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| Property in Care (PIC) ID: | PIC291 (Earl's Bu, Orphir);<br>PIC319 (St Nicholas Church, Orphir) |
| Designations:              | Scheduled Monument (SM13379)                                       |
| Taken into State care:     | 1947 (Ownership); 1952 (Ownership)                                 |
| Last Reviewed:             | 2026                                                               |

## Statement of Significance

# Earl's Bu and St Nicholas Church, Orphir



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# Historic Environment Scotland

## Statement of Significance

### Earl's Bu and St Nicholas Church, Orphir

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# 1. Summary

This document aims to present a holistic approach to support the definitions of cultural significance of Earl's Bu and St Nicholas Church as a Property in Care. It highlights the key features that make the site special by assessing it against six values that cover tangible as well as intangible heritage values. The most important aspects of significance for the site are summarised under *1.2 Statement of Significance* before each value is assessed individually under *2 Assessment of values*. The overall assessment takes into account the ongoing development of our knowledge of the site. The Statement informs Historic Environment Scotland's conservation and management activity, provides the basis for interpreting the site and highlights areas where more research is needed.

## 1.1 Introduction

The following Statement of Significance concerns the remains of the round church of St Nicholas (PIC319), and the neighbouring putative Norse drinking hall known as the Earl's Bu (PIC291). They are situated in Orphir, Mainland Orkney, and both are thought to date to the twelfth century. Legally, they are classified as two individual Properties in Care but are here considered as part of one single complex discussed more broadly as 'the wider Earl's Bu site'; a high-status Late Norse settlement/estate which also includes features lying outwith the boundaries of that which is currently maintained by the State.

The visible remains in State care consist of the low, turf-covered footings of a partially excavated (and poorly understood) structure/s traditionally interpreted as a Norse drinking hall. Beyond this to the south are the upstanding ruins of the once circular plan church of St Nicholas, of which only the semi-circular barrel-vaulted apse and part of the nave now survive. The 'missing' part of the nave is today laid out in gravel, and the whole is surrounded by more recent gravestones within an active graveyard.

Beyond the area in care lie the associated remains of a mid-eleventh century horizontal water mill with evidence of wider water management, and a focus of

metalworking. This structure was infilled with Late Norse midden debris from the adjacent PIC buildings. When considered collectively, this single complex referred to as the 'wider Earl's Bu site' may represent the full range of Late Norse economic and political aspects, as it potentially became the centre of political focus in Orkney at this time.

The site is particularly notable in that its physical remains apparently corroborate descriptions made in the *Orkneyinga Saga*, in which several specific references are made to activities enacted at the Earl's Bu in the 12th century. These include references to 'a large drinking hall' at Orphir, with a neighbouring 'magnificent church', (Christmas 1135, Ch LXVI) and the site as the location of a Yule feast held by Earl's Harold and Paul (Christmas 1128?, Ch LV).

Different areas of the site have been subject to varying degrees of archaeological enquiry.

The remains in State care were Scheduled before being taken into Guardianship (the Earl's Bu was first scheduled in 1938 and entered guardianship in 1947; St Nicholas Church was first scheduled in 1929 and came into guardianship in 1952).<sup>1</sup>

The site is unstaffed and free to access throughout the year. It is situated on the northern shore of Orphir Bay, overlooking the waters of Scapa Flow.<sup>2</sup>

There is a small car park for visitor use, adjacent to the neighbouring [Orkneyinga Saga Centre](#). Access to the PICs is via a sloping pathway which overlooks the 'drinking hall', the remains of which are mostly grassed, with uneven surfaces and level changes. The ruinous church lies beyond, through a gate to the south, and has a steep drop of about a metre at its east end. The site is well maintained with regular grass cutting.

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<sup>1</sup> Scheduling information available from [HES, St Nicholas' Church, settlement and mill, Orphir \(SM13379\) \(portal.historicenvironment.scot\)](#) (accessed: 29 July 2026).

<sup>2</sup> Prior to visiting, please check access information, available at: [HES, Visit, Earl's Bu and Church, Orphir \(historicenvironment.scot\)](#) (accessed: 29 July 2026).

Wider interpretation is available in the Saga Centre, which is maintained by Orphir Community Council, and itself overlies further Norse remains.

## 1.2 Statement of Significance

This document focuses upon structures which are in State care but includes discussion of associated features. This relationship is important in developing understanding of the site and therefore its significance.

The features within the complex referred to as the ‘wider Earl’s Bu site’ are collectively of national importance. The site comprises the round church of St Nicholas (PIC319) and the putative Norse drinking hall (PIC291) which are maintained by the State, and beyond these, the horizontal mill and associated water management system, and the metalworking site known as Lavacroon. There are indications of a wider Estate area, delimited by a boundary bank within an arc to the north of the focal Bu complex. While certain of these features are not within State care, they are here examined holistically, alongside PICs 319 and 291, as integral parts of a wider site with a collective significance.

Together, the features of the ‘wider Earl’s Bu site’ make a significant contribution to our understanding of settlement and society in the Late Norse period in Orkney, and of Norse architectural expressions of wealth, status and religious belief. They offer unique insight into the range of activities of the Late Norse Earls and the functions they controlled.

Key elements of the site’s significance are:

- As the only surviving example in Scotland of a pre-18th century round church, the form of St Nicholas is unique. It is highly significant as an unusual ecclesiastical building; one of several innovative forms within the Northern Earldom. It offers the potential to provide important information about Norse ecclesiastical organisation and beliefs.
- The site contributes to our understanding of the variety, distribution and character of Norse settlement, the nature of Norse influence in Orkney, and

the origins and development of high-status centres and ecclesiastical sites in the Norse period.

- The significance of the ‘wider Earl’s Bu site’ is further enhanced by its association with the places, events and individuals described in the *Orkneyinga Saga*. The *Saga*’s description of the hall’s position relative to the church, allowed its probable location to be identified, and influenced the interpretation of remains as they were subsequently exposed. It is not currently possible to determine whether the visible remains are the hall referred to within the *Saga* texts, although additional stretches of walling immediately to its west indicate several buildings in the vicinity.
- The Norse stone structures which have been identified as the Hall are part of a larger group of contemporary sites; substantial building projects as seen at Orphir could be viewed as the equivalent of the massive mobilisation for the building of St Magnus Cathedral or **Cubbie Roo’s Castle**.<sup>3</sup>
- The complex at Orphir is of crucial significance in terms of its delivery of understandable archaeology, proximity to an educational resource in the Saga Centre and its overall political significance in the Late Norse Earldom – which spanned Orkney and Shetland as well as Caithness and probably parts of Sutherland. As such it has international significance, especially in terms of a Scandinavian audience.
- Ecofactual data from recent excavations of the horizontal mill, beyond the area in State care, demonstrate that the discarded debris from the major buildings within the PIC focussed on large-scale feasting<sup>4</sup> as indicated in the *Orkneyinga Saga*. Additionally, that local resources were managed along similar lines to modern farming practice in Orkney for the benefit of the

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout the text, site names in **bold** are managed by Historic Environment Scotland and are publicly accessible. Access information can be found at: [HES, Places to visit \(historicenvironment.scot\)](https://www.historicenvironment.scot/places-to-visit) (accessed: 29 July 2026).

<sup>4</sup> Mainland and Batey 2019; Mainland in Batey 2025, Chapter 14.

Norse Earls and their retinue.<sup>5</sup> This provides a unique insight into the activities in the PIC which could not be identified on the basis of the very limited material recovered in the work prior to (and including) 1939.

- Recovery of a rune stone from the Round Church, in addition to runic inscribed bones from the Mill complex, shed light on the nature and extent of general literacy in Orkney at this period.
- The stone-lined 11th-century horizontal mill is the earliest recorded example of its type outside Ireland or Scandinavia. Excavations confirmed that archaeological deposits are well-preserved, and particularly rich in environmental data. They have very high potential to support future archaeological research.<sup>6</sup>
- The ecofactual material also demonstrates the high status of the Bu site and that it was a consumption site rather than a production site. Imports of specific commodities would have been sought from both local markets, such as Sanday for grain, Quoygrew, Westray for fish and potentially also Freswick Links, Caithness.
- The substantial environmental data now available for studying commensality<sup>7</sup> in Orkney as a whole, enable the integration of the data at this site into the overall understanding of Scandinavian Scotland.
- The site also provides a unique opportunity to study the water management system employed at the 'wider Earl's Bu site' which is only comparable at the Bishopric site of Garðar in the East Settlement of Greenland; in Omgård in Denmark, the water course is managed within an extended village situation. The presence of a working mill at every settlement must have been a fact of daily life, but within the Scottish and indeed broader Scandinavian context

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<sup>5</sup> Mainland et al 2015.

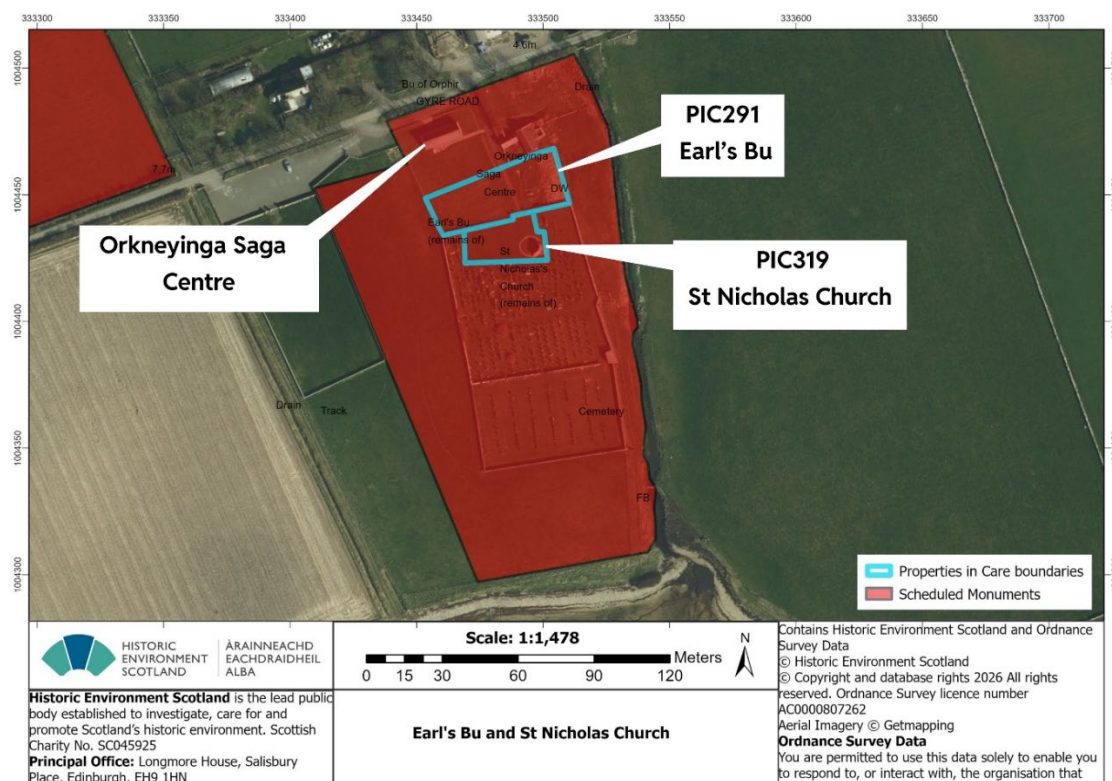
<sup>6</sup> Discussed extensively by Mainland in Batey 2025, Chapters 10 and 14.

<sup>7</sup> Commensality: eating together and sharing food, often in highly prescribed ways.

these are rare identifications, and even rarer to have been excavated using modern techniques of recovery.<sup>8</sup>

- It has been demonstrated that there was an active bullion economy at this site beyond the PIC, in the mill site and the area known as Lavacroon: the making of silver ingots, small scale working of gold and the active exchange of these metals using internationally recognised weight systems (through the recovery of weights) derived from Sweden and the East.

The above paragraphs highlight the key aspects of the importance of the site, and the following sections give more detail and address a broader range of values for the site, discussed holistically as the ‘wider Earl’s Bu site’.



*Figure 1: Earl's Bu and St Nicholas Church Scheduled Area and Property in Care Boundaries. For illustrative purposes only.*

<sup>8</sup> The recovery methodology for the ecofactual material at the mill site was ahead of its time in the development of environmental archaeology. The precision of recovery and sieving strategy employed in the excavations from 1978 onwards at the mill site has ensured direct comparability with more recent excavation recovery. Discussed in Batey 2025, Chapter 10.

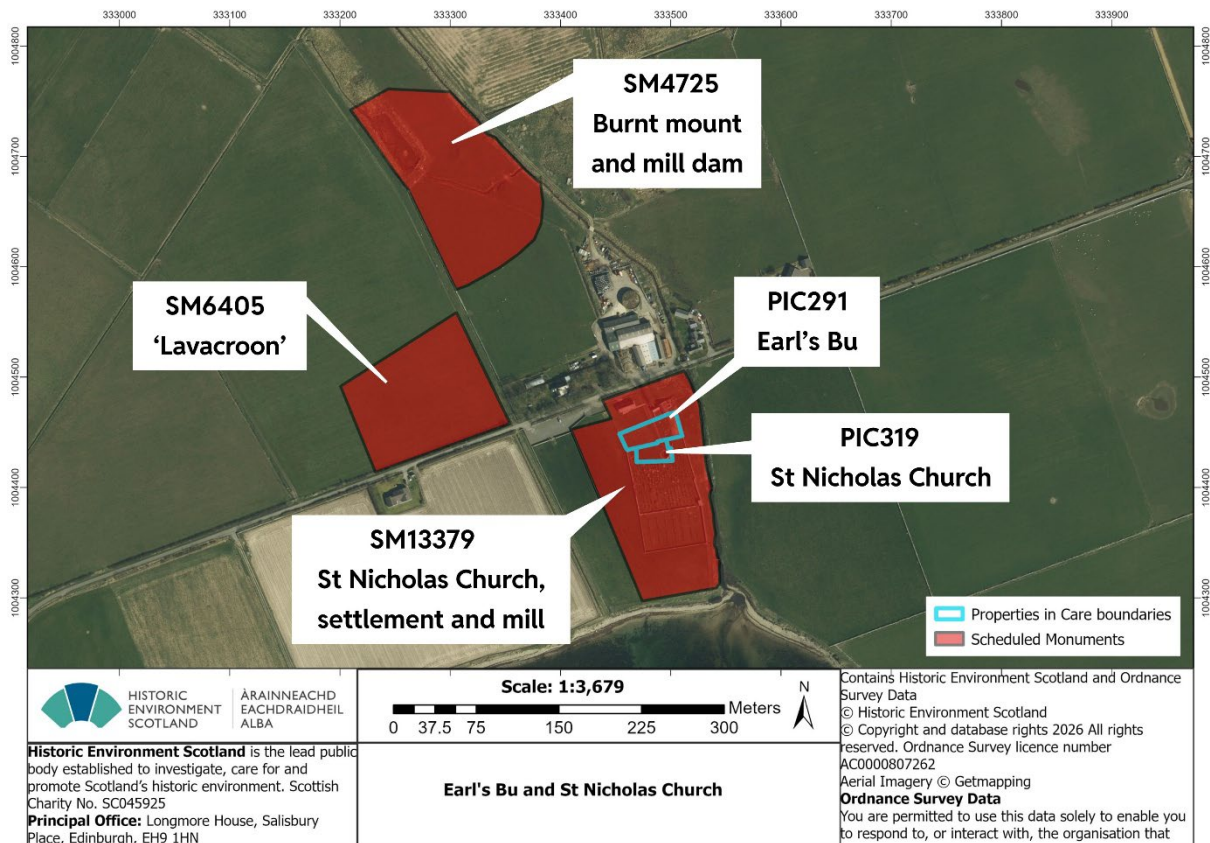


Figure 2: Scheduled areas associated with the wider Earl's Bu site complex. For illustrative purposes only.

## 2. Assessment of values

### 2.1 Background

The 'wider Earl's Bu site' comprises at its centre the dual Properties in Care (PICs) of the round church of St Nicholas and the neighbouring Norse drinking hall. Their physical fabric largely indicates a date of construction within the 12th century, and this is supported by several references to the activities there of the Norse Earls of Paul and Harald in the *Orkneyinga Saga*.<sup>9</sup>

Directly associated with these remains are other parts of the Earl's farm or Bu, which are not within State care: a horizontal mill immediately to the north, which was in

<sup>9</sup> Taylor 1938; Jesch 2025.

use for a relatively brief period from the Late Viking age into the Late Norse Earldom period. This is significant because it was infilled with debris from the activities at the Bu PIC structures, and enables an understanding of activities taking place within the Bu. To the north-west lies the site of Lavacroon, a Norse metalworking site. In addition, it is now clear that there was an extensive water management system of considerable longevity, from the Norse period into the modern, within the natural basin of the landscape.

## 2.1.1 The Round Church

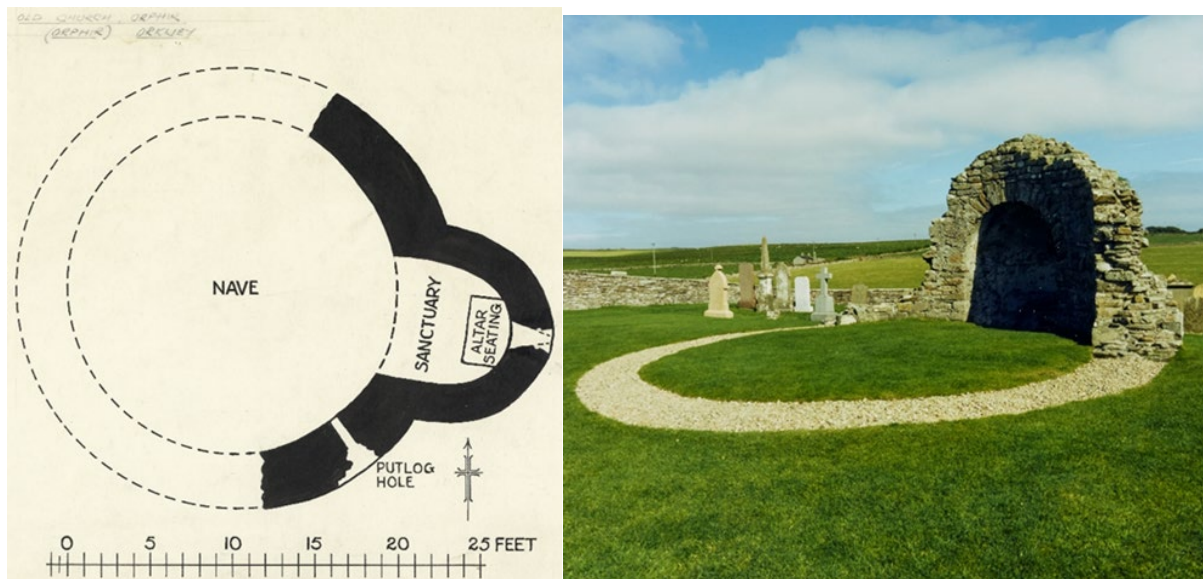


Figure 3 (left): RCAHMS c.1929 plan of St Nicholas Church. © Crown copyright: HES.

Figure 4 (right): Photograph of St Nicholas Church as currently presented, with gravel used to illustrate the arc once occupied by the nave. © Crown copyright: HES.

The Round Church, dedicated to St Nicholas, was once circular in form, but is now incomplete with only the apse and a small part of the nave surviving (see Figures 3 and 4). Thought to have been built in the 12th century, its form is considered likely to have been inspired by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and results from the Crusading activity of the later Norse Earls, particularly Earl Hakon, in that region, although Fisher has argued for a Scandinavian origin.<sup>10</sup> The circular nave is now incomplete; it was damaged during the building and subsequent demolition of

<sup>10</sup> Cant 1973, 5; Fisher 1993.

the later Parish Church, which was re-sited some distance to the north-east in the 1950s (See *Appendix 1: Timeline*). The complete arc that the body of the church once occupied is today laid out in gravel (5.8m in diameter; see Figure 4), and the whole surrounded by more recent gravestones, and enclosed within the bounds of an active churchyard, which was recently extended. The now-isolated Apse is itself complete and remains roofed, comprising grass-covered graded stones. It has a small window at its eastern extent, and there is a large step down to what might be presumed an original floor surface, but this building has not been fully excavated. A stone bearing a runic inscription was recovered from the wall in the 1950s<sup>11</sup> and is today housed at the Orkney Museum, Broad Street, Kirkwall.<sup>12</sup> Little, if anything, remains of the rest of the church.

### 2.1.2 The ‘Drinking Hall’



*Figure 5: The major structures of the Norse Hall complex. © Colleen Batey.*

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<sup>11</sup> See image of inscription: [Trove, SC1204727, Detail of rune inscribed stone \(trove.scot\)](https://trove.scot.nls.uk/trove/result?docId=SC1204727&docType=Image) (accessed: 29 July 2026).

<sup>12</sup> Hagland 1993, 370-373; N690.

The Drinking Hall structure was partially revealed during early excavations (recalled in Pope's 1866 translation of Torfæus),<sup>13</sup> and subsequently by A.W. Johnston 1899, to be followed finally by the work of Walter Grant in 1939 prior to the site being taken into State guardianship. Today the visible walling is the result of the last phase of activity in 1939, although along the churchyard wall-line, at a slightly different angle, the foundations of an apparently single-phase length of walling can still be identified. The description of the Hall in *Orkneyinga Saga* has significantly influenced the interpretation of these walling segments – a long single-phase wall marking the extent of the large drinking hall, with the 1939 excavations revealing the upstanding eastern part of the so-called hall. It is however clear that several phases of activity are indicated here<sup>14</sup> and the single structure/s are complex. Compounded with the lack of stratified archaeological investigation, this part of the site remains little understood. Yet it is apparent that the buildings do have major Late Norse phases, if not necessarily representing a Drinking Hall.



Figure 6: Aerial photograph of site. © HES.

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<sup>13</sup> Thormodus Torfæus (1636—1719) was an Icelandic historian who published a history of Orkney in 1697 entitled *Orcades Seu Rerum Orcadensium Historiae*. This was first translated into English in 1866 by the Reverend Alexander Pope of Caithness. Pope supplemented the original text with notes of his own, adding details and observations to update Torfæus' original text.

<sup>14</sup> Discussed *in extenso* by Batey 2003; Batey 2025, Chapter 1.

### 2.1.3 Site history

The following section provides a brief overview of the site history, with particular focus on the Late Norse aspects and their excavation. This is expanded in Appendix 2 which offers further detail, and a wider chronological narrative.

The location of the Bu complex, with its supply of fresh water, proximity to the waters of Scapa Flow, and its excellent farmland for both arable and pastorage, seems to have long been a focus of settlement. Human presence in the area predates the Norse evidence by millennia, with earlier activity well represented both within the confines of the Bu complex, and its immediate vicinity. One example of this is the unusual Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age decorated stone which was recovered during excavations in 1939 (see Figure 13). Excavations by Batey in the Mill area also uncovered worked flint material and saddle querns.<sup>15</sup>

There is a noteworthy concentration of burnt mounds in the area of the Bu complex, including one identified by Lamb (and subsequently investigated by EASE)<sup>16</sup> in relation to the building of the septic tank for the Saga Centre. Within the area of the Mill complex, a substantial burnt mound which sealed Bronze Age ceramics was excavated and found to have been cut through during the building of the Mill structures.<sup>17</sup> It is clear that the management of water within the area of the Bu was a long-standing and efficient activity (despite the very shallow gradient of the land), as the burnt mounds were also positioned adjacent to water courses.

Finds of Pictish symbol stones are rare in this part of Orkney and it is significant that such a stone was recovered from the work in 1939, prior to the remains of the Hall being taken into State guardianship. The stone was found to be carved with a crescent and V-rod motif, with a small split rectangle; the motif fitting completely onto the narrow edge of the slab (see Figures 14 and 15). It is assumed that the slab was built into a later structure and remains in situ,<sup>18</sup> although not visible in the

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<sup>15</sup> These aspects are considered more fully in Batey 2025, Chapter 2.

<sup>16</sup> Lamb, Orkney SMR; Moore and Wilson 1995,6; Wilson and Moore 1995.

<sup>17</sup> Batey 1993; Batey 2025, Chapter 12.

<sup>18</sup> Batey 2003, 49.

upstanding structural remains. There is some debate over whether a second Pictish Stone was recovered from the site (See *Appendix 2, A2.4*).

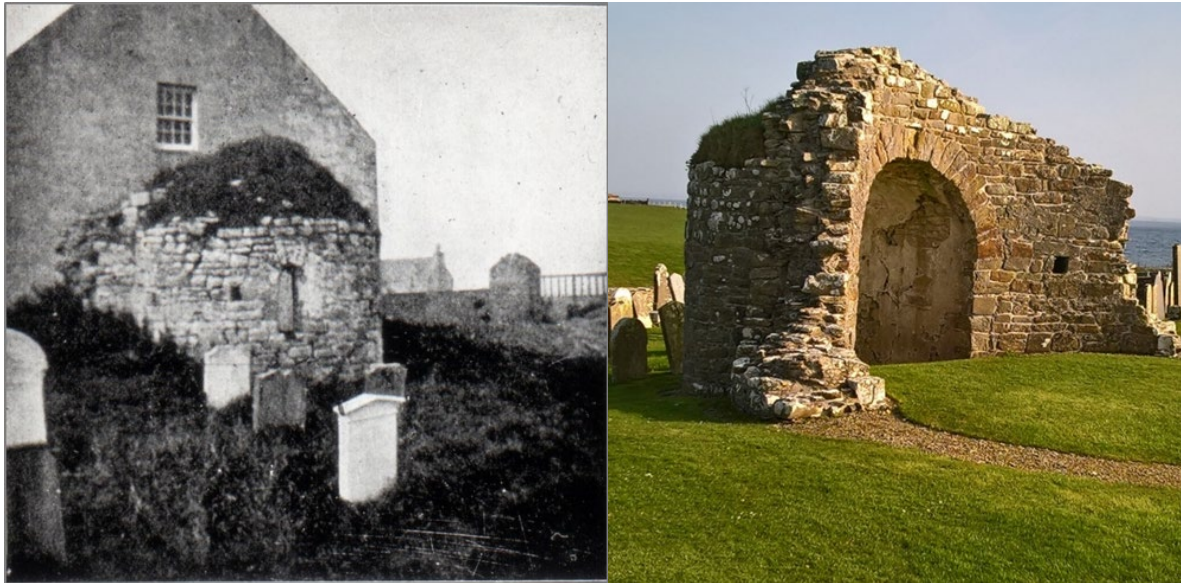
Underlying the mill complex there are indications of Late Viking presence in the form of large quantities of steatite vessels and a very different profile for the ecofactual evidence.<sup>19</sup> The buildup of midden material within this pre-Mill phase of activity is considerable, forming a substantial man-made mound (Farm Mound) and into which the mill was cut. Cattle are not a primary focus of the economy in this earlier period, unlike at other major sites excavated (for example **Brough of Birsay**, Orkney or Old Scatness in Shetland). Swine are well represented here as are sheep/goat and domestic species of bird (unlike the seabird focus elsewhere). The building of the mill structure in the mid-11th century overlies pre-mill Viking period contexts likely dating from the 10th century; these layers indicate activity pre-dating anything identified in the area of the Hall structures to the south. At this point, a watercourse was re-aligned to accommodate the mill and provide its water source. The mill structure was short-lived and was swiftly filled with debris of the Late Norse complex immediately to the south. This is the only structure which can be identified as potentially pre-dating the Late Norse Earl's Hall, and indicates an active farming regime, perhaps taking over the role from an active Pictish Estate, although there is no clear evidence to support this within the excavated areas.

All the visible structural evidence within the PIC can be assigned to the Late Norse period, that is post AD 1050/1100. The Late Norse era was the period in which the main building activity was taking place at the 'wider Earl's Bu site' – the construction of major buildings as well as the Round Church provide a good example of the floruit of the 'Golden Age' of the Northern Earldom. It is also at this period that several smaller farms were established in the immediate hinterland, defined by a substantial enclosing bank (head dyke) and indicated in the later Rentals of 1492.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Batey 2025.

<sup>20</sup> Thomson 1996.



*Figure 7 (left): St Nicholas church relative to standing Parish Church of 1829. © Orkney Library and Archive.*

*Figure 8 (right): St Nicholas church, modern day. © Colleen Batey.*

### **2.1.3.A The Round Church**

Dedicated to St Nicholas, the now ruinous round church is thought to have been built in the 12th century. When complete, the arc of the nave was 5.8m in diameter; the surviving walls are thick at 1.2m, and the barrel-vaulted apse measures 2.2m in both width and depth. The now-isolated Apsé is itself complete and remains roofed, comprising grass-covered graded stones. It has a small window at its eastern extent, and there is a large step down to what might be presumed an original floor surface. Little, if anything, remains of the rest of the church, but this building has not been fully excavated.

The church was apparently complete when Torfæus made reference to it in 1697<sup>21</sup> and indeed as late as 1757.<sup>22</sup> Pope made the observation (published in 1866) that a breach had been made to take stone for repair of the Parish Church<sup>23</sup> (which had been constructed in 1705; see Appendix 1: Timeline). Petrie's illustrations of 1861

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<sup>21</sup> Transl. Pope 1866, 108.

<sup>22</sup> Pococke 1887, 137.

<sup>23</sup> Pope 1866, 108.

show the church in virtually the same state as today<sup>24</sup> and indicated a build-up of material on the floor of this structure he termed the Girth House.<sup>25</sup> In 1900 Johnston cleared out the debris from the interior of the Round Church, recording a fine antler comb case (see 2.1.4 below).<sup>26</sup> Burials were also noted in this work and two human skeletons were sent for identification,<sup>27</sup> with no report now located. A stone bearing a runic inscription was recovered from the wall in the 1950s and is today housed at the Orkney Museum, Broad Street, Kirkwall.<sup>28</sup>



*Figure 9: The remains of the 'Drinking Hall' are today presented as a series of low, turf-covered walls. © Crown copyright: HES.*

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<sup>24</sup> Orkney archive mss D21/1.

<sup>25</sup> See also Petrie BP20 Scotland 85. Society of Antiquaries of London.

<sup>26</sup> Illus 9 Batey 2003, 33 NMS IL 326.

<sup>27</sup> SRO mss. D31/36/5/8.

<sup>28</sup> Hagland 1993, 370-373; N690.

### 2.1.3.B The Drinking Hall

The walling fragments which make up the structure referred to as the Drinking Hall were partially revealed during early excavations (recalled in Pope's 1866 translation of Torfæus), and then subsequently by A.W. Johnston in 1899-1901. These were followed finally by the work of Grant and Storer-Clouston in 1939 prior to the site being taken into State guardianship. Today the visible walling is the result of the last phase of activity in 1939 although along the churchyard wall-line, at a slightly different angle, the foundations of an apparently single-phase length of walling might still be visible.

The notes accompanying Pope's translation of Torfæus state that, prior to 1758, large and deep foundations had been found underground in the lands of the Bow, near the church, but that there were no local traditions as to the Earl's Palace.<sup>29</sup> Writing in 1861, Petrie described the immediate vicinity of the Round Church as 'abounding in numerous traces of ancient buildings believed to be the remains of the Earl's Palace'.<sup>30</sup> Subsequently, Johnston was responsible for pointing out the location of where the Earl's Bu (Drinking Hall) would have stood in relation to the Round Church according to the *Saga* description. Adding that at that time there were no indications of any ruins, and that the locality of previous excavations was unknown.<sup>31</sup> It is presumed that these earlier excavations referenced by Johnston were the ones recorded by Petrie in 1859 when 'close to the outside of the Churchyard wall, great quantities of bones of various domestic animals were found, and amongst them jawbones of dogs and cats in great abundance...'.<sup>32</sup>

The description of the Hall in *Orkneyinga Saga* significantly influenced the interpretation of the long walling segment discovered by A.W. Johnston between 1899 and 1901, with the 1939 excavations of Grant and Storer Clouston revealing the upstanding eastern part of the so-called hall.

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<sup>29</sup> Footnote to translation of Torfæus, Pope 1866, 107.

<sup>30</sup> Orkney Archive mss. D46/1/6/13.

<sup>31</sup> Johnston 1903, 21-2.

<sup>32</sup> Orkney Archives mss. D46/1/1/13.

No original site archive has survived from the work of Johnston. The walling noted in 1899 was immediately suggested as being an extension of an earlier wall recorded in Petrie's record of 1861 and was considered to have most certainly been a part of the Bu as described in the *Orkneyinga Saga*. A gravedigger discovered foundations at the north-west corner of the churchyard, lying east-west, and Johnston identified these as being part of an extensive wall forming the south side of the Earl's Bu (Drinking Hall). Continuing the line of this wall, further sections were identified and considered to be part of the same long wall, which measured about 136 feet (c.41m). Details of this are to be found in the two (almost identical) published reports.<sup>33</sup> In a major reconsideration of these discoveries, Batey draws attention to discrepancies in the reports and provides revised illustrations including more detail on the walling complex to the east of the long wall, which is the area currently visible to visitors.<sup>34</sup> An important observation made by Johnston was that the whole of the site was covered by 5 feet (1.51m) of debris above the clay subsoil on which the foundations were constructed, and earlier observers had noted a mix of bones, ashes and oyster shells mixed with collapsed masonry. Indeed, Petrie had noted in 1859 that '...having...traced numerous massive walls adjacent to the ruins of the Girth House, and running in various directions...we picked up among the debris large quantities of bones of domestic animals, such as the horse, ox, sheep, swine, dog and cat'.<sup>35</sup>

Renewed excavation commenced in April/May 1939 following a visit from J. S. Richardson of the Ministry of Works, and there followed discussion about excavation prior to the land being Scheduled; it was purchased by Walter Grant in June 1939.<sup>36</sup> Excavation was undertaken by two labourers who had worked with Grant on Rousay, including James Yorston whose partial notebook jottings supplied to Batey remain the only available detailed documents about this phase of work

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<sup>33</sup> Johnston 1903, 21-25; Johnston 1904, 199-201.

<sup>34</sup> Batey 2003, 39- 48; Batey 2025 Chapter 1.

<sup>35</sup> Petrie 1859, 28-9.

<sup>36</sup> Historic Scotland mss. File DD27/728; Walter Grant financed and facilitated the excavation and subsequent public presentation of several archaeological sites in Orkney in the 1930s. For further information, see [Midhowe Broch Statement of Significance | Historic Environment Scotland](#)

which took place between April and September 1939.<sup>37</sup> Several walls were noted, mostly of dry-stone construction, but with a square gatehouse which had an addition on its north side with lime mortar; ‘the Hall appeared to be ruined at an early date and its entire area packed to considerable depth with midden debris of medieval date’.<sup>38</sup> The complexity of both structural archaeology and midden dumping was clearly too much for this period of work, and it is only because of a drawing of the area during excavation in 1939 by David Wilson that the whole can be seen.<sup>39</sup> It is clear that several phases of activity are indicated here<sup>40</sup> and the single structure/s are complex. Compounded with the lack of stratified archaeological investigation, this part of the site is little understood. It is however clear that the buildings do have major Late Norse phases, if not necessarily representing a Drinking Hall.

The site was taken into State guardianship in two phases; the Earl’s Bu (Drinking Hall) in 1947, and the round church in 1952 laid out for public access.

There were very few finds recorded from the earlier excavations of the PIC sites (briefly considered in 2.1.4) and it is clear that there was indeed a major build-up of debris infilling the Late Norse buildings. These were not studied or retained, but those of the more recent excavations of midden materials related to activities in the Hall, which were discarded and rapidly infilled the underhouse of the (by now) roofless and abandoned mill buildings have been crucial. In these deposits, cod, ling, saithe and haddock bones<sup>41</sup> indicate consumption rather than production. Large amounts of butchered pig bones are specifically identified as feasting debris in this

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<sup>37</sup> Reproduced in extenso in Batey 2003, 60-61; Batey 2025, Chapter 1; The termination of these excavations happened due to world events, and activities in Orkney were focussed specifically to the war effort. It is notable that the trenches were not actually back filled until the end of war in 1945/6.

<sup>38</sup> HS mss File DD 27/7/728. Richardson letter 30 June 1939.

<sup>39</sup> HS mss. File DD27/7288. Wilson 17.10.46; redrawn in Batey 2003, illus. 14 and 15.

<sup>40</sup> Discussed *in extenso* by Batey 2003.

<sup>41</sup> Harland 2025, 202-204; 389-414.

phase.<sup>42</sup> Cattle and sheep bone evidence indicates consumption of locally managed animals.<sup>43</sup>

### **2.1.3.C Neighbouring Modern Structures**

The period following the Late Norse building phases is characterised by the presence of 18th – 19th century farm buildings adjacent to the site (piggery and store houses). The main buildings of the present Bu farm presumably date also from this period, as do a small number of horizontal mills with associated water management to the north of the site and a later Medieval vertical watermill which was destroyed by fire in the 1980s. A large modern barn was originally constructed in the 1950s by the farmer, being moved to its current location due north of the PIC due the discovery of the walling at the north-east which was later to be identified as the horizontal mill lade. This building was sited on structural remains which were preserved by a deliberate substantial sand layer, and these earlier remains were in part examined in 1986 by Batey<sup>44</sup> and additionally by Raymond Lamb and EASE in the 1990s. The barn itself was modified to become the Saga Centre.

### **2.1.4 Finds from the early excavations**

Except for the Pictish symbol stone and the prehistoric, pecked example, the finds from the earlier interventions are sparse. Despite comments that the site was filled with midden, only a limited assemblage of material, essentially unstratified, has survived. There is a full listing and catalogue of the artefacts recovered from the excavations of W. G. Grant and A. W. Johnston which were donated to the National Museum in Edinburgh.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Mainland and Batey 2019; Mainland 2025, for example 477-479.

<sup>43</sup> Mainland et al 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Batey 2003, 53 as the Barn Trench.

<sup>45</sup> Batey 2003, 62-68; following on from a study of several of these pieces by D. Patten as part of an MA Degree dissertation, University of Durham.

## 2.2 Evidential values

In combination, the remains of the Earl's Bu (Drinking Hall) and St Nicholas' Round Church, plus the features in the wider Earl's Bu complex, allow significant insight into the estate centre of the Late Norse Earls of the Northern Earldom of Orkney in the 12th century. This era was the floruit of Earldom power and is recognisable throughout Orkney in related buildings such as St Magnus Cathedral, the **Brough of Birsay**, **Cubbie Roo's Castle**, and **St Magnus Church** on Egilsay. Its significance is heightened by references in the *Orkneyinga Saga*, an early 13th century Icelandic narrative likely to have had an Orcadian informant (see below section 2.3). The proximity of the round church, major buildings, horizontal mill with its evidence of water management, as well as the metalworking focus at Lavacroon and bullion evidence, provide the potential for this single site to represent the full range of Late Norse economic and political aspects. It is considered likely that Orphir became the replacement political focus for Orkney at the time that Kirkwall was developing as the religious focus, and as both moved away from the previously pre-eminent Earldom centre at the **Brough of Birsay**, which was in many ways the immediate predecessor to the complex at the Earl's Bu. This combination provides a unique set of political, widely based economics and centrality aspects.

The primary evidential values are:

- Condition. The Round Church remains, although incomplete, are intelligible and relatively robust. Upstanding elements enhance the visitor experience and provide insight into a unique feature in Scotland. The Hall wall fragments need further interpretation, but currently are stable and grass covered.
- Completeness. The Church remains survive, in part, almost to head height, those of the Hall survive beyond foundation level, approximately 1m in height on average.
- Extent. As indicated above in this section, these two structures form part of a much larger complex of inter-related structures and complementary functions, all of which would have been dominated by the Norse Earls.

- Disturbance. Following the laying out of the Guardianship remains in 1947 there has been no disturbance within the PIC area of either the Hall or Church. In the case of the latter, although located within an active churchyard, the graves respect the laid-out church extent.
- The landscape context is crucial and whilst the demonstrably close association between Church and Hall at the site is not unique in Orkney – the **Brough of Birsay** and **Cubbie Roo's Castle** are comparable in this – the unspoilt natural environment and ease of access on the Orkney Mainland greatly enhance its potential for visitors.
- More recent excavation in the vicinity has enabled a fuller understanding of the activities taking place at the Earl's Hall, with feasting clearly indicated. This is confirming the description in the *Orkneyinga Saga*.
- The Round Church is unique in Scotland and one of several innovative forms unique to the Northern Earldom; the round tower of **St Magnus Church** on Egilsay can be complemented by the (now lost) dual round towers of both Deerness and the single round tower at Stenness for example.
- The artefactual material from the earlier work is limited, as are the observations about the midden contents. However, it is clear that the debris from the Hall was being discarded at least in part to the north and quickly infilled the unroofed and derelict underhouse of the mill. The activities indicated, such as a bullion economy, gold working and international and national commerce, all greatly enhance the status of the Bu site as a whole.

## 2.3 Historical values

The Northern Earldom of the Norse comprises Orkney at its heart, but also Caithness to the south and Shetland to the north. Throughout most of the period these areas were part of this single unit. From inception, as an economic force as well as political unit, this was managed by a resident earl on behalf of the Norwegian kings, from the days of Harald Finehair c. AD 875 until the island groups were ceded to Scotland as dowry payment in AD 1468. The later part of this period,

the so-called ‘Golden Age’ of Norse Orkney, is termed the Late Norse period due to its close political and economic ties with Norway.<sup>46</sup>

Conventionally, reliance of the information provided in *Saga* sources would not be considered academically rigorous, however there are elements of the *Orkneyinga Saga* which strongly suggest that although written in Iceland in the 13th century, there were local informants (possibly Icelandic family members) operating in Orkney.<sup>47</sup> Details of locations, hills and valleys, proximity of structures such as the Bu and the Round Church, are all elements which require a depth of knowledge rather than fabrication. There are a number of specific references to activities at the Earl’s Bu in *Orkneyinga Saga*, and scholars have sought to apply specific dates to these events.<sup>48</sup>

For example, at Christmas 1135, Chapter LXVI we learn in detail about the Hall and its nearby Church, and in this chapter beyond the section quoted below we learn of murder and mayhem amongst the assembled group:

There was a large homestead and it stood on a piece of rising ground, and there was a slope behind the buildings.<sup>49</sup> There was at Orphir a large drinking hall, and there was a door to the south side wall under the east gable, and a magnificent church stood facing the hall door; and one went down steps from the hall to the church. And when one entered the hall there was on the left a large flagstone, and [between it and the hall] were a number of large ale-casks; but opposite the outer door was a small room.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>46</sup> This has been discussed thoroughly in Crawford 2013.

<sup>47</sup> Guðmundsson 1993, 206-7.

<sup>48</sup> Taylor 1938 is pre-eminent in this. Although it is notable that the new translation by Jesch does not indicate any dates in the chapter commentary.

<sup>49</sup> The translation by Jesch (2025) is at variance with this description: ‘there was a very large estate and it stood on a slope, and there was a bank behind the buildings’ (Chapter 66, 171). This additional information about the bank is crucial for the interpretation of the wider farming landscape, as such a bank (Head Dyke) would have separated the infield from the outfield areas.

<sup>50</sup> Christmas 1135, Ch LXVI.

Christmas 1128 (?) had already seen action at the site:

It happened in the days of the brothers Harald and Paul that they were to hold a Yule feast in Orphir at the house of Earl Harald and that he was to bear the expense for both of them [that Yule]...Those sisters were there, Frakok and Helga, the Earl's mother, and they sat in a little sitting room sewing. Now Earl Harald went into the room, and the sisters were sitting on the cross-dais, and a newly sewn linen shirt lay between them, white as the driven snow. The Earl took up the shirt and saw that it was embroidered with gold...[it was destined for his brother and he was jealous]. The Earl snatched it from her and prepared to put it on [she begged him not to try it on because his life was at stake]. Nonetheless the Earl put it on...[and shortly breathed his last].<sup>51</sup>

The site remained a safe haven for the Earls in October 24, 1154:

Earl Rognvald left his ship and made for his hall at Orphir...he stayed overnight at Knarston ...because of a storm and was awoken from sleep with the news that Earl Erlend had attacked and routed Earl Harald and his men. Earl Harald fled to hide at Orphir.<sup>52</sup>

Whilst it is accepted today that these descriptions relate to the Earl's Bu, the present location was not always agreed upon. The Rev J. B. Craven entered the discussion in 1901, attempting to take a middle line while pressure was being applied to interpret the Earl's Bu location at nearby Swanbister. He chose his words carefully in the face of this raging disagreement of the time:

It does not appear whether the residence was at Swanbister, between the present house and the shore, or at the Church [of Orphir]. It seems probable, from the remains at Swanbister shore, that a large residence was there, but also important and ancient buildings have been traced near the Church.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Christmas 1128?, Ch LV.

<sup>52</sup> October 1154, Ch XCIV.

<sup>53</sup> Craven 1901, 57.

It is not known whether the Swanbister structure has been further investigated or located, but in the light of current understanding of the extensive nature of the Earl's complex, there is no reason why any major buildings at that location cannot be part of the Norse Earl's purview. Notably in this vicinity the Old Norse placename for a harbour is located (The Hubbin), so access to the Bu by water may have been from that location.<sup>54</sup>

## 2.4 Architectural and artistic values

In terms of architectural values, the Round Church merits considerable weight. In Scotland it is a unique example of a pre-18th century round church. It was one of several innovative forms of religious buildings within the Northern Earldom; the round tower of **St Magnus Church** on Egilsay can be complemented by the (now lost) dual round towers of both Deerness and Stenness for example. Thought to have been built in the 12th century, its form is considered likely to have been inspired by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and results from the Crusading activity of the later Norse Earls, particularly Earl Hakon, in that region, although Fisher has argued for a Scandinavian origin.<sup>55</sup>

The Norse stone structures which have been identified as the Hall are part of a larger group from contemporary sites; substantial building projects as seen at Orphir could be viewed as the equivalent of the massive mobilisation for the building of St Magnus Cathedral or **Cubbie Roo's Castle**. These structures are high profile and have a strong political message for the period. A further architecturally significant element at the Bu is the presence of a Norse horizontal mill (outside the area in State care), the first of this period (in a Norse context) to be identified in Britain.

Artistic contributions from the site include the unusual carved stone from the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age period (see Figure 13); one of several increasingly

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<sup>54</sup> See Batey 2025, illus. 14.9.

<sup>55</sup> Cant 1973,5; Fisher 1993.

recognised examples and under current study by Thomas<sup>56</sup> from a period which remains under-represented in Orkney. The recovery of the Pictish symbol stone, also from the 1939 excavations, is significant in several ways. There are relatively few such stones in Orkney, exceptionally few in this southern part of Mainland and interestingly this design is clearly defined along the narrow edge of this slab, indicating it was intended to be built into a structure; from that we can assume there were Pictish period structures in this district.

## 2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

### 2.5.1 Location

The physical siting of the Bu complex at Orphir is central to its history. The area currently defined under PIC legislation, comprising structural remains commonly identified as a Drinking Hall and the remains of the Round Church dedicated to St Nicholas, lies at the heart of a much larger contemporary complex, including the scheduled Horizontal Mill complex,<sup>57</sup> and the associated metalworking site of Lavacroon<sup>58</sup> and a newly identified *thing* site at Rare-ting.<sup>59</sup> Located in a natural amphitheatre with shallow sides which particularly shelter the site from the north and defined by Scapa Flow to its south, this is clearly a sheltered and favoured location. Throughout the known history the site, from prehistory to modern day, there has been activity in this immediate area, often related to the management of the local water courses, particularly the remodelling of the burn running to the east of the Mill and Hall complex.

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<sup>56</sup> Thomas 2016.

<sup>57</sup> For designation details see: [HES, SM4725, Bu of Orphir, burnt mound and mill dam \(portal.historicenvironment.scot\)](#) (accessed: 28 July 2026)

<sup>58</sup> For designation details see: [HES, SM6405, Lavacroon, settlement \(portal.historicenvironment.scot\)](#) (accessed: 28 July 2026)

<sup>59</sup> The thing name at *Rare-ting* near to the farm of Crya is suggested as an indicator of the presence of a seasonal meeting called by the Norse Earls of other significant members of the district for the purpose of administering laws. See Batey 2025, Chapter 15.

The significance of the location lies in its proximity to Scapa Flow and its natural views southwards towards the rest of the Norse Northern Earldom lands across the Pentland Firth. Following the move of political focus from the **Brough of Birsay**, which dominated the north-west corner of Orkney Mainland and the routes around the north of the island, political power was subdivided by a base established at Orphir and the growth of the ecclesiastical centre around the construction of St Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall.



*Figure 10: Wider landscape around Earl's Bu complex, viewed from the south-west.*

© Colleen Batey.

### **2.5.2 Aesthetic values**

The Bu complex dominates the ground defined to the north by the Hill of Dale and Scapa Flow to the south but does not itself command wide or significant long-range views. It does however dominate excellent farmland for pastorage and had easy access to Scapa Flow. This presence of accessible resources is of crucial importance in aiding an understanding of the local resources upon which the Norse Earls could call for the high-status activities, such as feasting and commensality, resources which were expanded by imports from controlled and lesser status sites throughout Orkney.

## 2.6 Natural heritage values

At the time of writing (March 2026) there are no special natural heritage designations for this site, which largely comprises semi-improved neutral grassland. The closest designation lies to the east at The Fidge,<sup>60</sup> designated as a special habitat and significant bird nesting area and Scapa Flow to the south is protected as a Special Protection Area.<sup>61</sup> In general, the landscape around the Bu is improved pasture, some arable, rough grass, heather and bog.<sup>62</sup> Notable species include birds-foot trefoil, and the Orkney vole. Both the bedrock geology and overlying superficial deposits belong to the Upper Stromness Flagstone Formation.<sup>63</sup>



*Figure 11: Aerial photograph showing position of wider Earl's Bu complex, which would have provided excellent farmland for pastorage and easy access to the fisheries of Scapa Flow.*

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<sup>60</sup> Designated as a Local Nature Conservation Site: Site 216; full description and map included in [Orkney Island Council, Natural Environment Supplementary Guidance – Annexe 1E Site Statements \(PDF 5.96MB\) \(orkney.gov.uk\)](#) (accessed: 29 July 2026).

<sup>61</sup> [NatureScot, Scapa Flow SPA \(sitelink.nature.scot\)](#) (accessed: 30 July 2026).

<sup>62</sup> Scottish Natural Heritage, ND.

<sup>63</sup> British Geological Survey GeoIndex: <https://www.bgs.ac.uk/geoindex/> [Accessed 28 July 2026]

## 2.7 Contemporary/use values

### 2.7.1 Social values

The Bu at Orphir is a significant site in terms of Norse heritage in Orkney. There is considerable local and international interest in the archaeology of the Vikings/Late Norse, and a major tourism interest in archaeology on the islands. With virtually all the place names being Norse in origin it is perhaps surprising that more is not made of the Viking heritage and the sites where it can be easily visited. The user-friendly *Orkneyinga Saga* allows access to the stories of the Norse Earls and is an entrée to the Golden Age of the Norse. However, beyond St Magnus Cathedral, **Maeshowe** (for the largest runic inscription collection to survive outside Scandinavia) and the **Brough of Birsay**, there are few visible elements to investigate on Orkney Mainland except with a specialist guide. On the islands there is little, beyond **St Magnus Church**, Egilsay and **Cubbie Roo's Castle** on Wyre. Orphir is unique in that it already has a Saga Centre adjacent to the PIC, and the clear *Saga* descriptions provide a significant starting point for visiting this particular site. Plans are in place (2025-26) to renew the displays at the Saga Centre and for it to provide a focus for Viking/Late Norse tourism in the islands; a starting point for further exploration and broadening of the tourism offering. Its proximity to the south-east border of The Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage site, brings a unique potential for this site and a broadening of its tourism base. There is currently a local circular walk to Breck which starts at the Bu car park, leaflets regarding which are available via the Tourist Information offices in Kirkwall and Stromness.<sup>64</sup>

### 2.7.2 Use values

The Earl's Bu and St Nicholas Church are unstaffed monuments, with the adjacent Saga Centre (run by Orphir Community Council) both free of charge attractions. Toilets are available at the Saga Centre as well as a small relevant display of the Norse Saga and its relationship to the Earl's at Orphir.<sup>65</sup> The site and visitor centre

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<sup>64</sup> Route details available at: [Walkhighlands, Orphir Bay, near Houton \(walkhighlands.co.uk\)](http://walkhighlands.co.uk)

<sup>65</sup> More information available on [Orkneyinga Saga Centre \(Orkney.com\)](http://Orkneyinga Saga Centre (Orkney.com)).

are both highly rated on Trip Advisor.<sup>66</sup> Visitor figures are not available for any part of this site.

### 2.7.3 Access and education

The site is easily accessible by car, bicycle or bus off the Gyre Road (leading from the A964, main road between Kirkwall and Stromness). There is good parking, and a good slightly sloping pathway to the Norse building foundations and round church. Simple signage explains the activities at the Earl's farm and complements that available at the Saga Centre, which also has toilet facilities. The footings of the buildings are grass covered and have unrestricted access; the incomplete church has gravel marking the full arc of the nave (removed during building and final removal of the Parish Church in 1952) and a steep unfenced drop of about a metre at its east end.



*Figure 12: Early photograph showing proximity of the parish church ([left of image] constructed in 1829) to ruins of St Nicholas Church. The building and subsequent demolition of the parish church removed the full arc of the circular nave. © Courtesy of HES.*

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<sup>66</sup> [Tripadvisor, Orkneyinga Saga Centre Reviews \(tripadvisor.co.uk\)](https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/Attractions-g1862107-Reviews-Orkneyinga_Saga_Centre-1862107.html)

In terms of educational value, the site is unique in that the standing remains combine so well to give visual evidence to the full descriptions in the *Saga* source. Whilst the ‘Hall’ footings are open to discussion by archaeologists, the round church is unique in form and context within the British Isles. There are other round churches, but in a Norse complex this is unique and part of a huge legacy of innovative Norse church buildings in Orkney from the Earldom floruit – **St Magnus Church** on Egilsay, the lost round towers of both Deerness and Stenness churches for example. The complex at Orphir is of crucial significance in terms of its delivery of understandable archaeology, proximity to an educational resource in the Saga Centre and its overall political significance in the Late Norse Earldom – which spanned Orkney and Shetland as well as Caithness and probably parts of Sutherland. As such it has international significance, especially in terms of a Scandinavian audience.

### 3. Major gaps in understanding

- Although there is a thorough reassessment of the structural remains visible at the Bu<sup>67</sup> the dating of the specific elements remains unclear. It is apparent that they do not form one contiguous structure, but geophysical work indicates a great complexity of building fragments within the confined area of the Bu PIC.
- There are indications in the area immediately to the north – where the horizontal mill has been identified – that there is an earlier phase related to pre-Mill development. Although the chronology is tight, it is clear that at that part of the site there was pre-existing Late Viking activity when the Late Norse complex was established. The extent of this is currently unknown, although it is clear that a considerable man-made build-up of Late Viking midden debris was cut into to create the mill structure and on top of this rise, the Late Norse complex is located.

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<sup>67</sup> Batey 2025, Chapter 1.

- It would be significant to know whether the Viking presence was associated with a pre-existing Pictish estate centre, in line with modern scholarship elsewhere in Orkney.
- The unique form of the Round Church is important, and fits within the floruit of Late Norse ecclesiastical architecture. A dedicated study should be undertaken of this expression of power.
- Further study could be targeted to examine the selection of St Nicholas as the patron saint for the church. It is clear that the cult of St Nicholas, patron saint of sailors and merchants, was increasing in popularity in Scandinavia in the 12th century.

## 4. Associated properties

**St Mary's Chapel** and **Cubbie Roo's Castle**, Wyre; **St Magnus Church**, Egilsay and St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall, are all sites which are both contemporary, and part of the floruit of the 'Golden Age of Orkney'. In addition, the most important political link in Orkney is between the Earl's Bu at Orphir and the **Brough of Birsay**, whose political eminence it replaced. The Bu at Orphir was supplied by many smaller, less significant sites, such as Quoygrewe and potentially also Tuquoy, Westray and Freswick Links, Caithness. A more recent type site of the horizontal mill is **Click Mill**, Dounby.

## 5. Keywords

Round Church and Hall; Earls Hakon and Paul; Late Viking; Late Norse; Horizontal Mill; Economic Hub; Ecofactual; Bullion; Gold working; Orkney Earldom; St Nicholas; Earl's Bu; Drinking Hall; Orphir.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Timeline

#### A1.1 The Round Church

| Date              | Event                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>?1135</b>      | Built in the 12th century (?c1135), dedicated to St Nicholas with possible inspiration from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. <i>Orkneyinga Saga</i> Chap LXVI <sup>68</sup> describes the church as a magnificent / splendid building (NOTE not specifically ‘round’), accessed down steps (or a slope) leading from the south side wall of the Earl’s hall. |
| <b>1705</b>       | Building of Parish Church (1) to south.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>1741 -1748</b> | Round Church used as lime store for the Parish Church.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>1756</b>       | Parish Church repaired with material from the Round Church. <sup>69</sup>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>1829</b>       | New Parish Church (2) erected to replace earlier structure (1) immediately to the north, the eastern wall of this stood on the western extremity of the Round Church.                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>1900</b>       | A. W. Johnston cleared out the debris from the interior of the Round Church.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>1929</b>       | (May) site Scheduled.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

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<sup>68</sup> Taylor 1938; Jesch 2025.

<sup>69</sup> Torfæus trans. Pope 1866, 108 note.

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                          |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1939</b>       | (April-September) excavations by Grant's workmen in the vicinity of the Round Church, probably in the area immediately outside the churchyard.                           |
| <b>1952</b>       | (July) Round Church taken into State Guardianship.                                                                                                                       |
| <b>1952</b>       | Possible excavation undertaken, but no known records survive.                                                                                                            |
| <b>1952</b>       | Removal of Parish Church (2), re-sited some distance to the north-east, but further damage to the Round Church resulted and recovery of runic inscription. <sup>70</sup> |
| <b>1978 -1993</b> | Geophysical work adjacent to the Round Church and Churchyard confirmed location of Parish Church (2).                                                                    |

## A1.2 The Earl's Drinking Hall

| <b>Date</b>                              | <b>Event</b>                                                                                                                                                        |
|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Late Neolithic / Early Bronze Age</b> | A reused carved stone from 1500BC – 1000BC was recovered during 1939 excavation season.                                                                             |
| <b>Iron Age / Pictish</b>                | A reused symbol stone from AD 600 – 700 was recovered from the 1939 excavations.                                                                                    |
| <b>Late Norse</b>                        | The structural remains of the PIC fall within the period of AD c1100–1250.                                                                                          |
| <b>1128</b>                              | <i>Orkneyinga Saga</i> description of murders at Christmas at Drinking Hall of Earls Harald and Paul.                                                               |
| <b>1154</b>                              | <i>Orkneyinga Saga</i> reference to Earl Rognvald at Orphir.                                                                                                        |
| <b>1758</b>                              | Notes accompanying Torfæus translation <sup>71</sup> detail the discovery of large foundations 'underground' in the lands of the Bu near the church, prior to 1758. |

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<sup>70</sup> HS mss. File DD27/728.

<sup>71</sup> Transl. Pope 1866.

|                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1859/1861</b>   | Petrie notes numerous foundations and ‘great quantities of bones of various domestic animals... jawbones of dogs and cats in great abundance’ found pre-1859 by farm servants.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>1899 - 1901</b> | A.W. Johnston. Walling found by gravedigger in north-western corner of graveyard lying east/west, identified then as part of the Earl’s Hall. Visible today at angle to old churchyard wall. Excavations by Flett and Johnston located other segments <i>of this same wall (sic)</i> .                                                                                                                        |
| <b>1901</b>        | Using the description in the <i>Saga</i> source, Johnston located the ‘doorway’ at the eastern end of the structure with the long wall (some 104 feet in length) of the hall identified.                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>1903</b>        | Johnston writing of the work undertaken mentions ‘the whole site is now covered with 5 feet deep of debris above the clay upon which the foundations of the church and Bu are built’.                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>1939</b>        | (June) the site was scheduled before the land transferred to W. Grant from the landowner Henry Sutherland in advance of excavation by two labourers who had worked with Grant on Rousay. It is possible this was an extension to the 1939 Scheduling of the Church. Identification of at least two phases; drystone walling, a square gatehouse with mortared northern extension. Infilling with deep midden. |
| <b>1946/7</b>      | (Nov) 1946 Grant offered the site to the Ministry of Works on the understanding that excavations would be completed and suitably consolidated, he offered a grant each year to ensure this happened. These terms were accepted, but Grant died in 1947 and the funds were no longer available. The site was taken into State guardianship in 1947.                                                            |

|           |                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1989 - 91 | Geophysical survey by Paul Johnson revealed several early excavation trenches and wall fragments <sup>72</sup> only partially recorded in surviving paperwork (which is limited). <sup>73</sup> |
|-----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

## Appendix 2: Detailed narrative of site history

A brief overview of the site history is provided above at Section 2.1.3, with particular focus on the Late Viking and Late Norse aspects. The following section provides a wider chronological narrative.

Human presence in the area predates the Norse evidence by millennia, with earlier activity well represented both within the confines of the Bu complex, and its immediate vicinity.

### A2.1 Neolithic

At the nearby peat-rich environment at Hobbister (some 6km east of the Bu), there are indications of Late Neolithic impact on the environment through low-level cereal cultivation alongside clearance and cattle grazing in that area.<sup>74</sup> Antiquarian sources provide indications of a standing stone as well as a stone axe ‘on the farm of the Bu of Orphir and near to the churchyard’.<sup>75</sup> No further detailed location is available. Current study by Dr Hugo Anderson-Whymark and colleagues indicates flaked flint knives from Smoogro (X.AA 197, X.AA 198 NMS collections) and a polished flint knife (X.AA 199). An additional find from the Hill of Orphir (X.AA 218) can be added to this small group. These fall within the Early-Late Neolithic era and a Late Neolithic cushion macehead from Smoogro (X.AH 152) is recorded by the Orkney Stone Tools project.<sup>76</sup> Excavations by Batey in the Mill area immediately adjacent to the Bu have uncovered worked flint material and saddle querns, in addition to the unusual late

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<sup>72</sup> Johnson and Batey 2003.

<sup>73</sup> See Batey 2003 for detailed consideration; Batey 2025, Chapter 1.

<sup>74</sup> Farrell et al 2014, 13.

<sup>75</sup> [Trove, 1964, Bu Of Orphir \(Standing Stone, Axehead\) \(trove.scot\)](#) (accessed: 30 July 2026).

<sup>76</sup> [Working Stone, Cushion Maceheads \(orkneystonetools.org.uk\)](#) (accessed: 30 July 2026).

Neolithic/Early Bronze Age decorated stone recovered during excavations in 1939 (see Figure 13). These are all considered more fully elsewhere.<sup>77</sup>

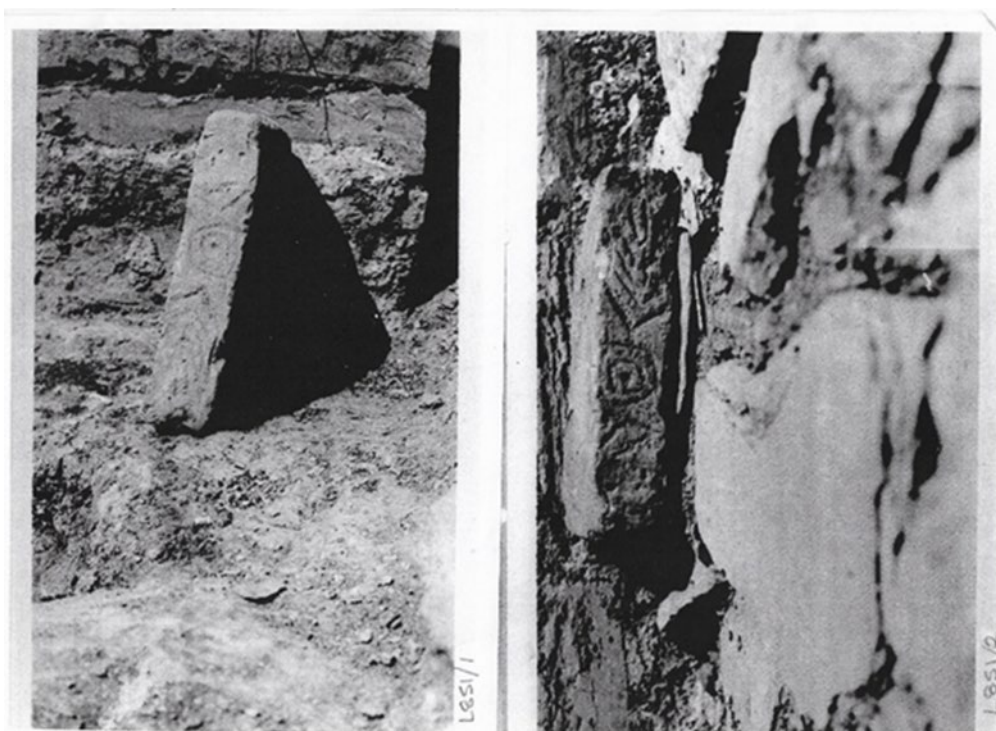


Figure 13: Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age carved stone from 1939 excavations. © David Wilson collection, Orkney Archives and Orkney Museum.

## A2.2 Bronze Age

The Bronze Age is more clearly represented at the Bu complex and immediate vicinity. A number of stray finds suggest localised presence; an ard in the NMS collections (X.AC 318) lacks locational definition beyond being from ‘Orphir Parish’, can now be joined by several stone tools of flat rectangular form from the north-east of the field known as Lavacroon to the immediate west of the modern Bu farm.<sup>78</sup> However, it is the relatively rich concentration of burnt mounds in the area of the Bu complex which is noteworthy. 250m north-west of the modern Bu farm<sup>79</sup> a major burnt mound of distinctive crescent form can still be clearly identified on the ground, but to this can be added further examples closer to the Bu itself. One was

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<sup>77</sup> Batey 2025, Chapter 2.

<sup>78</sup> Personal comment Chris Gee; Batey with Freeman 1986; Batey 2025, 21-2.

<sup>79</sup> [Trove, 1966, Bu Of Orphir, Pond \(trove.scot\)](https://trove.scot) (accessed: 30 July 2026).

identified by Lamb in relation to the building of the septic tank for the Saga Centre and subsequently investigated by EASE.<sup>80</sup> Within the area of the Mill complex at the Bu, a substantial burnt mound which sealed Bronze Age ceramics was excavated and found to have been cut through during the building of the Mill structures.<sup>81</sup> It is clear that the management of water within the area of the Bu was a long-standing and efficient activity, as the burnt mounds were also positioned adjacent to water courses.

### A2.3 Iron Age

Although Orkney is famous for its Iron Age archaeology, the Orphir district is very poor in evidence. A single site south-west of Swanbister House, the Hill of Breckna<sup>82</sup> is likely to be a broch. In the area adjacent to the Bu complex, Paul Johnson undertook geophysical survey in 1989-91<sup>83</sup> using Gradiometer and Resistivity methods indicated a double ditch enclosure, potentially Iron Age in date. Unfortunately, more recent survey by ORCA using slightly different methods failed to locate this massive feature.<sup>84</sup> At nearby Lavacroon, geophysical survey indicated two massive adjacent circular features which may be Iron Age in origin.<sup>85</sup> The material recovered there during fieldwalking is undoubtedly multi-period and may include Iron Age debris amongst the strong Norse iron working debris.<sup>86</sup>

## A2.4 Pictish

Finds of Pictish symbol stones are rare in this part of Orkney and it is significant that such a stone was recovered from the work in 1939, prior to the site of the 'Hall' being taken into State guardianship. It is a single slab with crescent and rectangle; the motif fits completely onto the edge of the slab. J. S. Richardson of the Ministry of Works described the stone in 1939 as 'the only object of archaeological interest

<sup>80</sup> Lamb, Orkney SMR; Moore and Wilson 1995, 6; Wilson and Moore 1995.

<sup>81</sup> Batey 1993; Batey 2025, Chapter 2.

<sup>82</sup> Trove, 1931, Hillock Of Breckna (trove.scot) (accessed: 30 July 2026).

<sup>83</sup> Johnson and Batey 2003, illus. 26,76, features 12-14 inclusive.

<sup>84</sup> DeSalle 2015.

<sup>85</sup> Johnson and Batey 2003; Johnson edited Batey 2003.

<sup>86</sup> Batey with Freeman 1986.

found in the present excavations’.<sup>87</sup> The images reproduced here (Figures 14 and 15) show a crescent and V-rod motif with a small split rectangle, on the narrow face of a large slab.

It is assumed that the slab was built into a later structure and remains in situ,<sup>88</sup> although not visible in the upstanding structural remains. In the excavation notebook of 1939, Richardson states ‘These workmen have revealed a number of walls of fair quality and mostly drystone construction, as well as a square gatehouse with an addition on its north- side with lime mortar’.<sup>89</sup> The frequent reference in subsequent publications relating to the find of the Pictish stone uses the term ‘pend tower’, citing Richardson.<sup>90</sup> It would seem most likely that this square gatehouse was subsequently termed the ‘pend tower’. The precise location of this feature is a subject of debate, with the best estimate being that this formed part of Structure A.<sup>91</sup> This could well be corroborated by the late James Yorston (one of Grant’s original labourers at the site), who visited the more recent excavations at the mill, and who recalled the problems of the Pictish stone being photographed due to the immediately proximity of other walls. This could potentially have been Building C immediately to the west of the north-west corner of Building A which is where Yorston recalled the find being made in 1939.

There is debate about whether there may have been two Pictish stones from the site. In an internal memo at the Ministry of Works, J.S. Richardson refers to the discovery of a ‘part of a Pictish symbol stone engraved with the crescent and v-shaped rod’.<sup>92</sup> There is, however, no record of him visiting the site at that time, so this information was apparently derived from a report back from the people working on the site, rather than a personal observation. In 1997, Mack brought together two references to Pictish stones at Orphir: one crescent and V-rod with

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<sup>87</sup> discussed Batey 2003, 49; HS mss. File DD27/728. Richardson 24.5.39.

<sup>88</sup> Batey 2003, 49.

<sup>89</sup> Memo Richardson 30 June 1939 reporting his visit to the site.

<sup>90</sup> For example, Mack 1997, 142; Scott and Ritchie 2014, 175.

<sup>91</sup> See Batey 2003 illus. 14.

<sup>92</sup> HS mss. File DD27/728. Richardson 24.5.39.

reference to a Minute by Richardson which is cited as ‘24 Mar 39’,<sup>93</sup> although to be corrected to 24 May 1939;<sup>94</sup> and the second stone with the crescent and V-rod with rectangle from the north-west corner of the pend tower, citing Minute by Richardson 12 Jul 39.

J.N.G. Ritchie made a brief comment on the Pictish symbol stone(s) at Orphir, repeating the image<sup>95</sup> with the observation that there were two stones discovered during excavations at Orphir by the Ministry of Works.<sup>96</sup> Richardson is actually recorded as making a visit to the site which he reported on 30 June 1939, when he was accompanied by J. Storer Clouston and Aage Roussell, the notable Scandinavian archaeologist. This is shortly followed by the minute of 12 July 1939 when he refers to the discovery of the stone with crescent and V-rod with additional rectangle incised. This visit would have potentially been his first sighting of the symbol stone, and it must be considered possible that he additionally noted the small rectangular incised symbol, and that rather than identifying that there were two symbol stones at the site, they were in fact the same one. Repeated publication by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland supports the identification of two stones at the site.<sup>97</sup>

The only known surviving image of a Pictish stone from the ‘wider Earl’s Bu site’, is from the David Wilson Collection and held in the Orkney Archives (see Figure 14)<sup>98</sup> and indicates an immediate location within a coursed wall, potentially to be described as having a mortar fill. It is particularly interesting because of the narrow nature of the face which is totally dominated by the full width of the crescent and V-rod, possibly suggesting a longitudinal fracture, although one which facilitates the equidistant positioning of the crescent.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Mack 1997, 142.

<sup>94</sup> Batey 1993, 49.

<sup>95</sup> Ritchie 2003, Illus. 6.

<sup>96</sup> Ritchie 2003, 122.

<sup>97</sup> RCAHMS 1994, 19; Fraser ed 2008, 116.

<sup>98</sup> Illus. 17, Batey 2003, 50.

<sup>99</sup> Scott and Ritchie 2014, illus. 5, 10.

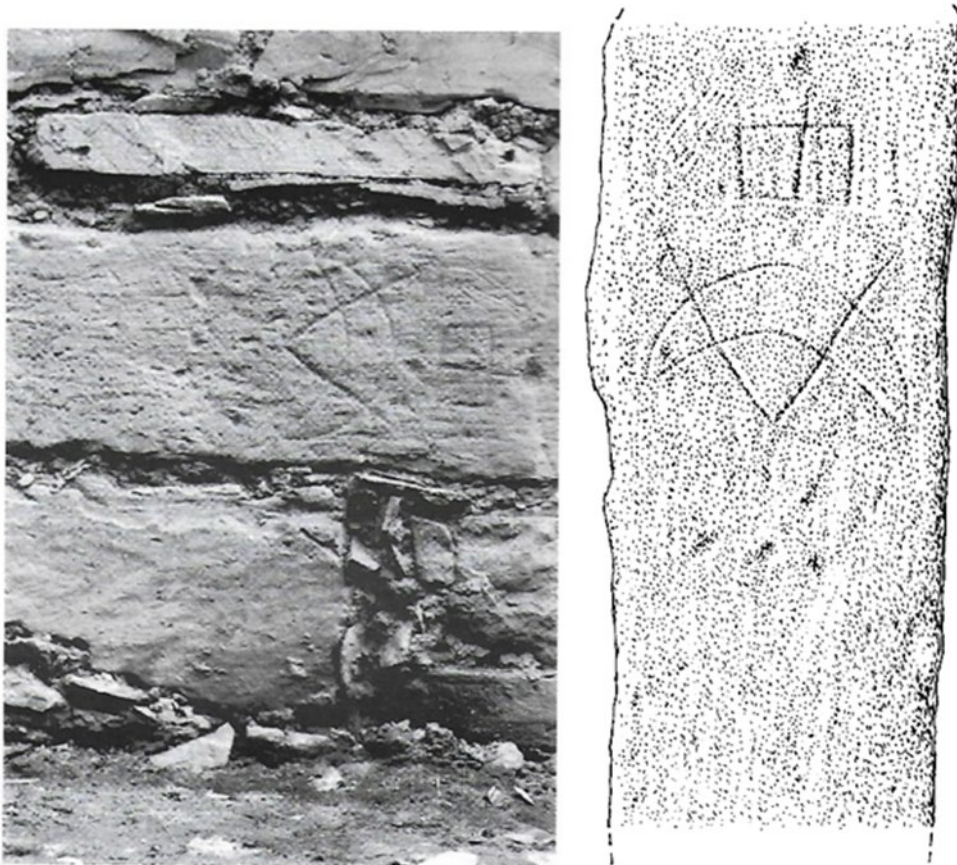


Figure 14: Image of the Pictish Symbol Stone in situ (left). © David Wilson collection, Orkney Archives and Orkney Museum.

Figure 15: Measured drawing of symbol stone, rotated by 90° (right). © HES(Ian G Scott Collection).

## A2.5 Viking Age

There is very limited evidence for the early years of the Viking Age in the vicinity of the Bu complex; a probable female Viking pagan grave was recorded from Greenigoe,<sup>100</sup> but otherwise evidence is available only in snapshots at the Bu. All the excavated structural evidence *within* the PIC can be assigned to the Late Norse period, that is post AD 1050/1100, but underlying the mill complex adjacent to the hall structures there are indications of a major Late Viking presence. This is identified by notable quantities of steatite vessel sherds in addition to evidence of gold working and the bullion economy as indicated by a ring money fragment and

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<sup>100</sup> Henshall 1952, 1 and 17; Batey 2025, 68.

two cubo-octahedral weights from the Eastern areas of Viking expansion. This richness is matched by unique elements of the ecofactual evidence. Cattle as well as sheep, goat and pig and all are well represented here, as are domestic species of bird (unlike the seabird focus elsewhere). The most significant feature of the pre-mill mammal bone assemblage is in the dominant use of butchered skull fragments, suggesting the cutting of head meat and tongues. This is the signature of the Thorrablot (þorrablót) feast, known still in mid-winter feasting in Iceland but uniquely identified at this site in the Late Viking period in the British Isles. The building of the mill structure in approximately the 1050s (mid-11th century), which overlies pre-mill Viking period contexts dating from the 10th – 11th century, is likely to indicate activity pre-dating the Hall structures to the south. At this point, a watercourse was re-aligned to accommodate the mill and provide its water source. The mill structure comprises a stone lined chute to its west, leading from a small pond which was fed from a more substantial water source to the north. This chute lead into an underhouse where the horizontal tirls would have been located and would have powered grinding stones in the upperhouse immediately above – this structure does not survive – and the surplus water was led away via the tail race (which had lintel stones along its length) to re-join the main watercourse. This structure was short-lived, likely no more than 50 years although potentially rather less and swiftly filled with debris of the Late Norse complex immediately to the south. This is the only structure which can be identified as potentially pre-dating the Late Norse Earl's Hall, and indicates an active farming regime, although it cannot be proven that there was already an active, pre-existing, Pictish estate in the immediate locality.

## **A2.6 Late Norse**

This is the era when the main building activity was taking place at the Bu – the construction of major buildings as well as the Round Church provide a good example of the floruit of the 'Golden Age' of the Northern Earldom.

### **A2.6a The Round Church**

Dedicated to St Nicholas, the round church is thought to have been built in the 12th century. It was once circular in form but is now incomplete due to damage caused

during the building and subsequent demolition of the adjacent Parish Church, which was re-sited some distance to the north-east in the 1950s. The once-complete arc of the nave (5.8m in diameter) is today laid out in gravel, and the whole is surrounded by more recent gravestones within an active graveyard, which was recently extended. The church walls are thick at 1.2m, and the barrel-vaulted apse measures 2.2m in both width and depth. The Apse is itself complete and remains roofed, comprising grass-covered graded stones. It has a small window at its eastern extent, and there is a large step down to what might be presumed an original floor surface, but this building has not been fully excavated. A stone bearing a runic inscription<sup>101</sup> was recovered from the wall in the 1950s and is today housed at the Orkney Museum, Broad Street, Kirkwall.<sup>102</sup> Little, if anything, remains of the rest of the church, although geophysical study by Paul Johnson shows clearly the footprint of the adjacent superimposed parish churches.

The church was apparently complete when Torfæus made reference to it in 1697<sup>103</sup> and indeed as late as 1757.<sup>104</sup> Pope made the observation (published in 1866) that a breach had been made to take stone for repair of the Parish Church.<sup>105</sup> Petrie's illustrations of 1861 show the church in virtually the same state of disrepair as today<sup>106</sup> and indicated a build-up of material on the floor of this structure he termed the Girth House.<sup>107</sup> In 1900 Johnston cleared out the debris from the interior of the Round Church, recording a fine antler comb case (see 2.1.4 above).<sup>108</sup> Burials were also noted in this work and two human skeletons sent for identification,<sup>109</sup> with no report now located.

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<sup>101</sup> See image: [Trove, SC1204727, Detail of rune inscribed stone \(trove.scot\)](https://trove.scot.nls.uk/trove/result?search=SC1204727%2C%20Detail%20of%20rune%20inscribed%20stone&from=results) (accessed: 30 July 2026).

<sup>102</sup> Hagland 1993, 370-373; N690.

<sup>103</sup> Transl Pope 1866, 108.

<sup>104</sup> Pococke 1887, 137.

<sup>105</sup> Pope 1866, 108.

<sup>106</sup> Orkney archive mss D21/1.

<sup>107</sup> See also Petrie BP20 Scotland 85. Society of Antiquaries of London.

<sup>108</sup> Illus 9 Batey 2003, 33 NMS IL 326.

<sup>109</sup> SRO mss. D31/36/5/8.

### A2.6b The Drinking Hall

The walling fragments which make up the structure were partially revealed during early excavations (recalled in Pope's 1866 translation of Torfæus), and then subsequently by A.W. Johnston in 1899-1901, to be followed finally by the work of Grant and Storer-Clouston in 1939 prior to the site being taken into State guardianship. Today the visible walling is the result of the last phase of activity in 1939 although along the churchyard wall-line, at a slightly different angle the foundations of an apparently single-phase length of walling can still be identified. The position of this wall, punctuated by trenches placed by Johnston in his 1899-1901 campaign of work, was not however visible during the works undertaken by HES around 2023 when the more recent churchyard wall was rebuilt due to subsidence. This subsidence may well have been the result of ground disturbed during excavations.

The notes accompanying Pope's translation of Torfæus state that, prior to 1758, large and deep foundations had been found underground in the lands of the Bow, near the church, but that there were no local traditions as to the Earl's Palace.<sup>110</sup> Writing in 1861, Petrie described the immediate vicinity of the Round Church as 'abounding in numerous traces of ancient buildings believed to be the remains of the Earl's Palace'.<sup>111</sup> Subsequently, Johnston was responsible for pointing out the location of where the Earl's Bu (Drinking Hall) would have stood in relation to the Round Church according to the *Saga* description. Adding that at that time there were no indications of any ruins, and that the locality of *previous excavations* was unknown.<sup>112</sup> It is presumed that these earlier excavations referenced by Johnston were the ones recorded by Petrie in 1859 when 'close to the outside of the Churchyard wall, great quantities of bones of various domestic animals were found, and amongst them jawbones of dogs and cats in great abundance...'.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Footnote to translation of Torfæus, Pope 1866, 107.

<sup>111</sup> Orkney Archive mss. D46/1/6/13.

<sup>112</sup> Johnston 1903, 21-2.

<sup>113</sup> Orkney Archives mss. D46/1/1/13.

The description of the Hall in *Orkneyinga Saga* significantly influenced the interpretation of the long walling segment discovered by A.W. Johnston between 1899 and 1901, with the 1939 excavations of Grant and Storer Clouston revealing the upstanding eastern part of the so-called hall.

No original site archive has survived from the work of Johnston. The walling noted in 1899 was immediately suggested as being an extension of an earlier wall recorded in Petrie's record of 1861 and was considered to have most certainly been a part of the Bu as described in the *Orkneyinga Saga*. A gravedigger discovered foundations at the north-west corner of the churchyard, lying east-west, and Johnston identified these as being part of an extensive wall forming the south side of the Earl's Bu (Drinking Hall). Continuing the line of this wall, further sections were identified and considered to be part of the same long wall, which measured about 136 feet (around 40.94m). Details of this are to be found in the two (almost identical) published reports.<sup>114</sup> In a major reconsideration of these discoveries, Batey draws attention to discrepancies in the reports and provides revised illustrations including more detail on the walling complex to the east of the long wall, which is the area currently visible to visitors.<sup>115</sup> An important observation made by Johnston was that the whole of the site was covered by 5 feet (1.51m) of debris above the clay subsoil on which the foundations were constructed, and earlier observers had noted a mix of bones, ashes and oyster shells mixed with collapsed masonry. Indeed, Petrie had noted in 1859 that '...having...traced numerous massive walls adjacent to the ruins of the Girth House, and running in various directions...we picked up among the debris large quantities of bones of domestic animals, such as the horse, ox, sheep, swine, dog and cat'.<sup>116</sup>

Renewed excavation commenced in April/May 1939 following a visit from J. S. Richardson of the Ministry of Works, and there followed discussion about excavation prior to the land being Scheduled; it was purchased by Walter Grant in

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<sup>114</sup> Johnston 1903, 21-25; Johnston 1904, 199-201.

<sup>115</sup> Batey 2003, 39-48.

<sup>116</sup> Petrie 1859, 28-9.

June 1939.<sup>117</sup> Excavation was undertaken by two labourers who had worked with Grant on Rousay, including James Yorston whose partial notebook jottings supplied to Batey remain the only available detailed documents about this phase of work.<sup>118</sup> A notable development however was the identification within the Orkney Archives (D23/36/5) of pages from Storer Clouston's site notebook of June 1939. This greatly clarified some aspects of the trench positions and walling sequence in preparation for the major review of the earlier work at the site.<sup>119</sup> Several walls were noted, mostly of dry-stone construction, but with a square gatehouse which had an addition on its north side with lime mortar; 'the Hall appeared to be ruined at an early date and its entire area packed to considerable depth with midden debris of medieval date.'<sup>120</sup> The complexity of both structural archaeology and midden dumping was clearly too much for this period of work, and it is only because of a drawing of the area during excavation in 1939 by D. Wilson that the whole can be seen.<sup>121</sup> It is clear that several phases of activity are indicated here<sup>122</sup> and the single structure/s are complex. Compounded with the lack of stratified archaeological investigation, this part of the site is little understood. It is however clear that the buildings do have major Late Norse phases, if not exactly representing a single building of what may have been a Drinking Hall.

The site was taken into State guardianship and laid out for public access in two phases; the Earl's Bu (Drinking Hall) in 1947, and the round church in 1952.

There were very few finds recorded from the earlier excavations of the PIC sites (briefly considered in 2.1.4) and there was indeed a major build-up of debris infilling the Late Norse buildings. These were not studied or retained, but midden materials related to activities in the Hall were discarded and rapidly infilled the underhouse of the abandoned mill buildings. In these deposits, cod (both fresh and dried), ling,

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<sup>117</sup> Historic Scotland mss. File DD27/728.

<sup>118</sup> Reproduced in extenso in Batey 2003, 60-61; Batey 2025, 13-17, illus. 1.9 and 1.10.

<sup>119</sup> Batey 2025, Chapter 1.

<sup>120</sup> HS mss File DD 27/7/728. Richardson letter 30 June 1939.

<sup>121</sup> HS mss. File DD27/7288. Wilson 17.10.46; redrawn in Batey 2003, illus. 14 and 15.

<sup>122</sup> Discussed *in extenso* by Batey 2003; Batey 2025, Chapter 1.

saithe and haddock bones<sup>123</sup> indicate consumption rather than production. Large amounts of butchered pig bones are specifically identified as feasting debris in this phase.<sup>124</sup> Cattle and sheep bone evidence indicates consumption of locally managed animals.<sup>125</sup>

## **A2.7 Medieval/Modern**

The period following the Late Norse building phases is characterised by the presence of 18th – 19th century farm buildings adjacent to the site (piggery and store houses). The main buildings of the present Bu farm presumably date also from this period, as do a small number of horizontal mills with associated water management to the north of the site and a later Medieval vertical watermill which was destroyed by fire in the 1980s. A large modern barn was originally constructed in the 1950s by the farmer, being moved to its current location due north of the PIC due the discovery of the walling at the north-west which was later to be identified as the horizontal mill lade. This building was sited on structural remains which were preserved by a deliberate substantial sand layer, and these earlier remains were in part examined in 1986 by Batey<sup>126</sup> and additionally by Raymond Lamb and EASE in the 1990s. The barn itself was modified to become the Saga Centre.

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<sup>123</sup> Harland 2025, 389-414.

<sup>124</sup> Mainland and Batey 2019.

<sup>125</sup> Mainland et al 2015.

<sup>126</sup> Batey 2003, 53 as the Barn Trench.