

Norse Settlement in Shetland: the Shetland chapel-sites project

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Introduction

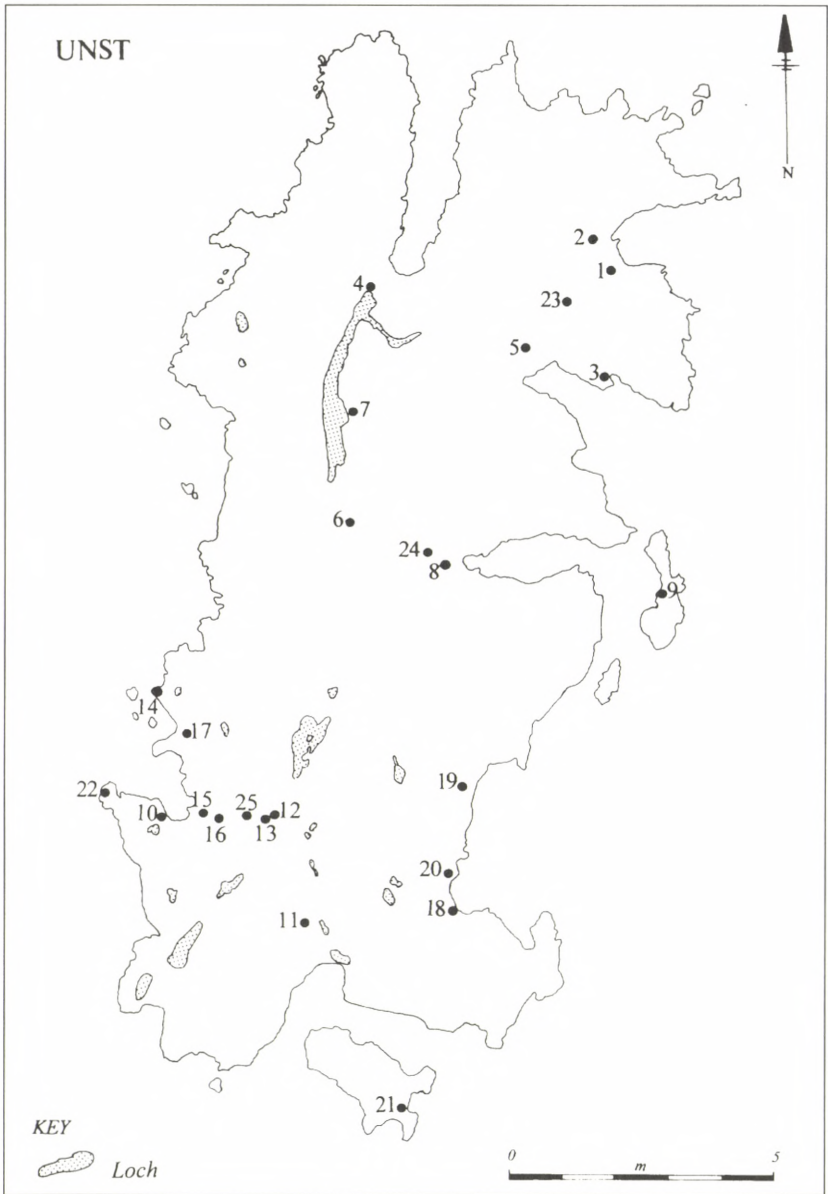
As Dr Doreen Waugh has described in the previous paper, both her work and that to be introduced below are new approaches to aspects of Norse settlement in Shetland, alongside an existing project on Viking settlement-sites in Unst undertaken under the auspices of the University of Copenhagen Institute of Archaeology (UCIA) and also a project of multi-period survey on Unst co-ordinated by the Shetland Amenity Trust (SAT). While looking at a more detailed consideration of one aspect of the Norse settlement, that of the adoption of Christianity, the paper delivered in Copenhagen in September 1999, nevertheless, took a relatively broad view of the issue. The first part considered the more general background of the Norse and pre-Norse (Pictish) church in Shetland (with some comparisons with the situation in Orkney), traditions of the Norse adoption of Christianity in these island-groups, general issues concerning chapel-sites in Orkney and Shetland, and a brief consideration of this in the broader perspective of Christianity within the Norse settlements across the North Atlantic region as a whole. The second part briefly described the inception of a new archaeological project by the Viking and Early Settlement Archaeological Research Project (VESARP: based in the Department of Archaeology, University of Glasgow), specifically to examine the broader issue through the evidence of Shetland Chapel-sites.

The first part was based upon material in complementary papers published elsewhere (Morris 1990; 1991b; 1996a; 1996b; forthcoming), and readers are referred to those papers for the broader issues and more general context for the VESARP project described herein. In sum, in my initial re-assessment of the evidence for Norse Christianity in the 'Northern Isles' of Orkney and Shetland, I hope I have demonstrated

that previous associations of a number of well-known chapel-sites with the so-called 'Celtic Monastery' as promulgated by Dr Raleigh Radford (1962; 1983) are no longer apposite. This group of sites, I believe, can be compared with similar examples in the North Atlantic from Faroe, Iceland and Greenland and the period of Norse control there and, therefore, I have proposed instead re-interpretation of them as Norse Christian chapels. It would be straightforward enough to suggest that these all relate to a post-1000 chronology, to fit in with our written accounts from the sagas etc. of the adoption of Christianity across the region as mentioned above. However, just as we have, in my opinion, been too obsessed with the recorded dates of formal recognition of the Scandinavian organisation of political control in the North Atlantic islands, so too I consider it to be likely that we have been obsessed with the AD 1000 date for the Scandinavian organisation of religious control. I have argued elsewhere for an 'informal' period of settlement in the Northern Isles preceding the formal recognition in the written sources. I would now like to propose that it is the same with the religious organisation. We can, in my opinion, expect Christian chapels well before AD 1000, especially in the context of the Norse equivalents of *eigenkirchen* or private chapels of chieftains, adjacent to their halls. The formal adoption in AD 1000 need, then, be no more than the official *de jure* recognition of a *de facto* situation with existing groups of Christians, rather than the act of a missionary church in a hostile religious environment – and may then be marked by further chapel-building (or re-building).

New work on chapel-sites in Shetland

Such at least is a hypothesis now to explore in practical terms, and this printed version of the paper will concentrate upon the content of the second part of that presentation, as VESARP has begun in the past three years in a modest way to address this question, through a programme initially of non-intrusive fieldwork, to be followed up in due course in the future by excavation at selected sites. Some of the foundations had already been laid, for instance by Dr Ronald Cant's historical studies (1972; 1975; 1984; 1996), both in mapping references and in identifying issues such as the relationship of these chapel-sites to land-units known as 'scattalds' in these islands. Of more direct archaeological relevance are Dr Christopher Lowe's more detailed field-surveys in Unst and Papa Westray (1988; 1991; forthcoming) and Dr Raymond Lamb's



work on some of the stack-sites of the North of Britain, which he has interpreted as Norse monasteries (1973; 1976). However, in overall terms and in some areas of Northern Britain, practically nothing has been undertaken on chapel-sites and buildings since the pioneering work of Sir

← **Caption for Unst map****Sites identified by Lowe**

1. St John's Church, Norwick	HP 6516 1411
2. Bartle's Kirk, Norwick	HP 6488 1463
3. Crosskirk, Clibberswick	HP 6503 12311
4. The Kirk, Burrafirth	HP 6078 1391
5. St Mary's Church, Bothen	HP 6357 1270
6. St John's Church, Baliasta	HP 6026 0959
7. Kirkamool, Cliff	approx. HP 603 115
8. Kirkhoull, Baltasound	HP 6197 0867
9. St Sunniva's Chapel, Balta	HP 6595 0809
10. St Olaf's Church, Lundawick	HP 5668 0412
11. Gletna Kirk, Uyeasound	HP 5922 0208
12. Kirk, Gunnister	HP 5873 0407
13. Kirkhoull, Gunnister	HP 5858 0400
14. Kirkaby, Westing	HP 5664 0640
15. Kirkamires, Underhoull	HP 5747 0415
16. Kirk, Underhoull	HP 5775 0406
17. Kirk Knowe, Westing	HP 5720 0567
18. Kirk of Millyskara, Sandwick	approx. HP 631 022
19. St John's Chapel, Colvadale	HP 6220 2453
20. St Mary's Chapel, Framgord	HP 6191 0293
21. Uyea Chapel	HU 6082 9854

Additional sites

- 22. Blue Mull (HP 5587 0425) and 23. Papil (HP 6454 1289): other sites identified as having potentially ecclesiastical associations.
- 24. Kirkton (HP 6126 0900) and 25. Crosbister (HP 5815 0390): potentially promising place-names on the OS map.

Henry Dryden in the 1860's and 1870's (1870) and that of other contributors to the overall survey of ecclesiastical sites in the 1890's by MacGibbon and Ross (1897).

This new programme has been concerned with desk-based assessments, walk-over surveys and more detailed surveys of sites in the three northern Shetlandic islands of Unst, Fetlar and Yell. In addition, a small-scale excavation project has taken place this summer at St Ninian's Isle in the south of Shetland, previously excavated in the 1950's and the site of the well-known Pictish silver treasure.

1. Unst Chapel-Sites Survey 1997

The survey of the northernmost Shetlandic island by the writer and Kevin Brady in 1997 was limited in its scope to an 'audit' of known chapel-sites: their state of preservation and their potential for future work. In particular, attention was paid to any changes since the last survey undertaken in 1982 by Christopher Lowe for part of the field-work of his PhD thesis (1988; 1991). Of the 21 sites Dr Lowe surveyed, 19 were re-assessed and four additional sites were examined; these were all described in the 'structures report' produced in 1998 (Morris & Brady 1998). Some additional information not recorded by Lowe was offered in the report as well as some minor revision of measurements, orientations and visible features. A comprehensive photographic record was taken of each site and this was listed in an appendix to the report. [However, this report was not a re-working of that earlier thesis, where more detailed information should for the moment be sought]. In addition, there was also an initial appraisal of the feasibility of further work that could be undertaken at a number of these sites.

2. Towards a project design

The information accumulated at the chapel-sites during the survey season on Unst in 1997 clearly showed the potential value of further, more intense commitment to these ecclesiastical monuments. It is our strong belief that these sites can yield still greater results when examined, at a number of different levels, in a controlled and well-defined, project over a number of years.

Five levels of work have been defined, ranging from further 'desktop' research, through various stages of survey, clearance and small-scale trial investigation, up to full-blown, large-scale intervention. For the immediate future, this project could move comfortably and in well-planned stages from the general assessment of data about chapel-sites (Phase I), through an intermediate period of questioning of these data at targeted sites (Phase II), to the specifics of large-scale, detailed examination at individual sites (Phase III). (See Table)

Thus, in the following years, it was intended that more detailed survey and other work would be undertaken across the range of the twenty-five sites in Unst, including geophysical approaches and comprehen-

Table

Unst Chapel-Sites Survey Project Design

Phases of work that should be undertaken at the sites surveyed (showing the feasibility of such work and the potential of those sites).

Unst Chapel-Site	Desk Top	PHASE I Survey	Clearance	PHASE II Small-scale Intervention	PHASE III Large-scale Intervention	Archaeological	Feasibility
St. John's Norwick		√		√		High	Good
Bartle's Kirk, Norwick			√			Low	Good
Crosskirk, Cibberswick	√	√	√	√	√	Very High	Excellent
The Kirk, Burrafirth	√			√		Low	Good
St. Mary's, Bothen		√		?√		?	Good
St. John's, Baliasta		√				High	Poor
Kirkamool, Cliff		√				Low	Poor
Kirkhoull, Baltasound		√	√	?√		Low	Good
St. Sunniva's, Balta		?√		√		High	Poor
St. Olaf's, Lundawick		√	√	√		High	Good
Gletna Kirk, Uyeasound		√	√	√	?√	?	Excellent
Kirk, Gunnister	√					Low	Poor
Kirkhoull, Gunnister				√		Low	Good
Kirkaby, Westing		√	√	√	√	Very High	Excellent
Kirkamires, Underhoull		√		√		Low	Good
Kirk, Underhoull	√	√		√		?	Good
Kirk Knowe, Westing		√		?√		?	Good
Kirk of Millyskara, Sandwick		√	√			?	Good
St. John's, Colvadale		√	√	√	?√	High	Poor
St. Mary's, Framgord		√	√	√	?√	High	Good
Uyea Chapel,		√	?	?	?	?	?
Blue Mull		√	√	√	?√	High	Poor
Papil	√					Low	Poor
Kirkton, Baltasound	√		√			Low	Poor
Crosbister, Underhoull	√					Low	Poor

sive photography, and structural survey where appropriate, supplementing Lowe's work from 1982. In addition, if funds were forthcoming, perhaps six or so sites would be selected for excavational intervention on a small-scale, trial basis during the first two excavation seasons, aimed primarily at characterisation and the addressing of particular structural and academic issues. This limited, but focused, fieldwork programme would form Phase II of the chapel-site project, with the intention that in Phase III probably a couple of sites would form the focus of detailed and comprehensive excavation over a further two or three seasons.

3. Unst Chapel-Sites Survey 1998

October and November 1998 saw the first phase of the recommendations of the 1997 Survey (Morris and Brady 1998, 67) initiated, when twelve of the sites were re-visited by Kevin Brady and Paul Johnson. Further, more detailed, assessment and survey on five sites were undertaken – work described in a subsequent 'structures report' (Brady & Johnson 1998).

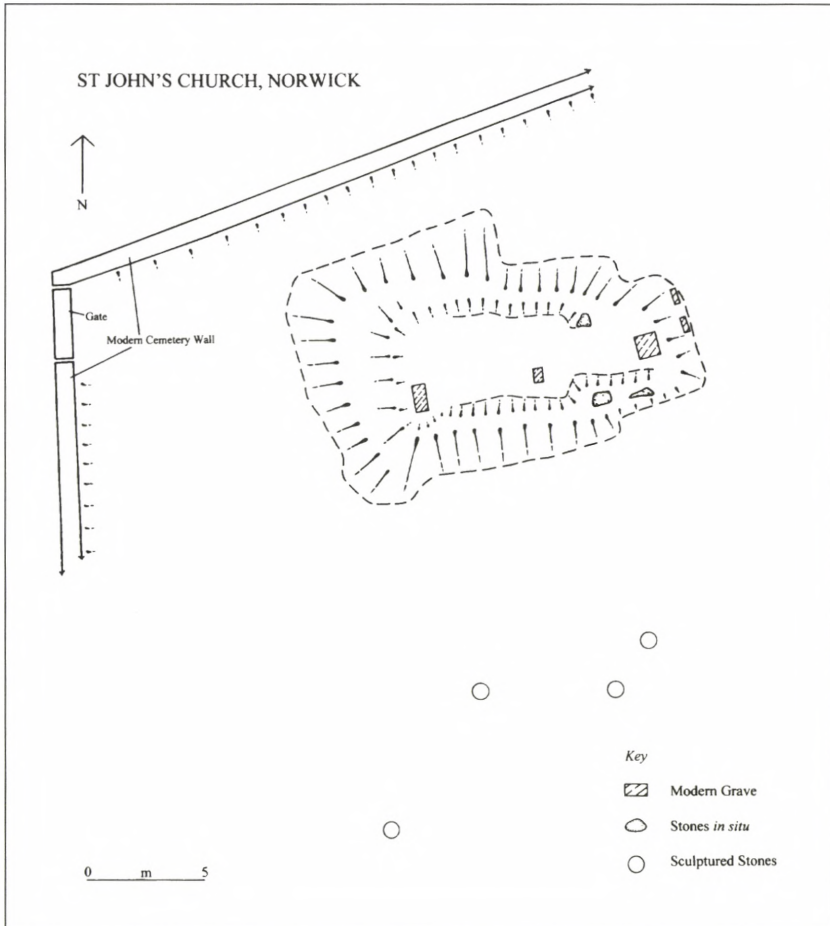
Of the twenty-five sites visited in 1997, five were plane-table surveyed to produce detailed, scaled ground-plans during this latest phase of work. These five sites present an interesting cross-section of the problems VESARP are faced with when attempting to frame a more interventionist research project to answer the questions which arise concerning these sites.

- **St John's at Norwick** (HP 6516 1411)

This remains as little more than grassed mounds with the odd protruding stone. However, the chancel and nave are still clearly discernible as are parts of a surrounding bank which pre-dates that of the modern graveyard enclosure. The graveyard itself has seven pre-modern gravestones *in situ*, including two carved stone crosses. Large-scale, intrusive examination of the remains is, however, out of the question as the site is in continued use for burial. Any further work would have to concentrate on survey.

- **St Olaf's, Lundawick** (HP 5668 0412)

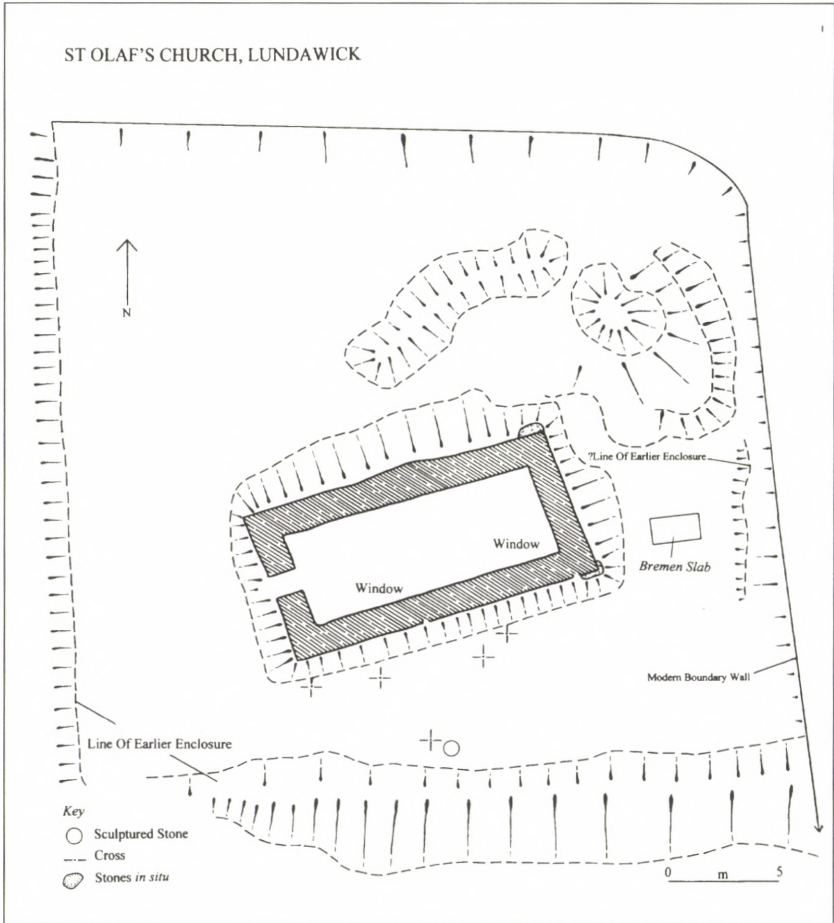
The picture at St Olaf's, Lundawick is almost identical to that at Norwick. The dedication to the Norwegian saint is important and there is ample evidence within the graveyard to suggest features ear-



lier than the crumbling kirk which dominates the site now. Again, large-scale excavation is ruled out as the graveyard is still in use, but small-scale issues of structural sequence, for instance, might be addressed.

- **Kirkhoull, Baltasound** (HP 6197 0867)

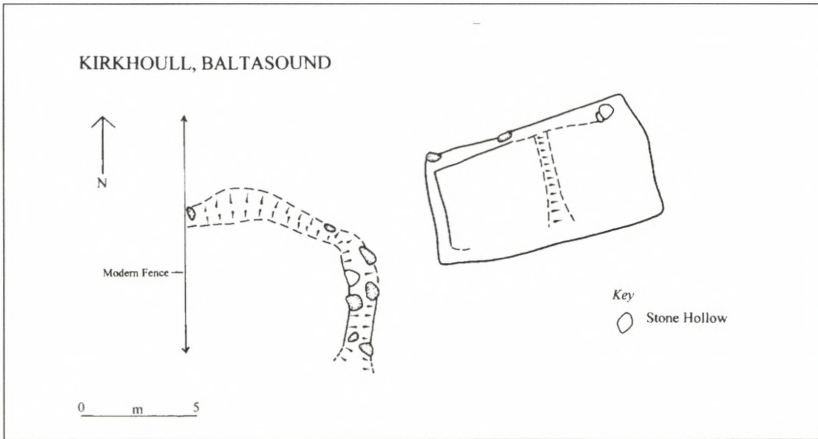
Kirkhoull in Baltasound presents an altogether different picture. The ephemeral structural remains associated with the place-name are clearly those of an agricultural outhouse from the Post-medieval period. Indeed the place-name remains the only evidence to date for there being any ecclesiastical connection with this site. On this basis



little further work can be planned within the parameters of this project, and questions arise about the nature of the relationship of sites and names.

- **Gletna Kirk, Uyeasound (HP 5922 0208)**

Gletna Kirk at Uyeasound is a complex site including a bi-compartmental structure flanked by two enclosures. There is a third, large enclosure located some distance away to the north-west. Although orientated east-west, on surface examination this would not appear to be an ecclesiastical structure but the place-name remains obviously evocative. Unlike the sites listed above, this site has no logistical hin-



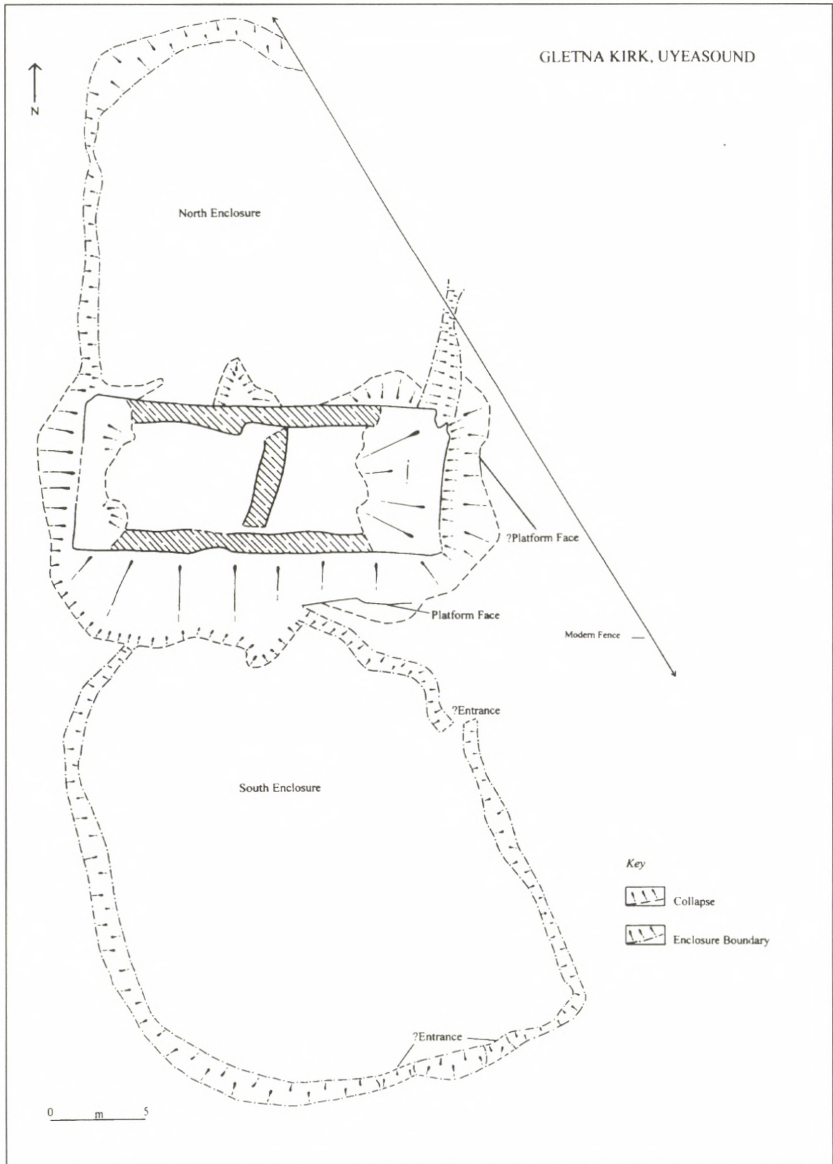
drances to being more exhaustively examined. Targetted excavation will hopefully solve the enigma presented by the apparent incompatibility of the place-name and the structural remains.

- **Crosskirk, Clibberswick** (HP 6503 1231)

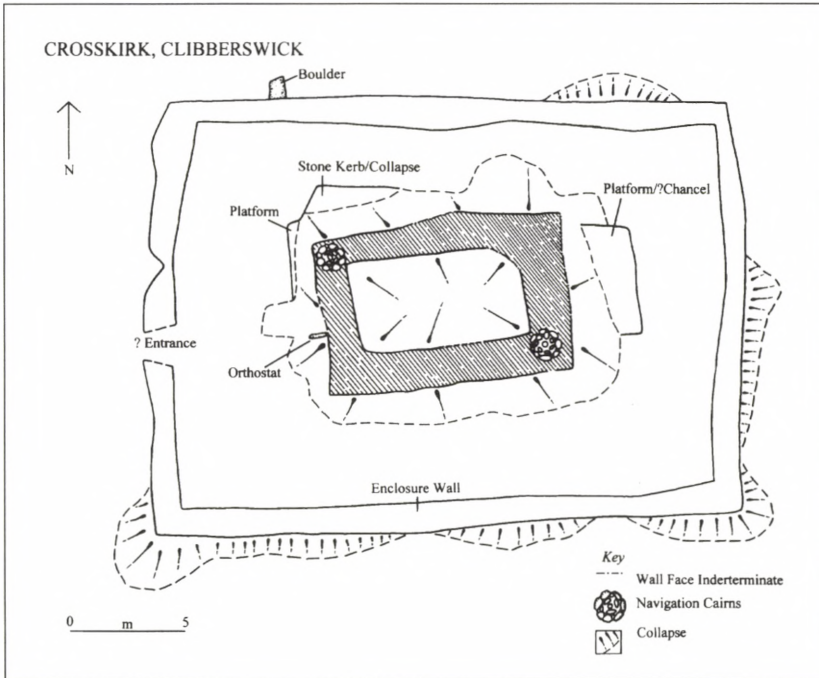
Crosskirk at Clibberswick is represented by a massive jumble of collapsed masonry within an enclosure. The site is aligned east-west and seems to be unicameral. There is little doubt from the structural remains that this once represented a church within an enclosing yard. There are no modern burials associated with this site and it is envisaged that this will be a focus of the excavation phase in this project.

In addition to these five chapel-sites, a further seven sites were visited during this season of work with a view to assessing their potential for geophysical prospection. These sites were:

- St Mary's Church, Bothen (HP 6357 1270)
- St John's Church, Baliasta (HP 6026 0959)
- Kirkaby, Westing (HP 5664 0640)
- Kirkamires, Underhoull (HP 5747 0415)
- Kirk, Underhoull (HP 5775 0406)
- Kirk Knowe, Westing (HP 5720 0567)
- St Mary's Chapel, Framgord (HP 6191 0293)



These sites again represent a mix of upstanding Post-medieval churches (e.g. Baliasta), the footings of seemingly Medieval chapels (e.g. Kirkaby) and place-names with no apparent ecclesiastical remains (e.g. Kirkamires). Five of these sites were considered to merit geophysical



surveying, and a third field campaign on the chapel-sites of Unst took place in late summer 1999 as a continuation of the Phase I non-intrusive survey at these sites, focusing upon geophysical survey directed by Paul Johnson and further topographic survey, co-ordinated by Kevin Brady (Brady & Johnson 2000).

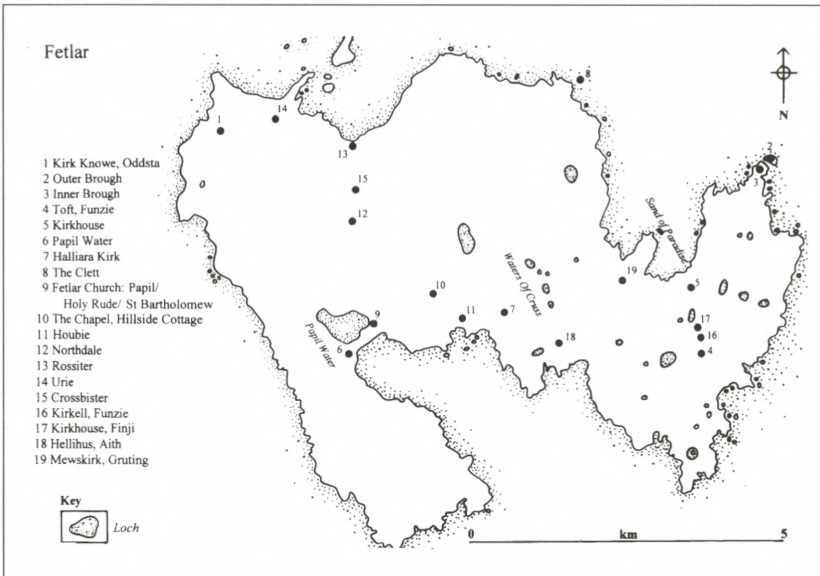
4. Fetlar and Yell

The early phases of the work on Unst in 1997 and 1998 quickly led to the realisation that the island should not be seen in isolation, but that there was a need to place the Unst material in a wider context. At the least, it was felt that the examination of potential chapel-sites should be broadened to encompass all three main islands at the north of Shetland: Unst, Fetlar and Yell. The initial extension of work from Unst to the neighbouring islands of Fetlar and Yell began in 1998, but, before even venturing out onto the ground, here we are having to undertake very basic documentary research to identify potential sites.

To this end, in the first instance, a desk-based study was undertaken by Kevin Brady in 1998 of the chapel-sites of Fetlar (Brady 1998). This was conducted in Edinburgh and, chiefly, in Lerwick: at the National Monuments Record for Scotland (NMRS); the Royal Commission for the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS); the National Library of Scotland (NLS); the Shetland Archives; the Shetland Room of the Library in Lerwick; the Shetland Museum; and through the Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) of the Shetland Archaeologist.

A total of nineteen potential sites for Fetlar, with grid-references, were gleaned from the above sources which have some evidence to suggest a potential ecclesiastical connection. The quality of the evidence varies greatly. Some of the sites are identified by place-name evidence alone, such as Kirkhouse, Finji (HU 662 904) or Crossbister (HU 607 923). Ten or eleven were noted from the 17th century onwards as the sites of pre-Reformation (or “Roman Catholic”) chapels, only some of which now appear to have definite traces remaining (e.g. Kirkhouse, Strand HU 6591 9111 or Halliara Kirk HU 6302 9080). Other sites, such as Kirk Knowe (HU 5838 9381) or Papil Water (HU 6043 9013) have both suggestive place-names and traditions of earlier remains, even though more recent visitors have recorded that they were unable to locate any structural evidence to associate with these names. Other sites are Post-medieval with no reliable tradition of an earlier foundation e.g. Fetlar Church (HU 6075 9053). Some sites are presumed Norse monastic foundations e.g. the Inner (HU 670 930) and Outer (HU 671 931) Broughs at Strandibrough.

The next phase of work by Morris and Brady on these sites in Fetlar, walk-over survey fieldwork, has only just taken place in September 1999. This has involved a basic field assessment of the sites identified from the desk-top survey – indeed in many cases here identification on the ground has been the main problem! Unlike Unst, it seems that perhaps either agricultural practices may have removed the evidence of former chapels in several cases, or even that tradition of the association of scattalds with chapels has given rise to the tradition of the existence of remains. The results of this fieldwork will then determine the future direction of the chapel-sites project in this island. As with Unst, the report produced (Brady & Morris 2000) will present recommendations for further optical and geophysical survey where sites are identifiable on the ground, as well as also evaluating the potential for excavation at promising sites.



So far, for Yell, Kevin Brady has identified, from a further desk-based survey of similar sources earlier this year (Brady 2000), the preliminary number of over 30 sites to be investigated, of which 24 are supposed Medieval chapel and burial-grounds and three are alleged Norse monasteries. As with Fetlar, the first stage of walk-over survey by Morris and Brady in late September 1999 indicated that some will remain simply as place-names of adjacent farms, others will now no longer be recognisable (even though the location is known), and in others remains which can be investigated further will be encountered. It is intended to continue this fieldwork in the spring/summer of 2000.

5. Monuments

Originally, these chapels and associated churchyards would have had associated church furniture, fittings and burial monuments. An interesting and distinctive group of grave-markers, apparently associated with the Norse church in these islands, includes those from Norwick, Framgord and Lundawick on Unst (Morris & Brady 1998) and Kirkhouse on Yell. These appear to have a connection with similar monuments from SW Norway. Dr Ian Fisher of the RCAHMS has kindly agreed to assist VESARP in their work on this aspect of the surveys.

However, at a more general level, as Dr Robert Stevenson emphasised (1981), we do not have to see this sculpture as necessarily either pre-Viking (i.e. notionally pre-800 AD), or alternatively post-Olaf Tryggvason (i.e. notionally after AD 1000). He has suggested that we may perhaps now begin to see a Viking Age context in the 9th and 10th centuries for monuments such as the group from Papil and Bressay (Close-Brooks & Stevenson 1982, 34-5), Stevenson 1981, *passim*). This, in its turn, *may* lead to a re-assessment of other monuments.

6. Folk-traditions and place-names

It has to be added that in areas such as these islands, there are very strong folk-traditions, which are of considerable assistance. On Unst, for instance, the work of Jessie Saxby from the early 20th century was the primary source for identifying traditional sites of old chapels (Saxby 1905), and – as reported by Dr Margaret MacKay (1987) – even in the modern day there is an interesting relationship between the scattalds in Fetlar and social obligations in relation to burials.

As is clear from Dr Waugh's paper on the place-name heritage of these areas (see also Hansen & Waugh 1998), some names relate directly to chapel-sites. In addition to the obvious *kirkja*-names (Fellows-Jensen 1987, 299-300), she has identified in the documents a 'Bonüs' on Unst (as an alternative name for Kirk Knowe: no 17 above), presumably a 'prayer-house' or *Boen-hus* which is known elsewhere in the North Atlantic (MacGregor 1984, 9-10). Such evidence can give pointers to the earlier existence of an archaeological site, although the relationship need not necessarily have been a straightforward one.

Further, the known presence of a 'Papil' name on each of the three northerly Shetlandic islands is itself of considerable interest, as a linguistic relic of the church structure which the Scandinavians encountered on their arrival here (Lamb 1995, 15).

7. St Ninian's Isle

Earlier in 1999, VESARP (under Rachel Harry) undertook survey and a small evaluation re-excavation of the chapel-site at St Ninian's Isle. This was to assess both the state of survival of archaeological deposits here, and the extent of the archaeological site in spatial terms, as well as

providing a proposed strategy for managing the site and presenting it better to the many visitors who come to it (Harry 2000). These visitors come because of the spectacular Pictish silver treasure (O'Dell & Cain 1960; MacRoberts 1965; Wilson 1971; Wilson 1973) found there in 1958 (even though this is now in Edinburgh, rather than Shetland!). I hope that perhaps in the future, as well as defining and exploring the site as a whole, there will be an opportunity to examine any surviving evidence for the earlier church (and other features) below the standing building (Thomas 1971, 14-15; Small 1973, 5-7). Also, if we accept the possibility of an earlier Norse (rather than pre-Norse) chapel at St Ninian's Isle below the existing building (Morris 1990, 10-11), then it is not impossible even for the remains of a remarkable stone shrine to be Norse in date, if Pictish in concept: Stevenson even suggested it was "no earlier than mid-ninth century, rather than before 800" (Thomas 1973, 11-13; Thomas 1974, 12-16; Thomas 1974, 12-16; Thomas 1983; Stevenson 1981, 291).

Conclusion: the wider perspective

From a purely historical perspective, it will be important to attempt to relate the chapel-sites to the changing structures of church organisation: from the pre-Norse missionary and/or monastic situation (perhaps reflected in the Papil type of place-name: see Lamb 1995), through what may well be a private farm-church structure of the later Viking and Late Norse periods (perhaps reflected in the numerous small chapel-foundations and related to the land-units of the *scattalds*: see Smith 1984), through to the adoption of a full-blown parochial system, which resulted in the 12th and 13th centuries in the demise of many such private chapels and the abandonment of many in favour of concentration upon a few 'head-churches' as centres of the new parochial organisation (see Cant 1975; 1984; 1996). Inevitably, a different structure of landscape organisation developed (Smith 1984), some detailed aspects of which have been examined by Dr. William Thomson, for instance in relation to the island of Fetlar and the area of Norwick in Unst (Thomson 1970; 1998). Thus, this work marks the inception of a new stage in research conducted by VESARP on early chapel-sites in areas associated with the Scandinavian settlement in northern and western Britain.

Of course, this work needs to be put in a broader context, and therefore, concurrently with the project on the northern three islands of Shet-

land, there will be plans developed for a more comprehensive chapel-site project both within Shetland and more generally in the North of Britain. Providing funding can be secured, we intend to extend our survey-project to the mainland of Scotland (in Caithness and Sutherland), as well as to the *Suðreyjar* or Hebrides.

But it also needs to be seen in the broader North Atlantic context, and it will be vital to link this up with similar evidence in other areas of the North Atlantic (i.e. Faroe, Iceland and Greenland) and to exchange information with, if not collaborate with, colleagues in these other islands. This could then become a broader international, inter-disciplinary study of the North Atlantic region – a project hopefully both in the spirit of, and under the aegis of, the North Atlantic Biocultural Organisation (NABO: see McGovern 1994, 1996, 1997).

From an archaeological perspective, then, the only logical way forward for understanding the remarkable data-set for Norse chapels would seem to be both holistically within the islands of Unst, Fetlar and Yell, and multi-dimensionally more generally within North Britain and the North Atlantic region.

Notes

The terms 'Viking' and 'Late Norse' are used in the sense discussed and defined by Dr. Gerald F. Bigelow (1985, 104-5).

This paper is based upon an earlier version given at the NABO Conference in September 1998 as part of 'The Summit of the Sea' Symposium at St John's, Newfoundland, and a shortened account of the work in Unst is to be published in *Church Archaeology* in the near future.

Acknowledgements

The work which is described in this paper includes work which formed part of a programme of archaeological work undertaken in the island of Unst in the summer of 1997 as part of an overall strategy of collaboration between the Shetland Amenity Trust and Copenhagen and Glasgow Universities on 'The Viking Unst Project'. This work was funded by the Hunter Archaeological Trust and the University of Glasgow. Further work in Unst in 1998 was funded by the Hunter Marshall Fund in the University of Glasgow, and that in 1999 by the Shetland Amenity Trust and the University of Glasgow. The desk-based work on Fetlar in 1998

was funded by the John Robertson Bequest at the University of Glasgow and in 1999 by the Hunter Archaeological Trust. Work in Yell is funded by the Shetland Amenity Trust, the Hunter Archaeological Trust and the John Robertson Bequest. The cost of my own travel and accommodation in Shetland in 1999 was borne by a grant from the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland. Grateful thanks are due to the Trustees of each of these funding bodies. The work was managed through Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division (GUARD). As will be clear from the text above, this represents a summary of work by a number of members of VESARP. I am particularly grateful to Kevin Brady for his assistance both at a general level and in the field, as well as Paul Johnson and Rachel Harry for their particular contribution to the work of this ongoing project.

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