

ILL 1 : Aerial view of the Brough of Birsay

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

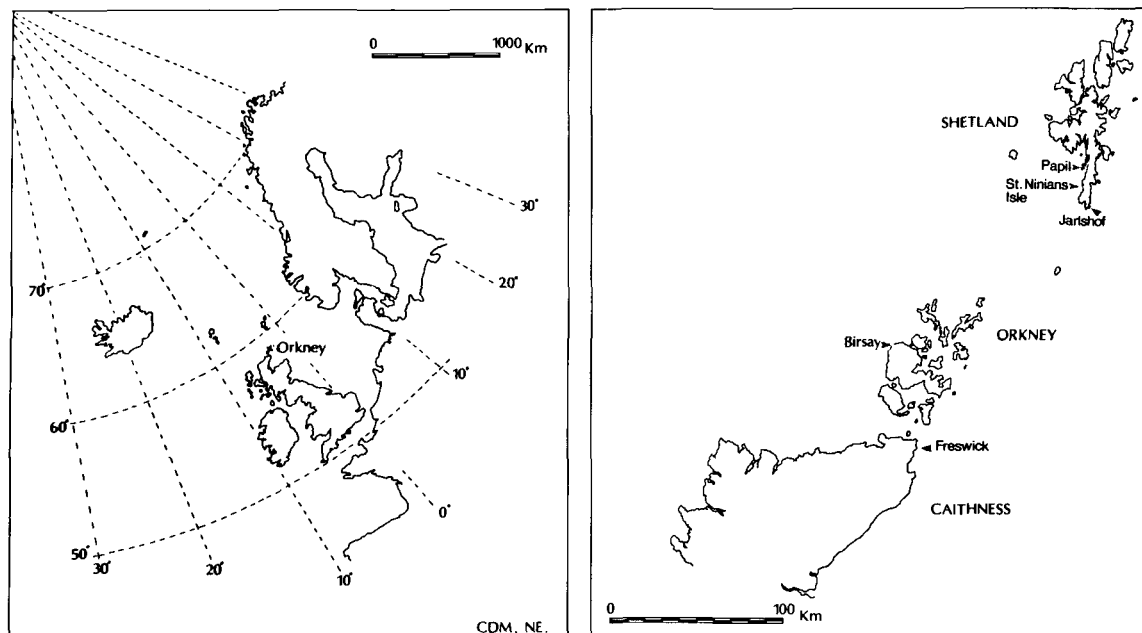
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The Brough of Birsay (Grid ref: HY239285) is an uninhabited tidal island approximately 21 ha in extent, lying off the NW coast of Mainland, the largest of the Orkney islands (Ill 1, 2). Rising sheer from the sea, the cliffs on the W side reach a height of 45 m; from there the land slopes gradually down to a promontory on the E side where the cliffs rise to no more than 4 m above the rocky beach and at one point have crumbled away. Just here a rough track leads up from the beach to the promontory where the ruined 12th-century church and the remains of Norse habitations are sited. The island, which is treeless, is grazed by sheep in the summer months, but in the winter, when waves of the Atlantic storms beat against the cliff, salt water streams down almost the whole length of the Brough. There are springs but no fresh water streams. Erosion of the cliffs, which, centuries ago, destroyed at least a part of the Norse settlement, still continues, although where it threatens the ruins it is halted by preventive work carried out by the authorities. A modern causeway, passable for three hours either side of low tide, leads across to Mainland and to a corresponding headland on which lie the recently excavated Pictish and Viking Age farmsteads of Buckquoy (Ritchie 1974 and 1977) and other early sites. From here a track continues to the village of Birsay.

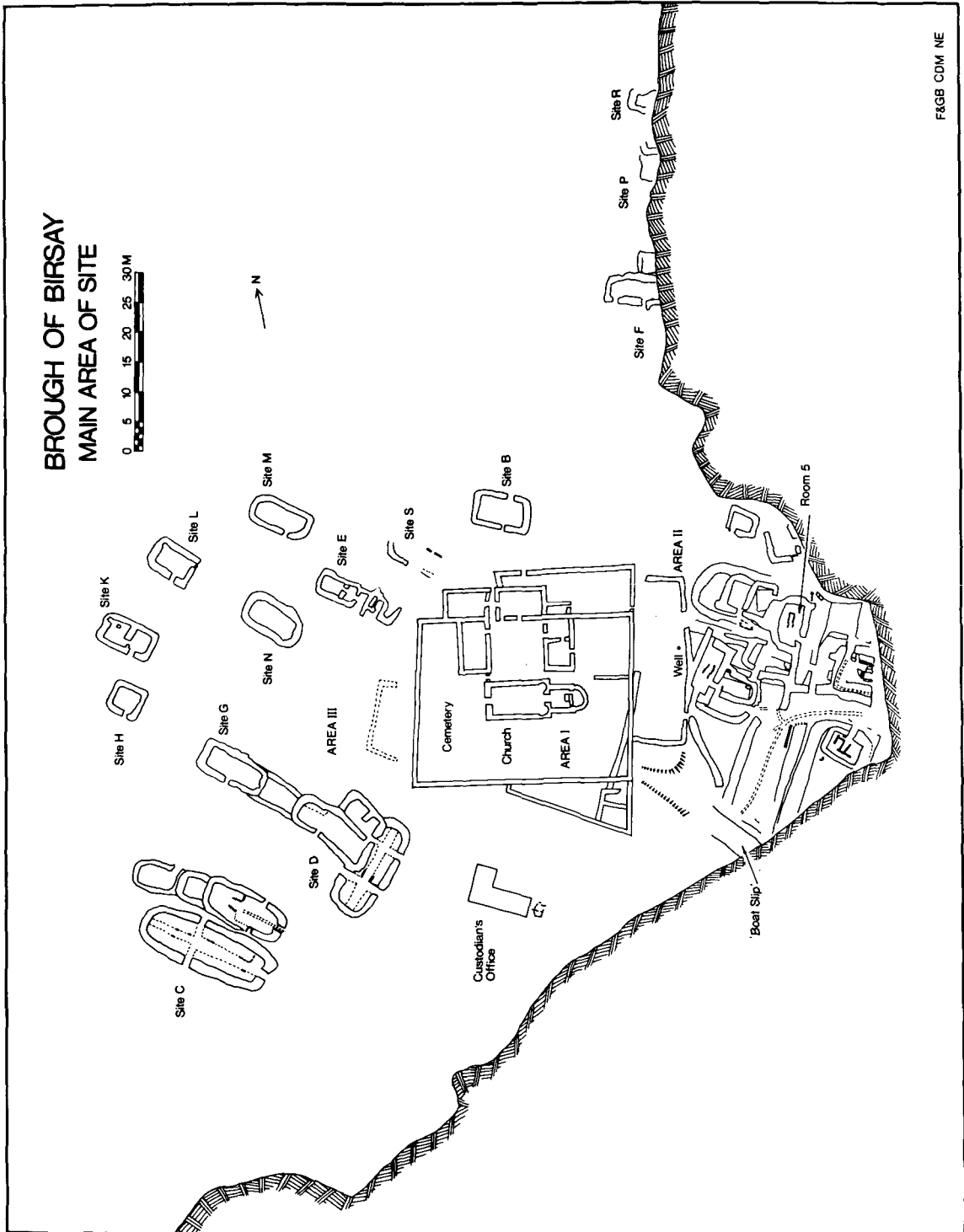
Little is known of the history of the Brough. In the account of Birsay published in the Inventory (RCAHMS 1946, 1-3) the writer quotes from a document of 1627:

‘. . . Ane littell holme within the sea callit the brughe of Birsay quhilk is thought by the elder sort to have belongit to the reid friars, for there is the fundations of ane kirk and kirkyaird thair as yet to be seen.’

The writer points out that the church and cloister are considerably earlier than the date when the Friars arrived in Europe. However it does seem to imply a folk memory of a monastic settlement on the island. In the Statistical Account of 1795 (Low 1795) the remains of the church are referred



ILL 2 : Location maps of (a) Orkney and (b) Brough of Birsay



ILL 3 : Brough of Birsay: plan of the main Pictish and Norse settlement

to as having been dedicated to St Peter and that is the name given to it in the plans published by Sir Henry Dryden (1878). But, in an 18th-century drawing in the University Library in Edinburgh which is reproduced in the Inventory (RCAHMS 1946, fig 69), it is designated as 'St Come's Church'. This drawing is dated to c 1774 by Marwick (1970) who also discussed the church. The dedication is discussed in detail in Lamb (1974).

The plan (Ill 3) shows the site which was divided into three areas. Area I includes the church with its adjacent buildings and the cemetery. Area II, the E Cliff Settlement, covers the ground between the E of the cemetery and the cliff edge including the main complex of Norse buildings and the 'boat slip'. Area III covers the slope above and to the W of the church, where a series of isolated buildings are scattered across the width of the island.

The purpose of this publication is to give a comprehensive catalogue of the finds recovered from the Brough between the years 1934 and 1974. In view of the length of time involved and the fact that so little has been published about the excavations, it may be helpful to begin with an outline of the various periods during which work was carried out, especially the pre-war years when the majority of the finds were excavated.

Area I was the first part of the site to which attention was directed. In 1934, the late Dr J S Richardson, H M Inspector of Ancient Monuments, concerned at the deterioration in the structure of the 12th-century church, began a major programme of repair and partial restoration, the first to be undertaken since an excavation carried out by Sir Henry Dryden in 1866 (RCAHMS 1946, 3). Under Dr Richardson's direction, the buildings adjacent to the church were excavated, the precinct wall foundations were rebuilt and the long task of clearing and levelling the cemetery was begun, a task which was to continue intermittently over a number of years. Earlier foundations were uncovered below the S wall of the church. These were found to be on a slightly different and more accurate E-W orientation. It was also noted that there were two layers of graves. The lower graves, some outlined with upright slabs, were on the same orientation as the building below the church. Two carved grave slabs, which are now in the site museum at Birsay, were also uncovered (RCAHMS 1946, 4, fig 53) and in 1935 the fragments of the well-known Pictish symbol stone, now in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, were discovered and pieced together (Ill 4). A few graves were examined and a brief report on one of them was written in a letter by Dr Richardson and is included in this report. A detailed account of the church, then referred to as St Peter's Chapel, and a report on its restoration and repair and on the excavation of the claustral buildings (as Dr Richardson assumed them to be) was published in the Inventory (RCAHMS 1946, 3-4, figs 54-6).

In 1936, Dr Richardson embarked on the excavation of the Norse dwellings in Area II, the outlines of which were apparent beneath the turf between the cemetery and the cliffs facing the Mainland. He himself retained the overall direction of the excavation and the team of four Orcadians with their foreman, the late Mr Thomas Drever, who had worked on the site since 1934, were employed on the new work. However, as Dr Richardson was unable, owing to his other commitments, to be in Orkney all the time, a supervisor who could be resident in Birsay was required. I was fortunate in being selected and continued in this work throughout two seasons. In 1938 my place was taken by the late Mr James Henderson and the work extended to Area III. Nearly at the end of his second season work came to an abrupt halt on the imminent declaration of war. Dr Richardson never resumed the excavation after the war and his only report referring to it is a very short summary with a site plan of Area II published in the same volume of the Inventory of Orkney (RCAHMS 1946, 7, fig 65).

No more work was done on the Brough until 1956, when Mr Cruden, with Dr Radford, spent a number of seasons interpreting the earlier excavations as well as continuing with further excavation. Dr Radford is the author of the official guide book *The Early Christian and Norse Settlements, Birsay* (1959) and papers on aspects of the site were read by Mr Cruden at the Third and Fourth Viking Congresses (1958 and 1965) and published in the proceedings of those congresses.

When it was agreed that I could prepare the finds for publication, prior to a full report on the site to be written later by Dr Radford, permission was given by the Department of the Environment to re-open a small area with the aim of clarifying Pictish and Norse levels. This was



ILL. 4 : The Pictish stone from the settlement

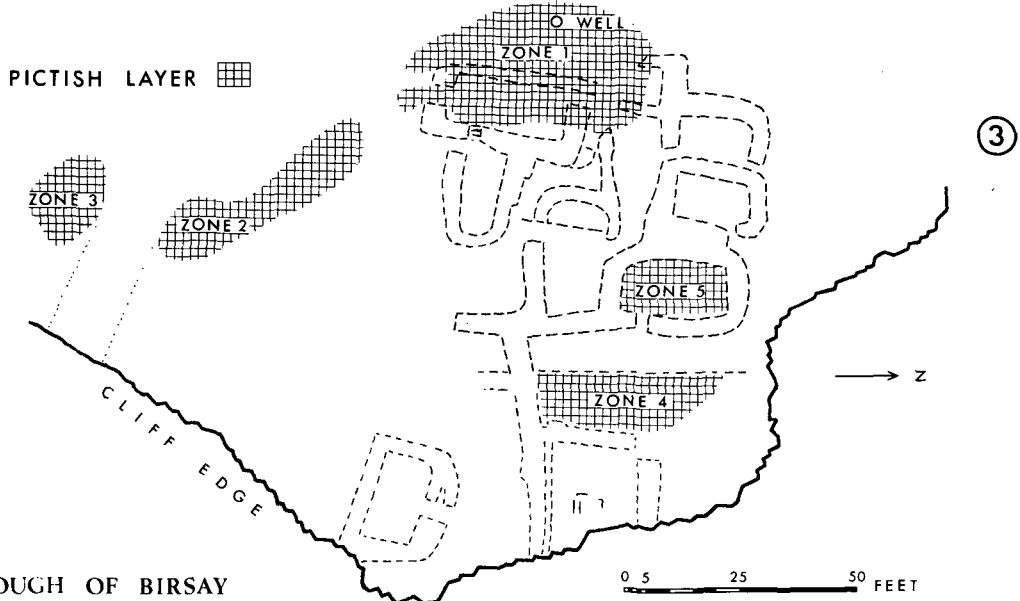
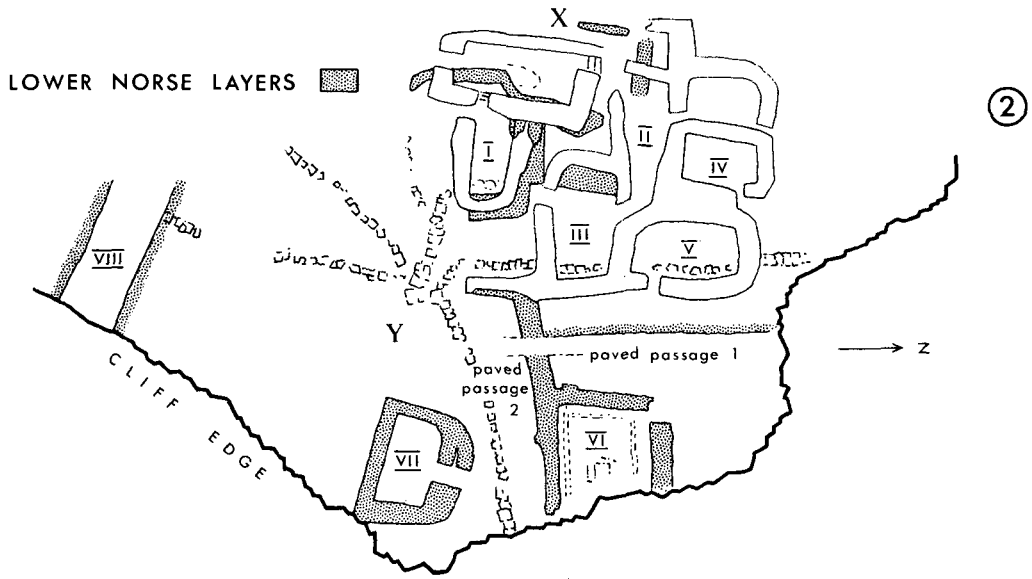
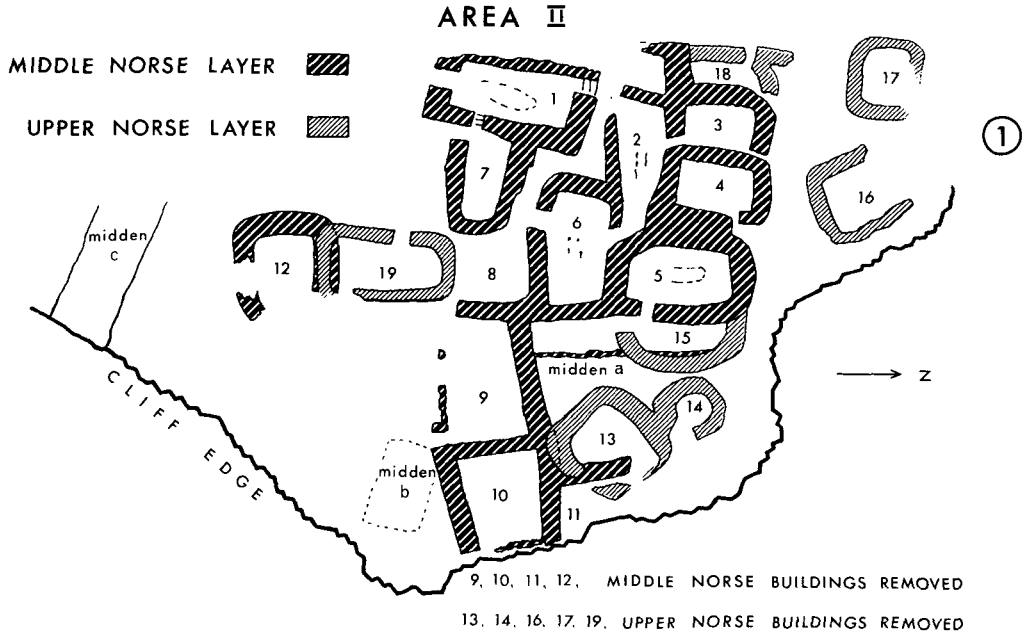
carried out during 1973 under the direction of Dr John Hunter. In 1974 Mr Christopher Morris and students from Durham University helped to continue the excavation below Room 5, while a new series of excavations was initiated elsewhere. In the Catalogue the finds from this small excavation have been added to those from the work of Mr Cruden and Dr Radford as well as to all those from the pre-war years, the total numbering over 600. The pre-war finds, except for a small number which were kept at Birsay, had been sent to Edinburgh for safe keeping on the outbreak of war. Some have now been allocated to Tankerness House Museum, Kirkwall. Only a very few have been published: some of the glass (Harden 1956), a few of the bone pins (Stevenson 1955) and a lead disc with a few of the moulds (Curle 1974). The bones and all the other specimens had also been packed up and sent off but there is no record as to their destination and they have never been traced. However, their loss is not as serious as it might be since a full account of the animal and organic remains from the 1973-4 excavation is included in this publication. Although this excavation was limited to a small area it is important as it covers the transition between Pictish and Norse occupation. The information it supplies is supplemented by the recently published reports on the neighbouring site of Buckquoy (Ritchie 1974 and 1977).

The site records available for the pre-war years include my own field notes for 1936-37 with a drawing of every object as it was unearthed, my photographs, and the plans drawn up by the then Office of Works when Mr Cruden came up in 1936 and made the first survey of the site. For 1937-38 there are Mr Henderson's notes and drawings together with his site plans. Finally there is the foreman's report, written by Mr Drever when he was in charge of the work of levelling the cemetery.

The system of recording the finds which was adopted in the pre-war years has been followed but needs some explanation. There is no problem over the horizontal location of the finds, which had been noted in every case, but the vertical stratigraphy is unclear in both Area I, the church and cemetery, and Area III, the isolated houses up the hill. In Area I, with the exception of a find from inside the church and another from the W apartment of the adjacent buildings, the objects were all dug up in the course of clearing and levelling the cemetery and, although carefully noted in the Foreman's records, they can only be classed as surface finds. In Area III, work which had begun in 1938 was unfinished when the war started. The house-sites had been partially excavated and it had been found that, in most cases, surface walling overlay earlier building. In the 1950s when Dr Raleigh Radford fully examined two adjoining house sites in this area (Radford 1959, 22-3, fig 2) he discovered three periods of building and re-building and was able to disentangle the essential features of the structures succeeding the original Norse farmsteads. The soil over this part of the Brough was thin, the situation was exposed, and the walls were in a poor state, owing to winter storms, animals grazing and people and dogs having wandered at will throughout the centuries; many of the finds must have been displaced.

In 1936 excavation on the Norse buildings in Area II had been started and was carried on through to 1939. Here the situation was different from that pertaining in Area III. For one thing the site was less exposed, for another the walls of the main complex had been strongly built. When the turf which overlay them was removed they were found to be standing in some cases as high as two feet (0.60 m), with the floors and hearths of the rooms substantially intact. Around this complex was a number of later, more lightly constructed buildings, while below it were the rooms and passages of an earlier occupation. So it was possible to distinguish in this area, and in this area only, separate horizons of occupation: lower Norse, middle Norse and upper Norse and below these, and not related to any identifiable structures with the exception of one small well, was the Pictish horizon.

The plans (Ill 5) illustrate these various phases. The buildings of the middle and upper Norse horizons are identified by Arabic numerals (Ill 5:1). The lower Norse horizon is divided into areas identified by Roman numerals (Ill 5:2); more than one phase of building is included in this horizon. The contemporary stratigraphy below Room 5 has been subdivided by Hunter and Morris into Room V phases 3a, 3b and 4a (Appendix 8:1). The Pictish horizon has been subdivided into zones identified by Arabic numerals (Ill 5:3). Zone 4 is subdivided into phase a and phase b. Zone 5, below Room V, has been subdivided by Hunter and Morris into phases 1a (pre-bronze working phase), 1b, 2a and 2b.



ILL 5 : Plans of the main settlement periods (1) middle and upper Norse (2) lower Norse (3) Pictish

Because the finds from Area II are the only ones to be stratified they have been discussed first, and form the framework for the chronology of the whole. This discussion is followed by that of the Area III finds, then those from Area I. When finds from Area III clearly belonged to a type found in Area II they have been discussed with the latter and merely listed under the discussion of Area III.

This text was written before the publication of Mr Graham-Campbell's *Viking Artifacts* (Graham-Campbell 1980). A comparison of the Norse finds from Birsay with those in *Viking Artifacts* indicates that, although there is no doubt that the middle Norse horizon at Birsay was built over the ruins of the lower Norse horizon, they can both be placed within the Middle Viking Period dating from the late 9th to the second half of the 10th century (Graham-Campbell 1980, 6-7) and that the upper Norse horizon of Birsay, as is indicated in the discussion of the finds, falls within the Late Viking or Medieval Periods from the second half of the 10th century to the 12th century.