

The Brough of Birsay
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The Brough of Birsay is a “small tidal island” located at the northwest corner of Orkney. The Orkney Islands are situated off the northern tip of present day Scotland (Graham-Campbell 216). Not only an important area for the Norse settlers in the eleventh and twelfth century, the Brough of Birsay was also an area of importance during the Pictish period. Norse settlements were built directly on top of the old Pictish settlements, which often makes it difficult to distinguish the settlements of the Norse period from the settlements of the Pictish period.

To further complicate the dating, Norse settlers used the stones from the Pictish settlements in their own new structures. Anna Ritchie talks of the Norse arriving in the Brough of Birsay around the ninth century. After that they settled and continued to grow and develop for three centuries (Ritchie 2). The fact that the Norse built over existing Pictish settlements is an example of the Viking's strategy of incorporating other cultures into their own. Despite preconceptions, the Vikings did not always obliterate areas they went to. However, place names and carvings from the Pictish period are almost completely absent from the Norse settlement remains at Brough of Birsay, as the Norse kept only a handful of indigenous names. The continuation of Pictish society, an overlap of the two groups, is further supported by the finding that Pictish artifacts continued to be used and buildings from the Pictish were reused by the Norse in later periods (Richards 91). The Brough of Birsay name itself comes from Old Norse words. Brough comes from the word *borg*, meaning “fort.” *Birsay* refers to an island or land with limited accessibility (Ritchie 14).

The largest of the minor Orkney Islands, the Brough of Birsay, is located northwest off Mainland, the principle island of the Orkney archipelago. It is twenty one hectares, or almost fifty two acres, and has cliffs reaching a height of forty five meters. There are no trees and although there are springs, there is a lack of fresh water streams. The absence of trees is quite significant when it comes to ship building as ship building was important to Viking settlers. Despite the findings of boat nails, boat building and boat repairing is not thought to have necessarily taken place on location at the Brough of Birsay as, “with a shortage of timber, the planks from any wrecked or abandoned boat would have been of value” (Curle 101). Some trees and boat supplies must have been present though as the Vikings were masters of boat building and it was their primary form of transportation. Indeed being an island, ships were necessary for the original settlers and any new settlers to come later.

During the summer months, sheep grazed freely across the island, but during the winter months, Birsay was a completely different environment. The waves of the Atlantic storms rose up and crashed along the cliffs of the island; thus water streamed along almost the entirety of the Brough (Curle 11).

Settlement on Orkney provided the “launch pad” for the ongoing early Viking raids in northern Britain and Ireland. The first settlers most likely left Norway to escape the increasingly dominant royal authority (Forte et al. 265). While the island proved to be a settlement for the one-time raiders and pirates known as the Vikings, excavations of Shetland and Orkney suggest that Scandinavian settlers had arrived long before the Viking raids began in the 790s. Even still, Viking raiders were not the first settlers nor were the companions of Thorfinn or other raiders seeking a different area to finally settle down. Rather, it was farmer type individuals who came early on to the previously Pictish area. These farming settlers have been described as people “who quickly absorbed the local population – the Picts – and their culture” (Magnusson 10). This absorption of the culture is made evident by several characters

in sagas, as well as by evidence including the rebuilding on existing Pictish settlements and the use of Pictish tools.

The Pictish settlement, and later the Norse one, is primarily concentrated on the southern side of the island (Graham-Campbell 216). Erosion a long-term problem for this site,, continues to threaten the remains of the settlement. Fortunately, the authorities have recently started preventative work to preserve the remains of the Pictish and Norse settlements for further study and historical enjoyment by future generations (Curle, 11). Drainage is an important factor in the placement of buildings on this island. In a cluster of Norse buildings, structures are oriented up and down, which ensures that the water would not settle in the buildings. Instead it would drain down the side of the island (Graham-Campbell 216). Because one side of the island is a mere four meters above the water level, high waves can cause the water to reach the settlement as it often did in the winter months and in heavy rain. Therefore, substantial drainage planning was critical in the design of the settlement.

One building in the Norse settlement is of particular significance: Pictish stones were used in the construction of a twelfth century church on the Brough of Birsay (Graham-Campbell 216). Although scholarly opinion seems to favor a nearby site on Mainland at the settlement of Birsay, some believe that the church on the Brough of Birsay is the same one mentioned in *Orkneyinga Saga*. Earl Thorfinn, one of the most famous individuals associated with the Brough of Birsay, constructed a church known as Christchurch, in the mid-eleventh century directly next to his own residence (Forte et al. 283). Thorfinn was raised in Caithness and later laid claim to his father's domain. Thorfinn was able to gain control of his share of the island by gaining support due to the suffering of Orkney under the Danish raids through the 1020s (Forte et al 272). Thorfinn was responsible for many advancements in the ruling of Orkney but his achievements were not limited to Birsay alone:

“Whilst in the past he [Thorfinn] has been presented as the last of the great Viking earls of Orkney, closer consideration of his achievements shows him to have been a figure who quite successfully straddled a culture divide. On the one hand, his background was rooted firmly in the traditions of the Scandinavian past, but on the other he strove to present himself as a figure of European stature” (Forte et al 275-276).

Thorfinn clearly had a significant impact on the Orkney Islands and on the Brough of Birsay in particular. Forte comments that “it was not until the process of decline had become manifest that it was recognized that the death of Thorfinn had marked the passage of Orkney's golden age” (277). The Brough of Birsay is particularly important to Thorfinn because it may have been the location of his church.

Christchurch is the site often referenced in regards to miracles and marvels in *Orkneyinga Saga*. These miracles are often attributed to the “saintliness of Earl Magnus” (Palsson et al. 102). Magnus was established as an Earl in Caithness with King Edgar's support. After the death of Magnus Barlegs there were competing parties for the earldom, and they all claimed to have ownership by birthright. Earl Magnus was the last to arrive in Orkney to claim his inheritance. The cousins, Hakon and Magnus, created a settlement that lasted for almost ten years, but as the peace between the cousins began to fade, a settlement discussion was planned after Easter 1115. Here, as the *Orkneyinga Saga* also portrays, Magnus was killed by his cousin Hakon. By killing Magnus, Hakon gained complete control of the areas including the Brough of Birsay. This murder seems to have troubled Hakon later on, however, and he attempted to do penance for this murder (Forte, et al. 280-281). Earl Magnus's grave was erected, at request of Magnus' mother, at Christchurch. At this site “a bright heavenly light was often

seen" (Palsson et al. 96). This heavenly natural phenomenon could be an explanation for why many Norse individuals went to Magnus's grave to pray and many miracles are reported to have happened there.

Miracles were not few and far between in this particular site. A blind man and two sick individuals prayed at the grave of Earl Magnus. Earl Magnus appeared to them along with God and the cripples "straightened up" and the blind man "was able to tell one hand from the other." Another miracle involved twenty-four sick individuals all gaining back their health after keeping vigil at Earl Magnus's grave. Many other miracles of similar attributes are reported at Earl Magnus's grave, showing the spiritual significance of Christchurch, and specifically Earl Magnus's resting place.

Many Vikings subscribed to the practice of raiding over the summer months and settling in the winter. The Brough of Birsay and other settlements in Orkney and Shetland served as winter bases for the Vikings (Palsson et al. 26). Thorfinn, after completing his piracy and raiding, and making his pilgrimage to Rome, moved to Birsay permanently. Viking employment of the islands began in the ninth century as "little more than the seasonal occupation" (Forte et al. 265). Permanent residence, like that of Thorfinn, is "linked by historical tradition to the influence of Olaf the White and the efforts of the kings of Vestfold in Norway to curb the activities of island-based pirates" (Forte et al. 265). Sagas suggest that this transition to permanent residence occurred around the thirteenth century. A Viking did not always pillage for the entirety of his life; Vikings often settled in permanent residences, in various locations such as Birsay.

Norse houses are differentiated from their Pictish counterparts at this site by their rectangular design. The preceding Pictish houses were generally based on circular or oval forms. The Norse houses found in the earlier periods are likely to be of farmers who immigrated. They may have still gone raiding, but there was an eventual shift to permanent settlements (Magnusson 10). The walls of the houses were normally bowed slightly and contained an earth core. In addition to the house itself, there were outbuildings such as "byres, barns, smithies, and such like." Boathouses are also not uncommon in coastal areas that have a sheltered cove or an inlet for protection. The overall settlement pattern was a "dispersed one." Occasionally a few houses and their outbuildings were grouped together, but this was by no means the norm. Furthermore, these settlements have no evidence of defense from ramparts or other structures (Hall 19-20).

The settlements could be quite large and have a number of buildings serving different functions. At the Brough of Birsay the "foundations of several sub rectangular structures from a number of periods of occupation are huddled around a small 12th-century church" (Graham-Campbell 215).

Norse houses are not the traditional houses one considers today. Instead of several rooms divided up, Viking Age homes tend to be one large room and are known as "hall-houses" (Ritchie 17). Richards talks of Pictish settlements being covered by rectangular, often single roomed, Norse structures. Some Norse halls had wall benches and box beds (Richards 91). C. L. Curle talks of several house sites excavated in the Brough of Birsay, most of which are only one room, though there is mention of one house site containing multiple rooms. Finds in these houses include a bone comb, fragment of whetstone, iron nails, iron bolts, bone pins, and various unidentified iron and clay fragments (Curle 85-88). These single homes provide an indication of the simple function of the Norse house, but these artifacts reveal some of the varied activities carried out by the inhabitants of such a house.

Overall, Norse finds at the Brough of Birsay are relatively few compared with those from the Pictish period. The important finds are a seal tooth amulet which had runic inscriptions on it, as well as “three bone combs, a small bone weaving tablet, two bone otter whistles or needle cases, a pair of bronze tweezers and two spindle whorls of polished statite” and a number of broken boat nails (Curle 101). Curle argues that this community imported many of their needs. Spinning and weaving probably took place very infrequently and the only industrial object found was the whale bone. Few personal items were discovered which give insight into that area of life, but some objects that were found were a strap end of bronze with an animal head and a long dress pick. On the other hand, tools and objects of utility were much more common in this area. From this Curle argues then that his general impression of the settlement is “of a relatively poor community with a strong emphasis on local crafts to supply its needs” (102).

Richards supports Curle's conclusion about the inhabitants of Birsay not being self-sufficient. It is commonly thought that the Birsay settlers instead opted to buy supplies from farms in the bay such as that at Buckquoy. Richard and Curle theorize that the settlers' purchase of goods from Buckquoy or any other settlement indicates that the inhabitants of the Brough of Birsay must have had something of value to trade. Some iron-working did take place on the island and silver was also melted down for use (Richards 91). Perhaps the Birsay population traded these metals for other necessary supplies, or perhaps they went back to their Viking ways during the summer months and raided for what they needed.

Despite Curle's findings indicating a poorer community, a couple exquisite buildings in the settlement have been referenced in the literature. *Orkneying Saga* talks of the church, Christchurch, and Anna Ritchie also mentions St. Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall in relation to St. Magnus's body in Birsay moving to Kirkwall (8). This movement from Birsay to Kirkwall does not diminish the importance of Birsay during the Norse period. The *Orkneying Saga* instead seems to take pride in the importance of Christchurch and the miracles associated with St. Magnus. Both of these factors had a profound effect on the individuals living in Birsay and Orkney as a whole. If this community was so poor and unable to support themselves, how did they support buying materials and supplies from areas such as Buckquoy and how did they support the building of the church on the site?

Birsay was not only Thorfinn's eventual permanent residence, but it was here that Thorfinn “built and dedicated to Christ a fine minster, the seat of the first bishop of Orkney” (Pálsson et al. 75). This church was the burial place of Earl Magnus and it was also the burial place of Thorfinn at his death in 1064 (Loyn 75). Thorfinn's burial at Christchurch shows the importance both religiously and politically of Christchurch and Birsay. Thorfinn's achievements are described as “beyond question great” and he is returned back to Birsay despite his rule over nine Scottish earldoms (Richards 10). Thorfinn brought Orkney to “the apogee of its power, exceeding even the degree of influence exerted by Sigurd down to 1014” (Forte et al. 273). From the mid-ninth century to the twelfth century Orkney was “the political focus of a semi-independent Norse state, whose ambit extended into Caithness” (Richards 90). At around the tenth century Birsay became one of the chief seats of the Orkney earls (Forte et al. 303). Up until 1472, Scandinavia dominated the Orkney islands politically and culturally. In 1472, however, Orkney became part of Scotland (Goodacre et al. 129). The wealth and power of the Orkney earls is reflected in their richness of major ecclesiastical buildings such as churches (Graham-Campbell 218). Since Birsay became a major location of importance for the Earls, Christchurch, especially, showed the success and power of the region. Despite Thorfinn's era being described as the golden age for Orkney, after his death peace prevailed over the earldom for much of the eleventh century (Forte et al. 277).