

A stack site off Stronsay, Orkney

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Tams Castle (NGR HY 68932341) is one of a pair of rock-stacks in a cliffbound bay of the tunship of Kirbister, on the rugged NE-facing coast of Stronsay. Its siting and the structures upon it closely parallel the inner Burri Stack of Culswick in Shetland, where a probable hermitage is associated with a larger monastic settlement (Lamb 1976), with the important difference, that whereas the Burri Stacks can only be viewed by telescope, the summit of Tams Castle is accessible by not too hazardous climbing.

The boulder-beach at the head of the bay can be reached by descending a gully from the clifftop, and the two stacks stand just isolated at the extreme high water of spring tides (fig 1). The northern, nameless stack has been reduced by erosion to a surface area of only 9 m by 2 m, which is thickly grassed, and without excavation it is not possible to say whether it has been occupied. The structures on Tams Castle, the southern stack, are well-preserved and their existence is easily detectable from the clifftop opposite. On the N and S sides the stack is vertical for its full height of 17 m, while the land-facing W side is a precipitous grass slope very dangerous to scale; the seaward side however has the form of a series of deep rock-ledges presenting an easy scramble up from the base. The greatest difficulty is to reach the foot of the stack on this side – without a boat, this has to be done by working along a narrow and slippery ledge above the waters of the Geo of Graverend.

On the summit are two enclosures formed within a parapet wall around the N, W, and S edges of the stack, the E side having been severely attacked by the sea. On the land-facing W side the parapet has a thickness of 0.8 m and stands 1.7 m high above the present ground level

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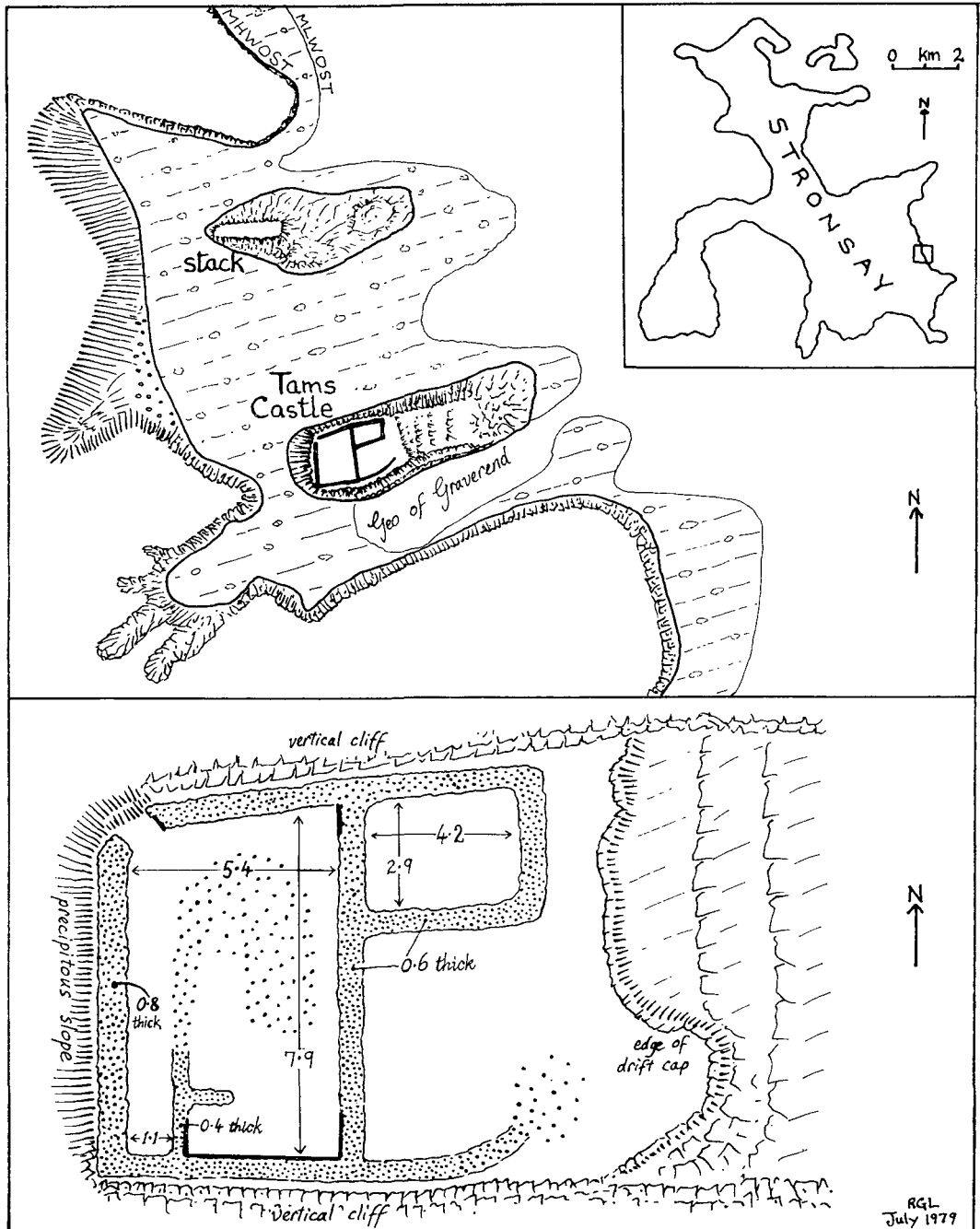


FIG 1 Tams Castle, location maps and sketch-plan. Heavy black lines on the sketch-plan indicate visible masonry wall-faces. Measurements are in metres

within. The landward enclosure, 5.4 m by 7.9 m internally, covers the full width of the stack; its interior is thickly vegetated, but a mass of debris filling most of the area suggests that there was a building there. From the SW corner of this heap of debris a wall, 0.4 m thick, emerges and runs S to meet the parapet wall, into which it is bonded. At the NW corner of the enclosure is a gap in the parapet with two courses of masonry, probably indicating the original entrance; access must have been either by a path up the side of the stack or by a rock-bridge or arête from the mainland.

Adjoining this enclosure on its eastern side is the second one, 4.2 m by 2.9 m, which occupies only the N half of the summit area. There is no trace of any structure within it. On the S side of the stack, the parapet wall curves inwards, away from the edge, and becomes lost in a confusion of tussocks. The rapidly-eroding section of the eastern side of the drift cap reveals rich black earth and masses of tumbled stones.

The parapets and enclosure walls, which on average stand 1 m high above present ground level, are for the most part about 0.6 m thick, and are vertical-sided; although thickly grassed, they are probably stone walls. Where stonework is visible it is seen to be well-laid masonry of quarried stones, carefully laid and incorporating long stretchers. Although no mortar is apparent, excavation would be necessary to ascertain whether the stones are dry-laid or, as often is the case, clay or soft lime mortar had been used.

The parallels with the Culswick stacks are very close. At both places there is a large enclosure on the landward side of the stack, occupying its full width, reached by an entrance gap in one of the land-facing corners, and sheltering a small building which must have been nearly or entirely concealed within the high parapets. Behind this enclosure each stack had a smaller one occupying only half the width of the summit. It is significant too that each stack is one of a pair, and at Culswick the other stack had a row of the oblong buildings characteristic of early monastic settlements. At Stronsay unfortunately the other stack of the pair has been almost destroyed by the sea.

Although the name 'Tams Castle' is locally current, no suggestions are forthcoming as to the identity of 'Tam', while 'Castle' (ON *kastali*) is used as so often in Orkney simply to mean a stack. The structures are traditionally explained as a garden, and it is possible that this is a folk-memory of the use of at least the smaller enclosure as a vegetable plot (cf the tiny garden-terraces of Skellig Michael). The accessibility of Tams Castle and the good state of preservation of its structures make it very important for the study of these small hermitages, and the currently active erosion attacking the vulnerable drift cap of the stack is therefore very worrying.

REFERENCE

- Lamb, R G 1976 'The Burri Stacks of Culswick, Shetland, and other paired stack-settlements', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 107 (1975-6), 144-54.