
5 AREA I : THE CHURCH AND CEMETERY

Area I (Ill 3) consisted of the church with its adjacent buildings and the cemetery. The finds from Area I were recorded by the Foreman, the late Mr Thomas Drever, during the summers of 1935 and 1936. Dr Richardson himself supervised the work on the church and adjoining buildings, but the levelling of the cemetery and preparing the ground for seeding with grass was carried out by Mr Drever and his team, with periodic visits from Dr Richardson.

MISCELLANEOUS FINDS

There were only two finds, other than pottery, within the church and the adjacent buildings, both were of bone and both, surprisingly, connected with gaming. 274 (Ill 50) is a fragment of a gaming board of whalebone, 92 mm by 62 mm, found in the W apartment of the building beside the church. Two of the sides have been broken off; the remainder is divided into rough squares by incised lines and there are perforations at the intersections, but in one of the rows they are out of place. The squares would link it with the gaming boards from Buckquoy (Ritchie 1977, fig 9), but the perforations put it in the class of the board with peg-holes instead of line intersections from Ballinderry Crannog I (Hencken 1936, 175-90, pl 25). However the Birsay example lacks the incised circle of the central perforation, or intersection clearly marked on the other boards. Possibly it was a trial piece or was too imperfect to complete. The second object, 275, is a small playing piece of polished antler with an acorn shaped terminal and basal peg socket, found under one of the stone seats in the NE corner of the church. It is a well known type, found as near at hand as Jarlshof (Hamilton 1956, pl 37: 8) and as far afield as Greenland where there are examples from Gårdar and Sandnes, (Nørlund 1936, 84), one of which is made of polished walrus ivory. Not connected with Area I but from the middle Norse horizon in Area II, another socketed playing piece, 271 (Ill 38), was found made from the femur head of an ox. Four draughtsmen similar to this, each with a basal peg socket, came from Kilmainham, Dublin (Bøe 1940, fig 36).

Still probably connected with the church is a fragment of dark green window glass, 641; Dr Hunter's report is as follows: "it is a dark green but badly weathered quarry, grozed on three edges and chipped at one corner". He considers it to be one of the most interesting of the glass finds from the site.

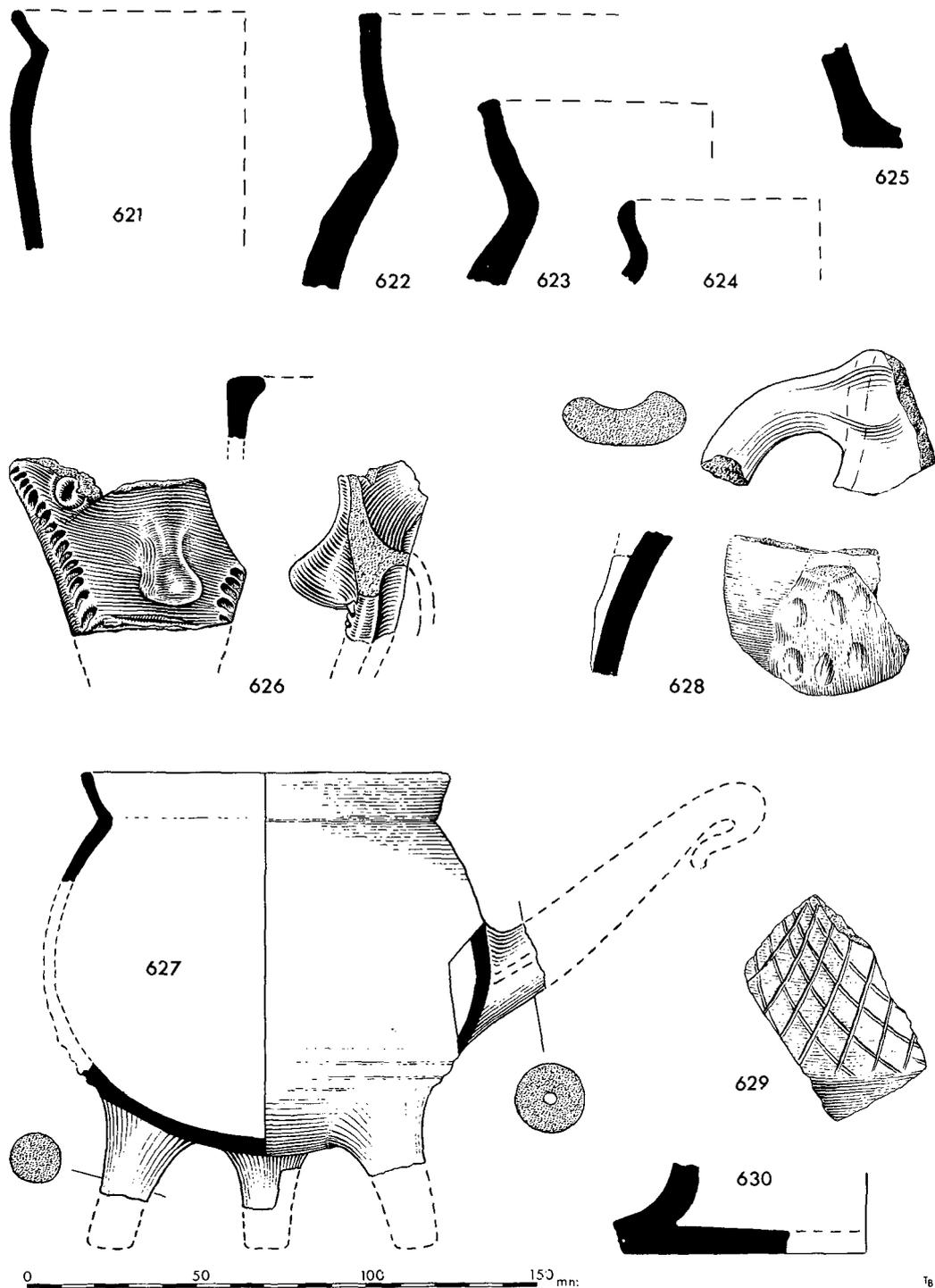
There were a few other finds from the cemetery. 273 was a handle made from an antler tine; one end was narrowed and had two perforations and the other was a curved point (Ill 50). A boar's tusk with its end cut and a George III penny have not been catalogued.

POTTERY

A number of fragments of pottery (Ill 56) were found in unstratified contexts in the buildings and the courtyard and a small number from the cemetery.

Two sherds (621, 625) of grass-tempered pottery were found which can be paralleled in the Norse material from Freswick (Curle 1939, 104-6).

The medieval and post-medieval pottery has been identified in the catalogue (626-630).



ILL. 56 : Pottery

TOMB STONES

Two early tomb-stones are illustrated in the Inventory (RCAHMS 1946, 4, fig 53) and are now in the Site Museum at Birsay. The first was found according to Mr Drever's carefully kept record "3ft

from the apse wall and 24ft from S graveyard wall at a depth of 8in". These measurements are incompatible if taken literally; presumably he meant the stone lay on N-S line passing 3ft E of the apse. It has an inscribed cross with a circle at the intersection of the arm, the shaft is incomplete. The second is a narrow tapering grave slab found "lying close alongside the W wall". On it are inscribed two wheel-headed crosses with segmental hollows at the inner junction of each expanded arm. The meeting point of the two shafts is enclosed by an oval band. This grave slab was mentioned in a letter dated 24 8 37 from Dr Richardson to Mr Edwards at the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland when sending some samples of nails, 502 in the catalogue, for examination:

"Yesterday we removed the sculptured grave slab with the two Celtic crosses on it to the museum building, and made an examination of the underlying grave.

The length of the grave was defined by two stones at the head and one stone at the foot. Like the others we have opened, the grave was firmly packed with the natural clay of the sub-soil, the skeleton which was in a very decayed condition appeared to be that of a young person, of slim construction but of fair height.

There were traces of wood especially near the upper part of the body suggesting that it had been boxed over. We also recovered a number of rusty nodules with wood adhering to them—suggesting clinker nails—as wood was scarce they may have used bits of an old boat—but you no doubt will be able to determine what they really are."

These nails 502 were recently examined at the laboratory of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland. Two out of five heads are almost free of corrosion and measure 23 mm in diameter. The attached shanks have completely perished but their diameter of between 4 mm and 6 mm can be estimated from the circular hollows left in the midst of the accretion of corrosion. In one case the hollows extend to a depth of 46 mm giving an idea at least of the minimum length of the nail.

Pictish Symbol Stone (Ill 4, 59)

An entry in Mr Drever's record dated July 16th 1935 refers to the discovery of the fragments of the Pictish Symbol Stone which is now, pieced together and mounted, in the National Museum of Antiquities in Edinburgh. His description of it is as follows:

"Another carved gravestone close to the West graveyard wall, depth 12 inches. Broken in many pieces, some of which seem to be missing. The carving is very beautiful but in its present state it is rather difficult to trace the exact design".

The first published account of the symbol stone is in the Orkney Inventory of 1946, and gives a different version of its discovery, saying that it had been found enclosed by two upright slabs outlining a grave set against the S wall of the precinct, "lying prone and shattered into no fewer than 29 fragments" and that fourteen of the fragments bore traces of carving and when put together displayed "an assemblage of symbol and figure sculpture, all of well known types, but hitherto not found in a similar combination". It is noted that the fragments were only approximately one inch thick (c 25 mm), and that the monument could never have stood upright. It is assumed to have been flaked off and that the other side had disappeared.

This account is at variance with that given in the Foreman's record but appears to be borne out by amendments to a plan which is in the Scottish Development Department (Ancient Monuments). The latter was drawn in 1934 before the symbol stone was found and is the basis of the plan published in the Guidebook of 1959 (Radford). However, manuscript amendments were added to the original plan in 1935 showing the symbol stone as a pile of stones set against an upright slab outlining a grave inside the S wall and adding further to the E a drawing of the second grave slab said by the Foreman to have been found, like the symbol stone, against the W rather than the S wall. It is surprising that Mr Drever should have made such a mistake. Certainly the Inventory account that it was found broken into twenty nine fragments is incorrect. A few days after it had been found I went to the Brough with Dr Richardson. The fragments, nine or ten, had been laid out on the flat ground outside the S wall where I photographed them lying on uncleared ground and thus not in their original position. I understood at the time that not all the fragments had been found together and after further searching three more were found and a fourth from over the cliff, these were then photographed with the original fragments. Subsequently yet more fragments were discovered.

The next account to be published was in the official Guidebook (Radford 1959, 13) when it was assumed that it had originally stood erect at the head of the triple grave, the three figures represented on the stone commemorating the three warriors buried beneath. This grave was opened in August 1938. A verbal description was given to me by Mr W G Moar who was a member of the team working on the brough. He said that there were three skeletons laid in a row on the clay soil with about one foot distance between each. One had the skull smashed in. Over two of the bodies boulders had been placed. I understood that no further examination has taken place. These boulders were replaced and the earth filled in.

The symbol stone is carved from a natural slab of old red sandstone. When complete it would have measured nearly 2 m by 0.8 m. The symbols represented are a 'mirror case', a crescent and V-rod, the elephant and an eagle. Below these is a procession of warriors. A fuller description is given in the discussion below, where the affinities and significance of the stone are assessed. It is, however, worth noting here that none of the Class II and other slabs with which it is compared have been shown to be grave markers, and this is an additional reason for doubting that the Birsay stone marked the triple grave.

Incised Cross From Area II

A fragment of flaggy sandstone (607: Ill 45) 115 mm long and found unstratified as a surface find in Area II bears an irregularly incised cross. The stone is dressed and smoothed on both sides. That part of the cross surviving, has expanded rectangular arms and a rectangular base. There are two scratched lines near the cross which, taken with the irregularities in the drawing of the cross, might imply that it was a trial piece. But it could be a grave marker (Cramp, pers comm). It is the only small explicitly Christian object from the site, and is therefore included with the finds from Area I.