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Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90137)

Taken into State care: 1907 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2004

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

ST MAGNUS CHURCH, EGILSAY



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ST MAGNUS CHURCH, EGILSAY

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The monument comprises the unroofed but otherwise largely complete remains of a church of late Norse (12th-century) date, and a very small part of the enclosed graveyard around it. Egilsay is a small island to the east of Rousay and is part of the Orcadian northern isles. The church, with its distinctive, tall tower is prominently sited on the highest point of this largely flat island.

The church consists of a rectangular chancel, a nave and cylindrical western tower arranged on an east-west axis, with an overall length of 19.2m. The chancel is barrel-vaulted with a chamber above reached through an arched entrance in its west wall. The nave is a short rectangle with a doorway towards the end of each side wall, whilst the tower has three doorways one above the other on its eastern face. The tower survives to a height of about 15m, although it probably originally stood to about 19m.

The church can be reached after a short walk from the ferry. The official Historic Environment Scotland route of access to this site leads through a farm and the Council's signposted alternative is across fields. While less direct, an alternative route is to follow the road and enter the site along the formal track to the graveyard, passing en route the school and redundant church (see below).

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- The church is dedicated to St Magnus, a local earl who was murdered by a rival Orkney earl (Haakon) on the island around AD 1116. It seems likely to have been the church recorded in *Magnus' saga* as having been built to mark the place of his martyrdom (the dedication to St Magnus can only be traced back to 16th century). The saga refers to a second church where Magnus and his companions sheltered while waiting to confront Haakon. A likely date for construction on historical and architectural grounds would therefore be after 1136, when Magnus' sanctity was recognised by Bishop William of Orkney and the future Earl Rognvald.
- A colourful story of the Earl's martyrdom, and the events leading up to it, can be found in the sagas.
- There are traditions that place the martyrdom elsewhere on the island (HY 470 300) where a stone marker was set up in 1937 and can now be visited.
- Magnus was first buried in Christchurch, Birsay (now thought most likely to be under Birsay parish church rather than **Brough of Birsay**).
- 1774 sketch by Low shows church as roofed, and the tower with a domed roof. Ditto Hibbert in 1822.
- Between 1822 and 1846 tower and church lose their roofs (there is the suggestion the top of the tower was removed to build a barn).

- 1907 State care.

Archaeological Overview

- From research to date, nothing can be gleaned about when and how the church was cleared. Nothing is known of the sub-surface archaeology of the site, but the potential is probably high.
- The area of archaeological interest is larger than the Property in Care. A small investigation in 2003 confirmed that an early stone wall, perhaps an earlier graveyard enclosure, lies just beyond the present graveyard wall on the east. There is certainly the potential for human remains, as well as structural evidence, to survive in and around the church.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- After St Magnus' Cathedral in Kirkwall, this is the finest surviving Norse church in Scotland. Its fine build and elaborate structure is testimony to the wealth and authority of the Norse rulers of northern Scotland; the Orkney Earldom.
- The significance of the church is enhanced by the fact that, apart from having lost its roof, the top of the tower and minor parts of the gable wall-heads, it is not only complete, but largely of one build (the most significant addition being some lintelled windows).
- The chamber above the chancel is an unusual feature, possibly a treasury/sacristy. There is also evidence for the presence of a first-floor timber gallery for an ecclesiastical or lay magnate, as can be paralleled in churches elsewhere.
- The prominent tower is the only surviving example of a small group of distinctive late Norse towers in Orkney (e.g. Stenness Kirk) and Shetland (e.g. Pabil, Burra) the architectural parallels of which are to be found in North Germany and around the Norse sea (contrary to a popular perception of links with Irish round towers). This is further architectural evidence for the far-flung contacts of the Norse earls.
- An 1846 survey of the unroofed church by the famous English architect, Sir Henry Dryden, is a useful source of evidence for the state of the church prior to its coming into State care. His early pioneering work is also important for our understanding of other Properties in Care, such as **St Mary's, Wyre**.

Social Overview

- The population of this small island is on the decline. The local community recognise the importance of St Magnus and place a high value on it as a tourist attraction that might have the potential to address some of their economic and social needs, if more visitors might be attracted to it. The potential certainly exists for more to be made of the church and other places of interest on the island, but there is an absence of facilities for visitors during their minimum stay of around 4 hours on the island. (The existence of a small redundant church building as well as a school, both near the church, should be noted. In contrast

to some of the other small islands, there is no local heritage centre or museum.)

- Modern Orcadian society attaches a high significance to the fact it was part of Norway for around 600 years.

Spiritual Overview

- St Magnus is a local saint with an international cult. After St Magnus' Cathedral in Orkney (where his bones were eventually placed, and rediscovered in 1919), Egilsay and Birsay are the most important sites associated with him. In the past Egilsay was therefore an important place of pilgrimage. There has been the occasional religious service on the site, e.g. in 1937 to celebrate octo-centenary of St Magnus' Cathedral. Present local spiritual views on St Magnus have not been assessed.
- The graveyard around St Magnus is still an active place of burial.
- The present owner of the church is unknown, but the guardianship deed gave the present and future proprietor of Tankerness Estates right of burial for themselves or members of their family.

Aesthetic Overview

- This beautiful church, more particularly its tower, is a stunning landmark from land and sea, visible over a considerable distance. Its scale, design and location reinforce the wealth, connections and maritime nature of the Orkney Earldom.
- Were the top of the tower accessible to the visiting public, it would offer unparalleled views of an important part of the Orcadian northern isles and reinforce the strategic importance of this particular location to maritime connections.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Nothing is known of the archaeology of the site/wider site, other than that there was an earlier boundary wall.
- Little reliable information is known of the wider archaeology of Egilsay, including the site of the second Norse church or contemporary Norse settlement. There is a suggestion that the bishop might have had a residence on the island, for instance.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- After St Magnus' Cathedral in Kirkwall, this is the best preserved Norse church in Scotland.
- The church is one of three sites established in Orkney around 1136 actively to commemorate and promote a local saint (at places of his martyrdom – **Egilsay**, burial – Birsay/**Brough of Birsay** and shrine - Kirkwall) who was the uncle of the ascending claimant to the earldom, Rognvald. The church at Egilsay is

therefore reflective of the wealth and sophistication of the Orkney's 12th-century Golden Age, and the close relationship between the earldom and the church.

- The establishment of the church can be linked to the colourful events described in Scandinavian sagas.
- The church is not simply exceptionally well-preserved, but its tower is a unique survival of a small group of distinctive Norse towers in Orkney and Shetland with architectural parallels in North Germany and around the North Sea. This is further evidence for the far-flung, maritime trading and political contacts of the Orkney earldom.
- One of several exceptionally well-preserved Norse buildings in Scotland, a significant proportion of which are in HES care in Orkney, Shetland and Caithness.
- A significant, if under-appreciated, part of the visible evidence for the Norse character of northern Scotland which was part of the Orkney earldom from the late 9th century to 1468. This Norse heritage is particularly valued by present day Orcadians and, indeed, Norwegians.
- Valuable archive sources give an impression of the appearance of the church before it lost the top of its tower and roof.
- The 'development' of this site as a visitor attraction has been perceived by islanders as holding the key to the economic and social regeneration of their fragile community.

Associated Properties

Elsewhere PIC in Orkney: **St Mary's Chapel, Wyre; Eynhallow, Orphir church and Bu**, and **Brough of Birsay**, mainland Orkney; **Westside, Tuquoy**, Westray; **Cobbie Row's Castle**. Caithness: **Castle of Old Wick; St Mary's Crosskirk**.

Because of its geographical location and the nature of the local ferry service, there is a logistical connection between Historic Environment Scotland monuments on Wyre and Rousay in particular, including contemporary monuments at **Cobbie Row's Castle** and **St Mary's, Wyre**, as well as the prehistoric monuments on Rousay. The Westness Walk on Rousay includes contemporary monuments that are also accessible to the visiting public.

A further connection is all sites associated with the life and death of St Magnus, specifically **Brough of Birsay**/Birsay and St Magnus' Cathedral, Kirkwall.

Orkney Islands Council has a network of so-called Saga Sites, including a Visitor Centre by **Orphir**. Old schemes include OIC having panels at or near some of our sites, including **St Magnus**.

In broad terms, links to other HES Norse sites, e.g. **Jarlshof, Mousa** (later reuse).

Artefacts associated with St Magnus cult in Tankerness House, Orkney Museums.

Keywords Norse, medieval, church, round tower, St Magnus, Magnus Saga, Orkney Earldom, Egilsay, Orkney, Norway, North Sea.