000; Brink 2004; Sanmark 2004.

scholarship.³ Initial desk-based assessments and audit surveys were undertaken on Unst, Yell and Fetlar - with further non-invasive archaeological investigation undertaken on Unst - however, unfortunately, the project did not progress past this early stage.⁴

Here themes of Christianisation and Norse conversion to Christianity in Viking Age Shetland will be addressed, specifically through a focus on the probable Viking Age and Late Norse chapel sites. This will be achieved by undertaking deeper analysis of the raw archaeological data collected for the relevant chapel sites, informed by the results of a season of fieldwork undertaken by the author in Shetland. This analysis will consist of placing the chapel sites within their wider landscape context, and will identify possible associations with the contemporary built environment in the immediate vicinity. As none of the chapels in the North Isles have been excavated, the analysis and dating of these sites will be informed by two case studies of excavated Viking Age chapel sites on the mainland of Shetland - St Ninian's Isle and Kebister.⁵ This comparative approach will inform discussions about the persistence of Christianity through the Viking Age in Shetland, landscapes of conversion, possible trends in chapel location, and the role that chapels played within Christianisation and conversion of the Norse settlers of the North Isles.

Results

The following chapel sites in the North Isles of Shetland were identified as likely to date to the Viking Age and Late Norse period, most of which were also accompanied by various forms of Early Medieval ecclesiastical sculpture. The predominant form of sculpture found at these chapel sites is the rough cruciform cross, which Ian Fisher has dated to the 9th-11th centuries AD,⁶ and it has even been suggested that they may represent a uniquely Norse form of ecclesiastical sculpture.⁷ This sculpture type is largely confined to the North Isles of Shetland, though there are examples elsewhere, such as the concentration of crosses at the chapel site on North Rona in the Outer Hebrides.⁸

The following is a catalogue of the chapel sites visited during fieldwork in the North Isles of Unst, Yell and Fetlar, accompanied by their National Grid References:

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- 3 Morris and Brady 1998, 9-13; Brady 1998; Brady and Johnson 1998; Brady 2000a; Brady 2000b; Brady and Johnson 2000, vols. 1 and 2; Brady and Morris 2000.
 - 4 Morris 2007, 275; Morris and Barrowman 2008, 166.
 - 5 Barrowman 2011; Owen and Lowe 1999.
 - 6 Fisher 2005, 164-165.
 - 7 Scott and Ritchie 2009, 8-9.
 - 8 Fisher 2001, 114-116.

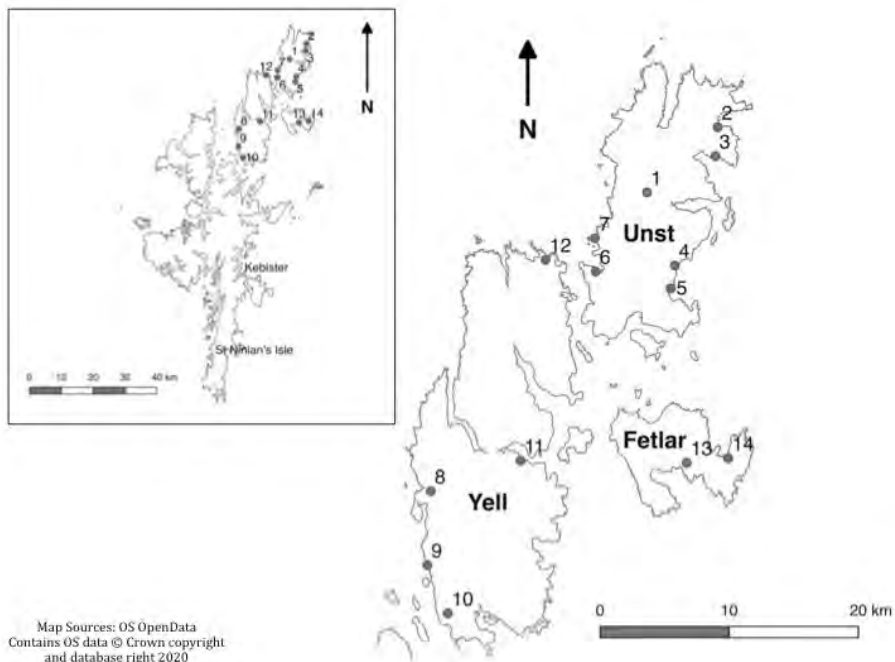


Figure 1: Locations of the chapel sites and the case studies (St Ninian’s Isle and Kebister) discussed in the text. Numbers correspond to the list below. Illustration by the author.

1. St John’s Church, Baliasta, Unst (NGR: HP 60256 09582)
2. St John’s Church, Norwick, Unst (NGR: HP 6517 1410)
3. Cross Kirk, Clibberswick, Unst (NGR: HP 6503 1210)
4. St John’s Chapel, Colvadale, Unst (NGR: HP 6220 0451)
5. St Mary’s Chapel, Framgord, Unst (NGR: HP 61912 02908)
6. St Olaf’s Kirk, Lundawick, Unst (NGR: HP 56693 04094)
7. Kirkaby, Westing, Unst (NGR: HP 5665 0640)
8. West Sandwick, West Yell, Yell (NGR: HU 4522 8883)
9. Kirkhouse/North Kirk Geo, West Yell, Yell (NGR: HU 4498 8368)
10. Ulsta, South Yell, Yell (NGR: HU 4640 8033)
11. Reafirth, Mid Yell, Yell (NGR: HU 5145 9095)
12. Kirk of Ness (St Olaf’s), North Yell, Yell (NGR: HP 53205 04897)
13. Halliara Kirk, Houbie, Fetlar (NGR: HU 6302 9080)
14. Kirkhouse, Everland, Fetlar (NGR: HU 6591 9111)

Comparative approach: St Ninian's Isles and Kebister

The chapels at St Ninian's Isle and Kebister were selected as case studies as they represent the whole corpus of excavated Viking Age chapel sites on Shetland. The purpose of including these sites in this survey is to assess the landscape situation of sites that have been firmly dated to the Viking Age, and possibly also the Late Norse period, in order to inform the analysis of the chapel sites that are expected to be from this period, but have yet to be excavated, to provide absolute and typological dating material. Furthermore, particularly in the case of St Ninian's Isle, this approach provides insight into how the incoming Norse interacted with the Pictish ecclesiastical landscape and built environment, and how these were adapted to bring them firmly into a Norse cultural milieu.

Many parallels can be seen between a number of the likely Early Medieval chapel sites from the North Isles, and the confirmed Viking Age and Late Norse sites at St Ninian's Isle and Kebister. The location of the chapel at Kebister in a prominent position overlooking the seaways of the voe, and with good visibility out to sea, is matched at sites such as St Mary's Chapel, Framgord, and Reafirth, Mid Yell. The commanding situation of the chapel at St Ninian's Isle, overlooking a principal bay or landing site also possesses many parallels, including Cross Kirk, Clibberswick, and St John's Church, Norwick. Interestingly, the obscuring of the chapel site from the sea seen at St Ninian's Isle is also mirrored at St Olaf's Kirk, Lundawick (Figure 2), which may suggest a Pictish ecclesiastical origin with a greater focus on the surrounding land than the seaways.

Both of the case study chapels are located either on top of, or in the immediate vicinity of, early prehistoric activity, specifically that from the Iron Age, which is a noted phenomenon for the Northern Isles and can be possibly seen at Kirkaby, Westing, and St John's Church, Norwick.⁹ Intriguingly, there is currently no evidence for Viking Age or Late Norse domestic structures in very close proximity to either of the case study chapels; however, midden material of Viking date and Norse character at Kebister suggests settlement nearby.¹⁰ This is unlike many of the surveyed sites from the North Isles that are clearly associated with Norse longhouses, such as St John's Chapel, Colvadale, and St John's Church, Norwick. This comparative approach demonstrates that all of the sites surveyed, especially those with associated sculpture and Norse farmsteads, have the strong potential to date to the Viking Age and Late

9 Lowe 1988, vol. 1 287-327; Owen and Lowe 1999, 252-289; Barrowman 2011, 189-192.

10 Owen and Lowe 1999, 293-295.



Figure 2: The 12th century St Olaf's Kirk, Lundawick, on the island of Unst. Photograph by the author.

Norse period, as excavations at the chapels at St Ninian's Isle and Kebister confirmed through invasive archaeological investigation.

Discussion

It is clear that the density of probable Viking Age and Late Norse chapel sites throughout the North Isles of Shetland is an intriguing and complex phenomenon. However, the vital steps of putting these sites within their immediate landscape context and assessing their impact on the conversion and Christianisation of the Norse has not previously been undertaken. The individuals and communities that erected these chapels on various sites throughout Shetland made clear and conscious decisions about where these special and sacred buildings would be situated within the landscape, and it is important to attempt to decipher this built environment. However, first, it is essential to address the issue of dating these ecclesiastical sites.



Figure 3: A rough cruciform stone grave marker in the graveyard at West Sandwick chapel site, Yell. Photograph by the author.

Dating the profusion of likely Viking Age and Late Norse chapels in the North Isles of Shetland is a problematic issue, made all the more difficult by the lack of excavation at these sites. The more traditional school of thought puts forward the idea that there was a burst of chapel building on high-status Norse farms following Earl Thorfinn's pilgrimage to Rome, and the subsequent creation of the minster and bishop's seat at Birsay in the mid-11th century.¹¹ However, it would appear that many of surveyed chapels pre-date this, as the rough cruciform stones found at many of the sites - almost always associated with a chapel structure - have been firmly dated to the Viking Age, specifically the 9th-11th centuries (Figure 3).¹² Furthermore, the excavations at St Ninian's Isle demonstrated continued Christian use of the site following the Norse incursions well into the 9th and 10th centuries, with the radiocarbon dates from the coffins at Kebister (late 9th to early 11th century) also

11 *Orkneyinga Saga* 1981, 74-75; Crawford 1987, 178-180.

12 Fisher 2005, 164-166.

demonstrating early Norse Christian activity and chapel building.¹³ Many of the chapel sites could have had Pictish antecedents, such as that found on St Ninian's Isle, however, this is almost impossible to ascertain without invasive archaeological investigation. This evidence provides only piecemeal glimpses into the exact nature of the relationship between political and ecclesiastical organisation in Viking Age Shetland, yet it is clear that Christianity was influencing the Norse incomers long before the official actions of the Earls of Orkney. Unfortunately, this does not aid any considerations about refined contemporaneity of the chapel sites, and, therefore, any real analysis about the density of chapel in the North Isles of Shetland. Despite this, it appears that many of these sites pertain to the Viking Age, and as a result it is clear that there was a rich and thriving Christian landscape throughout Unst, Yell and Fetlar during this period.

When it comes to the siting of these chapels the predominant concern appears to be visibility of and from the sea, with all of the chapel sites (including St Ninian's Isle and Kebister), bar three, possessing good views over the seaways. The placement of many chapels in commanding points overlooking important voes and bays is a clear attempt to maximise the visibility of these structures and the Christian faith, as they could be seen clearly from the many ships below as people went about their daily business. Chapels were often sited in locations where land and sea resources met, as this would have been a vital consideration for the initial siting of the Norse farms that they were built to serve. This would have resulted in chapels acting as hubs of community activity, specifically facilitating both local and overseas trade; unfortunately, this is difficult to see in the examples from the North Isles without excavation. However, evidence to support this has been discovered elsewhere, such as within the wooden church at Þórarinsstaðir, Eastern Iceland where lead weights and a quarter of a silver Danish coin (evidence of bullion circulation) were found.¹⁴ It has been stressed elsewhere that in the past the topography of Shetland ensured that maritime transport was the fastest and most efficient way to travel and move goods, therefore, the location of these chapels guaranteed that these Christian places of worship were seen by visitors and locals alike.¹⁵ This concept of optimum visibility can be seen through the use of quartzite blocks in the chapel and enclosure at Kirkaby, Westing, interpreted as a deliberate inclusion to ensure that the site could be seen far out into the busy channel between Unst and Yell.¹⁶ Intrigue

13 Owen and Lowe 1999, 84-85; Barrowman 2011, 198.

14 Kristjánsdóttir 2004, 47, 72-73.

15 Cant 1996, 172.

16 Brady and Johnson 2000, Vol.1 22.

and subsequent enquiry about these structures would have resulted in familiarisation with Christianity and its associated material culture, allowing for the casual spread of Christian knowledge that could facilitate more official involvement and inclusion in Christian practice. It is evident that these chapels would have been exceedingly prominent structures in the landscape of Viking Age Shetland, thus playing an important role in Christianising and converting the Norse who were still pagan, acting as a physical presence of Christianity within this settled landscape.

Despite this clear concern with the sea, not all of the chapels are situated near to the shore, and some of these sites have very limited or no visibility of or from the sea. Although this represents a small minority of the dataset, this siting of chapels away from the seaways is important, and clearly demonstrates a different concern for those who erected these inland places of worship. One particularly interesting example is the chapel site at West Sandwick, Yell, which is completely obscured from the sea as it sits in a hollow some distance inland. Yet, what is most noticeable about this Viking Age site - dated by the associated cruciform stones situated within the modern graveyard - is that it sits in a raised position above the banks of the Loch of Scattlands at its southern end.¹⁷ This association between inland chapel sites and bodies of freshwater can be seen elsewhere, particularly at the Kirk of Ness at the northern end of Yell, which also possesses severely restricted views of the sea. This may demonstrate a consideration for the use of this freshwater within Christian liturgy, during mass baptism for example, which would allow for more of a spectacle, and an expressly open-air and public act of worship that could be observed by members outwith the congregation. Specifically at West Sandwick - where there are no signs of contemporary structures or activity nearby - such an event, and the chapel itself, would have been the primary focus within this small area of visible landscape, almost acting as a natural amphitheatre. Therefore, it could be said that this would have fully Christianised this space, both visibly and perhaps audibly, though this cannot be certain. It is worth considering the view of Christ as a fisherman or 'Fisher of Men', with the siting of the chapel on the banks of the water imposing the Gospels onto the landscape, a powerful symbol for those already converted, and a teaching tool for those who could be persuaded.

Furthermore, these bodies of water could have acted as obvious meeting points within the landscape, for both official and unofficial local activities, therefore, siting a chapel in this location ensured that the presence of Christianity would be seen at these gatherings of the community. Crucially,

17 Scott and Ritchie 2009, nos. 94-97.



Figure 4: The 'Priest's Hoose'. The remains of a substantial Norse longhouse looking downslope towards St Mary's Chapel, Framgord, overlooking Sandwick bay on the island of Unst. Photograph by the author.

the chapel may have quickly become the point of assembly rather than the body of water, subtly extending Christian influence, and its importance, into the community with little or no active missionary work. Interestingly, a few of the sites located near the sea are also located close to bodies of freshwater further inland, such as St Olaf's Kirk, Lundawick, and Kirkaby, Westing, which may reflect a combination of the considerations discussed above.

Another striking trend is the frequency with which chapel sites are associated with or are in the immediate vicinity of Norse longhouses, with both Viking Age and Late Norse examples. The exceedingly early Viking Age domestic structures and activity excavated at Norwick, Unst,¹⁸ may be associated with St John's Chapel just to the North, and could represent some of the earliest interaction between Norse settlement and Christianity in Shetland. Although, it must be noted that the flawed recovery strategy of this

18 Ballin Smith 2007, 287-297.

rescue excavation calls much of the results into question, and the chapel has yet to be excavated to provide solid dating material. On the other hand, it is likely that the longhouses overlooking the 12th century chapel at Lundawick to the north-west, and the longhouses at Underhoull, are all contemporary.¹⁹ With all of these sites being intervisible with the chapel, this may represent either the clustering of farms around an ecclesiastical site or the construction of a church in a central location, both of which demonstrate the great importance of Christianity within this landscape. It is noteworthy that the majority of chapels surveyed on Unst are associated with at least one longhouse, whereas there are no examples of this on Yell or Fetlar - though this may be due more to the recent intensive study of Viking activity focussed on Unst than a genuine trend.²⁰

This suggests that many of these chapels acted as private places of worship for local Norse landowners and their families, with the chapel and associated longhouse at Framgord, Unst, being a very likely example of this (Figure 4). In these cases it is likely that the converted Norse elite was making a conscious attempt at top-down conversion, where Christianity was portrayed as the religion of status and wealth in order to convert their socio-economic inferiors who wished to emulate them. This can also be seen with the chapel site at Kebister, where the coffins contained within the burials were identified as pine that had to have been imported from mainland Scotland or Scandinavia.²¹ Combined with the likelihood that the chapel itself was also built of imported substantial timbers, this physical representation of wealth, power, and far-flung connections within the landscape would have acted as a strong motivator for joining the Christian faith for the wider Norse community.

At a number of sites the chapels are located in very close proximity to possible Norse - perhaps reused pre-historic - farm boundaries or land divisions. These boundaries also often appear to be incorporated into the field systems of nearby Norse farmsteads. Lowe's thesis attempted to link chapel sites in Shetland, specifically Unst and Fetlar, with scattald divisions of land; however, the uncertain origin of the scattald divisions and the lack of early documents in Shetland produced largely uncertain results.²² Nevertheless, at both Framgord and Lundawick there are low-lying turfed-over field or land boundaries that run from the longhouses on the hillside down to the chapels below, linking the domestic structures almost physically to the sacred ecclesiastical sites within the landscape. Locating a chapel on

19 Fisher 2002, 56; Bond and Dockrill 2013, 159-165.

20 Turner, Bond and Larsen 2013.

21 Owen and Lowe 1999, 290.

22 Lowe 1988, vol. 1, 243-247, vol. 2, Figs.52,53.



Figure 5: The view from the Norse longhouse at Underhoull (Upper) towards St Olaf's Kirk and the associated longhouses at Lundawick, Unst, showing the chapel in a commanding position above the bay. Photograph by the author.

a land division claims legitimacy of the landowner and their descendants to the land on which the building sits, noticeably mirroring the insertion of Viking furnished burials into or sited next to ancient monuments within the landscape.²³ This may also be demonstrating the dominance of Christianity within the landscape, by materially using the Christian faith to stake claims to land beyond dispute. A particularly interesting example comes from Halliara Kirk, Fetlar, which actually incorporates the substantial and extensive turf-covered remains of a Bronze Age land boundary,²⁴ which cuts the island in two, into the churchyard enclosure. The exceedingly commanding position of the chapel on a rocky outcrop on one of the highest points in the island, combined with a physical link to the ancient past of the landscape, would stress the dominance of Christianity - sitting triumphantly above the local built

23 Harrison 2007, 176-180.

24 SMR No.8719.

environment and Norse community - while possessing sense of permanence within the landscape.

Although not the focus of this current study, it is important to note the extensive corpus of Viking Age ecclesiastical sculpture outwith the North Isles, which indicates the presence of vibrant and active Christian landscapes throughout Viking Age Shetland. These impressive examples include the cross slab from Culbinsburgh on Bressay, dated to the 10th century, and the numerous fragments of sculpture and church furniture discovered at Papil in West Burra, assigned various dates ranging from the 8th-10th centuries.²⁵ These stone monuments were highly visible and unambiguous statements of Christianity within the landscape, erected during a period that has traditionally been interpreted as a distinct hiatus in ecclesiastical activity due to the arrival of the pagan Norse. Such sculpture, celebrating and emphasising the power of the Christian faith, does not indicate a decline or persecution of the Church during the Viking Age, and instead speaks of a wealthy, established Christian community. Although many of the sculptural find spots have yet to receive sustained and invasive archaeological investigation, the strong correlation between ecclesiastical sculpture and chapel sites in the North Isles hints at the presence of Viking Age ecclesiastical establishments all across Shetland.

North Atlantic parallels

It is worth briefly putting this survey of Viking Age and Late Norse chapel sites from the North Isles of Shetland into its wider Norse North Atlantic context. There are remarkable parallels between the Viking Age Norse chapel excavated on the Brough of Deerness, Orkney, and the chapel at Kebister, both of which were substantial constructions of timber with slot trenches or gullies and stone cladding.²⁶ The author believes that future excavations on chapels in the North Isles are exceedingly likely to encounter timber predecessors under the visible later stone structures at many of the sites. Specifically with reference to the contemporary Icelandic scenario, it has been recognised that the Christianisation of Iceland's landscape may have started from the beginning of the *Lándnam* period, due to a lack of pagan graves and plethora of early chapels.²⁷ Considering that there is a dearth of Viking furnished burial across Shetland and an abundance of likely Viking Age and Late Norse chapels in the North Isles alone, an exceedingly strong case could be made for a similar situation in Viking Age Shetland. Furthermore, striking parallels can be seen between the

25 Scott and Ritchie 2009, 4-8; Jennings 2016, 47-52.

26 Morris and Emery 1986, 301, 313-317; Owen and Lowe 1999, 85-86.

27 Kristjánsdóttir 2016, 454.

rough cruciform stones found in the North Isles and three examples excavated at the early 11th century church site at Þórarinsstaðir in Eastern Iceland, which Fisher describes as 'almost identical' to a number of the examples on Yell.²⁸ This sculptural evidence suggests contact or even transit through the North Isles before reaching Iceland. Perhaps converted Norseman from the North Isles of Shetland were amongst the first Christian settlers to sail west to the Faroe Islands and Iceland, to begin a process of chapel building and Christianisation of the landscape that they had first witnessed in Yell, Unst or Fetlar.

Conclusion

The omnipresence of the chapels - interestingly paralleled by the God they were built to worship - in prominent positions in the landscape, overlooking the various events and actions of everyday life, would result in a normalisation and permeation of Christianity, its ideals, architecture, and material culture, into Norse society. Thus, it is clear that chapels played a significant role in the Christianisation and conversion of the Norse within Shetland, and contributed extensively to the creation of Christian landscapes throughout these islands.

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28 Fisher 2005, 164-165; Kristjánsdóttir 2016, 452.

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