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Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC278

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90034)

Taken into State care: 1933 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2004

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

BROUGH OF BIRSAY



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BROUGH OF BIRSAY

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The monument comprises an area of Pictish to medieval settlement and ecclesiastical remains, situated on part of a small tidal island off the North-West corner of Mainland Orkney. The Brough is the probable site of a Pictish power centre (little of this is visible), but most of the visible remains belong to the period when Orkney was under the control of Norway. Birsay was the centre of the Earldom of Orkney in the late 9th and 10th centuries, and later developed into a settlement associated with a church and monastery.

The dominant impression for the visitor is of the low foundations of an extensive range of buildings across a slope, a 12th-century church and monastery and a replica of a Pictish sculpture.

Access is limited by the tides; there is a small on-site museum (seasonal). Cliff edge features have all been subject to coastal erosion.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

The name derives from Old Norse *borg*, fortress or stronghold (this may apply to the defensive natural qualities rather than a specific structure) while Birsay derives from an Old Norse term for an island or promontory accessible by only a narrow neck of land. Birsay is mentioned in the *Orkneyinga Saga*. From this we know that Earl Thorfinn (d. 1065) 'had his permanent residence at Birsay, where he built and dedicated to Christ, a fine minster, the episcopal seat of the first bishop of Orkney', but we cannot be clear whether the Brough as opposed to Birsay village area is being referred to (there is an alternative candidate for the Christchurch under the present church in Birsay village).

Prehistoric: A Late Neolithic macehead find may provide evidence of prehistoric settlement on the Brough.

Pictish (7th/8th-centuries AD): With the exception of the well, almost none of the visible remains are Pictish, although archaeological evidence suggests this was a significant settlement and that further remains survive beneath the visible later features. Evidence for an earlier church has been found beneath the upstanding 12th-century one (see below), but on the basis of discoveries elsewhere this is probably Norse rather than Pictish. Pictish settlement remains have been found to the west, north and south of the churchyard, however. On the basis of the Pictish slab (see below), its iconography of leadership, and the evidence for fine metalworking in bronze, it has been suggested that the Brough of Birsay was a Pictish power centre, although this view is now being challenged by some. It is possible that the symbol-bearing stone was related to a contemporary church and burial ground.

Early Norse (9th/10th-centuries): The Norse may have deliberately established their main centre where the Pictish power base had been; the nature of the

relationship between native Picts and incoming Norse is unresolved and a subject of particular interest. Intensive settlement was constructed to the east of the present churchyard, accessible from an elaborate entrance. Buildings were accompanied by associated walls and a complex drainage system.

Late Norse and Medieval (11th to 15th-centuries): The key development during this period is the move of the Norse earldom's power base to Kirkwall in the 12th century.

Precise phasing and dating of the site's development is difficult given the quality of the surviving record. Many structures were modified and the layout of the settlement remodelled. At the core of the site is the present 12th-century church, with its nave, chancel, and apse at the east end. The construction of this, and an associated short-lived monastery, was presumably endowed by one of the earls of Orkney. A west porch or tower was planned, if not completed. Three Norse runic inscriptions were found within the church. A partition was inserted in the late Medieval period. A courtyard of associated buildings sits to the north, built and reconstructed in several phases, the latest of which may be 15th-century.

16th/17th-century: A number of finds from this period in the east part of the churchyard. A report of 1627 suggests that the church and the churchyard were no longer in use by that time.

Late 18th-century: A drawing published in 1773 shows the church as still largely complete, though, the *Statistical Account* of 1795 says the church was "now much neglected". The *Account* also noted a series of foundations in the area of the churchyard. A source of 1805 notes the tradition of pilgrimage here "till of late".

1866: Small-scale antiquarian excavations of the church by Sir Henry Dryden, who noted the enclosure wall around the churchyard, but mentioned no associated structures or graves.

1867: Further excavations by Mr Leask of Boardinghouse.

1921: The "Church walls are now, for the most part, almost level with the ground".

1934: Guardianship. The Ministry of Works commenced major programme of excavation, repair and partial restoration, interrupted by war in 1939. Construction of seawall.

1956-64: Excavation, consolidation and restoration works re-commenced. 1964 Mancini cast of Pictish sculpture erected.

1973: New series of excavations began to the east of the churchyard.

1974-82: Larger-scale excavations, both within and outwith the Guardianship area.

1993: Storms exposed archaeological deposits in the east cliff face, and these were cleaned and recorded prior to the consolidation of the cliff face.

Archaeological Overview

- Much of the history of this site (see above) is derived from archaeological excavations.
- The upstanding remains on the site represent only a part of the total settlement complex in terms of both vertical and horizontal extent.
- Brough of Birsay provides important evidence for the transition from Pictish to Norse authority in Orkney and the nature of contact between the Picts and incoming Norse.
- Brough of Birsay lies at the north-west corner of Birsay Bay. Evidence for extensive Pictish and Norse settlement has also been found on the Mainland side of this bay, including, to the south, Birsay village where the 16th- and 17th-century palace of the Stewart Earls of Orkney and parish church are still to be found.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- The Pictish cross slab recovered from excavations in 1935 was sold to the National Museums of Scotland, where it is now on display. This fragmentary but highly important sculpture has been recreated on site in the form of a cast, erected in the approximate area in which the broken, buried fragments were discovered.
- The Pictish slab has been incised with four so-called Pictish symbols and a figural scene. The figural scene is particularly interesting from an iconographic point of view because of the manner in which the relative authority of the three men is distinguished through differences in their appearance, clothing and weaponry.
- In 1934 one of the stones filling the church was found to carry a possible ogham inscription; recent attempts to locate this stone have not been successful.
- The 12th-century church of St Peter and its associated monastic buildings preserves in its plan and surviving lower levels the clear layout of a small, but sophisticated Romanesque church. Arguably this is the most sophisticated church plan in Orkney, other than St Magnus' Cathedral, Kirkwall. It is of a form that can be paralleled at other church sites in northern Scotland and is reflective of architectural trends around the North Sea. There may have been a square tower at the west end and windows were glazed.
- Distinctive features of the domestic buildings include hall houses, a blacksmith's workshop, barn, and sauna. The Norse buildings at Brough of Birsay are internationally significant not simply because of the quality of their preservation, but also their range. They therefore enhance our understanding of the nature of Norse architecture and challenge the existing stereotypes.

The small visitor centre on the island contains important early sculptures and very interesting Viking artefacts.

Social Overview

- Not assessed.

Spiritual Overview

- Symbol-incised stones are thought to have had a ritual function. In some instances such monuments are directly associated with burials; the tradition of the Brough stone being associated with a triple burial is highly questionable, but it does seem to have been found in what was an early burial place. Archaeologists debate whether the people who were buried in these were pagans or early Christians continuing earlier burial rites. Even if pagan, it is likely that these monuments were being created by people who would have been aware that some of their fellow Picts were Christian. The precise meaning of such symbols remains the subject of debate (see below).
- It used to be thought that the 12th-century church on the Brough was Thorfinn's minster church and the place in which the bones of the martyr, St Magnus, were first buried (1116/7) before their removal to Kirkwall (c. 1135). The mid-12th century was the point at which the ecclesiastical importance of Birsay was eclipsed, although it remained a seat of the Earldom until the late 16th century. However, it is now thought most likely that Magnus was first buried in a church underneath the present parish church in Birsay village (St Magnus', where some archaeological evidence for Christian activity has been found from the 9th century onwards). None the less, the church on the Brough was on the itinerary of St Magnus pilgrims well into the Middle Ages and beyond.

Aesthetic Overview

- The remains now nestle on the lower, landward-facing slope of the Brough. The island itself and the surrounding Mainland have some dramatic cliffs and often wild seas. At the crest of the island is a small lighthouse.
- The visitor's approach to the site is enhanced by the unusual experience of walking across a tidal causeway.
- Despite the fragmentary condition of the original, the Pictish slab from Brough of Birsay is very important, and particularly well known. The stone bears four designs (the 'mirror case', 'crescent and v-rod', 'swimming elephant' and eagle). In this case the original stone was very thin and it is unclear if this was intended to be mounted into a structure; if it was self-supporting it seems that the other face may have been lost. For this reason we cannot be sure whether this was originally a symbol-bearing cross slab.
- Below the symbols is a figural scene of three male warriors with long robes, sword, spears and square shields processing to the right. The clothing, weaponry and hair of the man at the front is more ornate, and he is presumably the leader, perhaps a local king. The date of the slab is difficult to ascertain precisely but is perhaps 8th-century. If a symbol-incised stone, the inclusion of secular imagery of this nature is certainly usual; if a symbol-bearing cross slab

this image can be contrasted with the more familiar aristocratic hunting scenes deployed further south in Pictland.

- The modern seawall is a technical and artistic achievement in its own right.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- The archaeology encountered in the 1930s-1950s is not well understood, not least because of the failure of the excavators to publish. Archives have been used to attempt to reconstruct and report the discoveries of the 1930s; a similar exercise for the work of the '40s and '50s is still in preparation (Morris et al.).
- The most recent work by Professor Morris also remains to be published.
- The pre-Norse activity on the site is not well understood.
- The transition from Pictish to Norse power, and what this means for the people who lived in Orkney, is not well understood.
- The nature and function of Norse activity on the site is not well understood (see above), nor is the site's wider social, environmental and economic context.
- A report on our understanding of the church on the Brough in the light of the discoveries in Birsay village was forthcoming (Fawcett).
- In the absence of documentary sources, very little is known of monastic houses in the Northern Isles in general; the most comparable site, **Eynhallow**, has not been archaeologically investigated.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- The Brough of Birsay was a centre of local and regional importance from perhaps as early as the 7th century AD to the 15th-century AD. Probably a Pictish power centre, Birsay was the seat of the Earldom of Orkney in the late 9th and 10th centuries, and the buildings on the Brough surely relate in some way to this (the possibility that the centre was in fact near Birsay village cannot, however, be discounted). As such, for a part of its history, the Brough was therefore the regional centre of a part of the Norwegian kingdom and the majority of activity on it relates to the period of 600 or so years when Orkney was formally part of Norway.
- The Brough is part of a busy complex of Viking, Norse and later settlement around Birsay Bay, an area that includes the earl's permanent residence and the first Orcadian bishopric. The activity on the Brough needs to be understood in the context of this wider activity.
- The monument is significant for our understanding of pre-Norse to medieval Society in northern Scotland and offers a major contribution to our understanding of the transition from Pictish to Norse rule in the north of Scotland.

- The Norse houses are among the best preserved in the Viking world, and they are by no means typical.
- The Brough contains several features of particular architectural and aesthetic interest, notably a (replica of a) Pictish symbol-bearing slab, one of the best preserved and most extensive range of Norse houses in Scotland, and the low foundations of one of Orkney's/the Orkney Earldom's most sophisticated buildings, a Romanesque church and its associated monastery.
- The documentary sources, monuments and artefacts from this site testify to active connections between Orkney and the rest of the British Isles and Europe. In general, the perceived remoteness of this settlement on the north-west coast of Orkney is misleading, not least in a time when maritime connections between Ireland, the west of Scotland and the Norwegian homeland was so important, and east coast trading connections around the North Sea were also very active.

Associated Properties

In immediate vicinity, **Earl's Palace, Birsay**, St Magnus' Parish Church, Birsay, St Magnus', Kirkwall. Related ecclesiastical sites include **Eynhallow, St Mary's Wyre, St Magnus, Egilsay, Orphir Church, Westside, Tuquoy**, Westray; Caithness: **St Mary's Crosskirk**. Contemporary Norse settlement sites include **Earl's Bu, Orphir, Cobbie Row's Castle, Jarlshof** and, in the widest sense, Norse re-use of Mousa.

Orkney Islands Council (OIC) has a network of so-called Saga Sites, including a Visitor Centre by **Orphir**. OIC have plans to better develop and promote this network and are involved in a European-funded project, Destination Viking Sagalands. This is led by a government agency in Iceland and focuses on how sagas (and storytelling) can contribute to rural regeneration in the participating areas (South Greenland, various parts of Iceland, Faroes, Orkneys and the Lofoten and Troms areas of Northern Norway, in addition to a project in Northern Sweden).

Brough of Deerness (was HES, now OIC, stone chapel 10th century or later) is one of many sites in Orkney with foundations of Norse chapels, but this main example is formally accessible. St Boniface, Papa Westray (church, in occasional use and open to public) is broadly contemporary and its graveyard includes a distinctive Norse hogback monument.

Finds from the site are on display in the site museum, Orkney Museum, Tankerness House, and the National Museums of Scotland in Edinburgh.

Keywords Picts, Vikings, Norse, medieval, Pictish symbols, Pictish figural carving, Pictish, Viking and Norse houses, sauna, smithy, boat naust, Romanesque, chapel/church, graveyard, Orkneyinga Saga, Norway.