

The Brough of Birsay
By Danielle R. Christie

The Brough of Birsay is located just off the northwest coast of the mainland of Orkney, a “nearby tidal island [that can be] reached by foot causeway at low water” (Tomes 463). The different artifacts and important religious and political buildings discovered there make the Brough of Birsay one of the most significant places in Scotland, as it links the country to England, Ireland, and the rest of Europe (Ritchie, “Brough” 2). The Brough of Birsay was situated in an exceptional geographic location for trade since it was settled on the northern route:

They could victual ships, exact tolls from them, or indulge in outright piracy against them. At this period [around the eleventh century] the Isles and Orkney and Shetland arguably became richer than they were ever to become again. A combination of good land and external revenue from the trade routes brought wealth which is reflected in the splendour of the latest building at Birsay and the beginnings of the rise of Kirkwall. (Wilson 111)

The Brough of Birsay, situated in prime trading condition, was such a wealthy area because of it. Many rich people had settled there, but the island community was rich in its own right. The community did not depend on outside support completely, as they had a great supply of land, and therefore could earn money from farming.

The names ‘Brough’ and ‘Birsay’ both stem from the Old Norse word, borg, which means ‘fort,’ though the meanings of each are slightly different. Brough refers to the “naturally defensive qualities of the island, whereas Birsay, or Byrgisey in its older form, means specifically an island or promontory accessible only by a narrow neck of land” (Ritchie “Brough” 14). In present day, the island is about “21 hectares (52 acres) in area but erosion of the coastal fringe of the Norse settlement shows that much land has been lost over the last eight centuries” (15). Birsay is also a very important site in the present day; it is a site of “interdisciplinary paleoeconomic and paleoecological research, where innovative sampling strategies and intensive bioarchaeological analyses have set new standards for the region” (McGovern 338). McGovern goes on to explain that the marine erosion found in the Birsay Bay area has made it a focal point for such research (338).

The Brough of Birsay is commonly identified with the historical figure known as Earl Thorfinn (Tomes 463). The Orkneyinga saga explains that Earl Thorfinn, once he “was finished with piracy and devoted all his free time to the government of his people...established permanent residency at Birsay” (Pálsson, et al. 75). Christopher Morris’s research reveals that this event approximately occurred in c. 1048 (286). He also proposes that this idea of ‘permanent residence’ “might indeed be taken to imply a previous impermanence, or peripatetic system of residence by the Earls, which was ended by Earl Thorfinn” (286). This reference to Earl Thorfinn is also somewhat curious, claims Anna Ritchie, as this “permanent residence” might also insinuate that this was a definite departure from Thorfinn’s usual customary traveling from estate to estate in Orkney and Caithness (“Brough” 7). Such a decision makes one wonder why it was that Earl Thorfinn chose Birsay as the place to make his permanent residence. Ritchie suggests that Earl Thorfinn’s establishment at the Brough permanently was a “shrewd political move...to make visible and unmistakable the reality of Norse dominance over the native population of the Island (“Brough” 7).

Not only did Earl Thorfinn live in Birsay, but he also took the time to build a church there, which he named Christ Church, the first seat of Orkney’s first bishop (Pálsson, et al. 75). It is suggested by some

researchers that “the establishment of the bishop’s seat at Birsay could be seen as a symbolic act by the first Christians to achieve absolute power in the earldom” (Barret, et al. 15). Researchers diverge on the issue of whether or not Earl Thorfinn’s Christchurch and residence were on the Brough of Birsay or the Mainland; that is to say, at this point, the matter is still open to debate and as of yet has not been determined. Ritchie conjectures that “Thorfinn’s Christchurch was built in the mid eleventh century, whereas most architectural historians date the Brough church in the early twelfth century” (“Brough” 7).

The Orkneyinga Saga also relates that Earl Thorfinn “died towards the end of the reign of Harald Sigurdson and was buried at Christchurch, Birsay, the very church he had built” (Palsson, et al. 75). This event happened around the year c. 1065 (Morris 286). One might suggest that, because Earl Thorfinn chose to be buried at Christchurch, that it only makes concrete his connection to Birsay. Tomes asserts that Christ Church was “built over the foundations of an earlier Celtic Church, with, to the south, the Celtic graveyard partly underlying the Norse” (463). This demonstrates that the Vikings did not want to extinguish the Pictish religious culture that came before them, but to simply build off of what was already there. Christ Church was later “promoted into a cathedral” and in the north there are remains of a bishop’s palace, including a cloister (463). Anna Ritchie suggests that “the Brough remained a place of pilgrimage in post-Reformation times, and yet, compared to other Orcadian churches, the fabric of the Church has not survived well” (“Brough” 8).

The Brough of Birsay was a Pictish community. The Pictish people inhabited it in the seventh and eighth centuries before it was discovered by the Vikings; the Pictish settlement is represented by “a carved symbol stone of which a cast stands in the churchyard” (“Brough” 2-5). This symbol stone displays four common Pictish symbols: “the ‘mirror-case,’ the ‘crescent and V-rod,’ the ‘swimming elephant,’ and the ‘eagle.’” (15). Besides this, the stone also depicts three armed men, with one man clearly standing out as the leader (15). Ritchie goes on to describe the remains that have been found of Pictish buildings as well as the traces of a “bronze workshop producing fine jewelry” (“Brough” 2). Although none of the Pictish buildings can be seen anymore, there still is a small well associated with “Pictish metalworking in an enclosure on the east side of the churchyard” (16).

Excavation has revealed a considerable amount of information about the area: it has “yielded broken clay molds and crucibles, fragments of bronze sheeting and coloured glass, intermixed with ash from the metalworker’s hearth” (16). In Viking Scotland, Anna Ritchie indicates that “metalworking is likely to have been a specialized craft even in rural areas; an iron smithy has been excavated on the Brough of Birsay” (37). Several Pictish settlements have been located around the Bay of Birsay, including the Point of Buckquoy: many traces of human occupation from early prehistoric times into the Viking Age were uncovered in the erosion found on the south side of the Point (Ritchie “Brough” 14). It has been hypothesized that the Point of Buckquoy, which lies opposite the Brough of Birsay, “functioned as the home farm for the community living on the Brough” (Morris 290). The many artifacts that have been discovered at the Brough are able to provide a glimpse of what the domestic activities were there:

Spinning and weaving are represented by spindle-whorls and loomweights and by a small weaving tablet of the kind used to make decorative braids...Animal bones were used to make combs, dress pins and playing pieces for board games. Bread, porridge and ale were made from barley and oats grown on mainland farms. Whetstones for sharpening blades were essential, often perforated at one end to hang from the owner’s belt. (Ritchie “Brough” 20)

It is clear, however, that the Brough settlers still required many things from the Mainland. For example, the island of Birsay was simply not conducive to raising animals, or to growing barley and oats. Ritchie

contends that there is evidence of “iron-working, essential for the maintenance and replacement of tools and weapons”, and the presence of “large fish-bones and line-sinkers indicates that fishing from boats was carried out from the island itself” (“Viking Scotland” 51).

When the Vikings encountered the indigenous people in Scotland, they appeared to recognize the strength of the Christian culture there. Anna Ritchie asserts that the Vikings did not destroy the Pictish culture when they landed on Birsay, but preserved it:

The Vikings were taking over existing patterns of land ownership and administration, and [that] this was particularly clear at Birsay in Orkney, a Pictish power base which fell early into Viking hands. Not only were farms around the Bay of Birsay and the high status island settlement on the Brough of Birsay taken over, but individual house-plots on the Brough were maintained. (“Viking Scotland” 25)

It is clear that the Vikings did not want to destroy the culture they fell upon; rather, they wanted to preserve it and control it themselves. McGovern supports this idea, suggesting that “there was a relatively peaceful assimilation of Pictish residents to Scandinavian dwelling styles and language” (337). The Norsemen appeared at the Brough of Birsay around the ninth century, and developed the settlement for the next three centuries or so (Ritchie “Brough” 2). Because they didn’t want to harm the culture they had come to respect, a great deal of this development was the process of building and rebuilding over the previous Pictish buildings.

The Brough of Birsay was a very important site of religious history, as was the country of Scotland in general. Anna Ritchie contends that “the single most important difference between the Vikings and the peoples they encountered in Scotland was religion,” as Vikings were pagan and worshipped many Gods, whereas Scotland was part of the Christian world (“Viking Scotland” 25). Ritchie also discusses the religious significance of Birsay:

By the eleventh century, the Church in Orkney belonged to an episcopal framework, and its bishops owed allegiance initially to the archbishoprics of Hamburg-Bremen in Germany and York in England, then from 1104 to the archbishoprics of Lund in Sweden, until 1154 when Orkney and Shetland were transferred to Nidaros (Trondheim) in Norway...Thus a thousand years ago, Birsay was an integral part of early medieval Europe, maintaining links with Scotland, Ireland, England, Scandinavia and even Rome. (“Brough” 8)

Because Birsay was integrated into this “Episcopal framework,” they were very well connected to other countries across Europe. Birsay was also the final resting place of a significantly important martyr of the Viking age, St. Magnus. After ruling Orkney jointly with Earl Hakon for seven years, Earl Magnus was ultimately the victim of treachery from his co-ruler, and was executed by him (Palsson, et al. 95). After Magnus’ mother beseeched Hakon to let her bring her son to a church, and he agreed, “Earl Magnus’ body was carried to the Mainland and buried at Christ Church, which Earl Thorfinn had built” (Palsson, et al. 96). Once he was buried, his grave became a place of miracles: sick people went there because if they kept vigil with his grave, their illnesses were cured (Palsson, et al. 96).

The author of The Orkneyinga Saga goes on to tell that St. Magnus’ burial occurred when the Bishop of Orkney was William, and he was “the first resident bishop in the islands, and the episcopal seat was at Christ Church, Birsay” (Palsson, et al. 97). William, who was known as a doubter of the saintliness of Earl Magnus, was in Christ Church one day praying when all of a sudden he was struck with blindness and could not find his way out. He went to St. Magnus’ grave and “vowed that he would translate the holy

relics of Earl Magnus whether Earl Paul (another doubter of St. Magnus) liked it or not, and at once he regained his sight (Palsson, et al. 103-4). Divine intervention did not only happen to important religious figures like Bishop William, but to common people as well. There was a good farmer named Gunni from Westray whom St. Magnus came to him in a dream, telling him to report to Bishop William that he wanted to leave Birsay and go to Kirkwall (Palsson, et al. 104). When he hadn't immediately obeyed the order, St. Magnus came to him again and told him that if he didn't go to Birsay and deliver the message, he would suffer in the next life: as a result, Gunni went and told his dream at Mass to the whole congregation (Palsson, et al. 104). The Bishop did indeed move the holy relics to Kirkwall and "a good many miracles happened immediately after these events" (Palsson, et al. 105). The Orkneyinga Saga helps to illustrate the importance of religious institutions and how profound the impact of the miracles of St. Magnus were upon the people of Orkney. Indeed, Anna Ritchie explains that "the political and ecclesiastical importance of Birsay was eclipsed in the twelfth century with the foundation of the St. Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall, itself preceded by the removal of St. Magnus' bodily relics from Birsay to Kirkwall" ("Brough" 8).

The most recent ruins on Birsay are the remains of the "sixteenth century courtyard palace built by Robert Stewart, Earl of Orkney," yet several Norse remains have been discovered as well (Ritchie "Brough" 14). To the north of the alleged site of Christchurch are the remains of the bishop's palace, with a cloister (Tomes 463). Below this, by the shore, are the quite expansive remains of Earl Thorfinn's hall, "much complicated by the foundations of an earlier hall and what is left of later ecclesiastical buildings; not only that, but spreading up the hill, are the outlines of a number of Norse houses" (Tomes 463). Excavation has shown that, during the four or five centuries in which these houses have been built and rebuilt, the plots for those buildings have been preserved from Pictish into Norse occupation ("Brough" 18).

Typical Norse houses like those at Jarlshof and the Brough were known as "hall-houses" since each consists of a single large room (Ritchie "Brough" 17). In Viking Scotland, Ritchie further describes the kinds of houses found at the Brough of Birsay:

Hall-house and separate outhouse was the primary design, and later a nucleated design was adopted in which additional rooms were built on to the sides of the main house. Missing from the Brough of Birsay is the true longhouse, in which a byre was added to one end of the dwelling house, for this type of building was irrelevant to an island dependent on the mainland for animal husbandry. (51)

The house that is asserted to belong to Earl Thorfinn has remains that suggest that this might be true. There are remnants of what might have been a sauna, as it had "stone benches along the walls, and there appears to be a heating system which sent hot air along stone-lined ducts between the benches" (Ritchie "Brough" 19). If this house had the luxury of a sauna within it, this most certainly suggests that someone of great wealth and importance dwelled there. The Brough of Birsay is clearly archaeologically and historically rich, a settlement site abundant in both political and religious significance.