

The Cathedral of Christchurch and the Monastery of Birsay

by R G Lamb

The Brough of Birsay has been excavated more extensively than any other Viking site in the Northern Isles, with the exception only of Jarlshof; and it eclipses even Jarlshof in the historical associations which have been claimed for it. The little island off the NW corner of the Orkney mainland has been linked with such names as Earl Thorfinn, Bishop William, and the Cathedral of Christchurch, which figure prominently in the *Orkneyinga Saga*; and this historical interpretation so far has gone unchallenged. In 1974 the Department of the Environment's guidebook (Radford 1959) was reissued in a new format, without any major changes to the text. The present paper is an attempt to re-assess the place of the Brough of Birsay in the medieval history of Orkney, and to relate it to a wider archaeological problem – the difficulty of distinguishing between 'princely sites' and monastic settlements.

The Office of Works excavations between 1934 and 1939 uncovered a small church and associated buildings, which in the immediately post-war Royal Commission Inventory (RCAMS 1946, ii, 1–4, no. 1) were interpreted in monastic terms. Subsequent work uncovered further structures and prompted a re-assessment, first published by Cruden (1958), then detailed in the official guidebook (Radford 1959) and elaborated at the York Viking Congress (Cruden 1965). The church was now identified as the first cathedral of Orkney, the Christchurch which was founded at Birsay by Earl Thorfinn the Mighty (reigned c 1020–65). The building from the pre-war excavation was re-interpreted as an episcopal palace, and the layout found a good parallel at Gardar in Greenland (Radford 1962, 175; Nørlund 1930). One of the more recently excavated buildings was claimed as the hall of Earl Thorfinn.

The overall sequence at the site begins with Early Christian occupation followed by early Norse farmsteads. Later Viking-Age buildings are attributed to Earl Sigurd the Stout (who was killed at Clontarf in 1014) and to his illustrious successor, Thorfinn. Thorfinn's hall is linked chronologically with the building of the church, which was elevated to cathedral status early in the twelfth century. This last event is reflected in modifications within the church, and in the erection of the episcopal palace. On the site of Thorfinn's great hall was built a complex of small rooms, thought to have been accommodation for canons (Radford 1959, 4–9; Cruden 1965, 26–31). It is noteworthy that this sequence involves a change from a secular to an ecclesiastical use of the Brough. The earliest Norse buildings are ordinary farmsteads, which are seen against a background of ninth-century land-taking. By the early eleventh century the site is a 'princely' one, with Sigurd and then Thorfinn in residence there; and Thorfinn, after the fashion among illustrious men of his time, builds himself a church. But by the twelfth century the ecclesiastical aspect has taken over; the church becomes a cathedral, the bishop builds a palace, and the site of the earl's great hall is appropriated to the use of minor clergy.

This historical interpretation depends upon the *Orkneyinga Saga*, reinforced by the Longer and Shorter Magnus Sagas. The saga account enables us to fix the location of the earl's and bishop's palaces in relation to Christchurch – if we accept that the Brough chapel is Christchurch, it follows that the palaces were on the Brough too. And if we locate Christchurch elsewhere, the historical basis, by which the Brough is identified as a 'princely' and episcopal centre, collapses. Thorfinn, according to chapter XXXI of the main saga, often resided in Birsay, where he founded Christchurch, *dýrligt musteri*, 'a splendid minster'; and that was the first seat of the bishopric in Orkney. Chapter XXXII describes the burial of Thorfinn in Christchurch, and in LII we read about William, bishop in Orkney – 'he was the first bishop there; the episcopal seat was at Christchurch in Birsay'. But in these and all other references, the location is given only as *i Byrgisheradi*, in the district of Birsay, which meant probably the whole NW corner of Mainland. The site of Christchurch is not precisely defined.

Before the Brough excavations took place, Christchurch was generally thought to lie under, or in the precinct of, the present parish church of Birsay. This stands in the little hamlet locally known as 'The Palace', north of the mouth of the Birsay burn, and close beside the ruined palace of the sixteenth-century Stewart earls. The existing church dates from 1664; it was enlarged and restored in 1760 and again in 1867. The Rev George Low saw the site in 1773, evidently in the aftermath of the works of 1760, and he has left an account which is of considerable interest:

'Of the Ecclesiastic buildings there are still such traces left as show us they have been strong handsome and spacious. The old church lately pulled down was a neat cross with arches, and if it was not the same Rognvald built, it was far from modern. The foundations of vast buildings are yet to be traced under the Ministers and other gardens strongly built of stone and run lime with the numerous cut free stones proper for gates, &c., yet seen, evidence that these buildings were not intended for ordinary purposes. Add to this the reigning tradition of this being the Bishops palace; all these I say put together, where there is no written evidence will amount almost to a proof that Birsay was the seat of Thorfin's Bishoprick; and which continued in the same place to another period as we shall see' (Marwick 1924, 51).

Joseph Anderson too believed that Christchurch had occupied this site. He refuted suggestions that the modern church incorporated parts of an earlier one, but stated that 'there are remains of an older church, however, beside it, which are still known as the Christ's Kirk, and Mr George Petrie, who has made a ground-plan of the structure (of which only part of the foundation remains), has ascertained that it had an apse at the east end' (Anderson 1873, xcvi-xcvi).

John Tudor confirms that 'to the E of the church are traces of another one'. 'Close to the old school-house' (beside the church), he says, 'are the remains of old buildings, which, local tradition says, formed the old episcopal palace' (Tudor 1883, 314).

The ruined sixteenth-century earl's palace is a prominent landmark at Birsay; the episcopal palace reported by Low and Tudor has received far less of scholarly attention, although it was well remembered among the local inhabitants. One item of evidence for it, however, always has been well known; the Monsbellus inscription. Two fragments survive, one built into the S wall of the modern church, the other in a cottage on the N side of the graveyard; traced out and put together, the fragments give the reading 'Monsbellus' in sixteenth-century lettering (RCAMS 1946, ii, 5–6). In 1929 Dr Hugh Marwick published a letter discovered in the Advocates' Library in Edinburgh. This bore the signature of Adam Bothwell, Bishop of Orkney from 1558 to 1580, 'at Monsbellus in Orkney'. The inscribed stone therefore most likely came from an episcopal

palace, in use during the sixteenth century, which stood somewhere near the parish church. Marwick's report includes an interesting suggestion on the origin of the 'Monsbellus' name.

A paper by Robert Rendall in 1959 detailed the surviving traditional information and incorporated the valuable results of a field survey which he had made in the company of Dr W Douglas Simpson. Rendall relates that the inhabitants still referred to the 'Lower Palace' in distinction to the 'Ummost' (upper) or Earl's Palace; the Lower Palace was by strong tradition the Bishop's Palace. It is said to have stood beside one of the cottages north of the burn-mouth, the title of 'Lower Palace' still being used to refer to this cottage in particular. In the garden had been dug up numerous cut blocks of freestone, fluted window-facings, a copestone, and a finial; and built into a nearby shed was a long curved archstone. The line of a massive wall could be traced across the roadway in front of the cottage and the Old Schoolhouse. In 1957, 'a stone bearing the arms of Bishop Stewart (c 1511) was found by Mrs Cumloquoy, St Magnus Guest House, in a wall of what had been . . . the passage entrance into the Bishop's Palace'.

To summarise – it is clear that the settlement at the Birsay burn-mouth once included both earls' and bishops' palaces. The bishop's palace was in use during the sixteenth century; the Stewart earls also maintained a palace here at that time (as the St Clairs had done before them). There also had been what by Orkney standards was a very considerable medieval church. This was cruciform, with arches and an apse; which suggests that it was grander than any other church in Orkney with the exception only of St Magnus' Cathedral in Kirkwall. And no less a person than Joseph Anderson assures us that this church was still referred to by the local people as the Christ's Kirk.

Set against this, the claim of the Brough chapel to be Christchurch appears weak. The chapel's traditional dedication was to St Peter or, less authoritatively, to St Colm. No attempt to argue a way round this difficulty can stand against the transmitted name of Christ's Kirk at the parish church site. The Brough chapel too is very small for a cathedral. It has been claimed (Cruden 1958, 159) that 'the small size is no bar to this identification, for the early cathedral at Gardar in Greenland is no larger'; this is a worthwhile and valid comparison, but unconvincing. Orkney was infinitely more prosperous than the Greenland colony and, with its powerful central authority, we should expect a large church. The chapel in fact has a total floor area of a little over 60 square metres, against about 100 square metres for the first-period cathedral at Gardar. At the stage which is claimed to represent the elevation of Christchurch to cathedral status, the building was merely modified, with no effective increase in floor area. The Gardar cathedral, by contrast, was soon found inadequate and was rebuilt to a new scale well in excess of 200 square metres.

Admittedly, the only evidence we have for earls' and bishops' palaces on the mainland at Birsay, relates to a late period. But where Christchurch stood, the palaces were somewhere close by. And continuity of the sites from an earlier time is the most likely state of affairs. Why did the St Clair and Stewart earls have their establishments here, if not because the site traditionally was a ruling seat of Orkney? This location for the Norse earls' centre would accord very well with what we know of other important Viking-Age sites in the islands. Leading Norsemen normally did not choose to live on rockbound islets – they preferred the heads of sand or shingle bays where they could beach their ships. Such was the case at Westness on Rousay and Skail in Deerness, both of which were seats of important saga characters. Although nowhere at Birsay is there much in the way of shelter, the gap in the rocks where the Birsay burn runs down offered probably the best beaching facilities that could be found in the immediate neighbourhood. Here surely were located Thorfinn's hall, the Cathedral of Christchurch, and the palace of Bishop William the Old; for the buildings on the Brough of Birsay, some other explanation must be found.

The interpretation of the Brough of Birsay as a princely and episcopal centre depended upon

the assumption that the site was unique in Orkney and Shetland. The Brough of Birsay in fact is not unique. There is another major site in Orkney, the Brough of Deerness, which duplicates three of Birsay's essential features – the rocky islet situation, the chapel, and the longhouses. An equally large but much less well known site in Shetland, Strandibrough in Fetlar, duplicates the situation and the longhouses, but lacks an obvious church (it is likely however that it had a timber one). It is never easy to compare an excavated site with a surface-surveyed one, and in this case our judgement has been clouded by the long-held belief that Deerness was an Early Christian, that is a pre-Norse, monastic settlement. Recent analysis, however, has shown that Deerness differs significantly from Sceilg Mhichil and from other Early Christian eremitic religious settlements in Orkney and Shetland; the structure of the Deerness settlement is Norse, and, along with Strandibrough and another Shetland site (Maiden Stack and Brei Holm), Deerness is proposed as a Norse monastery (Lamb 1973, 88–94).

Very little is known about monasteries in the North Atlantic island dioceses, which from 1154 were subject to the archiepiscopal authority of Trondheim. No religious houses are documented in Orkney or Shetland, but this is hardly surprising. There are very few historical sources for the medieval period in Orkney, and this is especially true of ecclesiastical history – a state of affairs attributable largely to the cultural and linguistic break at the end of the Middle Ages, when the Northern Isles were transferred from Norway to Scotland. But even in Iceland, where there was no such interruption of the record, documentation of monasteries is scanty; many houses there are known only from the briefest of annalistic references. In Greenland we know of two religious houses only from the traveller, Ivar Bardarson, plus a single reference in a bishop's letter. But it would be strange indeed if Iceland and Greenland – the furthest-flung outposts of the Trondheim archdiocese – had had monasteries, while Orkney did not.

The Brough of Birsay's 'episcopal palace', when first uncovered, was given a monastic interpretation. Later on it was claimed that it was not monastic, because it resembled no known monastic layout. This claim prejudices the issue; for how can we, knowing nothing of monasticism in Orkney, form any preconceived notion of what monasteries there should look like? Surely we should not expect them to resemble the great houses of Europe, but rather those of Iceland and Greenland, which offer the closest economic and cultural parallel. Attention has been drawn to the similarity between the Brough of Birsay layout and that of Gardar, the episcopal seat of medieval Greenland. The buildings at Gardar fall into three categories – church, dwelling, and farm. So also did those at Skálholt, one of the two episcopal seats of medieval Iceland, as recorded in an eighteenth-century drawing which actually names the function of each individual building (Bruun 1928, 200–5). And so do those at the two known monastic sites in Greenland (Krogh 1967, 92–3; Vebæk 1953).

The main point about those Greenland religious houses (little archaeologically is known of the Iceland ones) is that they were, to all appearances, large farmsteads sharing sites with churches. Farm-and-parish-church associations are common in Greenland (Roussell 1941); how does one distinguish archaeologically between a farm and church which are a monastery, and a farm and church which are just a farm and a parish church? For without the chance literary record it would have been impossible to tell that these sites were religious houses; equally, it would not have been obvious that Gardar was an episcopal centre. This parallels the argument current within British archaeology, concerning the identification of 'princely sites' as against early monasteries. And with so little known about monasteries in the North Atlantic region, we cannot claim that the Brough of Birsay was an episcopal centre, on account of its resemblance to the Gardar layout. Being a combination of church, dwelling, and farm, the Gardar-Skálholt type layout may have been one common to both episcopal centres and monasteries; we have no plans of large, docu-

mented monasteries in Iceland, and still know very little about the larger of the two Greenland houses (a Benedictine nunnery) – no plan is available, and the published report of the excavation is little more than an outline.

The problem of distinguishing between princely centres and monasteries was extensively dealt with at a Scottish Archaeological Forum meeting on early monasteries. It was raised by Ian Burrow (1973) with reference to Tintagel, and by Professor Cramp (1973) in connection with Northumbrian sites; and the question was well summed up by Philip Rahtz (1973). Where, as at Birsay, the alleged ‘princely’ site was not merely aristocratic but also episcopal, an added dimension is given and the problem becomes archaeologically well-nigh insoluble.

Of Norse-period religious houses in Orkney, other than Birsay and Deerness, we have significant indications but few solid facts. Eynhallow (Mooney 1949) certainly was one, but it is an exceptionally difficult site to interpret. Its basic conception is in the Norse tradition but this has been modified by contact with the Romanesque – its builders evidently had an eye on the magnificent work then taking shape in Kirkwall under the hands of top-class English masons. On Corn Holm, off Deerness, there is an ancient chapel site and a tradition of sanctity; a great ruin-mound recently surveyed by the writer extends nearly 90 metres from the chapel site and by this sheer size suggests itself to contain something more significant than an ordinary farmstead. A feature shared by the Broughs of Birsay and Deerness was an enduring post-Reformation tradition of pilgrimage. A third Orcadian pilgrim-centre (which, according to the sixteenth-century writer ‘Jo. Ben’, was especially favoured by pregnant women) was the little island of Damsay in the Bay of Firth. Here was a chapel of St Mary; and George Low, quite unknowingly, has preserved for us a gem of information in his report that the local people called this chapel ‘Hellie Boot’ (Marwick 1924, 53). Professor D M Mennie (personal communication) has suggested that this, transcribed into thirteenth-century Icelandic, would be *heilug bót* (*heilagr*, holy; *bót*, betterment, cure, atonement). This may be compared with Monteith’s statement (Sibbald 1711, 5) that Damsay was the site of a nunnery. The islands of Auskerry and Muckle Skerry, and the ‘Monks’ Green’ or Old Kirkyard at Stromness, are other possibilities for medieval religious settlements; while in Shetland, we should not be too hasty to dismiss traditional reports of monasteries at the Chapel Knowe of Lunna, at Harrier on Foula, and on Wadbister Voe.

No excavation report has yet appeared on the Norse buildings on the Brough of Birsay, and the dating evidence for the various structures therefore remains uncertain. Until all the information is made available, it is impossible to arrive at a complete assessment of the site; it is likely enough that there are buildings there earlier than, and unconnected with, the postulated monastery. But whatever the full story of this very complex and interesting site, it is on the mainland that we surely should be looking for Earl Thorfinn’s hall and the Cathedral of Christchurch.

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